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The Perceived Sense of Urgency of Prevention of Low Literacy Problems Among Citizens in the Netherlands⁵

Abstract: The latest results of the PIAAC research (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) have highlighted the need for the Netherlands to face the issue of an increasing number of citizens with low literacy skills – 1.3 million citizens to be precise. Having a significant group of citizens facing low literacy skills affects the labour market, the care system and the field of welfare negatively. The question is whether Dutch citizens are currently aware of this sense of urgency and the need for investment in order to increase literacy skills among a great number of citizens. This study among 3,131 Dutch citizens shows that most of the respondents were familiar with the problem of low literacy skills, but did not sense the full urgency of it. They did think investment in order to overcome this problem was needed, but did not know how big this problem

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was or did not think it was a very urgent or important problem. Besides this most of the respondents were not actively involved in recognition of or discussions concerning the problem of low literacy skills. Therefore it has become clear that campaigns to make Dutch citizens aware of the sense of urgency of the problem of low literacy still seem to be necessary in the Netherlands.

Key words: low literacy, reading and writing skills, knowledge, attitude and behaviour, the Netherlands, campaigns.

Background

Although the Netherlands seems to be one of the strongest (knowledge) economies of the world based on the Global Competitiveness Index (Schwab, 2014), the social gap between low-skilled and high-skilled citizens is increasing (Bijl et al., 2014). The latest results of the PIAAC research (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) highlight the fact that the Netherlands needs to face the issue of an increasing number of citizens with low literacy skills (Buisman et al., 2013). More specifically, 1.3 million citizens seem to have low literacy skills and have difficulties in reading and writing during their daily private and working life (Buisman et al., 2013). At any rate the number of Dutch citizens facing low literacy problems has increased since 1995 from 9.4% to 12% (Buisman et al., 2013). Modern society dictates that one be able to write or read properly due to the fact that the use of language seems to be more and more an important part of one's job or daily life (e.g. conversations with colleagues, writing a report about a client or finding one's way by using the public transport).

The problem of having low literacy skills is not only a social, but also an economic problem. According to PWC (2013) the Netherlands faces annual costs of 560 million euros due to the fact that 1.3 million citizens have low literacy skills. These costs are derived, for example, from the fact that Dutch society collects less taxes, has more costs relating to social insurance, unemployment and use of the care system and is confronted with a lower productivity rate in the labour market. In other words the problem of low literacy affects different areas of our society, including those of labour, care and welfare (De Greef et al., 2013).

First of all the results of the PIAAC research show that 43% of the citizens facing low literacy skills are not active in the labour market and 11% of the unemployed have low literacy skills (Buisman et al., 2013). According to Houtkoop et al. (2012) citizens with better 'core skills' are better paid and it seems to be clear that salary increases in proportion to the rate of literacy. According to Hanushek and Zhang (2009) improvement of low literacy can affect an increase in employ-

ment income by 17% in the Netherlands. Likewise, the results of recent studies concerning the impact of language courses underline the fact that after undergoing education, learners with low literacy skills secure a better position in the labour market (De Greef, 2012a; De Greef, 2012b; De Greef, 2012c; De Greef 2012d). In fact 60% of the learners in a Scottish program got a better perspective on work (Tett et al., 2006) and participants of the 'Upskilling Partnership Programme' in New Zealand improved on their skills they needed in order to do their work properly (Department of Labour New Zealand, 2010).

Secondly, in the area of care, Hartley and Horne (2006) refer to several studies that show that people with low literacy skills risk more incidence of depression and are hospitalised more often. Twickler et al. (2009) underline the fact that citizens with high literacy skills enjoy better health than citizens with low literacy skills. More concretely Baker et al. (2007) show that elderly people who have poor literacy skills have a higher mortality risk than elderly people with good literacy skills. According to people with low literacy skills themselves, 40% of them perceive their state of health as 'not so good' or even 'bad' (Buisman et al., 2013). As with the improvement of the position in the labour market the study of Berkman et al. (2004) shows that parents (and especially fathers), who joined a language program, experienced reduced incidence of depression.

Thirdly Houtkoop et al. (2012) show that people who are able to read and write are more active in their social life and feel more happy in life. Furthermore, Dutch citizens with low literacy skills have less confidence in others, are less active in doing voluntary work and think they have fewer possibilities to influence politics than others (Buisman et al., 2013). But social inclusion can be improved among the group with low literacy skills after they have joined an (adult) education course (De Greef, 2012a; De Greef, 2012b; De Greef, 2012c; De Greef 2012d). More concretely, these citizens became more active in and around the house, were less isolated, took more part in social activities and gained greater self-confidence (De Greef, 2012a; De Greef, 2012b; De Greef, 2012c; De Greef 2012d).

