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Rethinking The Reading List? Student and Teacher Perspectives on Dutch Literature Education and 'Lezen voor de Lijst'

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Rethinking The Reading List? Student and Teacher Perspectives on Dutch Literature Education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’



Figure 1: Library Photo. Source: Unsplash

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the experiences and perceptions of Dutch high school students and teachers regarding mandatory literature education, with a particular focus on the pedagogic concept *Lezen voor de Lijst*. Amid a national decline in literacy rates among teenagers, the study explores how current educational practices regarding literature may contribute to student disengagement and displeasure, to then explore what improvements can be made to better align literature education with students' interests and needs.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines a mixed-method survey completed by 132 students (both current and recently graduated from the havo 4/5 and vwo 4, 5, 6 levels), from which then a follow-up discussion with three students, and interviews with four Dutch teachers were conducted. The findings reveal a disconnect between students' preferred reading genres, which are often English-language books in contemporary genre and speculative fiction such as fantasy, thrillers, and science fiction, and the older, more canonically perceived Dutch works that are typically featured on title lists. Students reported low motivation and lacking engagement due to these outdated or inaccessible texts, while teachers acknowledged structural constraints including the limited class time for literature education.

The research underlines the pivotal role of teachers in mediating student experiences and highlights the need for a more inclusive, flexible, and diverse literature curriculum. Key recommendations include diversifying the title lists on *Lezen voor de Lijst* as well as labeling Dutch books more accurately into speculative fiction genres when they include fantastical elements, integrating alternative assessment formats, increasing class time for literature, and more student involvement in selecting books.

This thesis contributes to ongoing discussions about literacy and literature education in the Netherlands and offers practical, evidence-based solutions particularly aimed at improving student engagement and motivation.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	4
1. Methods.....	8
1.1 Introduction.....	8
1.2 Research Design.....	9
1.3 Participants and Sampling.....	10
1.4 Data Collection Method.....	11
1.5 Data Analysis and Analytical Framework.....	12
1.6 Ethical Considerations.....	13
1.7 Limitations.....	13
1.8 Summary.....	14
2. Background Information.....	14
2.1 Literacy.....	14
2.2 Lezen voor de Lijst.....	17
2.3 The Dutch Education System and Pedagogy.....	19
2.4 Reading Habits.....	24
2.5 Speculative Fiction.....	28
2.6 Literary Canon in the Netherlands.....	32
3. Students (Experiences and Habits).....	35
3.1 Analysis.....	35
3.1.1 Survey Analysis.....	35
3.1.1.A Demographic Overview.....	36
3.1.1.B Reading Habits.....	37
3.2 Follow-up Discussion.....	45
3.3 Conclusion.....	47
4. Teachers.....	48
4.1 Interview Analysis.....	49
4.2 Conclusion.....	53
5. Conclusion and Discussion.....	54
Bibliography.....	61
Appendix A: Survey Questions.....	70

Appendix B: Follow-up Discussion Guide	78
Appendix C: Interview Guide	79

Introduction

Declining literacy rates are on the rise across many European countries for adults and children.¹ The Netherlands is no exception according to the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report of 2023, which measures the preparedness and ability 15 year olds have to function as citizens in today's society. For example, reading important messages via mail, thinking of tax authority messages and election voting, or simply reading news articles. Literacy rates have gone down significantly in the Netherlands, more than other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and EU (European Union) countries, with a current score of 459 compared to 476 (OECD) and 480 (EU) in 2022 when in 2015, the Netherlands scored 503, higher than other EU countries with 499 and OECD countries with 490.²

With these declining literacy rates it is crucial for students to be able to read well and function in today's society, literature education is ever more important. The mandatory Dutch literature education ensures that high school students have to read a certain amount of Dutch literature during their high school education. The appropriate books to read are often put on title lists as well as the pedagogic concept and list 'Lezen voor de Lijst'.

With anything mandatory there are bound to be varying opinions and sentiments regarding the pedagogical concept and process of literature education. A common finding is that most Dutch teenagers prefer to read in English. The genres that are most popular are thrillers, young adult (YA), and fantasy books.³ They are genres that are not as prominent on most title lists for literature education.⁴ This thesis will focus on such experiences and sentiments of current and graduated Dutch high school students, specifically in the educational levels havo (year 4 and 5) and vwo (year 4, 5, and 6), as well as the experiences and thoughts of a few Dutch teachers.

¹ 'New PIAAC Results Show Declining Literacy and Increasing Inequality in Many European Countries – Better Adult Learning Is Necessary', *European Association for the Education of Adults*, 11 December 2024 <<https://eaea.org/2024/12/11/new-piaac-results-show-declining-literacy-and-increasing-inequality-in-many-european-countries-better-adult-learning-is-necessary/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

² Mark Deckers, 'Het PISA-Rapport in Drie Grafieken Plus Eén Grafiek Die Niet Getoond Werd', *Mark Deckers*, 6 December 2023 <<https://www.markdeckers.net/2023/12/het-pisa-rapport-in-drie-grafieken-plus.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³ 'In De Leeswereld van Jongeren', *KVB Boekwerk*, 12 September 2023 <<https://kvbboekwerk.nl/consumentenonderzoek/smb-gfk-kwartaalmetingen/in-de-leeswereld-van-jongeren>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁴ 'Lezen Voor De Lijst | 15-18 Jaar', *Jeugdbibliotheek*, n.d. <<https://www.jeugdbibliotheek.nl/12-18-jaar/lezen-voor-de-lijst/15-18-jaar/alle-boeken.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

These brief findings about reading habits and preferences—which will be discussed more in detail in the next chapter—were reminiscent of my own experiences and sentiments with reading, especially when it came to the mandatory reading examinations in Dutch high schools. This personal experience and some anecdotal sentiments from past conversations are what led to this research to figure out how Dutch teenagers feel about the mandatory reading and how it could be possibly revised to better account for their interests. One recent conversation with a high school alum visualizes one such sentiment:

“...As someone who has been a fan of books ever since I could read, I initially didn't mind the idea of having to read a number of books and discuss them in our high school Dutch class. I followed a bilingual programme in high school, so we were encouraged to read books in English to improve our language skills... the habit of reading in English stuck, because there were more books to choose from in genres I liked better... However, the list that we were allowed to choose from was very limited. Translated books were not allowed and most books were written at least twenty years ago. Where my friends and I had previously recommended books to each other, we now advised each other against reading certain books. Usually, the reason for advising against reading a certain book included sexual violence, heavy religious themes, or racism. After reading a couple of books, most students gave up on the literature and hoped that an online summary would be sufficient to not fail the exam. Ever since, I have continued reading books in English and have not really felt inclined to consider other Dutch literature...”

– A Dutch high school alum, 2025

This quote alludes to the process that Dutch high schools test reading comprehension and literacy of young students. The pedagogic concept of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ was introduced in 2008 to help educators with having their students’ reading competency grow by reading adequate books for their level. The website has dedicated space to support teachers whilst also providing an up-to-date title list of Dutch literature for lower and upper class high school students. These title lists are mainly used to help students choose books with appropriate levels for their examinations. However, a common concern is that title lists can end up being used as ‘canon’ which, depending on the teacher, can happen. These title lists might be used as normative where students are forced to read at a certain level which then

leads to the original intention of the actual concepts to be lost, the intention which is meant to stimulate students to read and select books with an appropriate and challenging level.⁵

As most research to date has been aimed towards reading motivation intervention and the literacy and reading comprehension decline, mostly focusing on teachers, this research examines current sentiments and experiences of students and the mandatory readings they have to do in Dutch classes in high school. I wish to further examine these by interviewing several Dutch teachers and how they approach the mandatory reading experience. The intention of this research is to then give, if possible, potential recommendations of approaching the mandatory reading concept 'Lezen voor de Lijst' and mandatory reading in Dutch high schools.

The research question that I will try to answer is: *How can the experiences of the Dutch mandatory literature education of (graduated) high school students, in the year 4/5 havo and 4/5/6 vwo, influence or improve the pedagogic approach to literature education including the pedagogic concept of 'Lezen voor de Lijst'?*

Sub-questions:

- *What does the Dutch education system look like and Dutch literature education?*
- *What is the pedagogic concept 'Lezen voor de Lijst'?*
- *What is the purpose of the Dutch literary canon and what does it look like as well as how does it compare?*
- *Why is literature education so vital?*
- *How do/did (graduated) high school students (havo/vwo) experience the mandatory literature reading process and examination?*
- *What do Dutch teachers think of the concept 'Lezen voor de Lijst' and the current literature education?*

⁵ Anne Westers, Debbie Kooij and Marleen Kieft, 'Lezen Voor De Lijst: Onderzoek Naar Gebruik, Ervaringen, en Waardering', *Oberon Onderzoek | Advies* (2023)
<<https://www.bibliotheeknetwerk.nl/sites/default/files/documents/3006%20Lezen%20voor%20de%20lijst%20-%20oberon.pdf>>.

The thesis is divided into 5 chapters following the introduction, each addressing key aspects of the research. The chapters are followed by an appendix containing the questionnaire and interview questions.

In the first chapter, the methods that were used in this thesis are presented. In this chapter the participants and sampling for the research, as well as the actual research design, are presented.

In chapter two the background information is provided on the concept ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ for Dutch mandatory reading of Dutch literature for high school students, the Dutch education system, literacy and reading habits in the Netherlands, and the Dutch literary canon. Furthermore, it establishes basic knowledge that is necessary for the research in the following chapters as well as the essential background information needed for having a full understanding while reading this thesis.

Chapter three focuses on Dutch high school students’ experiences and thoughts on Dutch literature education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’. The main findings show a conflicting relationship between students and the literary curriculum that are shaped by their own reading habits, preferences, and teachers. While most students enjoy reading in their freetime, their genre and English reading preference does not align with most of the appropriate book titles that are approved. The appropriate and accepted book titles are often perceived as boring and outdated according to high school students. The presence of teachers poses a great influence on the literary experience, motivation, and enjoyment, as well as the chosen examination process that was often seen as having too much time in between reading and testing. Nonetheless, not everyone’s experiences are negative. Students reported discovering new Dutch literature though the majority wishes for more fitting books reflecting their worldly interests.

Chapter four focuses on Dutch high school teachers’ method of teaching and part in the whole process. Four teachers were interviewed regarding their method of teaching, their opinion, and part of the whole literature education process and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’. They all had strong interests in the Dutch language and literature as well as working with adolescents. They see their position as to steer students and give recommendations whilst being gatekeepers to what students are allowed to read and what not. They use ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ as a guideline and starting point for their students for books with appropriate literary levels. Different methods of motivating their students are implemented by

teachers; think of visiting literary cafés, author visits, and intricate title lists developed for their students. A main wish from the teachers is to have more time possible allotted for literature during class hours.

Chapter five, the conclusion, summarizes the main findings of the study based on both chapters. It further considers the potential recommendations that can be given to educators and Dutch high schools. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of the research and what further research can be done in the field as well as an ethical reflection. The key recommendations include:

- Diversifying the title lists on ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ (more contemporary Dutch authors, more speculative fiction, more multicultural narratives)
- Consider high quality translated works
- Labeling Dutch books more accurately into speculative fiction genres when they include fantastical elements
- Integrating alternative assessment formations and reducing time between reading and reflection
- Teacher support and student centered pedagogy
- Increasing class time for literature education
- More student involvement in the process of selecting and accepting books

1. Methods

1.1 Introduction

The scope of this thesis is to examine the reading habits, experiences, and sentiments of Dutch havo and vwo high school students as well as Dutch teachers in regards to the mandatory literature education of Dutch literature reading to apply these findings to make possible suggestions to revise or make changes in the current pedagogy in place including the pedagogic concept of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’. The participating students responded to a specific survey, some of these respondents participated in a follow-up discussion for more in depth insights. These students, 132 in total, are from year 4 and 5 (havo) and year 4, 5, 6 (vwo). To broaden the evaluation, recently graduated students were also included in the research. They

had to be graduated earliest in 2018 to latest in 2024. Four Dutch teachers were interviewed for the same reason.

1.2 Research Design

Survey and Follow-up Discussion

The research adopts a mixed-method approach by integrating quantitative and qualitative methods (a ‘mixed methods approach’) to explore trends in data while also incorporating the nuances of individual experiences.⁶ The research of this section starts with an initial survey to provide quantifiable insights and data. Quantitative methods, such as the survey, provide the ability to identify trends and relationships between variables to gather numerical data. These findings and results can be applied to larger populations as they are often generalizable.⁷

To gain more contextual understanding and deeper perspective of these experiences, follow-up discussions with a selection of students were done. The analysis of the discussion will be done by reading through the transcription and doing inductive initial coding.⁸ This selection is dependent on time and spatial constraints, as well as survey responses. The benefits that come from using qualitative research is the ability to use data that is usually not usable for measuring, unlike numerical data. It allows for explanations to be developed, and potential patterns to be identified that can benefit the research.⁹ A convergent parallel design was applied, as the survey was collected but, simultaneously, a follow-up discussion already took place before analyzing the survey data. The datasets are analyzed separately and merged for interpretation.¹⁰

From these findings, combined with the following chapter, it is possible to give preliminary recommendations to the current pedagogic approach and concept of ‘Lezen voor

⁶ Saul McLeod, ‘Mixed Methods Research Guide With Examples’, *SimplyPsychology*, 2024 <<https://www.simplypsychology.org/mixed-methods-research.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁷ Munther Mohammad Zyoud, Tahani R. K Bsharat and Khaled Dweikat, ‘Quantitative Research Methods: Maximizing Benefits, Addressing Limitations, and Advancing Methodological Frontiers’, *Zenodo*, 2024, doi:10.5281/zenodo.10939470.

⁸ Heather Stuckey, ‘The Second Step in Data Analysis: Coding Qualitative Research Data’, *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 03.01 (2014), pp. 007–10, doi:10.4103/2321-0656.140875.

⁹ Jo Moriarty, ‘Qualitative Methods Overview’, *ResearchGate*, 2011 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233741593_Qualitative_Methods_Overview_Methods_review_1>.

¹⁰ Saul McLeod, ‘Mixed Methods Research Guide With Examples’, 2024.

de Lijst'. As the survey is both close-ended and open-ended, it is a mix between quantitative and qualitative methods as well.¹¹

Teachers: Interviews

The teacher section of the study employed a qualitative research design by making use of semi-structured interviews, and in a particular case a written structured interview. This approach was chosen to explore personal thoughts and experiences on Dutch literature education, the pedagogic concept, and what books are acceptable. As was mentioned above, qualitative methods allow for the understanding of subjective experiences and interpretations of individuals instead of generalizable numerical data.

Four teachers were interviewed, from these interviewees were three current high school Dutch teachers. Two of these taught the upper classes of havo and vwo while the other only first years. The fourth interviewee was a retired teacher, their interview was done via a written document. A few questions were written down and corresponded, where the participant was selected based on their LinkedIn profile as they now focused on their own concept for reading literature in high school. The interviewees (teachers) were recruited through personal connections and LinkedIn. More recruitment approaches were used, however with a lack of response as the result.

Semi-structured interviews in person and the single structured interview that was written down and shared via mail were chosen, because they ask respondents to answer preset open-ended questions with flexibility to deviate and probe deeper in certain aspects. In order to have the data accurately captured and transcribed, voice recordings have been made.¹²

1.3 Participants and Sampling

Survey and Follow-up Discussion

For the survey, a total of 132 participants filled in the survey. From these 132 students, 3 individuals were selected and available for a follow-up discussion. This discussion took place as a small group discussion.

¹¹ Julie Ponto, 'Understanding and Evaluating Survey Research', *National Library of Medicine*, 1 March 2015 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4601897/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹² Shazia Jamshed, 'Qualitative Research Method-Interviewing and Observation', *National Library of Medicine*, 5 September 2014 <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4194943/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

The participants' profile requirements were that they had to be current or already (recently; from 2018 until now) graduated from Dutch high schools. They had to be either 4th or 5th year havo students or 4th, 5th, or 6th year vwo students. This sample population was chosen because the mandatory Dutch literature requirements for havo and vwo are much more strict than the other levels as well as that there are some similarities between the requirements of havo and vwo. Furthermore, they have direct experience with the mandatory reading of Dutch literature and the pedagogic concept of 'Lezen voor de Lijst'. With the recent decline of literacy rates in the Netherlands of Dutch youth in mind since 2015 and 2018, the boundaries of the already graduated students were set at a maximum of being graduated in 2018. The already graduated students were included to add to the discussion and to add more insights, though the findings have to be clearly stated.

The sampling strategy that was employed was with this intended purpose in mind.

