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Community oriented literacy coaching for adults with limited literacy and with or without an immigrant background

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The paper presents the project *Alphalernberatung*, which aims at creating a non-formal offer for literacy and basic education work adults with limited literacy and with/without German as their first language. In this context, further training courses for advisory staff in the social area will be created on the basis of existing advisory approaches: client centred advice, systemic advice, individual psychological advice. Learning counselling materials and self-learning materials on the subject of learning will be developed in German and several first languages.

Keywords: low literacy, coaching approaches, learning counselling, reach out approach.

1. Introduction

The prevention of limited literacy has been a topic in Germany for decades, limited literacy is understood as: "die Unterschreitung der gesellschaftlichen Mindestanforderungen an die Beherrschung der Schriftsprache, deren Erfüllung Voraussetzung ist zur sozial streng kontrollierten Teilnahme an schriftlicher Kommunikation in allen Arbeits- und Lebensbereichen [Participation in written communication is subject to strickt rules of compliance with (socially) prescribed forms]" (Drecoll 1981: 31).

Public interest in this target group began in the 1970s and, at that time, it was recognised that the group of adults with limited literacy needed greater support. Therefore, the first adult literacy courses were initiated at educational institutions, such as the adult education centre (Stauffacher 1992). The presence of limited literacy in Germany, despite attending school, needs to be emphasised in education policy, and society should also be more aware of the issue. Many concepts, projects, plans and campaigns have been implemented since then to

resolve this problem and, in the context of the Alpha Decade from 2016 to 2026, many current projects focus on limited literacy (homepage Alpha Decade)[1]. One of these projects is the *Alphalernberatung* project, which is the focus of this article.

2. Research background: The LEO – Level One Study

The LEO – Level One study provides reliable data on limited literacy in Germany for the first time, concerns individuals between 18 and 65 years of age, and is based on different alpha levels. Alpha level 1 refers to the letter level, individual letters are recognised and written, but word level is not reached when reading and writing (homepage vhs)[2]. According to the LEO – Level One study, 300,000 people of the German working age population are at alpha level 1 (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2011). Alpha level 2 refers to the word level and is relevant when the level falls below the sentence level, meaning that a person can read or write individual words, but not entire sentences. Two million people of working age in Germany are at this level, according to the Hamburg study (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2011). Alpha level 3 relates to the sentence level, persons who are able to read or write individual sentences, but who fail to be capable of writing short coherent texts and therefore avoid them (homepage vhs); the study states that 5.2 million of the employable population in Germany are at this level. Alpha level 3 also defines the border of literacy and limited literacy, and a total of 14.5 % of the adult population belong to the group of people with limited literacy at alpha levels 1 to 3; this corresponds to 7.5 million people (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2011). Incorrect writing at the text level is the criteria for Alpha level 4, and individuals operating at this level can read and write using everyday vocabulary even at the text level, but they make a lot of mistakes. They are able to read texts comprehensively, but there are many spelling mistakes in their written work (homepage vhs). In Germany, 13.3 million of the adult population are rated as

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[1] Online at: https://www.alphadekade.de.
[2] Online at: https://www.grundbildung.de/information/analphabetismus/alpha-levels/?L=0.

level 1 (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2011). Of the adults with limited literacy, 41.8 % or 3.1 million people, have a first language other than German, so that many of them were originally immigrants (Grotlüschen and Riekmann 2011).

3.   The *Alphalernberatung* project

The project has a duration of three years from October 2018 to October 2021, and is financed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research; it is a cooperation project between Arbeiterwohlfahrt Bielefeld and the University of Münster. The project is intended to contribute to the improvement of literary competences for life, and to increase the chances of mastering everyday tasks, such as reading letters independently. The program aims to strengthen the purpose and motivation of adults with limited literacy to learn and to support them in improving their competences and their current situation permanently, by means of their activities.