In summary, having a significant group of citizens facing low literacy skills can affect the labour market, the care system and the field of welfare negatively, while investment in education seems to have an effect due to an improved position in the labour market, state of health and social inclusion among participants after joining education. Therefore it seems to be worthwhile to invest in campaigns and programs which would make Dutch society and her citizens more aware of the problem of low literacy and try to increase the sense of urgency to invest in this 'social problem'. The question is whether Dutch citizens are currently aware of this sense of urgency and the need for investment in order to increase

literacy skills among a large number of citizens. This study gives an answer to the question of whether Dutch citizens are aware of the problem of low literacy and underlines the necessity and urgency of investing in this problem and being willing to themselves be active in order to help prevent or fight low literacy in the Netherlands.

Methodology

Sample

In order to analyse the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of Dutch citizens regarding the problem of low literacy, 3,131 Dutch citizens filled in an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed among 3 groups (T⁰: 1042 respondents, T¹: 1048 respondents and T²: 1041 respondents) by using an internet panel. In order to have a representative group of Dutch citizens the research team took several socio-demographic factors into account, such as gender, nationality and age. The number of male and female respondents were almost equal (T⁰: 50% versus 50%; T¹: 51% versus 49%; T²: 51% versus 49%). This was comparable with the national distribution of male versus female in the Netherlands (Hamstra, 2013). Secondly, Table 3.1 shows that based on the national distribution of age the distribution of age remains the same during the period of data collection, namely circa 32% of the respondents were 18 to 39 years old, circa 46% were 40 to 64 years old and circa 22% were 65 years old or older (Hamstra, 2013).

Table 1: Percentage respondents in terms of age category

Category of age	T ⁰ N = 1042	T ¹ N = 1048	T ² N = 1041
18 - 39 years	31%	32%	32%
40 - 64 years	47%	45%	47%
65 years	23%	23%	21%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Finally, according to the distribution of first-generation foreigners versus other Dutch citizens, 13% first-generation foreigners and 87% other Dutch citizens needed to be involved in the research (Hamstra, 2013). According to Hamstra (2013) during the data collection this distribution was almost the same as the nationality of the respondents, namely 12% versus 88% (Hamstra, 2013).

Procedure

In order to investigate the perceived sense of urgency of prevention of and investment in the problem of low literacy an external research organisation called 'Right Marktonderzoek' was asked to distribute the questionnaire three times among a representative group of respondents (according to several aforementioned socio-demographic factors). More specifically, Right Marktonderzoek used a national internet panel of respondents in order to gain enough respondents for this study during summer and autumn of 2013, namely:

- T⁰: Week 34 and 35 2013
- T¹: Week 37 and 38 2013
- T²: Week 38 and 39 2013

Instrument development

In order to gain insights into the perceptions of Dutch citizens regarding the sense of urgency and necessity of doing something to decrease the problem of low literacy, three components are important to mention:

1. The current knowledge concerning the problem of low literacy among Dutch citizens
2. The current attitude concerning the sense of urgency of the prevention of or the fight against low literacy among Dutch citizens
3. The current behaviour concerning the willingness in order to do something in order to decrease the problem of low literacy among Dutch citizens

Besides the questions concerning these three components, respondents were asked to answer questions on socio-demographic factors, such as for example gender, nationality and age, besides the risk of having low literacy skills. Table 2 gives an overview of the used and constructed scales per component.

Table 2: Overview of used scales, sources, number of items and Cronbach's Alpha's

Contents	Factors	Sources	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Scale
Socio-demographic factors	Gender, nationality, age, marital status, number of children, highest level of education, (un)employment	Buffel et al. (2008) in combination with intake questionnaire of the Regional Adult Education Centre in Nijmegen ROC and TNS Nipo (2006) question 39	9	Not applicable	Nominal, ordinal and scale different per item
Risk of having low literacy skills	DIS-scale: Diagnostic Illiteracy Scale	De Greef, Van Deursen & Tubbing (2013)	11	0.941	Likert scale
Knowledge	State of affairs concerning knowledge of low literacy problem	TNS Nipo (2006) and self-constructed scales	11	Not applicable	Nominal and ordinal scale different per item
Attitude	Sense of urgency regarding problem of low literacy	Antil and Bennett, (1979) and Antil (1984)	13	Necessity of societal investment: 0.79 Willingness to make own investment: 0.83 Sense of urgency of problem: 0.45* Rate of importance of problem: 0.47*	Likert scale
Behaviour	Rate of willingness to do something in order to prevent or fight against low literacy	Self-constructed scales	11	Discussion of the problem of low literacy: 0.90 Recognition of low literacy skills: 0.67	Likert scale

* Although Cronbach's Alpha is low, these items will be part of the questionnaire due to the importance of these items for this study.

