
PLACE: a case study

Building a Learning Community
without Going to School

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About Learning Futures

In 2008, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, in partnership with the Innovation Unit, launched the Learning Futures initiative to find ways to improve educational outcomes in secondary schools by increasing young people's deep engagement with their learning.

The project has worked with over 40 schools on developing innovative methods of teaching and learning aimed at increasing engagement. Through this process, Learning Futures has identified four approaches that lead to deep and sustained engagement:

- Using project-based learning that crosses disciplinary boundaries, with students of all abilities
- Treating school as a base camp for learning
- Taking account of (and utilising) every student's extended learning relationships, so that learning is something that can happen at any time, in any place, and with a wider range of coaches, mentors and experts
- Transforming school into a learning commons for which teachers, students and the local community share responsibility, over which they share authority, and from which they all benefit

Learning Futures commissioned this study because its subject, the Parent-Led and Community-based Education (PLACE) scheme in Bedford, is a radically innovative approach to education that exemplifies all four of these Learning Futures approaches.

This case study is part of a set of free, open-source publications, including a guide to project-based learning (written in partnership with San Diego's High Tech High), a handbook for school leaders who want to take a Learning Futures approach to education, a diagnostic tool for getting a sense of engagement levels in your school, and a guide to 'spaced learning' (a method for quickly embedding information in the long term memory).

You can download all these resources at www.learningfutures.org

Contents

Section 1: Introduction	7
Section 2: Background to PLACE	
– A learning community	12
– The student body	13
– Relationship with the mainstream system	14
Section 3: Principles of PLACE	
– Family as focus of learning	18
– Parent-led provision	20
– Supported by, but independent from, school	21
Section 4: PLACE as an example of Learning Futures approaches	23
– PLACE and project-based learning	26
– PLACE and school as base camp	28
– PLACE and extended learning relationships	30
– PLACE and school as learning commons	31
Section 5: In practice - PLACE families' perspectives	33
Section 6: Lessons from PLACE	41
Acknowledgements	44



SECTION 1

Introduction



Introduction

Bedford is home to an innovative education programme that exhibits some of the core ideas of Learning Futures in practice: the Parent-Led and Community-based Education (PLACE) scheme, which is best described as a home-education community affiliated to a mainstream school. This case study offers an overview of the core characteristics and principles of the scheme and a description of how learning takes place within its community.

PLACE, which began as a home-education community group, is now attached to Biddenham International School and Sports College. In the process, it has evolved from operating informally at the fringe of mainstream education to approved 'alternative provider' status, under the auspices of the Local Education Authority. This journey may be of particular interest to those investigating the development of similar provisions.

PLACE has developed organically and its principles – the family as focus of learning; parent-led provision; supported by but independent from the school – are lived through practice. The precise nature of PLACE is somewhat difficult to describe as, by its very nature, it accommodates and commissions a wide range of pedagogical approaches rather than having a set approach to teaching and learning. PLACE, in essence, provides a framework to enable families to personalise every aspect of their children's learning. The experiences of four families illustrate this point (see Section 4), though to respect their privacy all names have been changed.



SECTION 2

Background to PLACE

A learning community

PLACE is a community of home educators, with a wide range of backgrounds and educational philosophies, whose children have a diverse range of needs and aptitudes. There are 155 students currently registered with the scheme. The time and space constraints of mainstream settings do not apply and families each determine the appropriate range of educational activities for their children. For most families, these include independent learning with parents, group visits, taught sessions, formal qualifications and sporting and artistic activities.

Centralised learning provision is commissioned from a range of sources by the part-time co-ordinator of PLACE, including from subject teachers at Biddenham School, self-employed tutors and corporate providers such as language schools. Some students are also funded through PLACE to enrol on courses at local colleges. This creates a 'user-led' model, with tutors having to pitch their appeal – and the outcomes they expect to deliver – to both parents and students.

Whilst PLACE has an office, library and classroom space, known as 'The Other Place' (TOP), learning activities take place in a number of different locations, including students' family homes, Biddenham School, a scout centre, athletic stadia, galleries, museums and specialist providers in Bedfordshire and beyond. The full use of community resources and educational trips features prominently throughout each academic term.

