Espoo is in many ways an international city. This has emerged in the city’s business life, culture, university education and the residents’ daily lives in the course of decades. Arranging English-language basic education for children and families in internationally challenging and changing work and daily environments has been an important means to secure their school-going. The children’s learning paths have continued even if the parents’ roads have occasionally led abroad and back to Finland. These education opportunities have attracted international experts to Espoo as well, and enabled families to arrive and make home in the city.

In these small memoirs, several writers reflect on the early years of English-language instruction in Espoo and the birth of the Espoo International School. Memories from people involved in different stages of the school’s history have been pieced together in one story.

Also a number of key individuals in the city’s decision-making have influenced the planning and the birth of the international school: council members, trustees in committees, city mayors, deputy mayors of the education and cultural services as well as numerous other officers. Fire-hearted pioneers from among the school and parents alike have been needed to promote the common cause. As such, everyone who has worked hard for the city’s English-language education over the years deserves an acknowledgement.

In August 2015, one significant step was taken in the twenty-five-year history of English-language instruction in Espoo: a joint comprehensive school called the Espoo International School was formed and all English-language instruction moved under the same roof. The new premises locate in the Opinmäki (Learning Hill) campus in Suurpelto.

I warmly thank everyone who has worked for the international English-speaking school.

MRS. KAISU TOIVONEN
Director of Education
How it all started

In the year 1991, the city’s school authority began to think over the opportunity to start English-language instruction in Espoo. Principals of the Northern-Tapiola Middle School and the newly opened Postipuu Primary School were invited to participate in the planning. There was much to consider. Schools in which the instruction could start had to locate within a reasonable commute from different areas of the city. Because available school premises were scarce, English-speaking classrooms could be allocated only to schools in which they would not narrow down other teaching spaces. Most importantly, the principals of the schools had to be interested in arranging and developing English-language instruction.

In the spring of the same school year, the School Committee decided to start English-language instruction in Espoo as part of the Finnish-language instruction. The instruction was due to start in the school year 1992–1993. The English-speaking primary school grades were allocated to the Postipuu School and middle school grades to the Northern-Tapiola School. Espoo's entire borders marked the pupil catchment area for the English-language instruction.

**Expansion**

The number of pupils who applied for English-language instruction in the Postipuu School was high from the start. The numbers continued increasing throughout the whole spring 1992, even before the first semester had started. By May 1992, 95 pupils had been taken in. Teaching could thus start in all primary school grades. Owing to the great number of pupils, separate groups for grade 1 with 18 pupils and grade 2 with 21 pupils were formed. In addition, the instruction began in a joint group for grades 3–4 with 29 pupils and another for grades 5–6 with 28 pupils.

In the spring 1992, English-language instruction in the Northern-Tapiola School received plenty of applicants too. First, one group for grade 7 was formed. In the following year, already two parallel groups started, and so the numbers grew. Pupils in the English-language instruction received circa 70 percent of all teaching in English.

In the following years, the numbers increased quickly and the classrooms were filled. In 1995, bilingual teaching started in grade 1 in the Tahtiniitty School, slowly expanding towards the middle grades and to other schools. In 1996, English-language instruction began in another primary school, the Komeetta School, in joint groups for grades 1–2 and 5–6. Private English-speaking day care centres soon came along. Prerequisites for applying for the bilingual Finnish-English instruction were excellent Finnish-language skills and, for example, a background in English-speaking day care.
Pupils and teachers

PUPILS

Pupils in the English-language instruction represented many different nationalities from the start. In the beginning of the 1990s, the majority were children of Finnish expatriate families returning to Finland, who had lived abroad due to their parents’ work. Many had started school in English while abroad whereas others had English as their mother tongue. Some of the pupils’ home environments were English-speaking. Diverse cultural and religious backgrounds were found among the pupils too. This made daily life in the school communities very rich. The pupils’ backgrounds were taken into account in school events and the schools’ festive cultures. Many new things were introduced to daily life in the schools. The pupils’ parents had often fostered the development of the children’s Finnish-language skills during the years spent abroad. Pupils with a foreign language background received additional instruction in Finnish. They often had an urge to learn the language. The pupils were diversely talented and have since chosen different paths for the future. They have become pilots, doctors, nurses, professional ice-hockey players, singers, film directors, hotel managers and – last but not least – teachers. As young experts, some have later visited their old schools and greeted their teachers. The schools attracted many foreign visiting groups. Collaboration with the guardians was close-knit from the start, and parent associations operated actively.