Method of analysis

In order to interpret the perceptions of the respondents concerning their current sense of urgency and the necessity of investment in and prevention of low literacy, descriptives have been analysed.

Results

Knowledge of problem of low literacy

According to Table 3 it seems clear that almost 100% of the respondents were familiar with the fact that reading and writing problems exist. However, most respondents were not aware of the fact that more than one million Dutch citizens had low literacy skills. According to Table 3 12% to 13% thought that more than one million citizens had low literacy skills. Furthermore 34% to 40% were acquainted with people who experienced reading and writing problems (see Table 3). In addition to this, according to Table 3, 15% to 17% of the respondents knew that the national “Literacy Day” existed.

Table 3: Knowledge of low literacy problems

Aspects	Percentage of respondents		
	T ⁰	T ¹	T ²
Knows about the existence of reading and writing problems	98	99	99
Estimation of more than 1 million people with low literacy skills	13	12	12
Acquainted with people with reading and writing problems	34	36	40
Familiar with the annual “Literacy Day”	17	15	16

Secondly, according to Table 4, most of the respondents (86.1% to 88.8%) knew what the definition of low literacy was, namely the fact that ‘people are not able to read and write properly and as a result cannot fully participate in society’ or the fact that ‘people have problems with reading, writing, listening, numeracy, the use of computers and speaking’.

Table 4: Knowledge of definition of low literacy

	Definition of low literacy	Percentage of respondents		
		T ⁰	T ¹	T ²
1	People not being able to read and write properly and as a result not being able to fully participate in society	58.2%	58.9%	58.2%
2	People having problems with reading, writing, listening, numeracy, the use of computers and speaking	30.6%	28.0%	27.9%
3	People having dyslexia	2.8%	4.9%	5.5%
4	People can never 'adopt' the language	2.4%	2.9%	2.2%
5	People having problems with the use of computers and digital systems	0.9%	0.9%	1.4%
6	People in the 'low lands' have literacy skills	0.5%	0.7%	0.5%
7	Proper answer not given	4.7%	3.9%	4.7%
	Total	100%	100%	100%

Thirdly, around 85% knew of the existence of organisations which can give more information about reading and writing to those citizens who wish to increase their reading and writing skills. According to Table 5, most respondents thought that Stichting Lezen & Schrijven was such an organisation. In addition, circa 30% to 35% thought that it was possible to get this information via Stichting ABC, the Internet or the municipality.

Table 5: Organisation which can give information on increasing reading and writing skills*

Organisation	Percentage of respondents		
	T ⁰	T ¹	T ²
Stichting Lezen & Schrijven	43%	43%	40%
Stichting ABC	33%	33%	32%
Internet	31%	31%	32%
Municipality	32%	31%	31%
Regional adult education centre or school	28%	26%	25%
Library	26%	25%	25%
National phone number for Reading & Writing	19%	17%	19%
Community centre	16%	13%	16%
Princess Laurentien	12%	12%	10%
ETV.nl	8%	7%	10%
Via own job	2%	2%	2%
Different	2%	2%	2%
No idea	14%	14%	14%

Note:* More answers are possible

Attitude towards the problem of low literacy

Table 6 gives an overview of the four specific aspects of the attitude towards the sense of urgency of the prevention of low literacy. In considering the results one must take into account that '1' represents a low score and '5' a high score for the specific aspect. More specifically this means that the higher the score the more positive respondents were towards the specific aspect of the attitude. As a result Table 6 shows that the respondents were positive towards the necessity of societal development. On the other hand the willingness to make one's own investment was low. Furthermore the sense of the urgency of the problem and the rate of importance of the problem seems to have an average score (not high or low) on a scale from 1 to 5 (see table 6).

