

	<p style="text-align: right;">Date : 20/06/2007</p> <p><b>Public Libraries and Adult Dyslexic Customers: A Model and its Evaluation</b></p> <p><b>Ms Ritva Järvelin</b> Tampere City Library Tampere Finland</p> <p><b>Ms Marjaana Meriläinen</b> Tampere City Library Tampere Finland</p>
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### Abstract

*Dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties. Lifelong learning, complex working life and the need for ICT skills in everyday life have revealed how common dyslexia is. To provide access to information and promote literacy, both conventional and digital, are the core tasks of public libraries. Finland has consistently topped international tables of literacy achievement. But dyslexia occurs in Finland as anywhere else. Regional dyslexia association in Tampere proposed that a special information and service point for dyslexics should be designed within the Tampere City Library. The Finnish Ministry of Education gave the Sampola library a grant for the years 2004 - 2006 to start a project for creating services for dyslexic customers. In this paper we will describe how the service point for dyslexics and a model for cooperation were developed. This cooperative model is applicable in other domains as well.*

### 1. Introduction

Dyslexia is the most common cause of reading, writing and spelling difficulties. Dyslexia is not a disease and, therefore, there is no cure. However, with proper diagnosis, appropriate instruction, support and rehabilitation, persons with dyslexia can succeed at school and later in working life. The causes of dyslexia are neurobiological and genetic. Dyslexia affects

males and females nearly equally, as well as people from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Dyslexia not only complicates learning at school, but also lessens the person's motivation to study further, which, in turn, may result in a rather low general education. It is important to keep in mind that dyslexia does not mean a lack of intelligence. Dyslexia can be found at all levels of education, including university students. The way in which dyslexia manifests itself changes with age, probably due to neurological maturity, increased practice and experience, as well as individual ways of compensating for the deficit.

IFLA's publication 'Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia' emphasizes that the right to access culture, literature and information belongs to everyone, including people with different degrees of reading difficulties. It is important for every citizen to be able to obtain information about what is going on in society. Also, to exercise active citizenship and your democratic rights and to control your own life, you need to be well informed. Being able to read and write gives you a tremendous amount of self-confidence. It enables you to expand your view of the world and take control of your own life. Literacy helps people share ideas, thoughts and experiences and grow as human beings.

Active citizenship in information society calls for various types of literacy. Lifelong learning, complex working life and the need for ICT skills in everyday life have revealed how common dyslexia is. Dyslexics will confront an increasing variety of problems. The need for new literacy includes an ability to retrieve and evaluate information, to use e-mail and other digital communication means as well as to absorb and comment on the information promptly. Digital and media literacy is necessary in our media-centred world. A person who has problems in reading and writing will face similar difficulties in adopting ICT skills.

To promote literacy – both conventional and digital – and to provide access to information are the core tasks of public libraries. The library is for everyone and should be easy to enter and use. Dyslexics need special attention to be able to benefit from these services. Many adult dyslexics do not use the library. If they do, they may not want to be identified as dyslexics by the library staff. Nor is the library staff able to identify a dyslexic customer who might need assistance. This is where a regional dyslexia association can come in and act as a facilitator.

Finland has consistently topped international tables of literacy achievement. But dyslexia occurs in Finland as anywhere else. Estimates of the extent of dyslexia vary considerably. According to the most specific estimates it affects 6 - 7 % of the Finnish population, but if the definition is widened to take in general difficulties in understanding and learning, we easily reach 20 %. In our city, Tampere, that means 12,000 dyslexics and 40,000 individuals with learning difficulties.

In Tampere we have an active regional dyslexia association called PEO. It provides information to dyslexics, their families and public officials. In Finland, as in all other countries, dyslexia is the most common learning disorder among children. Our advanced health-care systems are able to identify dyslexic children early on and start appropriate rehabilitation. For grown-ups, it is more difficult to identify the problem and to find help. This is why PEO focuses on young and adult target groups. The idea to investigate how the library could help dyslexic customers was generated at PEO. In 2000, PEO proposed that a special information and service point for dyslexics should be designed within the Tampere City Library. The library took up the challenge and got to work.