Similarly to mainstream education, students undertake a range of qualifications and it is a requirement of the scheme that students will take to examination a minimum of five GCSEs (or equivalent), including Maths and English, by the time they get to the age equivalent of Year 11 (although students may stagger their qualifications). Other qualifications include SATs, BTEC qualifications, Arts Award, and AQA Project.

Families who register with PLACE must agree to a number of core requirements. In order to enrol on the scheme, parents must sign up to the PLACE code of good practice, complete a student progress report each term, sign a home-school

agreement and complete weekly registration forms. Regular attendance at PLACE activities is expected, and attendance rates and unauthorised absences are reported to Biddenham School. Participation in the scheme is voluntary and parents can deregister their children at any time.

PLACE exists as a relatively independent satellite, outside of the organisational structure of Biddenham School, accessing resources within the school where suitable (usually when the economics of scale are most attractive), but having significant freedom to access resources elsewhere. The relationship between the school and PLACE is anchored by the relationship between the Principal of the school, Mike Berrill and the founder and co-ordinator of PLACE, June McDonald. Mike is instrumental in brokering support agreements with the school when necessary. June is supported by a part-time administrator and has help from a parent-committee who provide a problem-solving and decision-making function.

It is most accurate to describe PLACE as a learning community where a changing constellation of resources: parents and volunteers, part time tutors and visiting experts, community and corporate providers and formal educational institutions, come together to provide highly personalised learning programmes for PLACE students.

The student body

Families registered with PLACE come from a wide range of backgrounds and have chosen to undertake home education for a variety of reasons (some of which are indicated in the stories in section 4). However, it tends to attract families already committed to home education, rather than pulling students directly from mainstream education. Within PLACE, there has always existed a wide range of educational abilities.

Some PLACE students have severe learning difficulties, some are extremely gifted, and some (such as serious athletes and musicians) have too many specialist commitments to be able to attend school full-time.

Hundreds of students have been registered with PLACE since its inception in 2004. Over the subsequent seven academic years, most registered students have acquired a range of GCSE and BTEC qualifications and accessed places in further and higher education and in employment. The educational attainment of the group is notable – PLACE offers access to qualifications that are unlikely to be achieved otherwise by home educated students, not through lack of academic ability but due to financial restrictions and practical difficulties (e.g. access to examinations and / or coursework evaluations).

Relationship with the mainstream system

PLACE was initially known as the 'Biddenham Upper School Home Educators (BUSHE) Programme', when Biddenham Upper School, in September 2004, accepted onto its roll a small number of students from the local home-education group, in order to allow them to access support for their GCSEs.

In 2006, BUSHE became the FSESHE (Full-Service Extended School Home-Education) programme, when the arrangement was extended to a local lower school in order for younger students to register and to access funded activities.

In 2009 the scheme became known as The Parent Led and Community-based Education (PLACE) scheme. All 155 PLACE students are now registered with Biddenham International School & Sports College. Their ages range from 5–16; however,

PLACE offers provision for younger siblings and older students where necessary, so provision is made for children aged 0–19. PLACE identifies itself primarily as a scheme for home educators – a stance that is represented clearly in parental registration forms and PLACE's Code of Good Practice. PLACE parents sign an agreement on joining that asserts that they, the parents, remain responsible for their children's education. Students are unable to simply transfer into mainstream – if they want to enrol at Biddenham as mainstream students, they need to go through the usual enrolment protocols, and standard admission restrictions apply.

PLACE has attracted national attention. It has been featured on Teachers TV and in the Times Educational Supplement. Ofsted has visited three times and has offered positive comments within its overall inspection of the affiliated schools. The regulatory authorities are intrigued by it as a model, but all attempts to make it 'fit' and to agree a funding arrangement satisfactory to government, have failed until recently, primarily due to the restrictive nature of historical funding models.

However, in January 2011, PLACE received a letter from David Bell, the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Education, which suggested that PLACE could continue as 'alternative provision' commissioned by the Local Authority and funded through the Dedicated Schools Grant. Students are now registered ('on roll') with the local authority via Biddenham School. The school draws down the age-weighted pupil unit (AWPU) of funding for each child via the local authority as part of its 'alternative provision' funding. The funds are kept within the school and funding for PLACE students is administered by the school.