Table 6: Attitude towards the problem of low literacy

Aspects of attitude	Measurement 1	Measurement 2	Measurement 3
Necessity of societal investment	3.72	3.70	3.71
Well willingness of own investment	2.61	2.58	2.63
Sense of urgency of problem	2.98	2.95	2.97
Rate of importance of problem	3.02	3.06	3.00

Behaviour towards the problem of low literacy

Regarding the different aspects of behaviour towards the problem of low literacy, Table 7 shows that respondents did not discuss the problem of low literacy very often. Moreover the respondents recognised low literacy skills only rarely, but still more often than they discussed the problem of low literacy.

Table 7: Behaviour towards the problem of low literacy

Aspects of behaviour	Measurement 1	Measurement 2	Measurement 3
To discuss the problem of low literacy	2.22	2.27	2.28
To recognise low literacy skills	3.02	2.99	3.00

Conclusions and discussion

Since a significant proportion of the Dutch population still seems to have low literacy skills, which can cause social and economic disadvantages in Dutch society, it seems a matter of importance that Dutch citizens emphasised a sense of the urgency of this problem and the necessity of investing in the prevention of low

literacy. The question was whether citizens in the Netherlands were aware of the problem, would emphasise that investment was needed and would be willing to invest in order to prevent or fight the ongoing problem of low literacy. The research results showed that most of the respondents were aware of the fact that reading and writing problems exist and knew what low literacy meant. On the other hand most of the respondents did not know that more than one million Dutch citizens faced writing and reading difficulties in daily life. Besides this only 34% to 40% were acquainted with people who faced these problems. Furthermore, 85% knew that there were organisations, which could give information in order to gain better reading and writing skills and circa 40% to 45% of the respondents thought that Stichting Lezen & Schrijven was such an organisation. In addition around 30% to 35% of the respondents said that Stichting ABC, the Internet or the municipality could provide this kind of information.

Secondly the respondents thought it was necessary to invest in the prevention of the problem of low literacy, but were less willing to invest themselves. Besides this, the sense of urgency and the level of importance of the problem were neither very high nor very low.

Finally it became clear that respondents did not often discuss the problem of low literacy, neither did they recognise low literacy skills among other citizens.

At any rate this study suggests that most Dutch citizens are familiar with the problem of low literacy skills, but do not totally perceive the sense of urgency of this problem. They do think the Netherlands should invest in order to overcome this problem, but do not know how big this problem is or do not think it is a very urgent or important problem. Besides this most of the respondents are not actively involved in recognition of or discussions concerning the problem of having low literacy skills. Therefore it has become clear that campaigns in order to make Dutch citizens aware of the sense of urgency of the problem of low literacy still seem to be necessary in the Netherlands. In order to stimulate other citizens to be actively involved in the issue of low literacy, campaigning still seems to be needed. Further research is necessary in order to find out if certain campaigns seem to be redundant and which factors seem to increase the perceived sense of urgency regarding the fight against or prevention of low literacy in the Netherlands.

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Spoznaja za urgentnošću prevencije problema niske pismenosti među stanovnicima Holandije¹⁰

Apstrakt: Prema najnovijim rezultatima istraživanja PIAAC (Programa za međunarodnu procenu kompetencija odraslih), primećuje se da je u Holandiji sve više i više građana sa niskom pismenošću, tačnije 1,3 miliona stanovnika. Shodno tome da se sve veća grupa stanovnika suočava sa niskom pismenošću, to utiče negativno na dobrobit, tržište rada, sistem zaštite. Pitanje u ovom trenutku jeste da li su holandski državljani svesni urgentnosti i neophodnosti ulaganja u svrhu povećanja pismenosti kod velikog broja stanovnika. Ovo istraživanje, u kojem je učestvovalo 3131 stanovnika Holandije, pokazuje da je većina ispitanika upoznata sa problemom niske pismenosti, ali da ne oseća potrebu za urgentnim reagovanjem. Smatraju da je ulaganje u svrhu prevazilaženja ovog problema neophodno, ali da ne znaju koliko je ovaj problem ozbiljan i ne smatraju da je on urgentan ili važan. Osim ovog, većina ispitanika nije aktivno uključena u prepoznavanje ili diskusiju vezanu za problem niske pismenosti. Stoga je postalo jasno da su kampanje koje će Holandane osvestiti o nužnosti rešavanja problema niske pismenosti preko potrebne.

Ključne reči: niska pismenost, veštine čitanja i pisanja, znanje, stav i ponašanje, Holandija, kampanja.

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