

## Shared Reading is not something you do alone



**Bringing people together around great literature does something to them. Reading good stories not only makes them stronger, but also teaches them how to look at things differently. It's a shame that not everyone has access to it! Or is it?**

### **The story of Jane Davis, PhD**

One day, somewhere in 2001, Jane Davis is on her way to work at the university in Liverpool. In a somewhat underprivileged neighbourhood, she is standing in front of the red light. She sees a scene of a toddler with mom and grandma. It evokes a verse from the famous poet Wordsworth. And suddenly she realizes that neither this child, nor mom or grandma, will probably never get the chance to see a poet come to life. It saddens her. Jane Davis herself grew up in a broken family where quarrel and alcohol ruled the roost. As a child, Jane tried to escape this by entrenching herself in the local library. Books became her friends. They opened up another world to her and the stories helped her understand what was happening to her. So she still ended up at the university to study English literature.

The scene at the traffic light in Liverpool triggers her to do something very concrete to bring large literature to 'small' people. She realizes that the power of literature, just as she

experienced it herself, can also mean a lot to others. Good stories can help to understand life, become stronger, make decisions, connect with others and their environment.

### **Shared Reading**

"Jane Davis developed a method in which Shared Reading together is central," says Dirk Terryn. He is founder-director of the Lezerscollectief in Flanders.

"The Lezerscollectief in Flanders (Belgium) is inspired by The Reader Organisation of Jane Davis. In England, The Reader Organisation now supervises more than four hundred reading groups. These can be found in nursing homes, prisons, psychiatric institutions, community centres, libraries and companies."

"Since 2014 we have also started reading groups in Flanders based on the model of Jane Davis. Also with us there are a lot of people who never come into contact with books. People who are struggling, but are not highly educated, or have no money for a university education. Jane Davis understood that these people rarely step over the threshold of the local library. She literally stepped up to them herself, invited them for a cup of tea and something sweet in the library. In prisons she 'seduced' the inmates with a bacon sandwich in a more cosy room than their private cell. Because she herself also grew up incapacitated, she recognized patterns and her 'rebellion' was also very credible".

***"Reading aloud slows down the story anyway. You read less and you read more details."***

"Reading groups are brought together in a cosy place. Unlike traditional reading groups where the participants have read the book beforehand - in Samen Lezen (Shared Reading) the text is read out loud and discussed at the same time. This is not a literary analysis of the text, but the experience and the way the participants experience their lives. Subsidy from the government or a sponsor makes it possible for volunteers to follow and train in the 'Davis method'.

### **Together we are smart**

"The aim of the Lezerscollectief is to unlock the treasure of world literature to a wide audience. No writer writes only for an academically educated audience. We go for a world in which everyone has access to literature. Every story is special in its stratification. What Davis understood very well was that reading out loud makes a story, text or poem more accessible. You don't necessarily have to be literate to do this. Reading out loud slows down the story anyway. You read less and you read more details. Just as it is different to walk through a landscape than to cycle: you've seen a lot more!"

"Moreover, the feeling of 'together we are smart' is created. Everyone can make an input in his or her own way if he or she wishes. In this way I am helped by what you read and discover in the text and you vice versa by me. The reading facilitator is trained to invite the exchange of thoughts, without exerting pressure. Nothing is right or wrong. There is not one truth. There are as many readings of the text as there are participants."

### **One text, many layers**

"Reading companions choose the texts and poems they want to work with. Something that suits them well, but a story that is layered. A text that is only about mourning or only about justice only allows one reading. That is not interesting. It is much more interesting

when a text touches several things and because of this everyone reads them differently. In this way the participants also become a bit of readers 'of each other'".

***"A certain story can stimulate the memory of people with incipient dementia".***

"The Lezerscollectief also compiles its own books in which texts and poetry are suggested. The choice is not so much aimed at certain target groups, but the texts are tried out beforehand. It is checked whether the story 'opens up' the conversation sufficiently to the readers. But above all the layering is essential".

"For example, experience can also teach us that a certain story stimulates the memory in people with incipient dementia. An added value therefore to use these texts or poems in reading groups in a residential care center".

**Safe in my group**

"Reading groups never have more than twelve participants. We read in a school, library, cultural centre, doctor's office where everyone can participate. Sometimes the reading groups are more closed: residential care centres, rehabilitation centres, CGGs, sheltered living. During a reading meeting a short story and a poem are read aloud. A meeting creates conviviality, but it is mainly the text that is central. The story also offers structure and support when the conversation slips too far or a participant freewheels too much".

"A text also offers security. Sometimes someone can use the story or a character from the story to articulate something he would otherwise not succeed in doing. Some recognize themselves in a certain character from the story or they recognize a situation they have experienced themselves. The conversation gives them the space to ventilate about this. At the same time it helps to let go. The mother in the story read out is exactly like my mother .... But further on in the story it turns out to be about a completely different mother. And the daughter in the story tackles it in a completely different way than I do ...".

"Shared Reading allows you to continue on something or to let it pass quietly. An experienced reading companion also has an eye for those who may not say anything because they allow themselves to be drowned out by the others. Shared Reading teaches you to look at things in a nuanced way: an event in the story can provoke a violent reaction in you while your neighbour on the right slightly overlooks it".

"We are not therapists and reading tutors do not receive therapeutic training. But the Lezerscollectief organizes activities that matter. This is how a participant put it once. It's about essential things. It is therapeutic like a good conversation with friends or like a good book or poem has a therapeutic value. One of our co-founders is a psychiatrist. He recognizes that patients sometimes indicate to benefit more from the reading group than from the group therapy. Maybe because it is less compelling? That is the luxury of the reading group: it is a form of meeting. They start from stories in order to... tell stories. But as Dirk De Wachter puts it: reading supervisors need to know what they are doing. You shouldn't send tinkerers at vulnerable people...!

## **SHARED READING ... with results**

### **Education**

94 percent of the children read more after participating in a weekly reading group. 80 percent of teachers feel more capable of reading together after attending a reading class, better able to guide their pupils in reading pleasure.

### **Mental health**

(Psychiatric institutions, sheltered housing, CGGs, TEJO)

83 percent experience a positive effect of reading on the mood.

### **Seniors and dementia**

(Residential care centers, service centers)

Nurses and family experience a beneficial effect in activating memory through stories.

### **Detention**

(Joint reading activities in Flemish prisons and detention centres)

48 percent show improvement in social and emotional behavior.

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