PLACE also has some independent funds accumulated through membership fees raised by Bedford Home Educators and also through many years of parental fundraising, donations and contributions. This 'float' enables PLACE to deal with day-to-day administration and to respond to urgent or ad hoc requirements.



SECTION 3

Principles of PLACE

Family as focus of learning

As long as the minimum PLACE requirements are met, families are able to pick and choose from the experiences, sessions and resources offered by PLACE. The learning opportunities organised by PLACE are scheduled on a fortnightly basis, with lessons typically being two hours in length. Some learning commitments are made over the course of an academic year, such as attendance at regular sports sessions or qualifications, whereas others are more immediate. Visits, trips and some sessions are organised on a termly basis but are sometimes ad hoc, especially when PLACE is responding to an unplanned but attractive learning opportunity. Terms are given an advance theme, chosen by the parent committee, and a regular time is allocated for whole group activity. Terms follow the structure of the formal academic year.

Each family reviews the PLACE options via email and books the sessions that they deem relevant to their children. Mixed-age groups are common; siblings often attend and learn together; parents can often help reinforce messages or lead small group activities within sessions. A parent rota – to take on either formal or informal support roles, depending on the session – ensures an appropriate ratio of parents to children is consistently maintained. Generally, however, levels of parental involvement vary greatly. Some parents always accompany their children; others rarely do.

This freedom to pick and choose enables highly personalised, individual timetables for each child and affords families a significant amount of flexibility in the nature of the provisions they choose. Care is taken to offer a range of activities that families can access. However, when formal qualifications are offered there is often an age restriction applied. This is sometimes due to the external restrictions of the qualification itself, or through the general principle expressed by the school that the minimum age for qualifications should be 12. Age restrictions are used as sparingly as possible, because in many families, both older and younger siblings will study the same things. Thus, if one child cannot study a particular subject due to an age restriction, it may become practically difficult for the family to send just one child to the session.

That is not to say early access to qualification is encouraged: PLACE is careful not to encourage students who are not yet ready to undertake formal qualifications to do so, and this is sometimes at odds with the wishes of the family. What is clear however is that age is not taken as a sure sign either of readiness or lack of readiness for qualifications.

Parent-led provision

On an organisational level the parent committee and parent volunteers are vital to the success of the PLACE scheme. Parent volunteers are involved in all aspects of administration, led by the scheme co-ordinator, covering vital administrative, legislative, financial, and technical roles. Such voluntary contributions are valuable to the culture of the scheme, as they encourage a sense of ownership from members.

The co-ordinator meets on a quarterly basis with the parent committee to discuss provisions for the scheme and to set the themes that govern the activities that will take place each term. The committee also discusses with the co-ordinator issues relating to the management of the scheme. The committee's role is largely to support the co-ordinator with management of the scheme and to help with resolution of any difficulties that may arise.

Whilst PLACE activity represents a significant proportion of learning provision available to families it does not represent all; families will access learning in different ways and some families undertake the bulk of learning at home or independently. For this portion of learning the parent drives and shapes the curriculum, and, depending on the philosophical standpoint of the family it may be more child-led than parent-led. This learning is reported formally through attendance registers but can be harder to 'see' for the outside observer. Thus, it is possible that a parent who rarely attends PLACE provision with their child could be deeply involved in shaping and delivering a range of alternative learning opportunities both within the home and the wider community.

Supported by, but independent from school

The relationship between PLACE and Biddenham is unique and has evolved over time. Initially, PLACE students were accepted on to the roll at Biddenham in order to access GCSE examinations and some science support sessions on site. Today, the relationship is more sophisticated, including access to increased physical resources (specifically sports and art classrooms) in addition to the teaching expertise of the subject teachers. The classes that are undertaken within the school are similar to mainstream provision, with a few notable differences: they take place in twilight sessions, they are typically two hours long, there is a broader age range within the class, and some parents are present. PLACE students are not restricted to the provisions offered by the school, as these simply make up one strand of the offering commissioned by the scheme for its students.