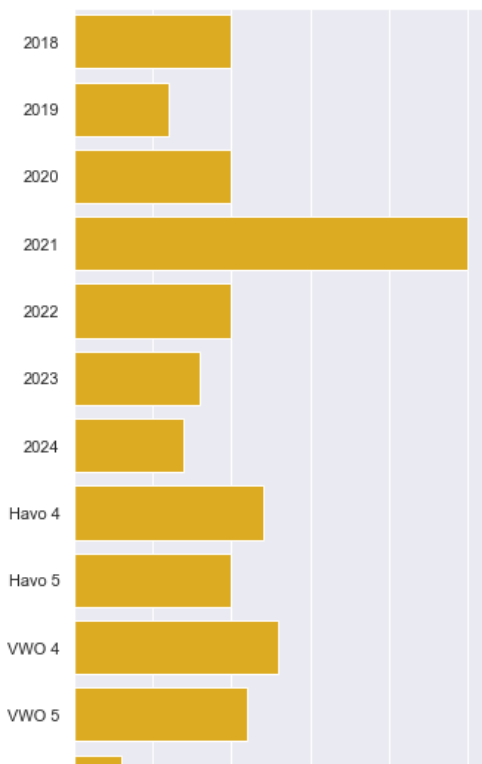


Figure 2: Demographic overview of respondents' education levels and year of graduating

High schools were contacted to reach current high school students. Personal networks were contacted for (recently) graduated participants. For the follow-up discussion, a subsample was selected based on time and place as well as their willingness to participate. It was therefore not possible to have follow-up discussions with current high school students.

A Demographic Overview

The majority of survey respondents consist of already graduated high school students, with a large group having graduated in 2021. This comes to no surprise as the personal network that was used in gathering responses consisted of mostly 2021 graduates. Fourth year high school students, havo and vwo, were close in numbers to each other.

Most of the respondents were 22 years old. However, the ages of respondents range between 15 and 28.

1.4 Data Collection Method

The survey was administered using Qualtrics as a digital questionnaire and the questions in the survey contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Most questions were mandatory to fill in. A five star scale was used to measure the experience of reading at school. The survey aimed to measure and examine the reading habits in the sample population's daily lives as well as their experiences, feelings, and thoughts toward and of the mandatory reading of Dutch literature at school.

The follow-up discussions were conducted with the selected participants to explore their findings in more detail. Based on emerging themes from the survey responses, a discussion guide was developed. The meeting took about 40 minutes and the voices were recorded, in person, with participant consent.

The teacher data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a structured written interview. The semi-structured interviews, as the name states, made use of a set of guided questions. These questions were flexible in nature and did not need to be asked in a specific order per se. Flexible questions that arose in the spur of the moment were also able and allowed to be asked. The interview guide covered personal habits of the teachers, their preferences in teaching and selecting literature, their thoughts on the pedagogic concepts and so on. The purpose of the four interviews was to provide additional context to help interpret the survey data.

The interviews lasted approximately 30-40 minutes and were conducted in person and online via Microsoft Teams. The written interview was shared via a personal message on LinkedIn. Beforehand, the participants were told about the purpose of the research and informed consent was asked and granted, with the right to withdraw at any time.

1.5 Data Analysis and Analytical Framework

The quantitative section of the analysis of the survey was done through exporting the results from Qualtrics in a CSV file to Jupyter Notebook. From there, Python was used to create graphs as visualizations to guide the analysis.

The qualitative analysis of the follow-up discussion was done by creating a discussion transcript. From this transcript a thematic analysis was done, where initial and inductive codes were selected based on the discussion guide as well as emerging perspectives from the

discussion itself.¹³ The codes were grouped into broader themes that allow for interpretation. A visualization map consisting of these themes and codes was made.

The interviews were transcribed after they were recorded. The data was then analyzed by using a thematic analysis. This was done by getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes to later look for and review these themes. The initial codes were gained from the interview guide as well as the interviewee's own responses. They were then further grouped into themes and were used to get the core ideas from the data.¹⁴ After, they were put into a visual code map.

1.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants for both the survey, the follow-up discussion, and interviews provided informed consent. By giving consent they were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time. The data was anonymized during analysis.

1.7 Limitations

Limitations regarding the research methods could include selection bias as sampling was not done randomly. Furthermore, generalizability beyond the sample population might be limited, as the sample size is quite small and includes mostly already graduated students. This sample inconsistency was mainly due to time constraints during the research. These constraints included spring break, 4th year travel trips, as well as other holiday dates and the central final exams for the 5th year havo students and 6th year vwo students, followed by the summer break. Additionally, the nature of survey participation hinges upon the willingness to respond as well as the willingness to self-report, which may impact the data.

For Python graph visualizations of certain survey question combinations, with personal lack of adequate skills, as well as time constraints, it was not possible to quantify qualitative responses as there were many responses.

¹³ Muhammed Naeem and others, 'A Step-By-Step Process of Thematic Analysis to Develop a Conceptual Model in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22 (2023), doi:10.1177/16094069231205789.

¹⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3.2 (2006), pp. 77-101, doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

While the number of 4 interviews can be perceived as only a few, they are certainly not limiting. They pose as adding context to the survey. The number of interviews thus has more room for expansion for even richer data.

1.8 Summary

This part of the chapter outlined the mixed-methods design through a survey and follow-up discussion used in this study on student experiences and sentiments with Dutch literature education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ as well as the qualitative methods through interviews with teachers to provide additional context to the findings from the survey and follow-up discussion. It includes the participant selection, data collection methods, and the analytical approach and procedures. There were 132 survey respondents (students), 3 participants in the follow-up discussion, and 4 teachers that were interviewed. From these teachers, 1 was already retired and 1 only taught first year students.

2. Background Information

This chapter provides background knowledge surrounding and supporting the understanding regarding the topic of Dutch literature education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’.

2.1 Literacy

Reasons as to why the literacy keeps decreasing since 2003 are still mostly unclear and are still being debated. A newer factor is the occurrence of Covid-19, as a worldwide health crisis, which had major impacts on schools and education. However, this argument does not explain the rapid decrease that happened before the pandemic and why the literacy rates are currently still decreasing, the factors affecting literacy thus predate Covid.¹⁵

With the Covid-19 pandemic, schools moved to online learning. While online education has the potential to expand educational opportunities, a key concern is the lack of

¹⁵Mark Deckers, ‘Het PISA-Rapport in Drie Grafieken Plus Één Grafiek Die Niet Getoond Werd’, *Mark Deckers*, 6 December 2023 <<https://www.markdeckers.net/2023/12/het-pisa-rapport-in-drie-grafieken-plus.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

interactivity compared to classroom teaching.¹⁶ While interactivity in regards to reading comprehension is important, schools should work with long, rich texts and good teacher support from a young age on in class according to an article by Bosman and others (2022).¹⁷ They mention in their research keys to effective pedagogy of reading comprehension, where interaction and motivation go hand in hand. This interaction and connection between teacher and student was significantly more difficult within a digital environment. By working together, as well as between students themselves, reading comprehension and the understanding of school texts becomes better as they are able to learn from one another.¹⁸ Thus the pedagogical shift during COVID-19, where online learning took over, likely exacerbated the decreasing literacy trends as this connection and interaction, which is necessary for reading comprehension and motivation, was lacking and more difficult.

In practice, the decrease in literacy has the possibility of causing college students to not be able to read books and source material adequately. They have not adequately learned how to do deep reading as their smartphones have replaced books and deep reading for small passages of text and stimuli when it comes to consuming information at present. In the United States only 17% of third to eighth grade teachers teach whole texts.¹⁹ Literature education teaches high school students social, human, and cultural values as well as that it expands the capacity to empathy and social judgement. Furthermore, it develops text and literary competence in general.²⁰

¹⁶ Gina Ionela Butnaro and others, 'The Effectiveness of Online Education during Covid-19 Pandemic – A comparative Analysis between the Perceptions of Academic Students and High School Students from Romania', *Training, Education and Research in Covid-19 Times: Innovative Methodological Approaches, Best Practices, and Case Studies*, 13.9 (2021), doi:10.3390/su13095311.

¹⁷ Anna Bosman, Sezgin Cihangir and Martin Bootsma, 'Dalende 'Leesvaardigheid': Een Herinterpretatie', *Red het Onderwijs*, 2022 <<https://redhetonderwijs.com/wp-content/uploads/Bosman-et-al-2022.pdf>>.

¹⁸ N. Moeken, F. Kuiken, and C. Welie, 'Samen Werken aan een Betere Leesvaardigheid: Een Vakoverstijgende Aanpak voor Samenwerkend Lezen in het Voortgezet Onderwijs', *Levende Talen Magazine*, 103.8 (2016), pp. 18-22 <<http://www.lttijdschriften.nl/ojs/index.php/lm/article/view/1638>>.

¹⁹ Rose Horowitz, 'The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books', *The Atlantic*, 1 October 2024 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/11/the-elite-college-students-who-cant-read-books/679945/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

²⁰ Ida Gabrielsen, Marte Blikstad-Balas and Michael Tengberg, 'The Role of Literature in the Classroom. How and for What Purposes do Teachers in Lower Secondary School use Literary Texts?', *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 19 (2019), pp. 1-32, doi: 10.17239/L1ESLL-2019.19.01.13.

Reading comprehension and literacy are important, as they enable and prepare people as citizens in society today.²¹ It is thus essential to have appropriate skills to survive, think of having a job or reading important notices. A finding by Bosman and others in 2022 shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds score lower. This can be because they do not speak Dutch at home for instance.²² Reading comprehension represents the ability to understand written text; it is not just the ability to recognize words. There are several comprehension strategies: predicting and making guesses about what can be seen or read; making connections to prior knowledge and background information; visualizing the text; summarizing by identifying the main idea into their own words.²³ It is thus essential to be able to extract meaning from text, which is the reason why Dutch educators examine reading comprehension and literacy of students via oral or written examinations by making summaries and connections to the literature and other experiences.

Current research that has been done on the literacy decline, reading comprehension, and motivations have often been requested by the Dutch government.²⁴ The literature focuses on YA literature on the reading list and in teaching practice. The research focused mainly on the teaching aspect and thus surveyed and interviewed Dutch teachers with the intention of giving recommendations to teachers.²⁵ Other research focuses more on how to incorporate the use of social media like TikTok in class.²⁶ Different research was done via a meta-analysis on the effects of reading motivation intervention in education, which found that interventions

²¹ Mark Deckers, 'Het PISA-Rapport in Drie Grafieken Plus Één Grafiek Die Niet Getoond Werd', *Mark Deckers*, 6 December 2023 <<https://www.markdeckers.net/2023/12/het-pisa-rapport-in-drie-grafieken-plus.html>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

²² Anna Bosman, Sezgin Cihangir and Martin Bootsma, 'Dalende 'Leesvaardigheid': Een Herinterpretatie', *Red het Onderwijs*, 2022 <<https://redhetonderwijs.com/wp-content/uploads/Bosman-et-al-2022.pdf>>.

²³ Dorothy Brandon, 'The Importance of Reading Comprehension', *Extension Alabama A&M and Auburn Universities*, 26 March 2021 <<https://www.aces.edu/blog/topics/home-family-urban/the-importance-of-reading-comprehension/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

²⁴ Anna Bosman, Sezgin Cihangir and Martin Bootsma, 'Dalende 'Leesvaardigheid': Een Herinterpretatie', *Red het Onderwijs*, 2022.

²⁵ Linda Ackermans, 'Young Adult-Literatuur op de Leeslijst en in de Lespraktijk. Een Onderzoek naar de Inzet en Positie van Literatuur voor Jongeren in de Bovenbouw van het Havo en Vwo', *Stichting Lezen*, 2022 <<https://www.lezen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/YAL-op-de-leeslijst-en-in-de-lespraktijk-2022-digitaal.pdf>>.

²⁶ S. Kulkarni, 'Een Gevoel Krijgen voor BookTok: Inzicht in Affect in de Boekensubcultuur van TikTok', in *Lezen in Beweging: Ontwikkelingen in leesbevordering, lees- en literatuuronderwijs, digitaal lezen en toetsing*, ed. by J. Dera and R. van Steensel (Eburon, 2024), pp. 86-99 <<https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/een-gevoel-krijgen-voor-booktok-inzicht-in-affect-in-de-boekensub>>.

geared towards stimulating interest had positive effects on reading motivation and understanding.²⁷

2.2 Lezen voor de Lijst

As this thesis focuses on the experience of mandatory reading of Dutch literature for high school students, it is essential to understand the pedagogic approach that most Dutch high schools use. The approach was developed by the subject teacher Theo Witte and based on his thesis *Het oog van de meester* in 2008.²⁸ In his thesis, Witte focused on literary competency and the steps needed to develop this competency within students, as it is a skill that needs to be taught just like learning to read. In this way, he developed and worked with competency and reading levels.²⁹

Witte's thesis became influential due to the novelty of his research on literary development. The research field on literary development of high school students was underdeveloped in 2008. There were no clear distinctions that caused teachers to be unable to clearly identify distinct phases in their students' long-term development in literature education. However, they could recognize individual differences between students. According to Witte, this reflected the nature of literature education to be part of the ill-structured domains where clear stages and solutions are difficult to define. His purpose was to provide research that could help improve the curriculum and literature education, to act as a bridge between education research and practice.³⁰

In the 'Lezen voor de Lijst' concept, the importance of reading diverse literature and genres is stressed and students need to be stimulated to read different and more challenging genres than their standard and favorite genres. This is the way that will grow their reading competency and helps them move up to a higher level.

²⁷ Lisa van der Sande and others, 'Effectiveness of interventions that foster reading motivation: A meta-analysis', *Educational Psychology Review*, 35.21 (2023), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09719-3>.

²⁸ Theo Witte, 'Het oog van de Meester. De Literaire ontwikkeling van havo- en vwo-leerlingen in de tweede fase van het voortgezet onderwijs', *Universitair Onderwijs Centrum Groningen / Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*, 2008, <<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/media/4215891/samenvatting-proefschrift-het-oog-van-de-meester.pdf>>.

²⁹ 'Docenten Nederlands – Informatie | Didactiek', *Lezenvoordelijst*, n.d. <<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/docenteninformatie/didactiek/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

³⁰ Theo Witte, 'Het oog van de Meester', 2008.

The reading levels show the stage of literary development and competency of students. Originally Witte only created the approach for upper years of high school. Now there are two sides of the approach, one for 12-15 year olds and one for 15-18 year olds. The levels differ between these two categories. For 12-15 year olds, there are 5 reading levels which range from novice reading to analytical reading. For 15-18 year olds, there are 6 levels ranging from experiential reading to academic reading. In this thesis we will only consider the latter category and levels as the focus lies upon upperclassmen and their experiences.

Levels 1 to 6 were ordered this way to start creating interest and enjoyment in youth who do not generally read much. The books in level 1 were better suited to their perception than more difficult and literature heavy works from level 6. These stepping stones of the levels are meant to build a foundation of literary competency and prepare students for higher education and other professional opportunities after high school, in addition to meeting the legal baselines of reading comprehension required for high school graduates. These differ depending on the education level of the students. Havo 5 students must at least be at level 3 out of 6 to pass, for vwo students that is level 4 according to the legal baselines that work in conjunction with the levels of 'Lezen voor de Lijst'.³¹

This pedagogic approach centers students.. There are sections on the website that are designed for teachers, however this is only basic information to act as a guide for teachers in teaching and examining the reading competencies of their students. There are assignments provided by the website, however they do not include an answer sheet.³²

The editorial board of [Lezenvoordelijst.nl](https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl) curated a title list to help students, librarians, and teachers with finding adequate books depending on the reading level of the student. Ultimately, it is up to the teachers to select certain books and on the website it is stated that the title list is not meant as a canon list, just a pedagogic title list. This pedagogic title list gets updated periodically with new additions. Books that are selected have to adhere to the following criteria: 1) must be interesting for readers of a certain level 2) must have cultural historical value 3) must have pedagogic potential and must attribute to the literary

³¹ 'Docenten Nederlands – Informatie | Werken met Niveaus', *Lezenvoordelijst*, n.d. <<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/docenteninformatie/werken-met-niveaus/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³² 'Docenten Nederlands – Informatie | Werken met Opdrachten', *Lezenvoordelijst*, n.d. <<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/docenteninformatie/werken-met-de-opdrachten/>>[Accessed 116 June 2025].

competency of students 4) must be diverse in for example time period; general; themes and more.³³

The editorial board of *Lezenvoordelijst.nl* uses these criteria. In order to follow the criteria and keep the books interesting for the students, the editorial board selects some YA novels, as not everyone is ready for adult literature. It is to serve as a bridge between the 12-15 year old students and the 15-18 year olds. Every year the current title list gets updated and expanded with at least 10 new titles. Essentially, no titles are taken out of the list unless they are very outdated.³⁴ Some books that were just added on the list this April (2025), were three books written by women. Namely: *Anya Niewierra*; *Elte Rauch*; *Kreek Daey Ouwens*.³⁵ It can thus be stated that the editorial board of the title lists have been working on diversifying their list with more female authors.