3.1.   Project goals

Just one to two percent of the 7.5 million adults with limited literacy named in the LEO – Level One Study in Germany attend literacy and basic education courses, which means that the vast majority of adults with limited literacy do not take advantage of literacy and basic education courses. It is difficult to understand why so few adults with limited literacy attend the literacy and basic education offers, and substantial research is needed to reveal the reasons. One possible explanation is that most are institutional services offered in the form of teaching, as is the case at many adult education centres. Therefore, if institutional education does not reach the adults with limited literacy, alternative learning modes would need to be created to appeal to as many people as possible, those with and without an immigrant background. Hence, the *Alphalernberatung* project has been developed with the aim of creating an informal literacy and basic education service, which does not presuppose that adults with limited literacy attend formal teaching classes. These methods will be located

much more often in places where people with alpha and basic education needs are suspected, therefore the *Alphalernberatung* project is an outreach service. The learning process takes place outside the classroom, in the everyday life of the adults with limited literacy, a linguistic and culturally sensitive approach is made to those affected in their first and second languages with the purpose of alphabetically oriented learning counselling. This should be supported by appropriate teaching and learning materials[3].

Self-directed learning processes outside a formally organised lesson will be combined with topics that can be taken into account in social space-oriented counselling services, so that the approach and the *Alphalernberatung* initiative are mutually supportive. The motivation for those seeking counselling in the social space is chosen as the basis for initiating self-directed written language learning processes within the alpha learn counselling framework since this relieves the written language burden on social space-oriented counselling. Adults with limited literacy can be found within the framework of various counselling services, which are not concerned with literacy and basic education, such as debt, housing or marriage counselling (Schneider et al. 2008). These different counselling services are appraised and consideration is given to how counsellors can better advise clients with literacy needs.

The first stage is observation of interviews between counsellor and client, and interviews with counsellors, then a training concept is developed for counsellors from different fields as a means to prepare them as literacy counsellors, based on the observations and interview.[4] After further training, the counsellor should be able to identify client's literacy needs and assess the corresponding alpha level. The intention is that the training also demonstrates how to communicate the topic of limited literacy sensitively in a target group-oriented manner during the counselling interview, and to describe how the literacy process is supported by focused, goal oriented and active questions, and culturally sensitive methods and materials.

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[3] Material production started in October 2019. The current status can be viewed on the project homepage https://www.uni-muenster.de/Germanistik/alphalernberatung/ under "Materialien".

[4] The interviews have already been completed and evaluated. Contents for the training for counsellors in the field of limited literacy can be found under point 3.2.

An advanced training concept for the *Alphalernberater* will also be developed within the project timescale, meaning that counsellors, who are trained to become *Alphalernberater* can explicitly advise clients in the area of literacy. The prerequisite is that the counsellors already have a high level of field competence in German as a second language/German as a foreign language (DaZ/DaF). This training focuses on learning, supporting the client and advising him/her about how to improve his/her reading and writing difficulties in a specific area, for example how to better understand letters and reminders regarding debt counselling. Information material and brochures from counselling centres will also be translated into simple German, added with many pictures, and six other first languages, with special reference to the large group of low literalized people with an immigration background.

The aim of the project is to increase the motivation of those seeking counselling to learn to improve their reading and writing, as difficulties in reading and writing are often indirectly related to other counselling services. In debt counselling, for example, experience demonstrated that reading and writing difficulties were also responsible for the debts incurred by people when, for example, letters and reminders could not be read or understood correctly.

As part of the follow up actions, a handbook and training videos will also be produced and made available online as self-learning materials on the subject of literacy.

3.2.   Interview evaluation

Qualitative interviews were conducted with counsellors from eight different specialisms[5], using a structured interview guide, lasting approximately thirty minutes per counsellor, and recorded on a dictation machine[6]. Initially general questions were asked, which

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[5] The specialisms are: social counselling, socio-educational support, government affairs, language course search, education, family and psychological situations, debt counselling and delinquent assistance.

[6] The advantages of working with a dictation machine are that the recordings can be recalled and transcribed at a later point in time. The statements of the different TNs can be compared transparently. It is also possible to quote from the interviews and it

related to the interviewee's professional and training specialism and experience as a counsellor, and to establish whether advice was given in different first languages, and if materials were made available or distributed in the counselling sessions. The next questions focused on literacy needs, for example regarding how counsellors recognised the nature of clients' needs and how to proceed if a client had difficulties reading and writing. It was also important to establish whether other materials were used when literacy needs were diagnosed, and whether the counsellor required support in this area[7].

