

NEVER TOO OLD TO READ

## Het Lezerscollectief and the positive effects of Shared Reading groups on seniors



Reading stories and poems together connects people and makes them stronger and more resilient. That is the philosophy of Het Lezerscollectief, a network of reading companions in Flanders and Brussels, which organizes reading meetings for people who have difficulty accessing literature. They also organize regular reading sessions with the team of residential care centre Huize Stracke in Boechout. Connectedness and quality are central in their approach.

British research shows that reading groups have a positive effect on seniors in residential care centres. Shared Reading provides cognitive stimulation (87% increased concentration), stimulates social interaction (86%) and increases involvement (73%). Staff of the residential care centres surveyed noted an improvement in mood and concentration. Shared Reading is a tried and tested method that is also conscientiously monitored.

### **Het Lezerscollectief and Shared Reading**

Dirk Terryn, founder of Het Lezerscollectief, was inspired by the British Jane Davis and her

Reader Organisation. Two years ago, together with Erik Van Acker and psychiatrist Jan Raes, he founded his own initiative, with the aim of bringing together as many people as possible around literature. They follow Davis' method, with the basic principle that a companion reads the texts out loud and occasionally leaves room for interaction around 'the experience of the text.



“Participants are therefore more strongly connected to the story, also because they do it together,” says Dirk Terryn. “Often what someone else says about it also helps to enter the imaginary world, to get to know characters who are a bit stranger or, on the contrary, very recognizable, and to open up the door to your memories. Because the text is read out loud, you slow down the reading process, the level of literacy of your participants does not play a role and the ability to concentrate is also less of an issue”. The reading facilitator brings the participants together and is also strongly committed to personal involvement. “In our training we teach the facilitators never to analyse the stories, but to look for hangers in the text to start the conversation. We also teach them to respect silence because some people just want to enjoy and listen.”

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### Reading in the residential care centre

“Some residents may have read a lot in the past and are no longer able to do so independently but remember it as a very pleasant activity and can continue to do so in this way. Others may not have read a lot and still discover it later in life. You don't have to be a frequent reader to enjoy S”, says Dirk Terryn. A year ago, he started a conversation with the director Jean De Ruytter and the daily manager Ineke Jaspers of Huize Stracke in Boecheout. “We have pre-screened for which residents the Lezerscollectief could be an added value,” says Ineke Jaspers. “Residents who are partially sighted and can no longer read properly or residents with incipient dementia who sometimes miss the story. We also see that residents who are less able to reach us in other activities can express themselves better in a smaller group.”

The reading companions choose which stories they read out. As an employee of the WZC, reading supervisor Sandra Poels sees the influence the chosen texts have on the residents. “If you only read a story or poem, you only give your own interpretation. During the reading sessions you hear the others saying or noticing things you hadn't seen in the first place. That makes it extra beautiful.”

“It pays to think carefully about what place Shared Reading gets in the range of activities,” adds Dirk Terryn. “The choice to use a personal member for this purpose is also a well-considered one. In some other residential care centres, volunteers provide reading support. Reading tutors all have a big heart for reading: they often know how powerful stories can be.”

### The reading area

One of the requirements for a successful reading session is a pleasant place to read. In Huize Stracke, the residents are welcomed in a cosy room, where they also enjoy coffee in nice cups with accompanying cookies while reading. Every two weeks they come together in a group of up to ten people.

### A network of reading companions

The Lezerscollectief now connects more than 50 committed reading companions in a network. Volunteers and staff members who guide (two) weekly reading groups in residential care centres, but also in libraries and prisons, for example. They follow a training course for this purpose and, in addition to a lot of inspiration, they also receive the short story book *Samen sterke verhalen vertellen* (Telling strong stories together). “The book has been compiled by reading assistants and the stories have first been tried out in numerous groups. We consciously choose short stories,” Dirk Terryn explains. “In this way you can complete a story per meeting. We conclude with a poem.”

“It's nice to see how, from a growing network, we can also gather expertise and further refine the approach and supply. There are, of course, a number of subjects that do a little more for senior citizens, for example through strong references to the youth of the reader, the context of upbringing, school hours. In the future, we certainly also want to bring our reading supervisors together in residential care centres for training and intervision. Already now they can share experiences through our website.”

“An appropriate quote is that of Guus Kuijer from *Hoe word ik gelukkig* (How do I become happy) (2009): “The advantage of books is that you can share feelings with hundreds of lives in a short time. Your development is faster than when you don't read. You end up in all sorts of cultures, in different eras and even in the opposite sex. Good stories nestle in your memory and become part of your own history.”

You may read Kuijer's quote differently from the point of view of seniors than from that of a growing child. The perspective of a life full of memories versus a life full of expectations. But as readers we imagine the same hundreds of lives we have not lived or will live (completely). Stories sometimes end differently from what we remember. But what a beauty to do that together and sometimes to share some of that commitment.

Would you also like to start a reading group and train a volunteer? More information can be found on the website [www.lezerscollectief.be](http://www.lezerscollectief.be). Sign up via [info@lezerscollectief.be](mailto:info@lezerscollectief.be). Watch the video report on Het Lezerscollectief on our website or our Youtube channel.

Source: Zorgwijzer magazine, December 2016, page 26-27