The concept of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ is not mandatory. Dutch literature education is mandatory, and schools can choose how they will test the aptitude of their students and what the students are required to read and how. It is thus not mandated that Witte’s concept has to be used in and by schools, however it is a tool and concept that teachers as well as students may use in selecting appropriate books to read depending on their level.

2.3 The Dutch Education System and Pedagogy

In order to understand the full scope of this thesis it is important to understand the Dutch education system, in particular secondary education. After children have finished their ‘group 8’, which is the 8th year of elementary school, they enroll in high school. High school students are on average 12 to 18 years old. There are several different education levels within high school.³⁶ Based on school advice from the results of a ‘final’

³³ ‘Docenten Nederlands – Informatie | Titellijsten’, *Lezenvoordelijst*, n.d.
<<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/docenteninformatie/titellijsten/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ‘Docenten Nederlands – Informatie | Nieuwe Titels’, *Lezenvoordelijst*, n.d.
<<https://www.lezenvoordelijst.nl/docenteninformatie/nieuwe-titels/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³⁶ ‘Hoe zit het Nederlandse Onderwijssysteem in Elkaar?’, *Onderwijsloket*, 18 April 2020
<<https://www.onderwijsloket.com/kennisbank/artikel-archief/hoe-zit-het-nederlandse-onderwijssysteem-in-elkaar/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

test that students in group 8 make, they get sorted and advised on enrolling in one of these education levels.³⁷

In 2022 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in the US released a statement about the pedagogy of reading in US schools that stated the main focus should shift from book reading and essay writing toward media literacy. This is because of the current multimodal and digital environment and landscape where it is important for students to be able to represent their ideas by using images and other multimedia, not just through text. The NCTE defines media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all these various forms of communication. They state the urgency that students must be able to participate responsibly in a digital world saturated with media.³⁸ According to the Associated Press based on the statement of the NCTE, teachers now believe that students both have less patience for long texts, and that engaging short pieces of writing will help them in the modern digital world. This causes teachers to assign fewer full-length books as there is more to be taught than only reading and literature, namely the 21st century literacy. Teachers have to work with the limited time available, which leads to reading shorter texts or less books.³⁹

As in the United States, Dutch reading pedagogy has changed in recent years.⁴⁰ The mammoetwet (mammoth law) of 1968, designed by minister of education Cals, created the current Dutch education system of today with the core levels of mavo, havo, and vwo.⁴¹ The main difference between these levels is that mavo (vmbo) takes 4 years of high school with a particular focus on practical skills and jobs, havo takes 5 years is more

³⁷ 'Schooladvies Toelating Voortgezet Onderwijs', *Rijksoverheid*, n.d.

<<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/schooladvies-en-doorstroomtoets-basisschool/toelating-voortgezet-onderwijs-gebaseerd-op-definitief-schooladvies>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³⁸ 'Media Education in English Language Arts', *National Council of Teachers of English*, 9 April 2022 <https://ncte.org/statement/media_education/>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

³⁹ Sharon Lurye, 'Not-so-great Expectations: Students are Reading Fewer Books in English Class', *AP News*, 17 September 2024 <<https://apnews.com/article/books-reading-high-school-english-class-c8d9f39773268a6e8c79cb0b3c78d3c1>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁴⁰ This thesis will use the terms 'Pedagogy' and 'Pedagogic'. In Dutch the term 'Didactiek' is used to describe the concept of Lezen voor de Lijst, however in English pedagogy is more fitting as it is the theory behind learning and Lezen voor de Lijst is not instructional as didactic would describe.

⁴¹ 'Mammoetwet van 1968 – Wet op het Voortgezet Onderwijs', *Historiek*, 26 September 2022 <<https://historiek.net/mammoetwet-1968-betekenis-definitie/84129/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

theoretical than mavo but still rather general, and vwo takes 6 years with an academic and theoretical focus that prepares the students for university.⁴²

With the mammoetwet, literature education became mandatory for all the education levels. Before, there were no central guidelines on the number of books to be read, literary theory, or literature history and movements. In turn, depending on what education level the students were at, as well as the school, the teachers dictated what was being studied. This resulted in having the focus lay on Dutch canonical literature and classics. The teachers and schools had a lot of freedom to design their own literature education classes which led to an abundance of literary movements.⁴³ It resulted in teachers bringing forth their own literary views and interpretations of literature to their students which caused differences in content, pedagogy, and quality among schools, as there were no central requirements and examinations.⁴⁴

With the entry of the second phase in 1998, the Dutch literature education pedagogy in high schools changed significantly toward emphasizing student independence. Since then, havo and vwo students have to read a required number of books for their final exams.⁴⁵ Compared to the mammoetwet there is less focus on literature history and cognitive knowledge about what literature is in favor of more emphasis on practical knowledge through focusing on student interpretations and the actual learning of reading literature as well as their experiences.⁴⁶

There is less time spent on literature education in Dutch classes, from 1 out of 3 classes to 1 out of 4 classes that are focused on literature, since the entry of the second phase.⁴⁷ The presence of reading literature has been diminishing over the years, with schools and teachers focusing and putting more emphasis on the central reading exams

⁴² ‘Welke Niveaus zijn er in het Voortgezet Onderwijs?’, *Onderwijsconsument*, 11 September 2023 <<https://www.onderwijsconsument.nl/niveaus-voortgezet-onderwijs/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁴³ Theo Witte, Erwin Mantingh and Marjolein van Herten, ‘Doodtij in de Delta: Stand en toekomst van het Nederlandse Literatuuronderwijs’, *Spiegel der Letteren*, 59.1 (2017), doi: <https://doi.org/10.2143/SDL.59.1.3259732>.

⁴⁴ Marc Verboord, ‘Literatuuronderwijs van Mammoetwet naar Tweede Fase: Trends en Effecten empirisch onderzocht’, *Levende Talen Tijdschrift*, 5.1 (2004) <<https://lt-tijdschriften.nl/ojs/index.php/ltt/article/viewFile/493/486>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁴⁵ ‘Literatuur Tweede Fase’, *SLO*, 9 September 2024 <<https://www.slo.nl/thema/vakspecifieke-thema/mvt/literatuur-tweede/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁴⁶ Marc Verboord, ‘Literatuuronderwijs van Mammoetwet naar Tweede Fase: Trends en Effecten empirisch onderzocht’, 2004.

⁴⁷ Theo Witte, Erwin Mantingh and Majorlein van Herten, ‘Doodtij in de Delta: Stand en toekomst van het Nederlandse Literatuuronderwijs’, 2017.

that count more towards the final grade.⁴⁸ Circling back to the United States and the shift from longer full texts to shorter texts, it might be possible that the Netherlands and the US have different pedagogical goals, though it seems that both focus more on the actual process of reading and reading skills instead of the cognitive knowledge.

Of the Dutch educational levels in high school, vmbo lasts the shortest, with 4 years of high school. Vmbo, ‘Voorbereidend Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs’ is the name in Dutch, educate students in vocational training. There are 4 different sections of vmbo. These range from basic vocational training to theoretical training.

In this thesis the main focus lies on havo and vwo. Havo takes 5 years to complete and vwo 6 years. In both levels, students have to choose their own profile in the upper classes. These profiles are: culture & society; economics & society; nature & health; nature & technology. These profiles each have a set of subjects and allow for some options to choose from as well. However, the main subjects of mathematics, English, and Dutch are all mandatory and included in each profile. Thus literature is included and mandatory for all students.⁴⁹ Depending on the particular school there are two strands of vwo. The regular track is called atheneum, which has 15 subjects in the first three years and then 8 exam subjects in the final years. There is also a classical track called gymnasium. Gymnasium is the same as atheneum, though it has three additional subjects: Latin, Greek, and classical cultural education. Some schools have bilingual education (tto). In these schools, classes are taught in English for subjects such as history and more. These schools still have to comply with the standard exam regulations from the Dutch ministry. They still have the same Dutch classes as regular high schools.⁵⁰

As we are discussing the mandatory reading, teaching and examination, it is important to note that these examinations are part of the so-called schoolexams. In the Dutch education system of high school there are two types of exams: schoolexams and central exams. Schoolexams are the exams students make in their upper classes and count for their final grade and these exams are made by the teachers. The central exam is one test that students take in either May or June in their final year. The most important difference

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ‘Nederlands Onderwijssysteem’, *idw*, n.d. <<https://www.idw.nl/nederlands-onderwijssysteem/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵⁰ Ibid.

is that the central exam is a standard test that every student in the Netherlands takes.⁵¹ The literature examinations count as schoolexams. These examinations can then take shape through oral or written tests, based on the teacher's own input, though they do have to meet certain requirements or final objectives. These objectives include a literary dossier about reading experiences, recognizing and distinguishing text types and using literary terminology while interpreting literary texts, and finally the main headlines of literary history and the read literary works within a historical perspective.⁵²

Different education levels (vmbo, havo, vwo) have different requirements. For VMBO, the exam requirement is 4 books though in some cases there are no guidelines as it depends on the sub-level of vmbo.⁵³ Two out of 4 books must be chosen from the list, and two may be from anywhere.⁵⁴ The only restrictions are that graphic novels are not allowed and a maximum of one book can be a poem or autobiography. Vmbo students are allowed to read a maximum of two translated works.⁵⁵

Compared to vmbo, there are havo and vwo where students have to read 8 and 12 books and no translations are allowed. For vwo, the requirements are even more strict, as 3 books have to be at least from before 1880.

As the pedagogic concept is just a guideline, teachers often become de facto gatekeepers to what students must read and in what way within the boundaries of the exam requirements.⁵⁶ There is no set standard that all teachers have to follow. Some teachers allow translated books and let their students select their own materials. The students, as they are allowed to select their own literature from these lists and sometimes outside of them, in most cases are the ones who keep the top 20 of most read classical

⁵¹ Kaja Sariwating, 'Wat is het verschil tussen schoolexamen en centraal examen?', *Onderwijsconsument*, 1 August 2022 <<https://www.onderwijsconsument.nl/wat-is-het-verschil-tussen-schoolexamen-en-centraal-examen/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵² Theun Meestringa, Clary Ravesloot and Helge Bonset, 'Handreiking Schoolexamen Nederlands Havo/Vwo', *SLO*, 2012 <<https://slo.nl/publish/pages/2812/handreiking-schoolexamen-nederlands-havo-vwo.pdf>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵³ Liselotte Idema, 'Waarom leeslijsten vol klassieke literatuur staan, terwijl dat helemaal niet hoeft', *Nu.nl*, 27 November 2022 <<https://www.nu.nl/algemeen/6238446/waarom-leeslijsten-vol-klassieke-literatuur-staan-terwijl-dat-helemaal-niet-hoef.html?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵⁴ 'Vakinformatie Staatsexamen 2025. Nederlandse Taal VBMO BB', *College voor Toetsen en Examens*, n.d. <<https://duo.nl/images/nederlands-vmbo-bb-2025.pdf>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵⁵ 'Lezen voor de lijst 15-18 jaar | Alle Boeken', *Jeugdbibliotheek*, n.d. <<https://www.jeugdbibliotheek.nl/12-18-jaar/lezen-voor-de-lijst/15-18-jaar/alle-boeken.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁵⁶ Linda Ackermans, 'Young Adult-Literatuur op de Leeslijst en in de Lespraktijk. Een Onderzoek naar de Inzet en Positie van Literatuur voor Jongeren in de Bovenbouw van het Havo en Vwo', *Stichting Lezen*, 2022 <<https://www.lezen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/YAL-op-de-leeslijst-en-in-de-lespraktijk-2022-digitaal.pdf>>.

Dutch literature in place as it can be difficult to select a book. They then end up with classics, in addition they might have to borrow books from the library which, depending on the location might not have a varied supply and newer books.⁵⁷

2.4 Reading Habits

The discourse that arises is whether the current education system is sufficient enough in contemporary society, with the rise of digital literacy and all kinds of distractions for the youth to occupy themselves with instead of reading.⁵⁸ Prior research has shown that the education level of parents has an impact on the reading level and scores of their children.⁵⁹ Families where one parent had at least a graduate degree and small-sized families would show more interest in pleasure reading. The socio-economic status of the parents is thus important to the reading habits and comprehension of their children.⁶⁰ In addition to that, the reading habits of parents and whether there is a reading culture at home has an impact on the habits of children, though the interest and motivations for reading of children decreases the older they get.⁶¹ The parental role in regards to reading habits and developing children's interest in reading is vital as reading activities help develop critical thinking, analytical skills, and vocabulary. Overall healthy reading habits show improvement in the overall academic performance of children. Thus developing reading as a routine activity from an early age is important.⁶²

Social Media and Reading Habits

A problem that parents might face in the promotion of reading habits are the distractions caused by excessive use of screen devices such as mobile phones, TV, and other electronic games. By limiting screen time and fostering a nice and rewarding reading

⁵⁷ Liselotte Idema, 'Waarom leeslijsten vol klassieke literatuur staan, terwijl dat helemaal niet hoeft', 2022.

⁵⁸ Rose Horowitz, 'The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books', *The Atlantic*, 1 October 2024.

⁵⁹ 'Één op de drie 15-jarige leerlingen in Nederland heeft onvoldoende leesvaardigheid', *Stichting Lezen en Schrijven*, 5 December 2023 <<https://www.lezenenschrijven.nl/over-stichting-lezen-en-schrijven/actueel/een-op-de-drie-15-jarige-leerlingen-nederland-heeft>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁶⁰ Abdul Jabbar and Nosheen Warraich, 'Factors related to Children, Parents, and School Teachers Influencing Children Reading Habits: A Review of Literature', *Online Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 6.1 (2021), pp. 228-244

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352734186_Factors_related_to_Children_Parents_and_School_Teachers_Influencing_Children_Reading_Habits_A_Review_of_Literature>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁶¹ 'Leesopvoeding in Nederland', *KVB Boekwerk*, 9 September 2024

<<https://kvbboekwerk.nl/consumentenonderzoek/smb-gfk-kwartaalmetingen/leesopvoeding-in-nederland>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁶² Jamila Bano, Jahra Jabeen and Sadrudding Bahadur Qutoshi, 'Perceptions of Teachers about the Role of Parents in Developing Reading Habits of Children to Improve Their Academic Performance in Schools', *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 5.1 (2018), pp. 42-59 <<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1180618>>.

environment, the reading habits of children can be improved.⁶³ However, this only concerns longer text literacy. The technological devices and formats promote digital multimedia literacies where children are able to design meaning across multiple modes. The focus is not solely on written text. These multimedia literacies are not measured by standard reading tests.⁶⁴

With these shifting habits, young people spend more time on their phones reading short texts instead of engaging with reading longer texts.⁶⁵ Their interactions with social media apps like TikTok's 'BookTok' influence their reading habits as well. Most active TikTok users are aged between 12 and 24 years old, resulting in most books being promoted on the application to cater to the younger audience. The most popular genres on the app are romance, short stories, and dark romance according to views and posts.⁶⁶

TikTok users create emotional reader reaction and recommendation videos, with posts on the platform tending to be more personal than aesthetically framed like on Instagram.⁶⁷ TikTok is mainly based on dynamic video based content whereas Instagram's core format is static posts and carousels.⁶⁸ With the power of imitation and replication of trends, book recommendations can be widely spread on TikTok. In the case of TikTok, communities and interests are termed as "side" defined by individualistic identities of creators, BookTok is such a side, within these sides are even smaller groups, think of queer fantasy readers.⁶⁹ These digital peer interactions where creators informally review and recommend books are called

⁶³ Zaheer Ahmad and others, 'Exploring the Factors Affecting the Development of Reading Habits among Children', *Library Philosophy and Practice*, (2021) <<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/6307/>>.

⁶⁴ Phillip Towndrow, Mark Evan Nelson and Wan Fareed, 'Squaring Literacy Assessment With Multimodal Design: An Analytic Case for Semiotic Awareness', *Journal of Literacy Research*, 45.5 (2013), pp. 327-355, doi:10.1177/1086296X13504155.