Statutory funding for PLACE stops at 16, so A-level provision for students of 16 and over is usually accessed through mainstream sixth-form centres, although PLACE does offer some limited AS provision for younger students who are ready to undertake study at this level. In rare cases, older students may still access provision; for example, when students have had a disrupted education for medical or other reasons, or where more time may be needed to access GCSE and BTEC qualifications.

The other key aspect to the relationship, as described earlier, is funding, which historically was administered through the school (and for some time through a neighbouring lower school as well). While the budget will now come via the local authority, it will still be overseen by the financial department within the school. PLACE will continue to use the support services of the school, such as the finance and examinations functions.



SECTION 4

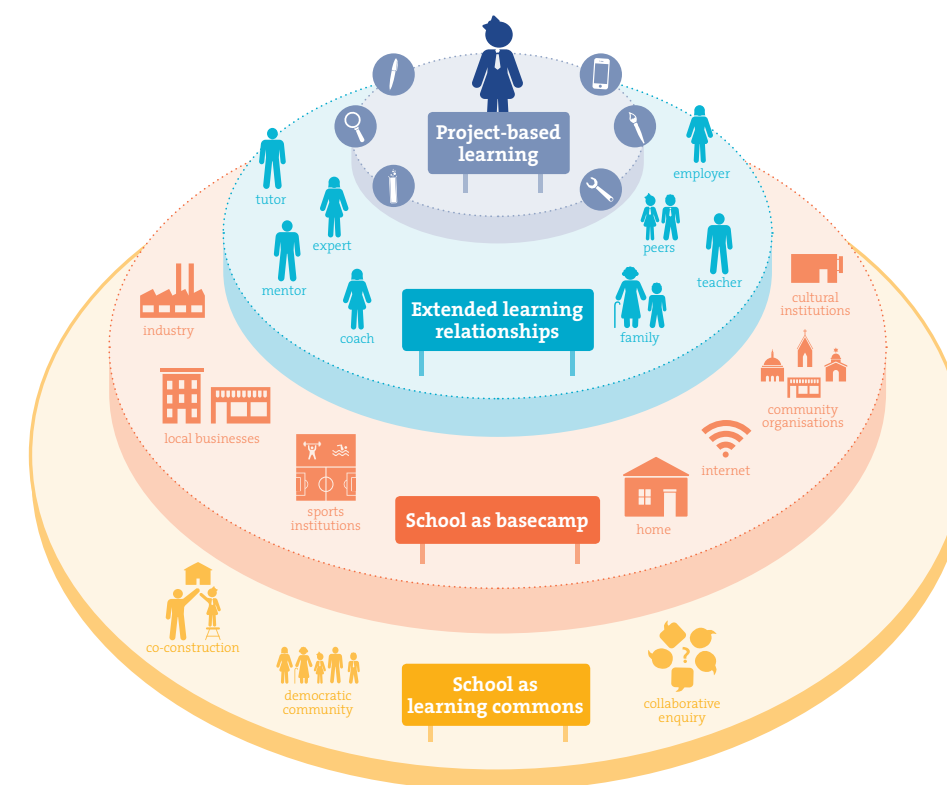
PLACE as an example of Learning Futures approaches

PLACE as an example of Learning Futures approaches

As indicated in the Preface, Learning Futures has identified four key approaches that are emerging as significant in creating engaging learning opportunities. These are:

- Using project-based learning that crosses disciplinary boundaries, with students of all abilities
- Treating school as a base camp for learning
- Taking account of (and utilising) every student's extended learning relationships, so that learning is something that can happen at any time, in any place, and with a wider range of coaches, mentors and experts
- Transforming school into a learning commons for which teachers, students and the local community share responsibility, over which they share authority, and from which they all benefit

The figure below summarises the approaches the Learning Futures schools developed.



Here we reflect on the extent to which PLACE illustrates these approaches in practice.

PLACE and project-based learning

Families in PLACE often use PLACE 'themes' as springboards for long-term, enquiries and projects. In the absence of formal teaching, one might even regard enquiry as the primary mode of learning (though families might not describe what they do in these terms). PLACE does not impose an expectation that students learn in this way, rather, it seems a natural response to the circumstances and flexibility of the model.

