



Literacy and reading promotion programs in the Dutch Caribbean

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Abstract:

In this paper some examples will be given of successful reading promotion and literacy activities on the Dutch Caribbean islands Curacao, Aruba and Dutch Sint Maarten. In the first part of the paper the language situation as well as the social and cultural background of library work in the Dutch Caribbean is depicted. In the remainder of the paper some details of campaigns and programs for preschoolers, primary school children and young adults on the Dutch Caribbean islands are given.

Introduction

In this paper some examples of successful reading promotion and literacy activities on the Dutch Caribbean islands Curacao, Aruba and Dutch Sint Maarten are given. These three countries together with the Netherlands form the kingdom of the Netherlands whose citizens all share the common Dutch nationality. The official language of the Dutch Caribbean islands is Dutch however on Aruba and Curacao, the Creole language Papiamentu is the common language. Since the 1980s more and more books and other publications are written in Papiamentu. On Dutch St Maarten English is the lingua franca.

Social and cultural context

The Dutch Caribbean island societies are very diverse culturally and linguistically. This is part of the reason why a true reading tradition never developed on the islands. The social and cultural circumstances create many challenges for librarians trying to promote reading and information literacy. Another challenge is that library development often has a low priority

for the local governments. As a consequence library buildings are rapidly becoming obsolete, not well maintained and suffer from technical problems. Libraries are often understaffed or the existing staff is not sufficiently qualified to carry out the necessary tasks.

Despite these difficult circumstances staff members of Dutch Caribbean Libraries have always been very creative and managed to develop a broad range of reading promotion and information literacy activities for children and young adults. In this paper examples will be given of some successful library campaigns.

Examples of these best practices are the book start campaign for preschoolers organized by the public libraries of Curacao and Sint Maarten. Another successful program is the bedtime stories program organized by the Aruban foundation 'Bon nochi drumi dushi' in close cooperation with the Aruba National Library. The Aruba National Library as well as the public library of St Maarten organizes yearly Children's book weeks under the slogan "Reading is fun". Mobile libraries or 'bookmobiles' are widely used for reading promotion activities on most Dutch Caribbean islands. The bookmobiles visit children at their schools, at afternoon schools and in their own neighborhoods.

Campaigns for preschoolers on Curacao and St Maarten

The public libraries of Curacao and St Maarten both organize book start programs aimed at preschoolers. Through this campaign, parents and caregivers of babies and toddlers are made aware of the importance of starting to read to their children at a young age. In Curacao all parents of two year old children receive an invitation for an information evening about reading to children at the library. More than 30% of the invited parents show up at these information evenings. The St Maarten public library also organizes workshops and information evening for parents of young children. Both libraries motivate parents to register their baby or toddlers as member of the library by giving out surprise bags with toys and booklets to parents who come to the library to register their preschooler. Another important element of the book start campaigns is the training of daycare workers and workers at pediatric clinics in reading aloud to young children.

Bedtime stories program on Aruba

Since 2007 a successful family reading program is organized on Aruba by the foundation "Bon nochi drumi dushi" in cooperation with the library. The volunteers of the 'bon nochi drumi dushi' (good night sleep well) foundation visit children at home around bedtime to tell them stories. The reading of bedtime stories is a relaxing activity for the children and lets them experience the pleasures of reading. The volunteers also teach the parents of the children how to read to their child. A special television program, DVD's as well as Pajama parties are other program activities.

Children's Book weeks on Aruba and St Maarten

On Aruba children's book festivals have been organized as a recurrent yearly activity since 1981. On both islands each year a different theme is chosen for the book week. Of course the book weeks and book festivals are organized in close cooperation with local schools.

Basically the Aruban festival consists of a tour of local Aruban, Antillean and Dutch authors of children's books. The writers visit practically every local school on the island during the festival-week in November. The activity has a festive character in which the Aruban culture in all its diversity plays a central role. The opening of the festival is a street-party in front of the library building. This party is organized by the library in cooperation with one of the local schools. As part of this celebration, the children of the school perform in self-made sketches and songs which centre on the theme of the festival. A book fair in which the local bookshops and publishers participate is also part of this celebration. The closing of the festival is also a small party, organized by another school on the island. On St Maarten the yearly Children's book week starts with the traditional opening parade in which the participating children dress up in line with the yearly theme of the book week. In 2009 the theme of the St Maarten book week was Healthy food so all children were dressed up as their favorite fruit or vegetable. Other activities in St Maarten's Children's book weeks are art competitions, excursions and storytelling.

Bookmobile services

Throughout the Dutch Caribbean bookmobiles are widely used for literacy and reading promotion activities. On Aruba and St Maarten bookmobiles are visiting the primary schools according to a schedule. This is an important service since most schools on these islands do not have school libraries. In Curacao the bookmobiles visit 35 locations on the island with two bookmobiles. In addition to the bookmobile visits to the schools the St Maarten library also operates the bookmobile outreach program. The object of this program is to reach out to children living in the districts who are unable to visit the library regularly for lack of transportation. The bookmobile outreach program brings library services home to the children in their own districts. Within the program twelve community centers and afternoon schools are visited by the bookmobile on weekly or biweekly bases. During these visits the bus is manned by a bus driver and a qualified library staff member. The library staff member tells stories and engages the children in reading activities and educational games during the bookmobile visits and the children get the chance to check out new books. Since 2011 the daycare centers on St Maarten are also visited by the bookmobile. Most afternoon schools and daycare centers borrow boxes with library books so the children can also read the library books in between bookmobile visits. On Aruba the bookmobile is also used to promote the bedtime stories program 'Bon noch drumi dushi'.

Special Programs for Young adults

It is not easy to interest young adults or teenagers for reading and literacy based activities. That is why the libraries of Curacao and St Maarten set up special programs for this group. In the Curacao public library teenagers have their own youth station which they operate themselves. In the youth station books and other information materials about topics that are

important for this age group are available. The Curacao libraries youth station even provides counseling to youngsters during specific hours. In the library of St Maarten a “Readers are Leaders” book club with a growing membership by and for high school students was established in 2010. The club organizes musical happenings and pizza parties on the parking lot of the Library. “Readers are Leaders” even has its own radio jingle. As part of the program the teenagers post book reviews and book discussions on Face book and Good reads. To motivate youngsters to read they can win prizes if they read a certain amount of books and write reviews about their books.

It is our Dutch Caribbean experience that even with a small but motivated staff and a very limited budget it is still possible successful reading promotion activities and reach out to various groups in the community.

Websites Dutch Caribbean Libraries:

Philipsburg Jubilee Library St. Maarten, www.stmaartenlibrary.org

National Library of Aruba, www.bibliotecanacional.aw

Public Library Curacao, www.curacaopubliclibrary.an