## **2. Service point for dyslexics in the Sampola branch library**

### **2.1. How we started to plan and develop community cooperation**

Tampere City Library decided to establish the service point at the new Sampola branch library. It is a reasonably small branch with 1200 visitors and 1200 loans a day and a staff of 14. A comprehensive school and the Adult Education Centre of the City of Tampere are housed in the same premises. Sampola is a well-known building close to the city centre and within easy reach.

For many years, the Adult Education Centre had been cooperating with PEO. We teamed up to formulate operating principles for the new service point, which was opened in September 2003. Our cooperation has been easy and smooth ever since.

The opening was promoted in local newspapers and on the local radio and the message came across well. We did not know exactly who would use the service and what kind of information people would be looking for. And, indeed, the wide spectrum of questions was a surprise to us. The clients ranged from comprehensive-school dropouts to university students. Their dyslexic problems as well as the services and information they needed varied greatly. It was soon evident that this kind of service came to meet a need. It was obvious too that our service point could not meet the overblown expectations of many of the clients. So many questions were beyond the competence and knowledge of the PEO's tutors and the library staff.

The Finnish Ministry of Education gave the Sampola library a grant for the years 2004 - 2006 to start a project for creating services for dyslexic customers together with the regional dyslexia association and Adult Education Centre. It was during this project that the service point for dyslexics and a model for cooperation were finally developed.

### **2.2. Services provided by the Dyslexia Service Point**

#### **The idea of the dyslexia service point is to**

- provide information and support
- encourage people to practise reading
- offer a non-judgemental environment, where dyslexics can use the computer and the Internet

Because dyslexic children are likely to be identified early, the main focus is on adolescents and adults. The services are intended not only for people with dyslexic problems but also for anyone with learning difficulties.

## **Facilities**

The service point is situated in the so-called “net square” of the Sampola Library. The net square is a room with 20 computers, equipped in the same way as computer classes at schools. There is always staff around to help you with computers. The regional dyslexia association itself chose this place. The small, separate service point within the net square is popular with other clients as well, so no one needs to stay away in fear of being labelled.

The service point provides the space, dedicated equipment with standard software, an opportunity to practise reading and writing with computer-aided programs and guidance for the use of the facilities. Easy-to-read instructions on the use of the equipment and programs are also available.

## **Marketing and information**

Information is available to dyslexics, their families and professionals. We provide information on dyslexia, dyslexia associations and public officials dealing with dyslexia and learning difficulties. The service point runs a website at [www.tampere.fi/kirjasto/sampola/lukitori](http://www.tampere.fi/kirjasto/sampola/lukitori). We offer up-to-date information folders of various topics including research and rehabilitation, learning difficulties, useful articles on dyslexia, and tips for teachers. Easy-to-read leaflets on library services for dyslexics are available. We also attend to marketing of various events to spread information on these services.

## **Courses and book talks**

The Adult Education Centre organises courses for dyslexics together with the regional dyslexia association PEO. Our library participates in the organisation whenever the courses deal with library services, literature or basic computer skills. The instruction takes place in small groups of maximum ten people. If necessary, two or three teachers are supplied, and the instruction progresses at a leisurely pace.

The library also gives so-called book talks, with the librarian informing people about easy-to-read books and other readily comprehensible literature. Book talks include reading extracts of books with the purpose of encouraging people to read further.

## **Peer support**

The most important individual service, however, is peer support. The peer tutor on duty offers guidance, counselling and support. The regional dyslexia association provides peer support on Monday evenings during school terms. People can come and discuss their own problem or that of a family member or a pupil with a person who has firsthand experience of the matter. The threshold to use the service has been made as low as possible: you can just

drop in without an appointment and the service is free. You can as well make a personal appointment outside on-duty hours. Also group visits are welcomed outside on-duty hours.