Projects can provide the gateway to many of the curriculum subjects and afford flexibility that subject-based teaching cannot. Students pursue qualifications such as the AQA Project qualification, reflecting the differing methods of learning that are employed by PLACE families. Students are typically invited to develop a project relating to a topic of their choice. Generic core skills are covered as a group whereas the bulk of the work that follows is often undertaken individually, in many cases involving working directly with experts. The following two examples illustrate the rich, largely self-managed and high quality learning experiences that PLACE facilitates.

Mia was 12 when she undertook the AQA qualification at Level 2. She chose the topic of Zoos and this topic was refined over time to the driving question "Are zoos the best place for endangered animal species?" The resulting project was a substantial piece of research undertaken online and through text books but also through engaging with experts in the field. Mia made contact with a Professor of Zoology and Head of the Department of Animal Management and Conservation based at the local safari park, as well as international zoology specialists, who were able to give her intensive input into her project. She managed her work through advanced project planning techniques, using GANTT charts, which her father taught her to use. She presented her work at a joint festival of learning held within Biddenham School in which she showed her portfolio, and expressed her learning through a 3D model of the forces impacting on an endangered species through metaphorical representations, accompanied by a song that she had written, sung and recorded as a lament to the species that were at risk

of dying out. Her project gained an A.

Jamie was 11 when he undertook the AQA qualification at level 2. He undertook a rigorous process of decision making to select his final choice of project which was to build a scaled replica model of the Victorian Kitchen Garden at Audley End. The project was inspired by a visit to Audley End and involved aspects of social history, science, ICT, literacy, model making, mathematics (as everything was done to scale), budgeting and the more generic project management skills of decision making, planning and time management. Jamie worked with a range of adults to undertake his project including his AQA tutor, who he met alongside his peers fortnightly for a two hour twilight session, his parents, and experts such as a professional model maker and the Head Gardener at Audley End who he engaged with throughout and to whom he presented his final model. In presenting his work to a wider audience at a festival of learning held at a local theatre, Jamie announced that he was confident, that if the gardeners of the Victorian period at Audley End were to see his model, they would have no hesitation in recognising it as their own. Jamie's work gained an A* and the attention of English Heritage who featured Jamie and his model on their website. He was also featured in the local press.

It is certainly true for PLACE students that their autonomy as learners means that they develop the skills and competencies, such as self-organisation and research skills, which are central to successful project and enquiry-based learning. These are skills which many mainstream students find highly challenging.

PLACE and school as base camp

Parents see PLACE as a resource that they can go to for support with their family's learning. They can access resources – textbooks, games, activities, teachers, coaches, group or experiential learning opportunities, funding for examinations or practical and moral support from the scheme co-ordinator and parents – that help them on their own learning journeys and they are free to pick and choose the tools that they need. Learning takes place both inside and outside the base camp of PLACE, with extended opportunities to spend time 'on the mountain' of learning, that is, in the community in which learning is most directly applicable.

Learning also takes place at many locations, including the home, community settings, and more formal centres including classrooms. Even these formal learning contexts are made permeable through the PLACE philosophy, so that 'lessons' are likely also to be attended by siblings, parents and other adult helpers.

In fact, the 'school as base camp' metaphor is a false conceptualisation for PLACE, because there is no 'school'. The home for them is the base camp and the wider community offers a palette of learning opportunities involving PLACE facilities, school, library, community settings and field visits. Without the institutional 'enclosure' restrictions of school (walls, timetables, subjects, age-cohorts, lessons and bells) PLACE students have freedom to use that palette to personalise their learning canvas.

The notion of 'PLACE as base camp' is well illustrated by two examples of Arts Award delivery within the PLACE setting.