⁶⁵ 'Hoe kan de Leesvaardigheid van Jongeren al jaren dalen?', *Tolkie*, n.d. <<https://tolkie.nl/2024/08/30/hoe-kan-de-leesvaardigheid-van-jongeren-al-jarenlang-dalen/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁶⁶ Charmaine, 'The 10 Book Genres That Are Taking BookTok By Storm', *A Dime Saved*, 28 October 2023 <<https://adimesaved.com/the-10-hottest-book-genres-on-booktok>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁶⁷ S. Kulkarni, 'Een Gevoel Krijgen voor BookTok: Inzicht in Affect in de Boekensubcultuur van TikTok', in *Lezen in Beweging: Ontwikkelingen in leesbevordering, lees- en literatuuronderwijs, digitaal lezen en toetsing*, ed. by J. Dera and R. van Steensel (Eburon, 2024), pp. 86-99 <<https://research.tilburguniversity.edu/en/publications/een-gevoel-krijgen-voor-booktok-inzicht-in-affect-in-de-boekensub>>.

⁶⁸ Kelsey Bishqemi and Michael Crowley, 'TikTok Vs. Instagram: Algorithm Comparison', *Journal of Student Research*, 11.1 (2022), <<https://www.jsr.org/hs/index.php/path/article/download/2428/1207/21799>>.

⁶⁹ Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill, 'Assembling "Sides" of TikTok: Examining Community, Culture, and Interface through a BookTok Case Study', *Social Media + Society*, (2023), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/205630512312135>.

“peer pedagogies” and learning about books as well as promoting literacy is then not confined to classrooms.⁷⁰

Kulkarni (2024) mentions that the collective identity formed by BookTok users creates a space for talking about books that are not recommended in title and literature lists or recognized by educational institutions.⁷¹ The “sides” on TikTok, especially the smaller groups within that are defined by individual creators’ identification, can deepen divisions where echo chambers can be created.⁷²

While there is more gender equity on BookTok as there is a greater representation of female authors and creators compared to the traditional publishing industry, there are still racial and LGBTQ gaps. There still tends to be little representation of authors or main characters from diverse backgrounds. The platform remains predominantly white and thus falls short on promoting true diversity in its authors, creators, and recommendations.⁷³

The international community on these social media applications also promote active users to read in English, which Dutch teenagers often read owing in part to the time it takes for works to be translated and their additional cost.⁷⁴ In order to promote Dutch teenagers to read more in Dutch, local publishers have started to add additional reasons for purchasing a book in Dutch. A recent example was the new Hunger Games book by Suzanne Collins, a special Dutch edition was published which highlighted the importance of the yearly Boekenweek with this year’s theme: Je Moerstaal (your mother tongue).⁷⁵

Reading Habits

Altogether, the decrease in literacy can be attributed to changes in technology and media consumption (the rise of smartphones and the internet) which impacted pedagogy. There is also, however, data suggesting increased interests in libraries. Studies suggest

⁷⁰ Michael Luigi Dezuanni, ‘TikTok’s Peer Pedagogies – Learning About Books Through #BookTok Videos’, *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*, (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.11901>.

⁷¹ S. Kulkarni, ‘Een Gevoel Krijgen voor BookTok: Inzicht in Affect in de Boekensubcultuur van TikTok’, 2024.

⁷² Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill, ‘Assembling “Sides” of TikTok: Examining Community, Culture, and Interface through a BookTok Case Study’, 2023.

⁷³ Alysia de melo, ‘The influence of BookTok on Literary Criticism and Diversity’, *Social Media + Society*, (2024), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241286700>.

⁷⁴ Arnold Le Febvre, ‘10 Redenen waarom het nooit wat zal worden met Nederlandse SF en Fantasy’, *Vreemde Werelden*, 8 June 2021 <<https://vreemdedewerelden.com/2021/06/08/10-redenen-waarom-het-nooit-wat-zal-worden-met-nederlandse-sf-en-fantasy/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁷⁵ Kim Meurs, ‘Nederlandse versie Hongerspelen-boek ziet er anders uit, om lezer over te halen’, *NOS*, 19 March 2025 <<https://nos.nl/artikel/2560363-nederlandse-versie-hongerspelen-boek-ziet-er-anders-uit-om-lezer-over-te-halen>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

Millennials and Gen Z are using libraries at higher rates than previous generations both in person and online. In 2023, the American Library Association conducted a survey that found 54% of Gen Z and millennials visited a physical library within the previous 12 months. To these patrons, the library is not just for reading books. About 43% of respondents did not identify as readers but visited local libraries for other matters such as using their computers, printers, and other services. It can be stated that libraries not only serve as suppliers of books to readers; instead, they also cater to non-readers as a place to sample materials, information, and media.⁷⁶

In the Netherlands, consumer research done by KVB Boekwerk found in 2023 that 46% of youth (aged 12-25) read weekly in their freetime and 11% even read every day.⁷⁷ The most popular genres are thrillers and adventure, followed by young adult (YA) and fantasy. Of this group, the older participants also have an interest in psychology and self-help books: 3 out of 10 of 20-25 year olds read them occasionally. They found youth readership has increased since 2018. What previously was about 45% of youth who never read or just on holidays is now 35% in 2023. This appears counter to the studies suggesting a decline in literacy or interest in books. Thus, other reasons for the decrease must apply. It could be that the difficulty levels of the books are not challenging or mature enough. The findings from the consumer research do not include demographics about teenagers who come from different ethnic backgrounds and speak another native language, which has been stated to impact literacy.

According to the survey, 12-19 year olds like reading the least, in large part due to the forced experience of reading in school of specific literature. Students in that age group read primarily because they have to, with many preferring other activities, disliking reading generally, or participating in other activities or being busy with school.⁷⁸

KVB Boekwerk's report states that 42% of TikTok users use the application for book inspiration and that reading in English and other languages other than Dutch is increasing. Between 2012 and 2021, there has been an increase in other language books being sold from

⁷⁶ 'New ALA report: Gen Z & Millennials are visiting the library & prefer print books', *American Library Association*, 1 November 2023 <<https://www.ala.org/news/2019/12/new-ala-report-gen-z-millennials-are-visiting-library-prefer-print-books>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁷⁷ 'In De Leeswereld van Jongeren', *KVB Boekwerk*, 12 September 2023 <<https://kvbboekwerk.nl/consumentenonderzoek/smb-gfk-kwartaalmetingen/in-de-leeswereld-van-jongeren>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁷⁸ Ibid.

7% to 17% with English being the most popular.⁷⁹ The main sentiment given as to why they wish to read in the original language of the book is to practice their language skills, as English is a large part of daily life through social media use, websites, and TV.⁸⁰ The books promoted and recommended on social media platforms are thus mostly not the books that Dutch educators expect their students to read for school.

2.5 Speculative Fiction

As the quote excerpt in the introduction shows, a concern with the Dutch literature on the list is that it is not relatable to adolescents. The topics that are discussed in many of these books, which were often written a long time ago, can be experienced as quite heavy. Books about the second world war are prominent.⁸¹ They are a far cry from the YA and fantastical genres students today prefer. It is possible to filter books on the Lijst based on level and genre, and at a glance it becomes apparent that most books are psychological fiction novels that target high school students with ages 15 to 18.⁸² Of all the hundreds of books on the list, only two are marked as fantasy for upperclassmen and 13 for students aged 12 to 15. These factors can cause reading motivation and pleasure to decrease, which may result in a decreasing literacy.

While fantasy and science fiction are immensely popular genres on streaming and cinema services, when it comes to books in the Netherlands and its Dutch authors this popularity and visibility is not present on Dutch bookshelves and the ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ title list. Famous translated works are still popular, but successful Dutch equivalents are difficult to find.⁸³

This is not for lack of interest in fantasy from Dutch authors: there are about 300 Dutch fantasy authors and about 200 books in the genre were published in 2022.⁸⁴ In a column de

⁷⁹ ‘Aanbod grootste reden voor anderstalig lezen’, *KVB Boekwerk*, 16 September 2022 <<https://kvbboekwerk.nl/consumentenonderzoek/smb-gfk-kwartaalmetingen/aanbod-grootste-reden-voor-anderstalig-lezen>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Jacqueline Brel, ‘De Tweede Wereldoorlog in de literatuur. Collaboratie en verzet, trauma en breuk’, *Literatuurgeschiedenis*, n.d. <<https://www.literatuurgeschiedenis.org/20e-eeuw/de-tweede-wereldoorlog-in-de-literatuur>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁸² ‘Lezen voor de lijst 15-18 jaar | Alle boeken’, *Jeugdbibliotheek*, n.d. <<https://www.jeugdbibliotheek.nl/12-18-jaar/lezen-voor-de-lijst/15-18-jaar/alle-boeken.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁸³ George van Hal, ‘Nederlanders zijn gek op sciencefiction, maar niet van eigen bodem. Hoe komt dat?’, *De Volkskrant*, 9 February 2023 <<https://www.volkskrant.nl/boeken/nederlanders-zijn-gek-op-sciencefiction-maar-niet-van-eigen-bodem-hoe-komt-dat~bff74780/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Vries (2024) mentions a reason that can allude to the lack of originally Dutch speculative fiction is that spirituality and belief in the Western World has instead made way for science and scientific reasoning. In contrast, Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez stated that magical realism posed a reflection of life in Latin America and linked with its culture.⁸⁵

The fantastical genre of speculative fiction can be linked back to 18th century romanticism and was a response to the Enlightenment and the accompanying rationalism movement. It was used to explain and fantasize the presence of the impossible and unexplainable. This, then, sets fantasy apart from science fiction, as fantasy invents what does not and could not exist in our reality compared to science fiction.⁸⁶ These fantastical elements thus contributed to the genre literature of speculative fiction whereas realism and the Enlightenment led to realistic fiction, also known as mimetic-fiction, that is grounded in fact, as opposed to creating a world of imagination, and seeks to connect the fictional and factual.⁸⁷

Posing the Netherlands against other Western countries, the argument about spirituality and belief is contradicting, as is prevalent in these other countries. In regard to religion, one of the most obvious reasons is attributed to Calvinism and its view on life, though sobriety is not just a Dutch phenomenon. Our upbringing, however, is not the issue. Dutch children's books are full of fantasy-esque materials, think of 'Kruistocht in Spijkerbroek' or 'Koning van Katoren'. Fantasy and science fiction should thus be more prevalent in the title list. A discussion that might allude to why there are so few books categorized as fantasy in the list can be attributed to labeling and categorizing of Dutch books which will be discussed in the following paragraph. What is present in the Netherlands, however, is the lack of mystery. The country is flat and almost everything is visible, while fantasy grows in inexplicable places like an impenetrable forest or mountain range. The Netherlands is too well-discovered and thus not mysterious enough.⁸⁸

Author Arnold Le Febre discussed in his blog that there are not really any good fantasy writing awards to win in the Netherlands when compared to popular genres, such as thrillers.

⁸⁵ Riemer de Vries, 'Nederland is niet mysterieus genoeg voor de fantastische genres', *Boekenkrant*, 1 March 2024 <<https://boekenkrant.com/column-nederland-is-niet-mysterieus-genoege-voor-de-fantastische-genres/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁸⁶ Farah Mendlesohn, *A Short History of Fantasy* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2009), pp. 12-13.

⁸⁷ George Bellis and Christopher Lane, 'Mimetic and Nonmimetic Fiction', *PMLA*, 119.1 (2004), pp. 133-135 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1261492>>.

⁸⁸ Riemer de Vries, 'Nederland is niet mysterieus genoeg voor de fantastische genres', 2024.

He further talks about how Dutch publishers tend to avoid using terms like fantasy and science fiction in promoting their books, resulting in mostly small publishers or self-publishing authors to publish these books. Bigger publishers do not want to take the risk; it is much cheaper and easier to sell a translated popular and well sold English book than to introduce a new unknown Dutch work on the market.⁸⁹

Essentially what this avoidance of indicating books as fantasy for example means is that Dutch fantasy works are often not categorized as such in libraries, even when they might have fantastical elements. An example of one such book is ‘Klifi’ by Adriaan van Dis; in the Dutch book community ‘Hebban’ his book is indicated instead as literature and a novel (Roman).⁹⁰ Though a current process is that the boundaries between genres are fading, some Dutch authors use fantastical elements in their novels but will still be categorized as novels and not science fiction. They are rated and considered literature.⁹¹

Overall, there is a gap between children and adult literature and books that are then considered fantasy. Themes in adult literature are full of serious and realistic topics such as depression, family connections, and relationship problems that are written with a mature audience in mind.⁹² This further represents itself in the circulation and total amount of book sales from the fantastical genre as they are small and structurally marginal. In the list of 100 bestselling books in the Netherlands of 2020, there were no science fiction or fantasy books. In the years before, only sporadically were there books from the fantastical genre but they included also non-Dutch authors like Stephen King and J.K. Rowling.⁹³

A common perception is that a book needs to be more challenging to read to be called literature. If it reads too easily and has too much plot it is suspicious and also not suitable for the reading list. Speculative fiction, science fiction, and fantasy, however, frequently discuss contemporary topics such as climate change, racism, and other pressing societal issues.⁹⁴ In the Netherlands, the relationship between the Netherlands and water is remarkable and has

⁸⁹ Arnold Le Febre, ‘10 Redenen waarom het nooit wat zal worden met Nederlandse SF en Fantasy’, 2021.

⁹⁰ Liesbeth Jochemsen, ‘Sciencefiction en fantasy in Nederland’, *Hier in Salland*, 6 June 2023 <<https://hierinsalland.nl/sciencefiction-en-fantasy-in-nederland/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁹¹ George van Hal, ‘Nederlanders zijn gek op sciencefiction, maar niet van eigen bodem. Hoe komt dat?’, 2023.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Arnold Le Febre, ‘10 Redenen waarom het nooit wat zal worden met Nederlandse SF en Fantasy’, 2021.

⁹⁴ George van Hal, ‘Nederlanders zijn gek op sciencefiction, maar niet van eigen bodem. Hoe komt dat?’, 2023.

become a cultural construct that is amplified in literature and can be related to the watersnoodramp (flood disaster) back in 1953.⁹⁵

This presence of water as a cultural construct that fosters speculative fiction relating to water led to the uniquely Dutch science fiction subgenre: ‘Ziltpunk’, which was created by Tais Teng and Jaap Boekestein in their bundle *Orkaanhoeders en Dijkenfluisteraars*.⁹⁶ Climate fiction as a genre has not been present much in the Netherlands previously.⁹⁷ That was until 2021, when Adriaan van Dis wrote *KliFi* about floods in a part of the republic.⁹⁸ Now there have been many books written in the subgenre Ziltpunk with the presence of techno-optimism to provide technological inventions to provide a better livelihood within the science fiction book.⁹⁹ Speculative fiction, albeit differently than fantasy and science fiction from other countries, is very much part of Dutch literature. Again the labeling of speculative fiction on the title list of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ does not label *KliFi* as fantasy, instead as a “toekomst roman” (futuristic novel) and dystopian, which can be confusing to readers navigating the title list.

In regards to the presence of fantasy as a genre as literature and thus as appropriate literature for students to read according to Dutch teachers, speculative fiction often is not seen as literature, which also explains why it is not included in the reading list. With a literary science background, it is possible to make connections to fantasy literature. However, there are not many literary scientists who have enough knowledge about fantasy to make these connections and fantasy has generally been neglected in the scholarly field.¹⁰⁰ It is easier to examine literature which has existed for a long time already.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ ‘Wij en het Water’, *Lotte Jensen*, 2022 <<https://www.lottejensen.nl/boeken/wij-en-het-water>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁹⁶ Tais Teng and Jaap Boekestein, *Orkaanhoeders en Dijkenfluisteraars* (Uitgeverij Macc, 2018).

⁹⁷ Stef Craps and Mahlu Mertens, ‘Klimaatfictie in de Lage Landen?’, *ResearchGate*, 27 February 2019 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331407788_Klimaatfictie_in_de_Lage_Landen>.

⁹⁸ ‘KliFi’, *Jeugdbibliotheek*, n.d. <<https://www.jeugdbibliotheek.nl/12-18-jaar/lezen-voor-de-lijst/15-18-jaar/niveau-3/klifi.html>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

⁹⁹ Kim Jelsma, ‘Alles is Water’ (Unpublished master thesis, Universiteit Utrecht, 2021) <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/40159/Jelsma_6863760.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

¹⁰⁰ Farah Mendlesohn, *A Short History of Fantasy* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2009), pp. 12-13.