The evaluation of the interviews with the counsellors showed that the majority took place in German but clients could have many different first languages, such as Arabic, Kurdish, Russian, Turkish, Greek, Polish, Bulgarian, Farsi or Serbian. The client's requirement for literacy support is recognised by the fact that letters are not understood, by the client's self-disclosure or even that forms written in his/her first language are not understood. Further indications are the application forms, which are completed by the clients and the details of their educational accomplishments; in some cases, it was possible to recognise that difficulties were present by the signature used in the letter[8]. However, the search for a suitable language course is supported or referred to. Most counsellors do not have special material for clients with literacy needs, and the this led to more advice being given with charts than with text. There were two main aspects for which counsellors require support: further training courses in literacy, which are requested by almost all counsellors, and initial training and materials. Strategies for conducting conversations, communication strategies, and practical examples of how to indirectly discuss the need for literacy were also in demand.

The other area concerns materials, for instance checklists are requested in order to identify literacy needs quickly and easily, as there is often no time within a consultation and additional tests are conducted to determine literacy needs. Lists of contact points/advice

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is a more relaxed situation for interviewers and interviewees if they do not have to take notes all the time or ask questions if they cannot follow the writing down so quickly (Thaller 2009).

[7] See appendix 1 for the interview guide.

[8] Materials especially developed for literacy needs were not used in the counselling sessions because the counselling services (so far) have not been equipped with them.

centres for literacy learners and visuals instead of text-based documents, for instance, in information brochures, were also in demand. These requests for materials and the training courses will be implemented in the project over the next few months.

The aim of the requirements survey was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the contents, methods, references materials, and alpha learner counselling. Preparation, in the form of the transcription of relevant passages from the interviews and the qualitative evaluation of the data collected, led to the development of a concept for the *Alphalernberatung*. This concept is derived from the counselling concepts used in basic education work to date,[9] and enables counselling of adults with limited literacy, within the framework of self-directed learning processes.

The theoretical basis for these counselling concepts varies and are discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.   Coaching approaches

Three coaching approaches are described in detail in this section, the client centred coaching approach, the systemic coaching approach and the individual psychological coaching approach.

Counselling is defined by Rechtien (2004: 16) as:

[…] ein zwischenmenschlicher Prozess (Interaktion), in welchem eine Person (der Ratsuchende oder Klient) in und durch die Interaktion mit einer anderen Person (dem Berater) mehr Klarheit über eigene Probleme und Bewältigungsmöglichkeiten gewinnt. Das Ziel von Beratung ist die Förderung von Problemlösungskompetenz. [An interpersonal process (interaction) in which one person (the person seeking advice or the client), in and through interaction with another person (the counsellor), gains more clarity about his or her problems and coping potential. The aim of counselling is to promote problem solving competence.]

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[9]   See   e.g.,   http://alfa-mobil.de/wp-content/uploads/Projektbeschreibung.pdf, AlphaKommunal - Vom Bürgeramt ins Lernangebot - Alpha-Dekade (alphadekade.de), Alpha-Quali_Projektsteckbrief.pdf (uni-erfurt.de) and other BMBF-funded projects that include advisory approaches.

The responsibility for the learning process is increasingly located with the learners, and this principle is particularly important in self-directed learning.

4.1. Client centred coaching approach

Most authors use the terms client centred counselling and person-centred counselling interchangeably, so that the person-centred approach focuses more on the concept of the person, and the client centred stance emphasises the roles of the counsellor and the client (Sander 2004). The method is based on the findings of the psychologist Carl Rogers (1902-1989) and concerns the experiences, experiential contexts and development of the individual. The person is considered in relationship to him/herself, in his/her interpersonal connections and environmental conditions (Straumann 2004). The focus is on the individual and not the problem, such that client centred counselling does not claim to solve a problem, but to help the individual to develop further within counselling interviews, in order to be able to solve his/her problem The client has the active role in the conversation and is given space for self-recognition and self-analysis. Therefore, consultancy can be considered successful if "Entscheidungen und Alternativen zur Problembewältigung erarbeitet sind, die die Rat Suchenden bewusst und eigenverantwortlich in ihren Umweltbezügen treffen und umsetzen können [Decisions and alternatives for solving the problem have been developed, which enable those seeking advice to consciously and responsibly make and implement solutions in their environmental relations]" (Straumann 2004: 643). The counsellor should not advise in a directive way, wherever possible, so that the individual's decision making and action potential are constructively expanded, and characterised by being self-responsible and socially responsible (Straumann 2004). The client should be enabled to develop his/her understanding, so that a change of behaviour or attitude is possible and rational, emotional and behavioural reactions which s/he triggers in other people should also be recognised, in order to be able to change them, if necessary. Client-centred counselling therefore aims at developing empathy for oneself and for other people, and is oriented towards longer term development