The Bronze Arts Award was offered to complement an Arts-themed term at PLACE. The children were offered a wide range of arts activities many of which would be reflected upon or developed to provide evidence for their Bronze portfolios. Arts Award students met with their Arts Award Adviser fortnightly for two-hour sessions. Throughout the term activities were offered to the whole PLACE community that included a visit to the TATE, a Graffiti tour of London, a sculpture tour of

Bedford, and workshops from manga drawing, drama, tie-dying, origami and digital photography. During the Arts term, an external arts competition was held in the town and PLACE responded by holding a workshop with one of the judges. Children who took part in the workshop were encouraged to enter their work into the arts competition and a high proportion of those who were awarded prizes came from PLACE. These prizes provided concrete evidence for their Arts Award portfolios. When moderated the assessor commented that the portfolios were clearly strengthened by the sheer range of arts experiences offered by the setting. The Award culminated in an Arts Festival designed and delivered by the children who offered workshops in manga drawing, drama, tie-dying, origami, digital photography to their peers and families.

The Silver Arts Award was subsequently offered to those who had completed their Bronze Award. The Silver programme did not sit within an overall arts term and the qualification itself called for more focus on one art form per child. This meant that the qualification was much more driven by the individual, and delivery was focussed on the process rather than the end product. In a group of seven, three children chose drama, one dance, two photography, and one guitar as their art form. All art-form specific learning took place outside of the fortnightly sessions with the arts advisor, with other adults and experts that were sourced by the students themselves. Participants had to identify an arts challenge and have this reviewed by an expert, which was, in most cases a tutor outside of PLACE itself. The award culminated in an Arts Festival that was entirely devised and delivered by the students themselves and included guitar workshops, exhibitions, drama workshops, and presentations. As a group they developed evaluation systems, which they have used to reflect upon their own work as arts leaders.

PLACE and extended learning relationships

Each family, indeed each child in PLACE accesses a different constellation of learning opportunities and experiences according to his or her needs, wants, and philosophies of learning. Thus, 'personalisation' is the responsibility of the student and their family, rather than the teacher. It is therefore less appropriate to talk about the 'pedagogy' of PLACE than about its [pedagogies](#).

As illustrated in the learner vignettes above, what this means is that students and their families decide who will support their learning – this may include parents, siblings and peers, as well as teachers from Biddenham and other trained tutors sourced from the wider community.

The role that parents play in PLACE most closely resembles that played in early childhood learning, where parents' importance to children's education is very widely acknowledged.

PLACE and school as learning commons

The leaders of PLACE are keen that learning opportunities are open to all and can be accessed by whole families regardless of age. This cannot always happen (particularly because many formal qualifications bring with them age restrictions). However, PLACE's whole-group activities, trips, and visits are designed to immerse whole families in learning experiences. PLACE also allows for and recognises the value of the broadest possible range of learning opportunities. Families can learn in ways that suit them, as long as they register their attendance with the central office.

The central tenet of the 'learning commons' - that learning opportunities are a shared resource, equally accessible by all and for which all are responsible - is lived in the everyday provision of PLACE and the practices of PLACE families. PLACE is offered to and run with the help of the parents themselves. Dialogue, negotiation, and constant communication play a vital part in this kind of scheme. In many ways PLACE is a traditional 'commons' – a shared space offering communal access. Having said this, it would also be an idealisation to say that all families perceive it in this way. For many PLACE families the scheme is seen primarily as a resource to support their home education rather than a community of learning – this sometimes leads to conflict and negotiations when the needs of the individual have to be balanced with the needs of the many.



SECTION 5

In practice - PLACE families' perspectives

The Johnson Family

The Johnson family has been with PLACE for two years. Mum Sian was a teacher and continues to work in education as a literacy specialist. It had never been their intention to home educate. Their children, Simon and David, were both educated in state school until Years 3 and 4 respectively, but the family felt that one son was not being sufficiently stretched academically while the other was not going to pass his SATs. They made the decision to move to private education. This had a positive impact on attainment but they found that pastoral care was lacking. Simon experienced severe bullying and had to be taken out of school. Younger brother David opted out later after a discussion with his family. David explained the differences he found between a school education and home education in the following way:

Home education allows us to have more experiences than we would have had. When you are at school, education is just about learning information but it should be more about experience and creative thinking.

It should fill gaps in the mind and help you to build on your tree of knowledge.