TEACHERS

Different nationalities were present among the teachers too. From the beginning of the English-language instruction, the teachers came from countries as varied as Finland, Great Britain, Australia, United States, New Zealand, Ireland, Canada, South-Africa, the Netherlands, Spain, Iran, Bangladesh, Palestine, Scotland, Wales, Columbia, Cameroon, Hungary and Tanzania. Those who taught the English-speaking groups often came from outside the city’s school network and spoke English at home, or were otherwise knowledgeable in the language. The new challenges were appealing to teachers in the Finnish-speaking schools too. Many had the courage to step into something new. The Finnish-speaking teachers took English-language courses and many of the English-speaking teachers studied Finnish.
Values and daily life in the schools

Dailly life in the English-language instruction was characterized by internationality and the diverse backgrounds represented. In the school-year 1992, the curriculum of the Postipuu School read:

“Our important aim is that the pupils in our school will learn to know, accept and appreciate diversity and to live authentically with people who are different. • Knowing and appreciating one’s own and other people’s cultures, knowing one’s roots, tolerance and the ability to encounter diversity in the daily life of our school, for their part, create the best possible grounds for true internationality.”

In the Postipuu School, pupils from special education groups mixed with the international ones. The distinct character of the school allowed everyone to learn tolerance and to embrace internationality every day.

Also the Northern-Tapiola Middle School stood out as international. The English-speaking groups made their first school trip abroad when the 8A group won the Smoke Free non-smoking contest and a prize trip to Athens. In the following years, the school received Athenian visitors in return.

Pupils in the English-speaking groups were actively involved in different school events and extra-curricular activities. Among the most memorable ones were the Island Trips taken to the Kälkö Island in Inkoo. These have left both photos and joyful memories behind.

The English-language instruction did not survive completely without challenges either. In the spring 1993 and in the following autumn, the whole teaching staff was laid off temporarily for three weeks. During the lay-offs, a mothers’ morning-coffee group arranged reading clubs and sewed costumes for the school’s spring festivities.
The English-language instruction in Espoo has raised wide interest in the national media throughout its journey. The city was nevertheless not alone in the headlines. Foreign language instruction began around the same time in Helsinki and Vantaa. Collaboration and networking started without delay in the capital region. The municipalities organized teacher seminars and school visits yearly. Also broader international networking took place.

As an example, The Postipuu School participated actively in projects run by the National Board of Education, the Kimmoke -language teaching development project and in other projects promoting internationality. Collaboration with the University of Helsinki was fruitful too – the school operated as a training ground for university students. The collaboration extended to vocational institutes later on, and the English-speaking groups received special needs assistant trainees.

The networks have since expanded. Some have even lasted until today. Collaboration partners in the year 2015 comprised the national FIS Steps-project, COMENIUS (a project which started pioneering collaboration with Espoo already in the early 1990s) as well as the Network of Bilingual and Foreign Language Schools in the capital region. The collaboration still produces entrance tests, teacher seminars and visits and creates practices for the mobility of pupils.

Learning and developing schools

Owing to its distinct character, the English-language learning environment has evolved and developed constantly. New ways of working were needed especially in the beginning. Some of the early challenges included preparing the curriculum and making teaching arrangements, scheduling lesson hours, recruiting teachers with adequate competencies, their English-language skills in middle school subject teaching and finding suitable learning material. There were great expectations to fulfill.

True pioneering work was done in all the schools. One teacher, for example, completed a major task by translating Finnish learning material into English for one's pupils in the Swedish-language subject. All in all, a lot of learning material was prepared on one's own.

The bilingual and foreign-language schools in Espoo collaborated a lot. The principals gathered regularly to discuss timely issues and the contents of instruction, and to plan pupil catchment. The teachers took courses, and the principals made study trips. The first year entrance exams were held in the premises of the city's school authority and monitored by English-language teachers. In the following years, the tests were held in the schools and further developed.