(Straumann 2004). The basic prerequisite for the counselling interview is that a positive counselling relationship can be established between the client and the counsellor, and it should be characterised by appreciation, recognition, acceptance and respect, so that trust develops between client and counsellor, and their relationship is one of equals. The method of conducting the conversation is not decisive, active listening, responding and reflecting content, paraphrasing and verbalising are presented as being supportive tactics (Hardeland 2014).

4.2. Systemic coaching approach

In general systems theory, any social system can be defined as a "Insgesamt an Beziehungseinheiten (Elementen), die miteinander verknüpft sind [Total of relationship units (elements) that are linked to each other]" (Brunner 2004: 658).

Social systems consist of an interconnected network of relationships, so that those that are subjectively perceived are of interest. In systems theory, the influencing element of the relationship system in which the individual seeking advice is the most important. In this theory, the assumption is that the counsellor has no direct influence on the person seeking advice, as is the case in client centred counselling, and consequently, influence must be considered in the context of the structural coupling of systems (Brunner 2004). The counselling includes consideration of the learner's biography and his/her relationship with the social environment, especially with the family (Ludwig and Schramm 2012). The interrelationships between individuals in a system become visible via communication, according to the systemic consulting approach, so that the interpersonal communication structure is regarded as a starting point for a system theoretical approach. Communication processes are clarified and improved so that a change of perspective can be systematically practised by means of consultation. The systems are mutually and influentially interactive, so that a desire to effect change in one system, for instance the learning system, is only possible if the effect on the other systems is taken into consideration. Systemic counselling aims to enable the learner to recognise the systemic connections in

his/her life and environment, which is the sole basis for him/her to initiate change that is likely to be successful. The counsellor gives signals that could generate a change in the client's behaviour (Brunner 2004) and, which have a direct or indirect influence on the social relationship system that envelops him/her and evokes change in the entire system context (Hardeland 2014). In systemic consulting, it is important that the counsellor proceeds in a neutral manner, so that the counsellor has no preference for specific ideas or participants within the system, because resolving the problem solution can only take place within the system in which it occurs.

Another important feature of systemic counselling is that it is strongly solution oriented: "Es wird in Lösungen und nicht in Problemen gedacht [It is thought in solutions and not in problems]" (Jaehn-Niesert 2012: 114). No attributions of guilt are made, but structures and explanatory patterns are developed. In systemic consulting, a resource-oriented approach is needed, in other words it is assumed that the possible solution already exist in the system, but is not currently available because that the client is not aware of it. The purpose of the counselling process it to raise the client's awareness (Pätzold 2004). The client currently solves subjectively significant problems in a way that has negative side effects but, in order to reveal alternative possibilities, deep insight into the system is required, which can also be achieved by obtaining a detailed description of the client's past and present problems. Alternative patterns possible in the system that are currently unrecognised can only be found by describing a situation (Pätzold 2004). Circular work is also conducted, since the focus of interactions is communication. Jaehn-Niesert (2012:114) explains that action is always "Resultat eines vorausgehenden Handelns […] und gleichsam auf das neue Handeln reagiert wird [The result of a preceding action and related to the new action]".