¹⁰¹ Mariska Reniers, ‘Waarom Fantasy niet wordt gezien als literatuur’, *Fantastischgenre*, 4 April 2017 <<https://www.fantastischgenre.eu/waarom-fantasy-niet-wordt-gezien-als-literatuur/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

2.6 Literary Canon in the Netherlands

What is perceived as Dutch literature that everyone should know is put in the literary canon. The canon is not meant as dictating mandatory literature and it is not meant to be the same forever. Instead, it is meant to guide teachers, librarians, and others to inspire and motivate reading.¹⁰²

The previous Dutch literary canon was established in 2002 by members of the Society of Dutch Literature. Recently, in 2022, a new version was made by professionals and Dutch literature lovers both from within the Dutch language area as an initiative of the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature, Royal Library (KB), Language Union, and the Catholic University Leuven. Almost half of this group are Dutch teachers.¹⁰³ The literary canon list is thus a collaboration between the Netherlands and Flanders and not an initiative from the government. The literary canon is crucial to the identity of the Netherlands and the selection of literary works is based on cultural and historical importance, meaning they need to be able to make changes in society. An example of such a book is *Max Havelaar*, which made the move towards dismantling the colonial system in place.¹⁰⁴

The survey respondents who helped create the revised canon in 2022 pushed for more gender diversity, ethnic diversity, and more authors from colonial backgrounds. This resulted in 24 women to be on the list while previously the amount of female authors on the list was 11. In regards to naming authors from colonial backgrounds, most respondents were unable to name any. This shows the wish for a more diverse list. However, due to lack of awareness and knowledge diverse authors and works get lost. For most, the canon is fundamental to the collective cultural memory, as was mentioned before.¹⁰⁵

As 20 years have passed, it would seem that the new canon list would appear to be more diverse in titles. As was mentioned, there has been an increase in female authors. However, the new list from 2022 still seems rather similar. Responses on the minimal changes of the canon caused comments to be made like a lot of “dead white male authors” according to a

¹⁰² ‘Canon doel’, *Literaire canon*, n.d. <<https://literairecanon.be/nl/over/doel>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹⁰³ ‘De Literaire Canon 2022’, *Hebban*, 1 October 2022 <<https://www.hebban.nl/lijsten/de-literaire-canon-2022>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹⁰⁴ ‘Dit zijn de boeken die iedereen gelezen moet hebben’, *Canon van Nederland*, n.d. <<https://www.canonvannederland.nl/nl/actueel/uit-de-pers/dit-zijn-de-boeken-die-iedereen-gelezen-moet-hebben>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹⁰⁵ Lieke van Deinsen and others, ‘De Nederlandstalige Literaire Canon(s) Anno 2022’, *KANTL* (2022), <[https://ctb.kantl.be/assets/files/pages/files/De_Nederlandstalige_literaire_canon\(s\)_anno_2022_-_Een_enqu%C3%A0te_naar_de_literaire_klassieken_Rapport_\(voorpublicatie\).pdf](https://ctb.kantl.be/assets/files/pages/files/De_Nederlandstalige_literaire_canon(s)_anno_2022_-_Een_enqu%C3%A0te_naar_de_literaire_klassieken_Rapport_(voorpublicatie).pdf)>.

blogpost on Hebban.¹⁰⁶ The big three (Gerard Reve, W.F. Hermans, and Harry Mulisch) of Dutch literature still take place 4 to 2 in the new literary canon list ranking. Multatuli takes the first place yet again. When examining the title list, there are no female authors in the top 10. The majority are male authors as well as already established and older books.¹⁰⁷ For children's book authors on the list, half of them are women. 78% of the titles in 2022 were also mentioned in the 2002 canon list, though now there are more Flemish authors. This can be credited to many Flemish respondents as opposed to 2002. Poetry in the canon list is disappearing and some other classics are dropping on the list.¹⁰⁸

Thus, there is discourse surrounding diversity and representation in literary canons. Not just in the Netherlands, but in the United States as well. Questions arise as to what works deserve to be in a canon and who decides what gets to be in a canon. Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994) sparked controversy and debate about exactly these two questions.¹⁰⁹ Bloom was an American literary critic who taught at Yale. He was often seen as having controversial commentary, not just with his Western canon.¹¹⁰ His literary canon did not just include American authors. He focused on 26 "immortal" authors, who are considered the paragons of Western literary excellence. These are divided into four periods (theocratic; aristocratic; democratic; chaotic).¹¹¹ The main discussion within the book focuses on aesthetics and literary values. He states that the inclusion of certain works should be based on their aesthetical qualities such as originality and strangeness as well as their depth and linguistic mastery instead of the political or moral content.¹¹² Furthermore, he posits Shakespeare as the center of the canon, who to Western writers according to Bloom is the principal anxiety of influence in the struggle for originality.¹¹³

¹⁰⁶ 'De Literaire Canon 2022', *Hebban*, 1 October 2022

¹⁰⁷ Coen Peppelenbos, 'Nieuws: Dit is de nieuwe Nederlandstalige literaire canon; Max Havelaar blijft fier bovenaan staan', *TZUM literair weblog*, 1 October 2022 <<https://www.tzum.info/2022/10/nieuws-dit-is-de-nieuwe-nederlandstalige-literaire-canon-max-havelaar-blijft-fier-bovenaam-staan/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹⁰⁸ Toef Jaeger, 'Toch weer veel dode, witte mannen in de nieuwe literaire canon', *NRC*, 30 September 2022 <<https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/09/30/toch-weer-veel-dode-witte-mannen-in-de-nieuwe-literaire-canon-a4143776>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹⁰⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994).

¹¹⁰ 'Harold Bloom', *Britannica*, 3 June 2025 <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Bloom>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹¹¹ 'Harold Bloom Creates a Massive List of Works in the "Western Canon": Read Many of the Books Free Online', *Open Culture*, 28 January 2014 <<https://www.openculture.com/2014/01/harold-bloom-creates-a-massive-list-of-works-in-the-western-canon.html>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹¹² Daniel J. Silver, 'The Western Canon, by Harold Bloom', *Commentary*, 1994 <<https://www.commentary.org/articles/daniel-silver/the-western-canon-by-harold-bloom/>>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

¹¹³ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1994).

With his arguments and focus on the Western Canon, there are those who wish to widen the canon to include more diverse and oppressed works. Bloom defended the Western Canon by stating that literature should be judged and valued by universal standards like originality and depth, not politics. The authors he praised were mostly “Dead White European Males”. Bloom called these movements the School of Resentment, who see the canon as merely dead white European males and interpret texts through these political lenses such as feminism.¹¹⁴ It can be compared to the complaints against the current literary canon in the Netherlands where people are asking for more diverse voices.

The controversies surrounding Harold Bloom’s canon are thus related to exclusion and insufficient inclusion of non-Western and minority authors. According to the opposition it overlooks diverse voices and perspectives. Circling back to the Dutch literary canon, the differences between The Western Canon and the Dutch canon lies first and foremost in the scope. The Dutch canon, rightfully, only focuses on Dutch-language works (Flemish and Dutch) whereas Bloom’s canon encompasses Western works and authors (mainly European and American). The purpose of the Dutch canon, as was already mentioned, lies in cultural memory, national identity, and education. It is meant to show the collective cultural memory and identity of the Netherlands and Flanders and to serve as a guide for literary education.

Bloom’s canon focusses on and defends aesthetic values and literary originality. He focuses on literature from Western Europe and the Americas. Compared to the Dutch canon, the Western Canon was not created with educational and cultural purposes in mind. Instead, the works and authors were selected based on their timelessness and aesthetical value. A clear difference also lies in the authority and who chooses the canonical authors and works, which for the Dutch canon were educational and cultural bodies and literary lovers. The Western Canon, however, was constructed by Bloom’s personal judgement.

The title list provided on the website of *Lezen voor de Lijst* includes almost all books in the top 100 of the Dutch literary canon from 2022. The influence of the Dutch canon can thus be seen in the compilation of the title list provided to guide teachers and students in high school.

¹¹⁴ Daniel J. Silver, ‘The Western Canon, by Harold Bloom’, *Commentary*, 1994
<<https://www.commentary.org/articles/daniel-silver/the-western-canon-by-harold-bloom/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

3. Students (Experiences and Habits)

This chapter focuses on analyzing the findings from the survey and follow-up discussion. The 132 respondents were or are high school students, specifically from havo 4 and 5 and vwo 4, 5, and 6.

3.1 Analysis

3.1.1 Survey Analysis

To understand the experiences, thoughts, and motivations that current and graduated havo and vwo high school students have about the mandatory reading of Dutch literature at school, a survey was conducted. There were a total of 132 respondents. While 4 of them did not completely fill out the survey, their responses were still taken into account during this analysis. Most questions were filled in by 123 respondents, as they were not all mandatory. This section presents the analysis of the survey data in relation to the research question: *How can the experiences of the Dutch mandatory literature education of (graduated) high school students, in the year 4/5 havo and 4/5/6 vwo, influence or improve the pedagogic approach to literature education including the pedagogic concept of 'Lezen voor de Lijst'?* and the coinciding sub-question: *How do/did (graduated) high school students (havo/vwo) experience*

the mandatory literature reading process and examination?

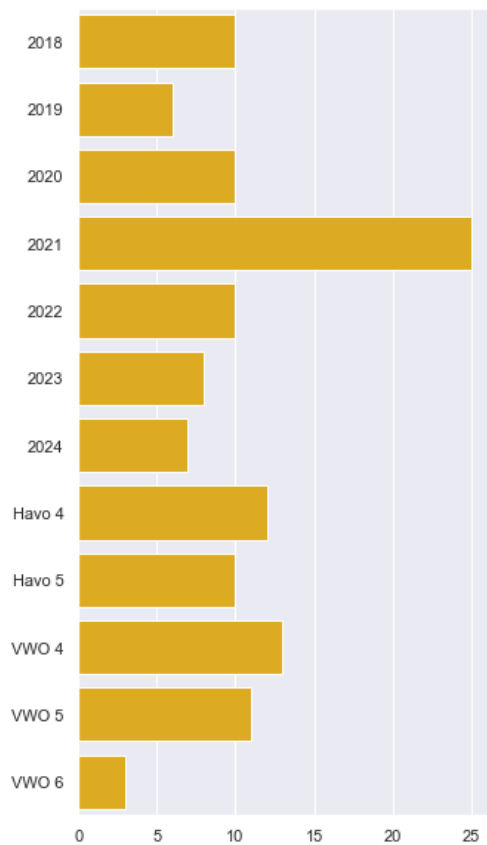


Figure 3: A demographic overview of education level and graduation year

3.1.1.A Demographic Overview

To first gain insight in the respondents demographic, questions regarding their background were asked. Figure 3 shows the distribution of havo 4/5 and vwo 4/5/6 students, as well as the graduation dates for already graduated high school students.

A significantly large group of people graduated in 2021, and it is clear that there were more respondents who have already graduated as well as the overall majority of respondents. This is mainly due to time constraints at the time the survey was distributed and the research was done, namely during the spring break and final central exams for the senior years. This, having a large group of already graduated students, means that a lot of the findings may be a little bit more outdated.

The ages of the respondents range between 15 and 28, with the largest groups being 22 year olds, followed closely by 16 and then 17 year olds. By far the largest group of respondents is female, with over a 100 respondents.

3.1.1.B Reading Habits

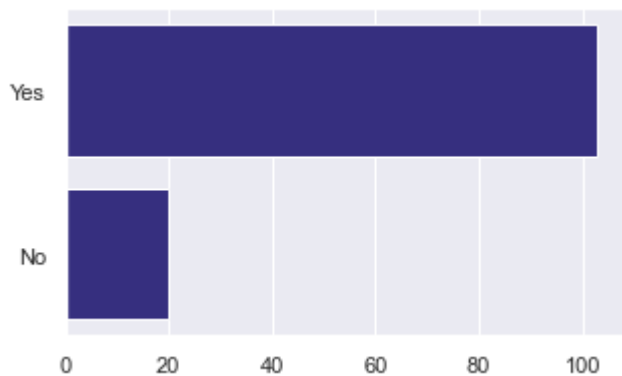


Figure 4: Do you read in your free time?

In this section of the survey, questions relating to the respondents reading habits were asked. These questions ranged from how many books they read in their free time and in what language they prefer to read to how often they read and what their preferred form of reading was.

As figure 4 shows, the large majority of the respondents read in their free time. This shows that they clearly like to read books regardless of their experience and feelings of the Dutch literature education. Though, according to the survey, most respondents read on vacation (50 responses) or during the week (31 responses).

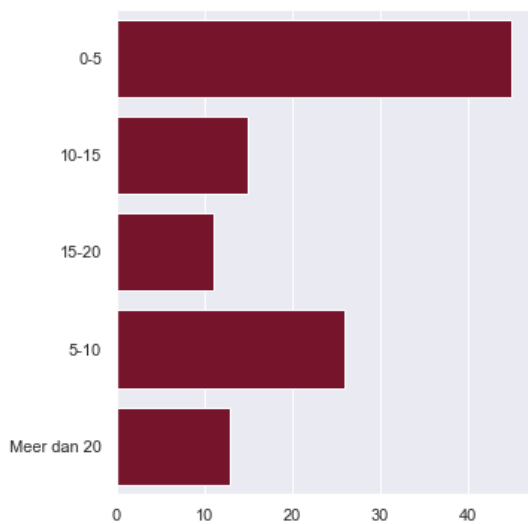


Figure 5: How many books do you read in one year?

Of the respondents who read in their free time, most read between 0-5 books or 5-10 in a year. As figure 5 shows, for the other amounts of books they read in a year all lie quite closely together.

Acquiring books

Figure 2.4 shows how the respondents get their books. Only a small number borrow them from school, which makes sense, as this is mostly regarding the books they read in their free time and not just necessarily about the Dutch literature they read for school. In the additional comments, respondents remarked that they for example read books from their parents' bookshelf, download pirated book files, or receive them as gifts.

Preferential genre and language

The preferred genres of reading are by far Young Adult (YA), with 67 results, and fantasy, with 61 results which can be viewed in figure 6. These are both genres that generally are not available or accepted by Dutch teachers for the required reading according to the title list of Lezen voor de Lijst as well as the availability that was mentioned in an earlier chapter

about Dutch fantasy. These genres are generally absent from the approved literature lists.

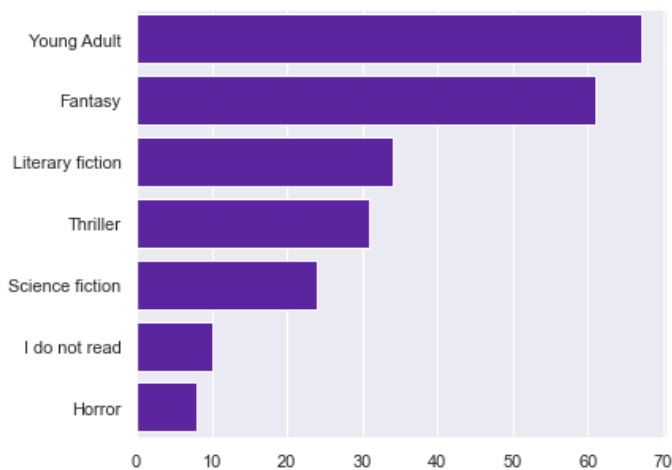


Figure 6: What is/are your favorite genre(s) to read?

Most respondents prefer to read in English. This finding, along with their preferred genres to read, can shed a light on whether they like the Dutch mandatory literature education. Some of the motivations for these choices are:

“...English is the original language of the book, I do not like reading translations...”

As well as:

“...I do not have to think too hard because Dutch is my native language...”

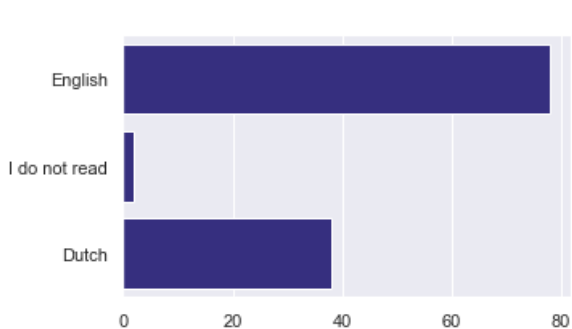


Figure 7: What is your preferred language to read a book in?

Other comments range from English being a more beautiful language than Dutch, English books being better written than Dutch ones, to barely having any interesting books in Dutch. English books are also often noted as being less expensive than Dutch or translated works. The preferences lie in accessibility, aesthetic value, and perceived higher quality of the writing, as they are often the original work.

Social media

Of the respondents who use book related social media platforms, the majority uses TikTok's BookTok (43 responses) and Goodreads (32 responses) either every day or once a week. They use Goodreads to find new books to read or to keep track of their reading challenge. Most use the book related social media platforms for recommendations and to read more books, also books which are in English.