David

The family began with education entirely at home but soon found that they wanted to join up with other home educators. They joined a few groups near to them but eventually settled on PLACE. One of the key attractions, alongside educating with like-minded families, was the funded provision. They would not have been able to access GCSEs without the funding provided by PLACE.

Simon and David access a range of learning opportunities through a mixture of PLACE activities: these include learning at home (making use of both the internet and parents as guides), more informal group learning (for example both boys are part of a rock band led and taught by their music teacher), and

private sporting activity (eldest son Simon is a figure skater). Both boys have ambitions to go to university. Sian feels relaxed about whether they do or not, maintaining that it is their choice.

Managing Simon's and David's learning is admin-heavy for Sian and requires keen planning skills and an ability to respond to last-minute changes. However, home-based learning offers a much broader and richer range of experiences. Sian likens PLACE to a shop, in which she and her children enjoy a high degree of choice:

PLACE allows my children to choose what they want to study and how to study. They can then add to their education with other activities that they choose.

Sian, mother of Simon and David

The Walker Family

Sandra is mum to four children aged between 5 and 13. Sandra describes their education as a hybrid between home and school education, allowing for some freedom but also giving structure, especially where qualifications are concerned. Her two eldest sons, Ben and Shaun, attended school until they were in Year 3; Peter has never attended, and Anne, her youngest child, attends the local school through her own choice. Ben and Shaun have dyslexia to different degrees and Sandra noticed that their self-esteem had dropped as a result of attending school. Keen to keep her children's self confidence intact, she began to home educate. There was a period of removing the 'school' mindset, common to children who come out of mainstream school, but there is not an anti-school sentiment in the family.

Sandra is now a single parent and feels that home-education, while challenging at times, has provided a source of stability for the family. The balance that PLACE provides between freedom and structure suits the needs of the family. Due to the focused nature of their learning, they find that they can cover a school day's worth of work in two hours, leaving time for experiential or social learning in the afternoon. They undertake project work on a regular basis and make regular use of 'lap books' to record and develop their learning, a technique that especially suits the 'non-linear' thinking of the two eldest boys. Lap books are commonly used within home education and can be described as elaborate scrapbooks made by the student to capture learning. Sandra likes to keep her children on track with what they would be learning in school in the core subjects of English, Maths, and Science but also enjoys the flexibility to stay with a topic until it is fully understood, or to touch lightly upon other topics that may not be of interest yet to the children. At home, there is no option for boredom; if the children don't want to do one activity, then they can choose something else. It is this flexibility in the PLACE approach that is so important for the family. Sandra would like her children to access a broad range of experiences and learning opportunities, but is clear that she would also like them to achieve seven GCSEs to enable them to access a full range of options beyond their home education.

While she regards the qualifications offered by PLACE as necessary for her children's future, Sandra recognises that, when entering into qualifications, a significant amount of flexibility is lost, as the whole family cannot attend and content becomes driven by the qualification rather than by the child's interests. A compromise must be made, and through PLACE the family can access the best bits of home education and the necessary elements of school education.

The social side of PLACE is also something that is valued by the family – they feel that the children in PLACE tend to be more cooperative and inclusive, displaying more tolerance and acceptance than is felt to be 'the norm' by their school-educated peers.

The Evans Family

Steven, at 10 years old, has been to school for just three days, and that was while on holiday in Slovenia. He learns with his older sister Samantha, 13, who has always been home educated. For the family the decision to home educate was a natural and positive one; mum Louise sees education as something that happens at all times and that enriches and improves their lives. Both parents work shifts to ensure that they are available for their children during the day.

In describing their style of education, the family contrast the 'free-range' education that they enjoy with the 'intensive' and 'constrained' education offered through mainstream schools.

Steven describes his education metaphorically as 'an allotment between a wild meadow and a school'. For him, this represents the balance of structure and freedom.

PLACE allows access to the best bits of education without the need to constrain their children to a building, fixed learning schedule or an age group. The family accesses a lot of PLACE provision and makes good use of the trips and visits available. They describe holidays as key learning experiences that form an important strand of their education. The family has recently visited Slovenia, Venice, and The Eden Project, both as a family and with PLACE groups.