Preparing the new curricula took place in the years 1995 and 2005. The reforms brought changes to lesson hours in the English-speaking groups. For example, the hours of mother tongue (Finnish-language) instruction increased, and lively conversation about the purpose of one's mother tongue took place. The changes followed the amendments of the Basic Education Act. The Finnish-language curriculum was applied to the pupils' Finnish and literature studies.

The goal of the English-speaking middle school was to help pupils succeed in their further studies, also in Finnish. Later on, the international Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme was introduced and issued as the curriculum for the English-speaking middle school. The bilingual and foreign-language schools in Espoo collaborated a lot. The principals gathered regularly to discuss timely issues and the contents of instruction, and to plan pupil catchment. The teachers took courses, and the principals made study trips. The first year entrance exams were held in the premises of the city's school authority and monitored by English-language teachers. In the following years, the tests were held in the schools and further developed.

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Already fifteen years ago, hopes emerged, lively rumors circulated and plans were made to join the English-speaking primary and middle schools as one international comprehensive school operating under the same roof. Petitions were signed, politicians lobbied, surveys administered and public forums held. The Education Committee addressed the plans to join the schools in the beginning of the 2000s.

One step towards the common goal was taken on October 26th, 2000, when the English-speaking middle school grades were combined into a separate school unit, the Espoo International. The Komeetta and Postipuu Primary Schools continued to host the English-speaking groups for grades 1–6. Hopes for establishing a joint English-speaking comprehensive school lived on.

The long wait and relentless work was rewarded when the decision to form a joint English-speaking comprehensive school was finally made on December 4th, 2007. The English-speaking primary school grades from the Postipuu and Komeetta Schools and the middle grades from the Espoo International, previously located in Northern Tapiola, became a joint English-speaking comprehensive school, the Espoo International School.

The school began its operations on August 1st, 2015.

The Espoo International School is like a microcosm. Languages, cultures and different religious backgrounds meet in its everyday life by learning together. Meaningful friendships are formed. Are they the peacemakers and economic ambassadors of the future?

Teachers of exceptional talent bring colour to the life of the school. They help to equip the pupils with the skills and courage needed to answer to the challenges of our ever more complex, globalized world.

The first school year in the new Espoo International School in Opinmäki is now closing. It is possible to see already what challenges lie ahead: the number of pupils and of those interested in the English-language instruction increases steadily. Many more apply for the English-language instruction than the school can receive.

Along with the challenges, there will be great opportunities ahead. The English-speaking, international school truly is an accomplishment, something to be proud of.

Espoo International School 2015

The future

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The principal’s afterword

The Espoo International School locates in a developing and growing city close to the country’s leading university campus. The city’s educational level and the pupils’ international backgrounds create an excellent ground for innovative educational work. It is hard to find a better environment for a developing school.

Espoo did pioneering work when it started offering basic education in the English language in 1992. Ever since the school started, one key idea has been to involve guardians in the school’s operations. The parents’ backgrounds in international schools around the world have given the collaboration an excellent start.

The journey of our school has now lasted more than 20 years. Our place as part of the Espoo Education and Cultural Services has taken root. An international school enables international businesses to arrive in Espoo and to recruit world’s top talent. Few international high-tech cities can compete with offering pupils free-of-charge high quality education in the English language.

In the future, all schools will have to adapt to individualized learning and educational needs in an increasingly diverse cultural environment. We are excited to embrace this challenge! The new curriculum brings Finnish basic education closer to the Middle Years Programme (MYP) administered by the International Baccalaureate (IB) organization, which has been followed by the Espoo International School already for years. For this reason too, the Espoo International School will remain – I believe – in the lead of creating multi-field phenomenon-based educational practices in Espoo and in Finland.

The future of the Espoo International School seems sunny and interesting. When the school was established, it was an exception among other schools with its multi-cultural outlook and the adopted international curriculum.

Let us continue our success and good work by upholding the school’s key principle: the pupils’ integrated growth, participation and life-long learning.

Yours sincerely,

MRS. ANNE-MARIE RAPO
Principal
Memories

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