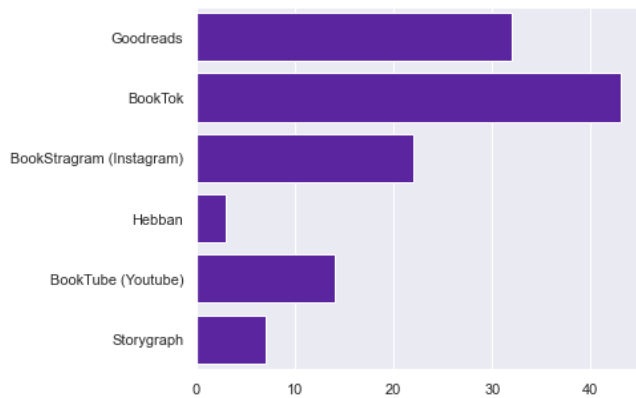


Figure 8: Do you use book related social media platforms? If yes, which platform(s)?

3.1.1.C Reading at School

Almost everyone was familiar with the pedagogic concept and website 'Lezen voor de Lijst'. Most respondents make use of the actual website and title list provided by 'Lezen voor de Lijst', closely followed by a given title list from the teacher. This title list from the teachers shows that the teachers have much power in choosing what their students read for the Dutch literature classes.

Respondents mentioned they often chose a book and then had to check if their teacher allowed them to read it.

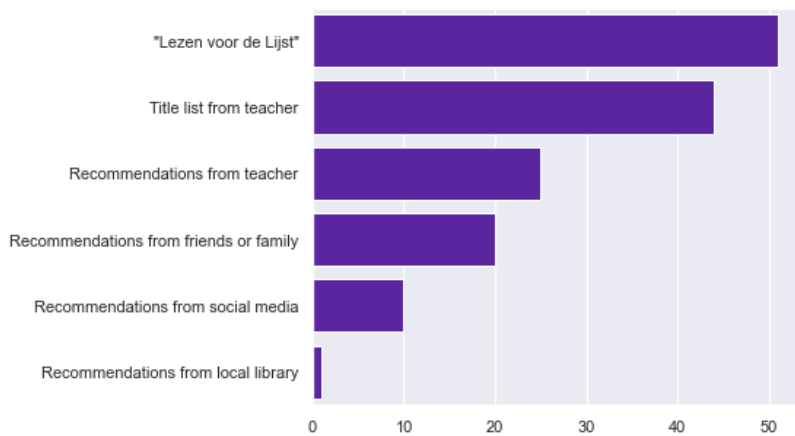


Figure 9: How does the proces of selecting a book work at your school when it comes to 'Lezen voor de Lijst'?

Selecting books

The respondents' method of selecting a book varies depending on the person. One respondent stated that they like to read, which is why they chose to read books of a certain author (Lucas Rijneveld). Ethnic background also played a part in one respondent's process of selecting literature, who mentioned that they read books by Adriaan van Dis as well as books about the Dutch Indies. Many respondents who had graduated high school indicated they did not remember the process well anymore.

The books that the respondents read for literature education were mostly originally Dutch works, though in some cases respondents stated that some translated books were allowed, bringing this back to the knowledge that the teacher ultimately decides what qualifies as appropriate literature for Dutch high school students.

Often mentioned genres, books and authors were: Harry Mulisch; literary fiction and novels; "very boring books"; level 3 and up books; no fantasy; poetry bundles; various Dutch authors; more than 100 pages; war novels; classics like 'Gouden Ei' and 'Passievrucht'; the big three (Mulisch, Hermans, Reve).

Selecting books: appropriate literature

Following question 21 regarding what books and literature the respondents typically read for literature education, someone mentioned a reason as to why they found the books they had to read to be boring. Their argument was that they did not connect to their world of experience. Some books used very sexual themes written by a man which the respondent quoted as *"totally not sexy, no thanks"*. This argument was certainly not a singular occurrence

as two other respondents agreed with it, and I quote, *“Things with sex because ‘we are all teenagers and love sex’...”* and *“Dutch laments with unnecessary sexscenes...#ArnonGrunberg...”*. It can thus be stated that many high school students believe that quite a few books on the title list, be that from their teacher or from the ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ website, use themes that do not fit their interests, which makes their reading experiences more unpleasant and wish for more diverse literature.

Thoughts on literature education

When asked about how these requirements impacted what books they read and whether they liked it or not, statements were:

“The mandatory aspect of having to read after school was not a nice activity for my teenager brain, it made me abhor reading”

“I thought it was a shame that fantasy or science fiction was only rarely accepted. This is why I did not like to read for school”

Other popular statements varied along the lines of selecting books based on their themes that were interesting, such as historical books or about other countries; people who liked to read but were saddened that the options were rather limited; reading as little books as possible for the stars or points needed (teachers can demand students to read more challenging books which in return have more stars or points from which they then do not have to read extra books). The main consensus that can be drawn from the findings of this question is that the majority did not enjoy the books that they read simply because of the themes. The forcefulness of having to read and being graded caused displeasure amongst students. The disconnect between students’ preferred genres and what they are allowed to read for school thus often leads to displeasure and disengagement.

Of course not everyone thought the experience was terrible. One respondent stated that through literature education they found new books and authors that they were unfamiliar with which gave them more motivation and interest in reading. Their teachers hyped up Dutch literature and tried to improve the image. This yet again signifies that the teachers are key to the enjoyment of the reading pleasure and motivation of their students.

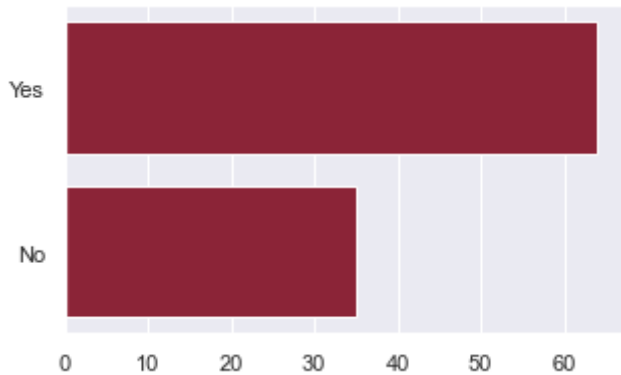


Figure 11: Do you read during your classes?

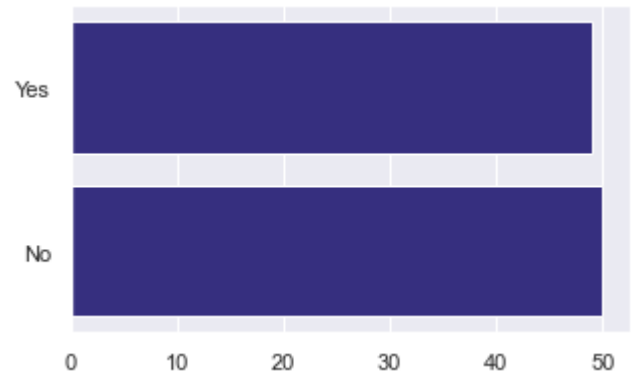


Figure 10: Do you discuss the books that you read in class with the teacher or other students?

Figure 11 shows whether the respondents read their literature books in and during their Dutch class. The majority states that yes they do have designated time for reading. Figure 10 on the right was about whether they discussed the books that they read in class with their teacher or other students. Interestingly, here the difference is very narrow, with the slight majority stating that no, they do not or did not discuss the literature in class even if they might have read it during class.

Motivations for these choices ranged from the teacher asking for updates on which books and how many the students have read, and what the students thought of those books, to book recommendations and discussing books with fellow classmates. Some respondents had to read some books together in class, like *Max Havelaar*, some teachers read poetry, and others were asked about their interpretation of the books. Though a respondent stated that there usually was the idea of right or wrong where there was a set correct interpretation, if you did not agree with said interpretation then you were wrong. Thus, the overall influence teachers have over the literary experience is a central theme. Teachers often dictate which books can be read and how they are assessed, which, in turn, affects students' motivation and enjoyment. Some students reported positive experiences where teachers fostered engagements by, as mentioned above and in the survey, recommending meaningful books or creating a classroom environment conducive to discussion and exploration.

When asked what sort of books the respondents would have like to read or like to read for the mandatory Dutch literature education, the responses varied with answers like reading books about people with a similar age; realistic books; modern retellings of historical stories; translated works; fantasy; books with societal themes; books about foreign countries; themes fitting for teenagers; books about politics and society; autobiographies; more variety of book genre, theme, and writing style; more recommendations for female authors; the big three as it is fitting; coming-of-age or YA; books with interesting and difficult topics like drug abuse and addiction; less depressing themes.

These are just slivers of responses, yet they capture the debate about Dutch literature education well. Some people state that they would like to stay with the traditional works because it fits the idea of Dutch literature education and that is just how it has always been while others mention their wish for more diverse and fitting books for teenagers. One respondent states that literature is important for Dutch cultural knowledge but that it is important that there is enjoyment for teenagers, which will not happen when reading many books from “...*a couple of white men from last century*...”. This contributed to the theme that these books are outdated, boring, and not suitable or interesting for teenagers, especially books targeting sexual content and other emotionally heavy subjects and themes.

When asked to rate their overall experience with Dutch literature education and thus also title lists that may include *Lezen voor de Lijst*, figure 12 shows that most respondents hold a neutral (3) opinion, followed by not liking the mandatory reading (2). Only a very small share of the respondents finds it to be really fun.

Reasons as to why have already been mentioned above. This is because some really do not like the books that they are required or allowed to read, whereas some find those books to be great. The mandatory aspect was exhausting to some, and the pressure to read many books caused stress to some. This stress and books that are not interesting caused some students to only read a few books completely while using online summaries for the others. Some respondents state that they have learned a lot from literature education and see it as a positive experience. Some preferred reading over general Dutch classes. The people who enjoyed the title list as well as literature education mainly stated they enjoy discovering new authors, books, and genres. Though the main consensus that can be drawn from the answers written

down is that most students did not enjoy the selection of book titles, which again the teachers have the final decision over.

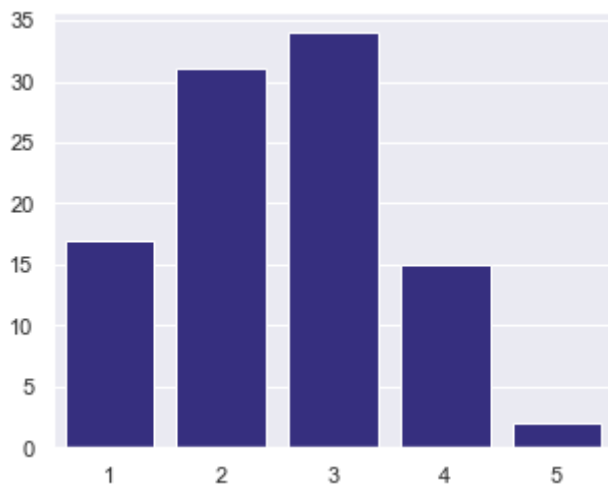


Figure 12: How would you rate your experience with Dutch literature education and Lezen voor de Lijst?

Positive aspects of literature education

Question 31 asked the respondents what parts of literature education they liked. Respondents stated that making connections between themes and aspects as well as interpreting the books was nice. Another remark that was popular was that respondents got introduced to new books that they normally would not tend to read. The freedom to choose a book, to just read a book for a subject, and discussing these books were also often written down.

When asked on how to possibly improve their personal experiences. The most common answers related to these:

- More freedom to select a book
- Less books
- More diverse books
- Audiobooks
- More information and recommendations for nice, relatable, and fun books
- Translated books
- Space and time for reading at school in between and during classes
- More responsibility for the student, no mandatory reading time during class

- More attention on reading pleasure and not reading skills through, for example, reading a book that has been turned into a movie
- Different examinations, no oral exam at a later date but a written exercise immediately after finishing a book
- No mandatory books when an author visits school

Research findings done by Stichting Lezen (2019) align with the findings from this survey. In general students are satisfied with reading and the reading list with a 6,7. This average grade seems to go along with the findings in figure 12 as it seems rather neutral albeit a bit more positive perhaps. The students in their research read most books, however they too did not read all books. In their research they found that canonical Dutch literary works are still very popular and the most read books but that they are not quite appreciated. A main finding they too had was that the personal reading lists of students were not very diverse, this however is not the title list per se but the reading list of students which contain the books they read. They themselves selected the heterogenous books.¹¹⁵

Some parting comments that respondents left are:

“...Dutch literature is still rather limited in genres that the youth finds interesting...”
 and *“...Talk about the books during class...not in an oral exam later when all the fun has gone as remembering all the details is hard...”* and finally *“I think that the process of literature education works pretty well...I am not difficult, if the school does it a certain way then it must be fine...students and youth can use the extra push for reading...especially Dutch literature...”*.

3.2 Follow-up Discussion

The follow-up discussion was a semi-guided discussion following the survey. It took approximately half an hour and there were 3 graduated high school students from vwo (2) and havo (1). The following visualization depicts the common themes and inductive codes that were taken from the discussion transcription.

¹¹⁵ Jeroen Dera, ‘De Praktijk van de Leeslijst. Een onderzoek naar de inhoud en waardering van literatuurlijsten voor het schoolvak Nederlands op havo en vwo’, *Stichting Lezen*, 2019 <https://www.lezen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/praktijk_van_de_leeslijst_digitaal.pdf>.



Figure 13: Visualization of themes and codes

The discussion got started through restating whether the alumni liked to read or not. All three stated to be avid readers, albeit with different interests. While all three preferred to read in English, one stated to prefer reading in Dutch when it came to classics as the text becomes easier to understand and recognize.

Overall, the discussion corroborated the sentiments of the respondents in the survey. The genres that they liked to read were often not suited for the teacher’s requirements with Dutch literature. The participants stated varying degrees of satisfaction with the mandatory Dutch literature education. However, one participant really liked the part of the Dutch curriculum as they could read their favorite books with historical themes or about queerness. Another participant thought the books were terrible. They stated that they selected books based on their length, however they turned out to be very boring.

Their main concerns were with the examination part of the literature. Students expressed frustration with the time lag between reading and assessment, which often led to a reliance on online summaries and a decrease in genuine engagement. Statements like that it took too long between reading the books and the final oral exam were named, as you would

forget much of the books by that time resulting in the online summaries to be needed. Furthermore, the notion of “correct interpretations,” enforced by some teachers, further impacts the enjoyment and motivation of students. It was often unclear according to the participants what the purpose and goal was of the exams. Different interpretations between the teacher and the students caused a rift of right and wrong where the student would be downgraded as it is not the “accepted” interpretation. This occurrence caused some displeasure with the participants, as students who did not actually read the books and instead used online summaries received higher grades.

The greatest wish to improve the experience of the mandatory Dutch literature education is to allow more freedom in selecting books and, thus, having less strict requirements. These requirements are decided on by the individual teachers or schools so there is not a one-fits-all checklist. Even though the participants stated the importance of Dutch literature as ways to get out of one's comfort zone and as Dutch culture, they wished for translations to be allowed as well to motivate students to read more. Especially since some do not read at all or select the shortest books available on the list.

The teachers thus have a very important task in the actual reading. They should try to give fitting recommendations for teenagers. One of the participants stated that they did not like the recommendation of their teacher, which led to the whole interpretation debacle. They then stated that teachers should focus more on the importance of reading Dutch literature but also about what they expect of the students in the examinations as it was unclear to them.

Even though there is a sense of freedom in selecting books, students still feel restricted. They are unable to read their favorite works or works in their preferred genres and are thus not familiar with many of the books on the title lists they often receive at school. However, it can be said that students are perhaps not looking well enough for what interests them.

3.3 Conclusion

The analysis of the survey and follow-up discussion provides a view of how Dutch high school students, both current and graduated, experience the mandatory Dutch literature education, particularly through the lens of the pedagogic framework “Lezen voor de Lijst”. This analysis provides a sometimes conflicting relationship between students and the literary

curriculum, shaped by factors such as personal reading habits, genre preferences, their perceived relevance of the material, and the pedagogical execution process by teachers.

One of the most prominent findings is that a significant portion of the respondents enjoy reading in their free time, especially genres like Young Adult and fantasy, genres that are generally absent from the approved literature lists, even “Lezen voor de Lijst”, as well as reading in English. Conflicting sources might explain the lack of fantasy and science fiction books in the title lists, as the categorization and labeling of Dutch books often are labeled as different genres even if they have fantastical elements. There seems to be an attitude in the Dutch book world that does not consider speculative fiction as literature. This becomes more evident as there are less writing awards to win in fantasy compared to other genres in the Netherlands.¹¹⁶ In general, students found the book titles they often had to read to be outdated and boring. Some enjoyed discovering new books and genres and expressed their acknowledgement of enjoying literature education due to enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers, though. This again underscores the pivotal role that educators play, a role in cultivating an environment where reading is meaningful and enjoyable.

