

Ask the audience

Following the SENCO debate at Special Needs London featured in our January issue, we bring you some comments from the delegates who attended the event



What is the Home Education Centre (HEC)?

We are a voluntary group supporting families who educate their children outside the mainstream system. It is really new and there is nothing going on like this anywhere else. Often home educators meet and form groups. It can be as simple as a few parents meeting and getting their children together at their houses. There may be one or two groups that are doing something a little bit more formal, but I have not come across anything like this.

We started five years ago as a group of five children at the top of a nursery. There was one room, and I would come in with a couple of boxes from my car, set it all up and then pack it away at the end of the day and take it back home. It came from a need and from meeting the right people along the way as I made the journey to where we are now, which is a dream come true.

Why did you create the HEC?

When I became pregnant I thought about what I would do when my child was of school age. Would I hand him over to a complete stranger about whom I knew nothing – their philosophies, ideas or ideals – or should I teach him myself as a trained teacher?

When I decided that I wanted to home educate, I realised that my son needed access to sport, drama, friends and so on; I did not want him to be at home working with me all the time. That is what triggered the idea of the Home Education Centre.

What is the purpose of the HEC now?

It has always been about non-compulsory group activities that you cannot do at home. When we got a group of children together I did things like drama and dance. The basic philosophy has not changed – the ideal of support for each other and non-compulsory options of different subjects unavailable at home.

What has changed is that we now have 60 children and lots more families. It has had to become a lot more formal and organised. Over the last two years we have developed what was basically in my head as a philosophy and written it down so that we now have policies for everything. All that we do is now formalised so that we can say 'this is our model'.

What are the benefits of home education?

On a personal level it produces a rounded human being. I believe that many schools are blinkered and too narrow in their focus. Home education gives children a chance to be themselves rather than moulding to what society dictates as the norm. Every child is unique and individual. So often in a school situation I have seen children who are different pressured to conform and picked on for being different. The children here really accommodate each other's differences. My children love the freedom to adapt the curriculum. My

The interview

son asked a question about Prince John and in one 45-minute session we went from King Richard to the Magna Carta to the growth of Parliament and to Stalin. You struggle to do this in school as there are a large number of children and you have to stick to the curriculum. With home education you can go on a journey, from one tangent to the next with no boundaries, and you can explore their imagination and interests in a way that is impossible in school.

For those looking to home educate what are the barriers they might face?

Money is a factor. We have a lot of single-parent families who are now being pressured to work without any consideration for the fact that they are home educating their child. Even in two-parent families one person has to stay at home and home educate the child. The finance issue is an interesting one but generally for the families that do it money isn't a driving force, it is the kids. Everyone loves their children, but to home educate you have got to like spending time with them.

What are the benefits of the Home Education Centre?

The main benefit is support for each other, as it is not always an easy journey. Everything we do we have to fund ourselves – we get no money for books, computers or exams so by pooling our resources we can help each other. Also, the children can learn in their own way and there is no pressure to conform to anything. They might start off on a session and if they are not happy they can leave and go on to something else. The children become very independent.

How do you ensure that children have access to a broad curriculum?

That is the responsibility of the parents, and what we do is complementary. For example, the three days we are not at HEC I do cover the curriculum. What we provide here is what the children want to do. I am not a scientist but Zena (another parent at the centre) is, so I make sure that my son does an hour of science a week with her. I can also discuss with Zena things that we have covered at home. If you look at the board you will see that on a Friday we do Latin, movies, computers, French and drama. What we provide over the two days at HEC is very broad and we don't take responsibility for their education – the parents are the educators.

Do you have any contact with the local authority or local services?

We have a fantastic relationship with Somerset County Council and I've been working on this for the last five years. We feel that it is important is to challenge how people do things. Although some home educators can have an 'arm's length' approach, we feel that by working with the County Council staff they can understand what we are doing and

there is more chance of us improving our practice. We have worked through all their practices with them; they come to us and talk to us.

How does home education improve the provision available? Massively, otherwise the options are either school or school. I think that school works well for the vast majority of children, and home education wouldn't work for a lot of families. However there are children who are struggling and demotivated in the system and who would flourish being home educated, but parents have to be on board as it is a family and lifestyle decision.

What does home education offer to children that mainstream schools do not?

It provides the freedom to learn as an individual, and schools are catching on to that. It is just another way of doing things but we have the freedom to adapt work to the child's skills which schools often struggle to accommodate. As a home educator you are also learning with the child.

How do parents find out about home education?

One of the main aims when I set this group up was to increase public awareness that home education is an option so I did a lot of publicity. I've been on the BBC's news programme Points West and various Somerset radio stations and I given several interviews. My view is that the more I talk about it in public the more people will know about it. After Points West I had a lot of contact from people who didn't realise they could home educate and were worried about being taken to court.

How does the HEC cater for pupils with special needs?

We have several children with dyslexia and we have an awareness of how children like to learn. I believe that all children have a special need as they learn in their own way. This is why we don't want to grow too big as we can work with children individually. A lot of our activities involve exploring, investigating and talking and we do not do lots of writing unless the children want to.

How do you ensure that you cater for all your pupils' needs?

It starts with the way that we plan. At the end of last year we got all the children together for a meeting in a big house. We used a massive sheet of paper and mind mapped all the activities they would like to do. That is the basis of our planning, and we try to match parents to the activities that are requested. We have now got teams that provide arts and crafts and performing arts, and parents who work with younger or teenage children. We have all the ages ranges covered and we can link things together. Some of the



> parents have brilliant ideas too, and we often trial things to give the children a taster. For example, we have done some role playing that came from an incident between two children, and some assertiveness work which was an adult's idea, and the children are loving it.

The difference between home education and school is that the parents are the driving force – they are taking responsibility. Parents who are considering home education might not know where to start but we show them what we do and they get a feel for it. There's no 'them and us', it is a team. We have a management team but the group belongs to everyone and we all have an input and share ideas. It is very much a collaborative, co-operative community; no one is the 'expert'. When we plan we also give planning sheets out to families to ask if there is anything they would like to run.

Where do you see home education ending and formal education beginning for your own children?

My son has no intention of going to school and I feel quite confident of taking him through to GCSEs, and of him going to university if he wants to. A friend of mine home educated through primary school and then put her son into a secondary school as she did not feel confident of taking him through that stage. It very much depends on individual families. People forget that even for school educated children a lot of learning goes on in the home. What we do as parent seems to be alright from birth to five years as our child learns to talk and walk and do all these amazing things, then at the age of five we are supposedly not suitable anymore. As home educators we just carry on and adapt as we go along.

How do you feel about the proposed tighter regulations for home educating?

We have written a report in response to this. My personal view is that it goes back to the idea that you could define what was best for your child but that has now been turned over and the State now defines this, which is worrying. They don't know your child, they are not well trained; they are just looking at it through school's eyes. Until they have studied the different ways of learning and immersed themselves in it I don't think they are in a suitable position to judge. The nature of home education is that you work with your own child and you know everything about them.

What are your long-term plans to improve the provision?

The children evaluate sessions and we look at how they work. We can experiment with things. The children vote with their feet, rather than sit there and endure it. We would like to create a network to support other home education centres. This centre has provided a model that can be used by other groups as a basis to set up a home education centre. It would be nice to have a purpose-built building of our own, but I don't know how far down the line this would be. The ideal would be to have a learning centre that is not just accessed two days a week, but is available when people need it. It is working so well that we want to think very carefully about the next step.

Sean Stockdale is the Editor of Special. For more information on the HEC visit www.homeeducationcentre.org.uk/