

# ONERVA – A SCHOOL AND A CENTRE FOR LEARNING AND CONSULTING

## EDUCATION AND SUPPORT FOR DIVERSE LEARNERS

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### **ABSTRACT**

This presentation is about the practices of Onerva Mäki School and Onerva Centre for Learning and Consulting in supporting diverse learners. First we present the education organised at Onerva Mäki School and then we provide an overview of our consulting services, which aim to promote pupils' learning at their neighbourhood schools. In all these practices, the main focus is on language and communication.

### **TEACHING DEAF AND HARD-OF-HEARING PUPILS AT ONERVA MÄKI SCHOOL**

Onerva Mäki School is a state-owned special education school. The school provides pre-primary, basic and voluntary additional basic education for pupils who need special support due to difficulties related to vision, hearing or language. This means we provide education for deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils and pupils with cochlear implants (CI) as well as for pupils with Usher's syndrome and hearing-impaired pupils with multiple needs. Each pupil's studies are individually planned. A pupil can either follow the national curriculum or study some or all subjects according to an adjusted syllabus. For pupils with multiple needs the instruction can be provided by activity areas. One of the main goals in our work is to offer our pupils education and rehabilitation so that they can be independent individuals and manage their studies as well as their own lives after basic education.

Bilingualism is an important principle in our deaf education, and we also teach sign language to our hard-of-hearing pupils whose native language is Finnish. There is a large variation in sign language proficiency among our pupils when they start school and also among the pupils who come to Onerva Mäki School after some years at another school. This variation is a big challenge for teachers and assistants not only in sign language lessons but in all lessons, and it has to be taken into consideration in our social environment, during school breaks and at school events. And it is not only about sign language proficiency – it is also about social rules, participating in discussions and more. Pupils may need a lot of guidance to manage in these situations, especially if they have not had an opportunity to study with other sign language users. We also have to consider how to support our pupils at school and in the residential home as well as at their own homes. Weekends and holidays can be challenging if there are no peers to talk to or activities to join. We therefore work closely with the guardians and help them find hobbies and social environments where sign language is used.

At Onerva, the pupils have their own "home classes", but in different lessons we have flexible grouping depending on the subject, the language being used and the individual

goals of each pupil as well as on their sign language or Finnish proficiency. We try to make the learning environment as good as possible for each pupil. Pupils have to be able to use their native tongue during lessons with teachers as well as with their classmates. Most of our deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils are taught in sign language, but signed Finnish and Finnish are used when necessary. For some of the hard-of-hearing pupils, Finnish is the language used in teaching, but we try to encourage them to use signing in order to be able to communicate with peers.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils with multiple needs can study according to the activity areas. In their education, the main focus is on everyday life skills and communication in particular. We have pupils who use only pictures to communicate or use pictures and signs together. Tactile signing is being used with some pupils, and we also teach it to pupils with Usher's syndrome.

Education at Onerva is combined with rehabilitation and guidance that support learning. The guiding principle in all school activities is rehabilitative everyday life. Rehabilitation is based on the individual needs of each pupil, and they have their personal plans for rehabilitation. For many pupils, speech therapy is an important form of rehabilitation. It can mean helping the child to speak, but very often it consists of training in lipreading and listening skills. One example of multidisciplinary work is a peer group for pupils with Usher's syndrome. The group meets approximately once a month, and while they do activities planned by the pupils themselves, they also discuss their hopes and fears for the future and the challenges that Usher's syndrome will bring into their lives.

Sometimes an intensive training period for teaching Finnish sign language is needed. This is the case when a child does not know sign language at all or not well enough to start school, or if the family uses a different sign language. Among the immigrant pupils, there are many whose hearing loss has been diagnosed only after they have moved to Finland, and in some cases the child has been completely without any language.

## **UTILISING NEW TECHNOLOGY**

New technology is being used in many ways in teaching most subjects. Smart boards have been used in our classes for many years. Our practice-based evidence shows that for visual learners the boards have proved to be an excellent means of teaching. They have also made lessons more interactive. On a daily basis, tablets are also being used. These enable the easy taking of pictures and videos, which has changed our practices in many ways. For example, teachers can take a picture or a video of what has been taught and discussed in a lesson or of what has been drawn or written on the whiteboard. They can then show it in the next lesson to refresh pupils' memory of what was covered previously.

Our latest experiment is flipped learning. In one case, a teacher made videos in sign language about the themes the class was going to learn in a history lesson. The videos were put on YouTube and the teacher made QR links to the videos so that the pupils could watch them either on their mobile phones or on tablets. Pupils were also given pictures and texts about the same theme to support the signed video. After getting familiar with the text and pictures and/or watching the video, they discussed the theme in the history lessons. This gave the pupils much more time to work on the theme in the lessons, because they had already learned the basic issues through the video. Videos in sign

language also give the pupils a possibility to watch it many times – some pupils mentioned that it was very good for them to watch it more than once. This mode of study also supports pupils in doing their homework if they have difficulties understanding written Finnish. So we feel that flipped learning as well as all the use of new technology are of great value in teaching deaf and hard-of-hearing pupils.

## **SUPPORTING PUPILS IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

In Finland, the ideology is to educate pupils primarily in mainstream schools. This approach means that most hard-of-hearing pupils, pupils with CI and some deaf pupils study in mainstream schools. The mission of Onerva Centre for Learning and Consulting is to support the education of these pupils. Our services include counselling visits and support periods.

Counselling visits are usually made to pupils in pre-primary or basic education. The visits comprise monitoring clients in their own environments, followed by a pedagogic counselling discussion. Counselling discussions are attended by the staff involved daily with the pupils (e.g. teachers, special needs assistants and therapists), guardians and possibly by the clients themselves. In schools with no previous experience of teaching deaf or hard-of-hearing pupils, these visits are vital to giving the staff basic information on matters concerning the communication, language and teaching of these pupils.

The support periods at Onerva Mäki School are designed to help pupils manage optimally in their own neighbourhood schools. The contents, objectives and focuses of support periods are customised to meet each pupil's unique needs. The objectives are defined in cooperation with the pupil's school, guardians and potential other partners. Usually these support periods include assessments made by special education teachers, consulting teachers, psychologists, speech therapists and other professionals. A support period at Onerva Mäki School is also a good way for pupils to receive peer support and to improve their sign language skills.

The problem with these services is that they are subject to a fee and the home municipality's education department must make a financial commitment to them. This requirement has caused a situation where all the pupils do not have equal opportunities to benefit from these services.

## **VIDEO-ASSISTED TEACHING**

Our new service for pupils in their neighbourhood schools is video-assisted teaching in sign language. Video-assisted teaching in sign language began in autumn 2012, first as a pilot experiment with just one deaf pupil, but it was soon established as a part of our support services. This year we had five pupils from five different local schools participating in these lessons. The number of pupils joining each lesson varies from one to three. One of the pupils is deaf, and the others are children with deaf parents (CODA). The main reason these municipalities buy this service from Onerva Mäki School is that there are no qualified sign language teachers in those municipalities. No study has been made on this video-assisted teaching so far, but the practice-based evidence shows that it is a good way to give deaf as well as CODA pupils access to sign language lessons in their local schools.

## **OPEN AND ADAPTABLE LEARNING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

At the beginning of 2016, Onerva will move to a new building. The staff and pupils have actively participated in designing the new premises. One of the aims has been to create a new kind of learning and working environment that enables functionality, activeness and the application of new technology. New space arrangements and new ways to use spaces have been created in compliance with modern ideas on learning so that the new building will be optimal for action-based learning. The new learning environment will enable us to support diverse learners better than ever before.