4. Teachers

This chapter focuses on the findings from the four interviews that were conducted. The interviewees are four teachers. They were asked questions about Dutch literature education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’. A full list of questions can be found in appendix B. These insights from four teachers are important to contextualize the findings regarding literature education and ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ from the student survey as the teachers make the final decision as to what their students are allowed to read. The main themes and codes taken from the interviews were put together in a visual map.

¹¹⁶ George van Hal, ‘Nederlanders zijn gek op sciencefiction, maar niet van eigen bodem. Hoe komt dat?’, *De Volkskrant*, 9 February 2023 <<https://www.volkskrant.nl/boeken/nederlanders-zijn-gek-op-sciencefiction-maar-niet-van-eigen-bodem-hoe-komt-dat~bff74780/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

4.1 Interview Analysis

In order to gain more insights on the teacher perspective of Dutch literature education and Lezen voor de Lijst, teachers were interviewed. Two were current teachers who teach havo 4/5 and vwo 4/5/6, one teacher only taught the younger students in the years before havo 4/5 and vwo 4/5/6, and one interviewee is a retired teacher who currently focuses on their own literary education platform which is reminiscent of the ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ web page but that focuses on teachers. The last interviewee received a document with questions to fill in instead of a live interview like the others and the questions were also slightly different.

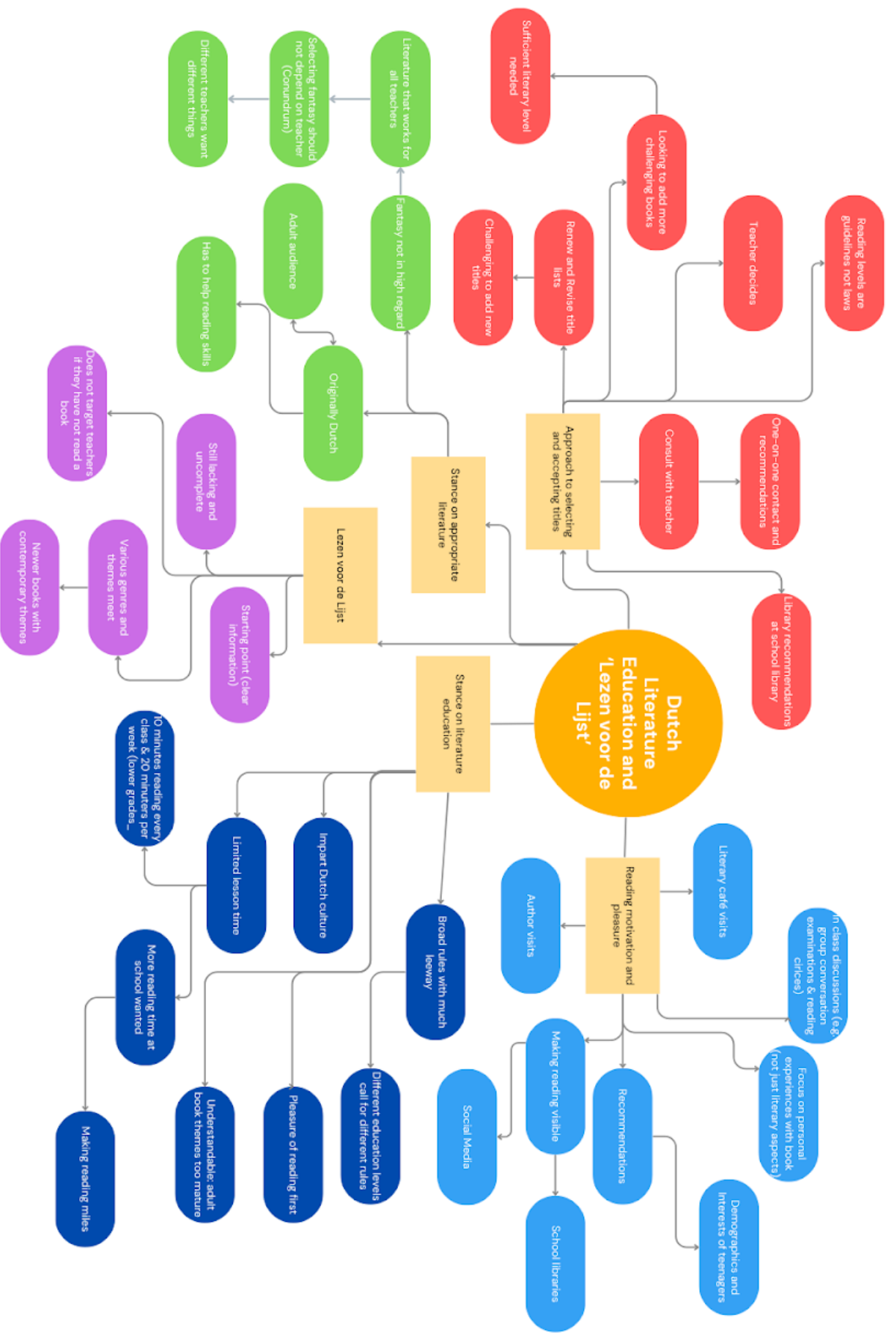
In the analysis they will be indicated as teacher A, teacher B, teacher C for the teacher who only teaches the younger students, and interviewee D for the retired teacher. They mostly come from different schools.

The graph below is a visualization of the major codes and themes that could be drawn from the interviews. It follows the themes on selecting and accepting books; stance on literature education; reading motivation and pleasure; stance of appropriate literature; and Lezen voor de Lijst. The questions they were asked inspired these themes that were encoded. We will now discuss these codes.

Stance and position

To start with the positions of the interviewees, they all stated to have a strong interest in the Dutch language and literature. They mentioned that they like reading. Their favorite genres range from originally Dutch literature to fantasy, thrillers, and YA. One of the major reasons to become a teacher was, according to most of the interviewees, to work with adolescents.

Their position, as they too stated, is to steer students and give recommendations, whilst also being the gatekeepers to what book titles are appropriate and allowed to be read and what titles are not suitable. The general consensus that can be taken from the interviews is that this varies between teachers and schools. They generally state that the main requirement is that it should be originally Dutch while the actual regulations are very broad and thus have much leeway for the teachers, with teacher A delving deeper in the literary value that needs to be sufficient according to them.



Different teachers want different things, which can lead to discrepancies in what is and what is not allowed. These discrepancies vary more between schools than within a school between teachers, as they often work together to set their own rules and guidelines. An example of such a discrepancy between teachers was stated by teacher C where they had a discussion whether books that had been turned into motion pictures should be allowed or not, as students could simply opt to watch the movie instead of reading the actual book.

Reading motivation and pleasure

Teacher B and C mentioned their purpose of giving recommendations and having students consult with them for fitting literature. This is in accordance with improving reading motivation and pleasure amongst their students. They both state that their main goal is to have their students read, from which then as reading motivation grows more challenging books can be added and read to prepare the students for university or college for example.

Teacher A mentioned their understandance about the displeasure students might experience with literature education. Reading a book with mature themes such as extramarital affairs and sexual scenes, may not be too interesting and exciting for 15 to 18 year olds; it does not quite fit into their own world of experiences. However, it is important to note that reading such books with challenging themes and writing styles challenges the students. They also stated the importance and, perhaps, core notion of Dutch literature education which is to impart Dutch culture.

Literacy

Questions in the interview were also aimed at the literacy rates in the Netherlands and thus within their class environments. However, it was not possible to gather any useful information about this topic as literacy insight could not be gained due to demographic differences between students, cities, and schools. The teachers also did not have any concrete thoughts or evidence on the matter. Therefore, this part of the research was rejected and will not necessarily be further discussed within the analysis. They did state the growing concern with the declining OECD and PISA scores. However, just as reasons as to why these scores are on a decline, we cannot continue with this theme in this research.

Motivation methods

A theme that came to the forefront quite some times relates to the reading appreciation, motivation, and pleasure of students. Teachers are well aware that many students do not seem

to like literature education per se. Approaches they undertake to motivate reading and reading pleasure is by for example visiting literary cafés or having authors visit school to discuss their literary works.

What is more, by first listening to the interviewees and then reading through all their transcripts, it becomes clear that teachers apply various methods to motivate their students. In some cases, also depending on the group of students and their demographic it may be more difficult or easier. Teacher B makes intricate title lists with recommendations based on their students' demographics and interests. For example, they had made a title list with relatively short books that had a lower level of difficulty, but that would be suitable to be read if students had limited time. They curated a selection of books with various themes and genres so that there should be something for everyone to enjoy.

Teacher B also mentioned a different way of examining their students. Instead of oral exams that are one-on-one, they incorporated group conversation examinations where students have to discuss their books with each other. This way of examining their skills, comprehensibility, and interpretation had received positive feedback from their students. It shows the effectiveness of discussing and talking about books in class. Teacher A corroborates that in order to motivate students it is important to make reading and books visible at school. This can be done through social media but also by having a school library.

Teacher A, B, and C all stated that the time available for literature education, especially reading in class or during class hours, is rather limited. Teacher B states to spend at least 20 minutes per week on reading, however, they also noted that actual meeting time with their class was very brief as their school system did not allow more. All three current teachers therefore stated their wish for more reading time at school.

Lezen voor de Lijst

When asked about the pedagogic concept by Theo Witte 'Lezen voor de Lijst', all four interviewees stated that they were aware of its existence and teachers A, B, and C all make use of it in their own teachings and classrooms. An important finding was that they all found the website, that works in accordance with the youth library, to be the central starting point with clear information for students to find more information about the books and not the end point.

When a student selects a book title from the title list of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ they do not have to consult with their teacher and are immediately allowed to read the book as they categorize appropriate books based on their difficulty level. In other cases, if a student does not make use of the title list of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ or one provided by their teacher, they first must consult with their teacher about whether their book qualifies for the 8 to 12 books that must be read in havo and vwo. The student chooses the book but the teacher ultimately decides, it depends on the difficulty level of the book whether it is accepted. Teacher A mentioned that through the title list of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ the students came and read newer books with contemporary themes instead of the older and, according to many previous high school students, notoriously uninteresting literary works.

Nevertheless, they do not defer in all cases to the pedagogic concept of the Lijst. They clearly state that they either make their own title lists with recommendations for students, with books that they find to be missing as well from the website as teacher B and teacher C state that the platform is “*still lacking and uncomplete as well as that it does not contain all books that can be read*”. Another comment, made by interviewee D, is that ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ targets mainly students and even though there is a designated portion for teachers. It does not target teachers as much if they have not read a certain book and need information.

4.2 Conclusion

This chapter presents insights from the interviews with four Dutch teachers, three are currently teaching while the fourth is retired. Questions were asked about their perspectives on literature education and the use of the pedagogic ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ platform and concept. The teachers, each with varied teaching experiences, shared common ground in their passion for Dutch literature and their role in guiding students’ reading choices. They emphasized the flexibility in book selection, with some variation between schools regarding what qualifies as appropriate literature. While the teachers generally agreed that books should originally be Dutch and of sufficient literary value, they navigate this with their own interpretations and set of guidelines that can be school specific. When asked about the issue of student engagement, they recognized that certain literary themes that are commonly found in appropriate books on title lists do not resonate with young readers. However, they state that these books still serve educational and especially cultural purposes.

Another key theme that can be drawn from the analysis was reading motivation and how the teachers aim to foster reading pleasure among their students. Teachers use different strategies like curating custom reading lists based on student demographics, incorporating author visits, promoting school libraries, and adopting alternative assessment methods like group discussion. While ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ is a widely used and appreciated tool, it is viewed more as a starting point for information and as a guideline rather than a definitive source. The interviewed teachers stated to supplement it with their own selections, noting that the title list of the concept has limitations. Although literacy rates are a point of concern, the interviews were unable to yield any data on the subject due to variability within the demographic. This led to the topic to be excluded from further analysis within this research. Ultimately, the interviews underline a shared desire for more classroom time dedicated to reading and a flexible, student-centered approach to literature education.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to inquire the sentiments and experiences of current and graduated Dutch high school students in havo 4/5 and vwo 4/5/6 regarding Dutch literature education and the pedagogic concept ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ to see how this pedagogic approach could perhaps be improved or changed if possible. The intention is to give preliminary recommendations where possible to the current educational practices.

The findings of the analyses of the survey, follow-up discussion, and interview provide a picture of Dutch literature education and the experiences surrounding it, particularly for havo and vwo students and recent graduates. This research started with the question: *How can the experiences of the Dutch mandatory literature education of (graduated) high school students influence or improve the pedagogic approach to literature education, including the pedagogic concept of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’?* Through both quantitative data (survey) and qualitative insights (follow-up discussion, survey, and teacher interviews), this analysis and this thesis aimed to reflect on that question as well as offer clarity about what is working, what is not, and what perhaps needs to change entirely.

The background chapter outlined a concerning decline in literacy rates in the Netherlands, with Dutch teenagers scoring significantly lower in reading comprehension

compared to earlier years and to other EU and OECD countries. This statistic underlines the importance and urgency of literature education. Pedagogical approaches such as ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ were designed to foster literary competence and skills through six reading levels created by Theo Witte. However, the implementation of literature education and the pedagogical concept vary across schools and classrooms as there are no rigid requirements.

The main implications that can be derived from the main findings of the research is a cultural disconnect and engagement loss due to the literature the students are required to read compared to their own reading habits that include favorite genres. Furthermore, the use of for example ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ varies across schools and educators as teachers ultimately decide how they approach literature education. Some students may benefit from more flexible teachers and their requirements while others may feel more repressed. Teachers were concerned about the lack of proper time in the curriculum to focus meaningfully on literature. With increased pressure currently on central exams and other broader skills, it seems that literature education loses time and attention. Students critiqued about long delays between reading a book and being tested, which led them to disconnect from the material. This might suggest that there needs to be some structural reform again in designing a curriculum for Dutch classes, especially when taking notice of the decreasing literacy rates. In general the ability for students to succeed in the current system often depends on other factors such as their parental involvement, reading culture at home, and other access to reading materials. Students who come from non-Dutch backgrounds often struggle more with literacy and engaging with complex Dutch literature.¹¹⁷

A key finding is the clash between reading for pleasure and the act of reading because it is mandatory. Many students, even those who identified as enthusiastic readers and booklovers, shared that the moment a book became a school assignment, their reading experience changed. The experience often became more about collecting the necessary points or stars, by choosing for example the shortest or easiest books, and less about understanding or appreciating Dutch literature. One survey respondent mentioned: “*The*

¹¹⁷ Abdul Jabbar and Nosheen Warraich, ‘Factors related to Children, Parents, and School Teachers Influencing Children Reading Habits: A Review of Literature’, *Online Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 6.1 (2021), pp. 228-244

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352734186_Factors_related_to_Children_Parents_and_School_Teachers_Influencing_Children_Reading_Habits_A_Review_of_Literature>[Accessed 16 June 2025].

mandatory aspect of having to read after school was not a nice activity for my teenager brain, it made me abhor reading.”

The limitations of Dutch literature education and the title lists were often stated. Students often felt they could not explore their own interests within the pedagogical approach of literature education. Fantasy and YA literature were overwhelmingly cited as favorite genres, yet they were and are rarely accepted or encouraged within the Dutch curriculum, teachers, or Lezen voor de Lijst. This has a direct impact on their engagement and enjoyment. Some even confessed to reading as little as possible and filling the gaps with online summaries. This shows the discontent of a significant number of students with the current approach where they have to discuss the books they have read, books that they felt had little relevance to their own world or interests.

Teachers introduce students to the literary experience and help frame it for them. Whether it is through the title lists they approve, the freedom they allow, or the way they discuss books in class, teachers can either ignite a love for literature or extinguish it entirely. Several students shared their stories of teachers who “hyped up” Dutch literature, who gave thoughtful recommendations, or who took the time to talk about books in class. For those students, literature education was a nice experience instead of just another school assignment.

On the other side, there were also students who felt that their interpretations and thoughts on a book did not matter. They described experiences where their views on a book were dismissed because they did not align with the teacher’s interpretation or the “correct” standardized interpretation. One respondent said: *“There was always a right answer. If you didn’t agree with the teacher’s view, you were wrong.”* This caused frustration and discrepancies when students who had not read any of the books really received higher grades because of these standard interpretations and online summaries.

The follow-up discussion echoed these sentiments. All three participants emphasized the important role of teachers in shaping how literature is talked about and valued. They critiqued the lack of clarity in the expectation of literature education regarding these summaries and interpretations.