4.3.   Individual psychological coaching approach

The individual psychological counselling approach assumes that individuals struggle and exert themselves because they feel inferior, which is the driving force to achieve goals and to develop (Pätzold

2004). In contrast to the systemic approach, neutrality is not expected from the counsellor, who is able to emotionally strengthen the client, so that s/he can obtain an advantage over others. In individual psychological counselling, the client's life goals should be identified because s/he is not always conscious of them, in this context, misguided actions receive meaning when viewed from an external perspective. Clients are encouraged to take responsibility for the outcome of their (life) project and then to attribute the results to themselves (Reimann 1997). This includes the counsellor avoiding the offer of possible solutions because a solution may be useful from his/her perspective but may not be adopted by the client, since it is not appropriate to his/her specific situation, therefore, it is not a solution. However, if the client's situation suggests that this solution is appropriate, s/he is very likely to be able to find it without the counsellor's advice. If the counsellor introduces suggestions for solutions, which are inadequate for the client's situation, s/he promotes an unfavourable hierarchical divide between an expert, who can offer concepts, and an inferior patient, who is unable to accept them. A good example is written language deficits in adulthood, which can often be understood by a childhood learning block and, within the framework of individual psychological counselling, old patterns of action could be identified that would have been helpful in childhood, but do not lead to the desired goal in adulthood (uncovering the "inner logic" of those affected). On this basis, new patterns of action should be developed within the counselling session, which are better suited to the current learning problems (Tröster 2000).

4.4.   Learning counselling and literacy

All three counselling approaches originate from psychotherapy, but were adapted for pedagogy and are also applied within learning counselling (Pätzold 2004). Learning support aims to help learners in foreign language learning, when the learner should take responsibility for his or her learning process. In learning counselling, the counsellor helps to determine the learner's learning goals and objectives, to select suitable learning strategies, and to evaluate results with the

learner; a major goal of learning counselling is the assumption of learner autonomy (Mehlhorn and Kleppin 2006).

In literacy and basic education work, there are also a few special features of learning counselling: counselling extends beyond pure learning counselling for the acquisition of written language and learning progress in the written language cannot be separated from a learner's personal development (Ludwig 2012). Learners often feel ashamed that they cannot read and write sufficiently well, despite attending school and the reasons frequently result from the lack of parental support, negative school experiences, possible trauma and fear of failure in written language situations (Grosche 2012). Feelings related to having been ignored and neglected, or of being regarded as a problem child, are also a childhood experiences that often occur in the biographical experiences of those affected by limited literacy. "Dieser Zusammenhang von funktionalem Analphabetismus und einer schwierigen Kindheit wurde auch in den zurückliegenden Alphauntersuchungen wiederholt festgestellt [This connection between functional illiteracy and a difficult childhood has also been repeatedly established in past alpha studies]" (Ludwig and Müller 2011: 35). Adults with limited literacy know that they have a deficit in reading and writing compared to other people, which does not correspond to societal norms, and their learning problems, some of which are biographically anchored, should be resolved by counselling interviews. Through counselling, the participants could "die Entstehung ihres negativen Selbstbildes im Laufe ihrer Lerngeschichte, ihre aktuelle Lebenssituation und die sich durch die Alphabetisierung ergebenden Veränderungen verstehen lernen und zu einem veränderten Selbstbild und neuer Handlungskompetenz gelangen" [Learn to understand the emergence of their negative self-image in the course of their learning history, their current life situation and the changes resulting from literacy. Counselling should help to arrive at a changed self-image and new competence to act]" (Fuchs-Brüninghoff 1991: 20).

There are also difficulties such as language, for example adults with limited literacy speak in colloquial language more often than in educational language. The counsellor needs to adapt to the client's language and must also notice and interpret non-verbal signals, since the ability low literalized people to express themselves verbally is

often limited. If the consultation does not succeed on a linguistic level, then it is of no value (Pätzold 2004).

The ability to reflect is usually not strongly pronounced in adults with limited literacy for instance: they find it difficult to reflect on internal and external learning conditions, to determine their learning goals and objectives, to select learning strategies and materials, and to evaluate their progress. Therefore, the counsellor must advise more directly than s/he would with clients of a higher educational level (Teepker 2015). In term of life goals, adults with limited literacy will be less likely to express what they wish to achieve in life and how this can be accomplished. Therefore, the need for learning guidance in the literacy field is particularly high, even if the added value of guidance is not always immediately recognisable, because this form of support is unknown. It is unusual for learners to be asked about learning initially, rather they are usually taught working methods and procedures on a direct basis.