The peer tutor on duty answers any questions concerning dyslexia, learning difficulties or the customer's condition. If the tutor does not know the answer, he or she will resort to the national support network and provide an answer later. PEO will also answer all inquiries made by e-mail. The service point has been contacted in a variety of situations. Among the most usual are:

- Dyslexia has been diagnosed. How to proceed?
- To get information on dyslexia and learning difficulties in general
- To get dyslexia tested or diagnosed: where and how are tests and diagnoses made, how much do they cost?
- How to get rehabilitation?
- To get means and devices for everyday life management
- Problems at school, study skills
- Social problems brought by dyslexia
- How to encourage a child to read?

On request the peer tutor will prepare a CD-ROM containing exercises selected according to the individual's dyslexic profile for the client to train at home. Study guidance is available at certain times. Last year the service point had two people on duty: a peer tutor and a special needs teacher.

A quick dyslexia screening test is available during on-duty hours.

### **Other activities**

Conventional library services are also available. Dyslexics can make a personal appointment with the librarian to use the services of the library. The CD-ROMs for training have been purchased according to expert recommendation. Our library staff is also a member of a local dyslexia network.

### **How the responsibilities are shared**

The library offers the space, computers and programs and guidance, as well as information on dyslexia and loanable material. The staff instructs both the peer tutors and the clients of the service point. The services are developed together with PEO, which is responsible for anything that has to do with peer support and on-duty services. PEO sees that the information material is up-to-date, keeps its members informed, participates in events and gives courses. A dyslexic client likes to get personal service, but may feel shy of asking. PEO's peer tutors are familiar with library services and can instruct their clients in the use of the library. The Adult Education Centre provides courses for dyslexic learners. It also organises meetings for professionals.

### **2.3. How the staff was trained**

In the course of the project, the project secretary informed the library staff about dyslexia and the appropriate way of dealing with clients with this type of problem. This gave the staff more confidence in customer service. She also toured the different branch libraries talking about this issue and evaluating the accessibility of services in each branch from a dyslexic client's point of view.

### **3. Evaluation of the operation**

To evaluate the operation of the service point, statistics are compiled on the number of customers, CD-ROMs prepared, and the hours of peer tutors on duty. The demand for dyslexia service is closely monitored. Any questions put to peer tutors are recorded in order to steer information accordingly. The tutors also get clients from outside Tampere and its immediate surroundings. At the moment, the tutors are not able to serve more customers. The time needed for one customer varies from 30 minutes to two hours and the appointment should take place in a peaceful environment.

For the project, interviews were conducted with the staff of the Tampere City Library and PEO's members. A Master's thesis on library services for dyslexics, based on this material, is being prepared in the Department of Information Studies at the University of Tampere. This will give us more information on the awareness and perceptions of the library staff of these issues as well as on the perceptions of dyslexic clients of library services.

### **4. Impact and future**

As a result of the partnership of the library, the regional dyslexia association and the Adult Education Centre, Tampere was admitted to an EU programme called Equal, funded by the European Social Fund. The Finnish branch of the programme aims to develop a model for a service and advice centre for people with learning difficulties. The pilot project comprises four cities, each of which is to develop an operational model of their own. The best practices will be selected to serve as a basis for a nationwide model. The key content of Tampere's contribution is the partnership model developed in the course of the operation of the service point for dyslexics.

Peer support is based on volunteer work by a small active group. This means that the operation is vulnerable in the long term. The peer tutors are also too busy to engage in monitoring and updating the information folders or the website during their on-duty hours. How to keep the information up-to-date is a challenge.

In Finland, the use of public libraries is extremely active, and they are easy to access. They do not label customers and, therefore, are an ideal venue for this kind of special service. To ensure the future of this activity, cooperation with many different officials is important. In our case, cooperation with the local dyslexia association and the Adult Education Centre is especially important. In addition we need to work together with officials in cultural services, education, employment service and social administration. In the future, to provide services

for diverse user-groups, the library needs to cooperate with these groups more closely than it has done traditionally.

At the more general level, we believe that the impact of our project extends beyond its original subject, dyslexia. As an example, we are now starting cooperation with the Adult Education Centre and the Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers in Tampere in order to educate some immigrants as peer instructors. Therefore, they will be later able to train other immigrants in digital literacy in their own language. So we think that the cooperative model developed in our dyslexia project is applicable in other domains as well.

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