When looking at the pedagogic concept ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’, most students were familiar as they used it to select books. However, the survey respondents still felt that such title lists were still restrictive and outdated. They stated that most of the books did not

reflect their own world of experiences, as the book themes were often very mature or the books were just old. The Dutch literary canon, which was revised in 2022, also shows that the top 4 books are yet again the same old Dutch literature that has been called the big three. These authors (Hermans, Mulisch, and Reve) are prominent on title lists as well as on the Dutch literary canon. It emphasizes the rigidity of Dutch literature, it is still mainly older white men.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, the concept ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ is appreciated. For teachers, it provides structure and legitimacy. If a student selects a book from the list, double checking whether the book is appropriate is not as necessary. For students, the website serves as a starting point in their search for interesting books to read.

When asked what they would like to see change in literature education, students offered some suggestions. The findings from both the survey and the follow-up discussion point toward directions for improvement from a student’s perspective. Students ask for more freedom of choice and diversity. They want books that reflect their age, interests, and social realities. They also request for translated works, audiobooks, and multimedia resources to be allowed, though whether that is possible when it comes to reading and literature depends on the Dutch pedagogy. In addition, they stressed greater emphasis on reading pleasure, more diversity in books, and different examination methods. Students do not reject the idea of Dutch literature education altogether, they actually recognize its cultural and educational importance. However, they mostly do not agree with the current and past process.

The teachers care about literature and their students. They are aware of the challenges and sentiments that students have. They then have their own ways of trying to motivate students and to make the experience more pleasurable. Such motivations were, for example, visits to literary cafés, inviting authors to school, or discussing books in class.

However, they too mentioned the limited time for reading at school and stated as a wish for that to be more the same as students. Furthermore, there is no clear cut regulation about which books are acceptable. Some teachers go out of their way to make personalized lists based on their students’ demographics and interests according to

¹¹⁸ Coen Peppelenbos, ‘Nieuws: Dit is de nieuwe Nederlandstalige literaire canon; Max Havelaar blijft fier bovenaan staan’, *TZUM literair weblog*, 1 October 2022 <<https://www.tzum.info/2022/10/nieuws-dit-is-de-nieuwe-nederlandstalige-literaire-canon-max-havelaar-blijft-fier-bovenaam-staan/>> [Accessed 16 June 2025].

themselves. Some also accept a much wider variety of books than another teacher at another school who for example focuses much more on the literary skills and comprehension than just the focus on having students read longer texts. The differences lead to inconsistent student experiences that vary, essentially, based on what school a student goes to.

Building on these insights it is important to give potential recommendations to perhaps improve the process and experience of Dutch literature education. First off, for the students, taking into consideration all that they have mentioned it should be important to the board of 'Lezen voor de Lijst' as well as teachers and their own title lists to modernize and diversify them. They should work on aiming for more contemporary Dutch authors as well as including more genre fiction and speculative fiction, and more multicultural narratives to reflect the identities of current high school students. While it is virtually improbable, restrictions on translated works can be loosened. There are many high quality literary works from other countries that could potentially be of more interest to some students, though the focus should definitely be on original Dutch works. Thus teachers must stay vigilant to new published books that may be suitable as well as the people updating the title list of 'Lezen voor de Lijst'

On a continuing note to that, it is important that the labeling and categorization of Dutch books allows for more works to be labeled as science fiction or fantasy. This way students may more easily find books of interest in these genres that were often favored in the survey. Now these books may disappear or go unnoticed as they are labeled as different genres.

Assessment practices should potentially be revised. The time that goes on between reading and evaluation should be reduced. By introducing these shorter reading and reflection cycles students may be more motivated to read the books and may have more deeper and personal interpretations of the books they have read. Alternative assessment formats may also lead to more engagement by students.

It is understandable that the whole process may seem daunting to teachers, especially since they have such a pivotal role. It is therefore important that teachers have support through policy and training to offer development in student centered pedagogy and such. Though perhaps the most important takeaway that can be given is that students should be more involved in their own learning. Teachers should allow for students to propose more

book titles from various different genres, even if the teachers are perhaps not as knowledgeable about, for example, fantasy. It should not come at a cost of the enjoyment of students. By promoting social media platforms like BookTok, Goodreads, or Hebban, teachers can blend digital culture and their students with literature education. These interactions can support building a community of readers within schools that increases the visibility of books and literature.

All research has limitations, in this particular case there is sampling bias. A significant portion of the survey participants were recent graduates rather than current students, this may have skewed perspectives as they are not necessarily current experiences anymore. This was partly due to time constraints. Unfortunately, the final exams and spring break fell right in the middle of the research. The current research provides qualitative insights, however it does not include all education levels of Dutch high schools.

As time is limited, there is much potential for further research in this field and to address the limitations. A more specific scope and longitudinal study could allow for more clear insights of a particular education level, year, student background, or how reading preferences and experiences of literature education evolves over time. Comparing the Dutch literature pedagogy to other countries that are facing similar challenges can add more insights and nuance. There is definitely more to discover.

Ethical considerations

Positionality

As a Dutch high school graduate I do know first hand about Dutch literature education rather recently from a student perspective. I share my personal experiences with some peers of mine. In my opinion, the books that we were required to read as well as books that we could select from a title list were very boring and outdated. The themes and storylines were just not interesting to a sixteen or seventeen year old me. I vividly remember reading about a dinner and some teenagers who assaulted a homeless person, quite serious and emotionally heavy topics.

The reason why I chose this topic to research is because I have heard from so many peers that they did not enjoy the literature education. I wished to find out what exactly they did or did not enjoy and how teachers view this.

I acknowledge that this may impact and influence my perception on the experiences and sentiments regarding Dutch literature and title lists. I tried to stay as neutral as possible while conducting the survey, follow-up discussion, and the interviews. To mitigate, I wrote down the questions in a neutral manner with no clear leading questions. Though from the main findings of the survey results, it appears that most students do share my personal sentiments, experiences, and thoughts. During the research I had to stay self-reflective and reflect on my own biases and assumptions as a researcher. By incorporating feedback and asking questions I can address potential biases and assumptions.

I believe that the research findings are not harmful to anyone. I have been researching what students' experiences and sentiments are regarding the mandatory Dutch literature education and 'Lezen voor de Lijst' and how this could perhaps be improved or changed if possible. The people who filled in the survey, who participated in the discussion, and who were interviewed all could withdraw their consent. This consent was taken via the survey as well as via voice recording for the discussion and interviews. The findings and transcripts were anonymized and stored safely.

Benefit

I believe that my research can give back or be beneficial towards the groups involved. My research can potentially benefit high school students to provide solutions and recommendations to make their experiences more enjoyable. This in return can possibly help teachers with literature education.

Transparency

To ensure transparency I made sure to have a clear methodology and research that states the different steps. By clearly stating and documenting the process others will be able to understand how the research was conducted and see whether or not it is valid. I also disclosed any personal conflicts of interest in my positionality. In addition, by using clear communication without use of any jargon to ensure that the research can be read by anyone who is not Dutch. By following these principles and practices I can plan on providing clarity on all steps in the research process.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Survey on the experiences, habits, and sentiments regarding mandatory reading in Dutch high schools with the concept of ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’

Mandatory questions and non mandatory questions are indicated like this.

Welcome to the research study for a master thesis of Book and Digital Media studies at Leiden University!

I am interested in understanding your experiences, reading habits, and sentiments regarding the mandatory reading in high school for the subject Dutch. The concept that is used in examining reading skills is ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’.

You will be presented with information relevant to the reading experiences and habits in Dutch classes. Then, you will be asked to answer questions about it. Your responses will be anonymized for the resulting study.

This study should take you about [survey duration in minutes] to complete. If you are interested in participating in a small follow up discussion about your answers, please fill in the box. In order to have a chance at winning, make sure to fill in your email address at the bottom of the consent question.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. You can contact me regarding questions and withdrawal at Nikki van Balkom/n.m.h.van.balkom@umail.leidenuniv.nl.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- **Your participation in the study is voluntary**
- **You fill in the survey truthfully**
- **You are a current HAVO/VWO high school student in the year 4, 5, or 6; OR you are a high school graduate (HAVO/VWO) between graduating year 2024-2018**
- **You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason**

•

Yes I consent

•

No I do not consent

•

Yes I consent, and I would be interested in a follow up discussion. I can be contacted through this email address...

Section 1 General information

Q1 What is your current level of education?

Havo 4

Havo 5

Havo 6

VWO 4

VWO 5

VWO 6

Graduate

2018

2019

2020

2021

2022

2023

2024

2025

Q2 What is your age? [open question]

Q3 What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary / other

2nd Part: Reading Habits

Q4 Do you read books in your free time?

Yes

No

Q5 If yes, how many books approximately do you read in a year? [open question]

Q6 How do you get your books? Check all that apply

Purchase physical or digital copy

Borrow from someone

Borrow from a library

I get them from a minibieb

I get them at school

Other...

Q7 What is(are) your favorite genre(s) to read? [select all that apply]

YA

Thriller

Sci-fi

Horror

Fantasy

Literary fiction

Other... [Magazines, non-fiction, self-help etc.]

I do not read

Q8 In what language do you read most books?

Dutch

English

Other language...

I do not read

Q9 Why do you read in your chosen language of preference? [open]

Q10 On what device do you mainly read?

Physical book

E-reader

Phone

Tablet/iPad

Laptop

Other...

I do not read

Q11 When do you read the most (after school on weekdays, weekend, holiday...)? [open]

Q12 Do you use book related social media? Think of TikTok (BookTok), Instagram (Bookstagram), YouTube (BookTube), Goodreads?

Yes I make use of the book related social media

No, I do use the social media platforms for other uses

No, I do not use social media

Q13 If you use book related social media, which ones in particular (you can select multiple)?

BookTok

BookStagram

BookTube

Goodreads

Storygraph

Hebban

Tome

Q14 If you use book related social media, how often do you use it? [open]

Q15 If you use book related social media, how do you use them? (e.g. I started reading more; started reading in English; I try new books...) [open]

Q16 Do you use recommendations from these apps in selecting what to read next?

yes

no

3rd part: Reading at school

Q17 Are you familiar with ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’?

Yes

No

Q18 How does the process of selecting a book to read work at your school regarding ‘Lezen voor de Lijst’ assignments/examination? [select all that apply]

I use the title list that is provided by my teacher

I use the Lezen voor de Lijst website to find a suitable book

I ask for recommendations at my local library

I ask for recommendations from my teach

I ask for recommendations from friends/family

I take recommendations from social media/the internet

Other... [open]

Q19 What type of books are considered suitable to read by your teacher for Lezen voor de Lijst? (translations, novels...) [open]

Q20 How does this process impact your choice in books? Explain what types of books you read, whether you enjoy them, and how the teacher takes part? [open]

Q21 Do you read in class/at school?

yes [elaborate in what way]

no

Q22 Do you discuss the readings/books in class? (with students and teacher)

yes

no

Q23 If you discuss them in class, please elaborate how and in what way. [open]

Q24 Do you discuss readings/books with your friends?

yes

no

Q25 What types of books would you like to be able to read in school for the mandatory reading and examinations? Please elaborate your answer. [open]

Q26 How do you feel about reading at and for school? Give an indication on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being I really do not like to 5 being I like it very much.

Q27 Can you elaborate on this? [open]

Q28 If your experience is negative, how can your reading experience at school be improved/or how could it have been improved? Please motivate your answer [open]

Q29 If you like the mandatory reading process, can you please explain what aspects made you like it? [open]

Q30 What types of literature, if you know them, do you read mostly for the Dutch classes? (e.g. Biography, dystopian, historical fiction...) [open]

Q31 Do they fit within your own personal favorite genre(s)?

Yes

No

Q32 Do you know how many books you have to read this year/how many books you have had to read? [open]

Q33 Are the books that you have to/had to read separated by difficulty level? (e.g. level 1 to 6) Please explain. [open]

Q34 How was/is your reading ability and comprehension examined/tested? (oral exam; written exam...) [open]

Final Part: main takeaways and reflection

Q35 Write in about ... words how you wish the mandatory reading at school can be changed/improved or why it should not change? Please elaborate and motivate your answer [open]

Q36 If you could choose any book to read, would it improve your experience? (E.g. Harry Potter books; more YA; translations...) Please motivate your answer [open]

Appendix B: Follow-up Discussion Guide

*Questions were originally in Dutch.

Welcome to this follow-up discussion. Thank you for your time and participation. You have all completed the survey about your experiences with 'Reading for the List' and the compulsory reading of Dutch literature in secondary school for the Dutch language course. This follow-up discussion will build on these results to gain a better understanding of your motivations and experiences.

I will record this conversation on my phone, and your names will be anonymized.

Some questions will be asked again, because I don't know what your answers were.

- Are you currently in secondary school or have you graduated?
- Do you like to read, and what kind of books do you prefer to read?
- Do you read in Dutch and Dutch literature in your free time? Why/why not?

- Are you familiar with different and new Dutch literature? And how do you know these books?
- What were your personal experiences with literature education for the Dutch language course and with reading for the list?
- How were you allowed to choose books? Was it through a list shared by the teacher, reading for the list website, choosing book titles yourself?
- Did you feel you had a lot of freedom in that choice? And are/were they books you enjoyed reading, and still read today?
- The survey responses often show that students find the books they read far removed from their own experiences. With themes that are not really relevant to teenagers, how did you experience that?
- Was it mainly independent reading? Or was a lot of it done in class and/or in groups?
- Did literature education influence your motivation and enjoyment of reading, and how?
- How would you improve your experience with literature education, if you think it needs to be improved? Or why not?
- What is something teachers could have done to motivate you more to read for Dutch class?
- Respondents argue for more freedom in choosing books. Do you agree? According to teachers, we students were given quite a lot of freedom in selecting reading material. How did you experience that?

Appendix C: Interview Guide

- How long have you been teaching Dutch?
- Why did you choose this profession? (Briefly explain)
- Which classes do you teach? (level and grade)
- Do you enjoy reading and read a lot yourself?
- What kind of books do you mainly read? Which genres?

*Reading for the list process questions

Do you use the website www.lezenvoordelijst.nl? And do you use the teacher information section or the list of titles offered? (How?)

Can you tell me how the reading for the list process works at your school, how the books are chosen, and how it is handled during/in class? How is it further tested (reading skills, etc.)?

- Students are allowed to choose titles that are approved
- Students can choose from a specific list of titles
- Students are required to read certain titles
- Students are completely free to choose titles (for inspiration)

Are teachers allowed to choose the rules themselves, or is someone else in charge of this?

Who is in charge, and have you noticed that other schools do things differently?

What kind of books do you accept based on the different grades and levels? What requirements do you set for the titles that must be read in literature classes? And how do you determine the reading levels of students?

- The titles must match the interests of the student
- The titles must match the level of the student
- The titles must have cultural-historical value
- The titles must fall within the canon of Dutch literature
- The titles must represent a diversity of subjects, genres, and authors
- The titles must offer opportunities for discussion and reflection, for example, because they address complex themes or controversial topics
- The titles must increase my students' empathy and understanding
- The titles must be in line with the exam requirements for literature education (for inspiration)

What is your opinion on YA on the list? Are you in favor of more YA on the list? And what requirements would be set for this? → Or do you only allow them in the lower grades?

How do you select titles that students are required to read in literature education?

- I consult the website www.lezenvoordelijst.nl
- I use literature guides and professional literature
- I ask for input from fellow teachers and departments within the school
- I do this based on recommendations from literature experts and reviewers
- I take the literary canon and important authors into consideration
- Other, (for inspiration)

*Reading comprehension questions (Questions in italics were scrapped)

Have you noticed a decline in the reading level and reading skills of your students in your own classes? We are all aware of the declining PISA scores. Is there also a difference between HAVO and VWO?

What do you think are the possible reasons for this decline?

Do you have any ideas on how to counteract this?

Does reading education look different now than it did before 2021, when I was a student?

How has it changed?

What else influences students' reading skills? Are you familiar with the discussion about compulsory reading and reading enjoyment? Based on anecdotal discussions, many students do not necessarily enjoy reading in secondary education. To promote reading, as it were. The reason often given for low reading motivation is that the books they read are not close to their own experiences. What methods do you implement to increase enjoyment and thus reading motivation? Would it be an option to put more YA on the list or perhaps translations of popular genres such as fantasy? And why are you allowed to read a maximum of two translated works in vocational education?

What are your personal thoughts on social media such as BookTok, and do you see a way to use this in your lessons? For example, through recommendations, discussions, and silent book review trends?

How do you stay up to date with new books for the reading list?