5.   Next steps

The first phase of the project, the data collection and evaluation, is almost complete and the second phase is beginning, this is the preparation of the training concepts, which form the theoretical basis for the consulting approaches, section 3.1. The training course theoretical development has not, so far, been particularly based on any of the three consulting approaches, therefore, it is likely that elements from all three approaches will be included. This strategy is supported by the fact that all three approaches have been successfully tested in alpha-betting projects. The *Deutscher Volkshochschul Verband* (DVV) learning counselling concept is an example of the procedure following individual psychological counselling and was guided by the feeling of inferiority, which is the focus of the individual psychological approach. The SeGel project of self-directed learning[10] investigated how the degree of self-management of institutional adult education services can be increased and how learning arrangements

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[10] Online at: https://www.die-bonn.de/id/31915/about/html.

can be offered in which participants can learn more according to their individual needs. It is also oriented towards this approach.

The systemic counselling approach is also applicable to literacy work and is implemented by a team consisting of a course instructor and a counsellor, the literacy teacher is also advised regarding suitable pedagogy (Ludwig and Schramm 2012). The study conducted by Ludwig and Schramm (2012) shows that hypotheses are formed in case studies, which reflect the contributions of teachers and counsellors regarding difficulties low literalized people have in the course, and include their learning history. The focus is on questions that the participants ask, the reasons that prevent the learner from learning, the changes in the relationship environment and the perspective of life, which would result if the person seeking advice no longer had any problems with written language. The relief of individuals when they admit their problems in the presence of the closest reference persons in the process and in counselling interviews is emphasised by Jaehn-Niesert (2012), for example clients with their literate children, in the framework of Family Literacy (Jaehn-Niesert 2012 also Ludwig 2012).

In relation to the client centred approach, the University of Leipzig LeLeBe project is significant and has been published as "Learning Counselling for Participants in DaZ Literacy Courses" (Markov et al. 2015). However, this approach is also used in adult foreign language work as an integral part of language learning counselling. In the coming months, the final design of the training concept will be shared against the background of the current preparation of the training materials and a first test of these.

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Appendix. Interviewleitfaden für Berater*innen

1. In welchen **Bereich**(en) beraten Sie Beratungssuchende?
2. **Seit wann** beraten Sie bereits? Seit wann in diesem Feld?
3. Was haben Sie **gelernt/studiert**?
    (inhaltliche Schwerpunkte + Fortbildungen zum Fach oder zu Beratung?)
4. **Wie viele** Beratungen finden ca. pro Woche statt?
5. **Wie verläuft** eine Beratung in Ihrem Bereich üblicherweise?
    (Anzahl der Sitzungen, Ort, einzeln/Gruppen, Ziele, Direktivität, Methoden)
6. Welche **Muttersprachen** bringen die Beratungssuchenden mit?
    (Welche sind die häufigsten? Welches Sprachniveau? Nutzen Sie Dolmetscher?)
7. Geben Sie **Material** bei der Beratung aus oder bringen die Beratungssuchenden Material mit? Verschriftlichen Sie Informationen?
    (Formulare, Broschüren etc.)
8. Welche Ihrer **Kompetenzen** erachten Sie in Ihrem Bereich als besonders wichtig/hilfreich?
9. Haben Sie Klienten mit **Alphabetisierungsbedarf** in Ihren Beratungen?
10. **Woran erkennen** Sie Alpha-Bedarf bei Beratungssuchenden?
11. **Wie gehen Sie vor**, wenn Sie Alpha-Bedarf erkennen?
12. Nutzen Sie bestimmte **Materialien**, wenn Sie einen Verdacht auf **Alpha-Bedarf** haben?
13. Würden Sie sich **Unterstützung wünschen**, Alpha-Bedarf zu erkennen? Wenn ja, in welcher Form?
14. Würden Sie sich **Materialien wünschen**, die Sie bei Ihrer Beratung für Klienten mit **Alphabedarf** einsetzen könnten?
    Wenn ja, welche Materia