A range of adults is involved in the education of the two children. Teachers, sports and gym coaches, scout leaders and family members are all identified as people who help with learning. Both Steven and Samantha have lots of ideas about what they might like to do when they get older and both like the idea of university. Louise hopes they will do whatever makes them happy.

The Thompson Family

For the Thompson's, the decision to leave school was made swiftly due to an intense period of bullying at the second school of her youngest son, Rob. Both Emily and Rob entered into a period of adjustment that was difficult at first and found that educating purely within the family did not suit them. They began looking for other families with whom they could share learning and PLACE was suggested to them by the council. At first, they rejected the idea, as they had heard that the scheme was connected to a school which, given their recent experiences, was off-putting. However, when PLACE was suggested again, this time by another home educating family, they decided to give it a try. Rob hopes to become a teacher, so for him it is important to maintain his academic progress to a high standard and PLACE enables him to access the qualifications he needs. They have found that home education allows them to maintain Rob's qualifications but also to follow his interests and to stick with a topic of interest until he is ready to move on. They note that within PLACE many families are extremely high achieving and that qualifications are of high importance for some families.

PLACE provision makes up only part of Rob's curriculum. Rob, at age 13, is staggering his GCSEs and is currently undertaking Maths and three sciences with PLACE. English, English Literature, ICT, and Statistics (if PLACE runs it) will be taken next. Learning takes place at home, with regular trips and visits and Rob also accesses learning at a corporate learning provider called 'Explore Learning' in which he works alongside mainstream and home-educated children. Rob plans on finishing his GCSEs with PLACE and then going on to a local sixth-form centre before university. Mum Emily feels that a balance is needed between formal and child-centred education and sometimes parents have to be clever enough to disguise specific learning in projects, 'like hiding vegetables in pasta sauce'.

They reflect on how their learning has changed since home educating:

At first there was a fear of forgetting everything – written work used to be a testament to the fact that he was learning – which is not necessary on a one-to-one. We test knowledge after each subject.

Emily, mother to Rob



SECTION 6

Lessons from PLACE

Lessons from PLACE

PLACE is situated in a particular context that is dependant upon key relationships, commitments and the personalities of its leaders and members. The scheme has developed as a community of learners and has been able to innovate due to the permissive protection of Biddenham International School and Sports College. It would not easily become a standardised and sanitised 'model' for learning provision because it is characterised by a focus, not on structure but on people. It was built as a result of the relationship between two educational leaders and still hinges on that relationship. Its principles are 'lived' through constant negotiation that can feel messy and overwhelming at times, precisely because of the reluctance to impose arbitrary structures that may well be more efficient to administer but which would serve the individual children less well.

PLACE is an example of emergent innovation that would not easily be replicated. However, through parental involvement, individual timetables, mixed-age groups and family involvement, there is a lot that mainstream education could learn from PLACE.

PLACE poses many questions to the mainstream; why is learning constrained almost entirely to the physical buildings of the school? Why are parents not present in the classroom? Why does age represent readiness for qualifications? Why do we segregate learners by age? In what ways could schools be more responsive to the resources within the community, and to unexpected opportunities? Who else, apart from subject experts, could children learn from? Who does our timetable serve?

PLACE has developed organically and for that reason many of its strengths can also be seen as weaknesses: it is dependant upon the passion and enthusiasm of people rather than the clean lines of structured organisation. It depends on relationships, negotiation, and goodwill. It is complex and in a state of constant flux. It requires a particular and rare set of conditions to survive, conditions that are not easily codified or replicated. As an organisation it is neither self-conscious

nor strategically driven. However, PLACE has proved itself resilient to significant challenge and continues to be attractive to those seeking an alternative to both mainstream education and 'pure' home education. PLACE is a system bound by clear principles and objectives. It provides a living example of organised education developed along very different lines to the factory-based model of education.

PLACE continues to develop. The recent change in its status has had an impact. A PLACE management group has been developed to monitor, commission and begin to consider what the mainstream could learn from the PLACE scheme, a development that may aid PLACE in becoming more strategic. However, as it is, PLACE continues to offer a true example of radical innovation in practice.

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