



Home Schooling... should you?

by Jenny Nel

I decided to home school my children when I moved to a remote village in the Karoo and boarding school would have been the only other option.

I left the pollution of the city when my children were in Grades 4 and 2. I resigned from my high school teaching post and jumped off the cliff of security - wanting my kids to be able to roam freely in a clean and beautiful environment. To get away from traffic and after-care and my children cutting their reading teeth on the newspaper headlines on every lamp-post first thing every morning on our journey to their school.

I envisioned a thousand problems - what about sport, friends, all the things of a primary school that I knew nothing of? What about singing in an assembly and learning to mix with all kinds of people, reading aloud in class, prize giving, ballet lessons, karate? All these precious things called me back - and yet I know that the other side of them was: after-care every day; hungry children in a traffic jam; teachers frustrated by huge classes and unruly other kids who had been weaned in daycare centres (this must be the saddest thing not worth any salary and, I think, a true problem); me - after a day's teaching - maddened by the same problem and too tired and frustrated to be easy with my own kids - and too poor not to do it, or to have a wand and employ a housekeeper and cook. And so, we would trudge home - all tired - and while I cooked, my small children, exhausted by their day, flopped in front of the TV. I'd had enough; so I moved.

I had no clue about home schooling or primary schools. I tracked down my first lead and bought a Brainline course that supplied all schoolwork expected from Grade 0-12. Armed with my CD, I launched into our little school - a sunny table, a beautiful view and a dog curled at our feet. I started in June 2001. Grace was in Grade 4 and twins Amber and Gabriel in Grade 2. My reasoning was that they would learn something at least, but if I'd made a big mistake, I thought I'd realize it, and at the most, we'd risk and lose six months of school, and they could go back in January of 2002 if need be.

I need not have worried. To my delight, my friends Noelle and Hester were also home schooling. Noelle, in the village too, and Hester on a farm nearby. Our children were of different ages: Noëlle's younger

than mine, and Hester's a little older. A group of home schooling parents and kids on farms on the other side of Graaff-Reinet introduced themselves and our Fridays became our town day - tennis, swimming, cricket, hockey lessons by proper coaches and amazing parents, and our village kids joined the Haywards and McNaughtons for fun, the odd debate, orals and prize givings, our group activities.



We settled into a routine quickly: from Mondays to Thursdays we'd start at 08:30 and work till 12. At 12 the "home school group" would meet: they totalled 9 kids at one glorious point! Noelle and I would take it in turns and give the kids a bit of fun, and a group class - something in which age didn't matter. They had poetry lessons once a week; pottery lessons, project lessons in which we'd spend a term on a particular subject and each child would submit a project on that subject, and we had a newspaper. "The Owl Advertiser" had no editor, but a committee - all the children. The term would begin by deciding on a theme for the newspaper for that term - mainly to ensure that we had a good front page! Then the committee would draw up a calendar of events and decide who would be responsible for reporting on which events, or items of interest. They were each given tasks - cartoons, recipes, drawings etc. Each child had to interview at least one person (and make arrangements for the interview) and each was responsible for collecting their share of advertisements and sponsorship. It was their little business. They would set deadlines, and the term ended with them editing each other's work and laying out the newspaper. Once printed, we'd have a collating session and an end of term tea. They would then deliver it to the selling points, make arrangements to collect the money as it came in, and they amazed us all by their capable and responsible ways. Journalists Gill and Clive took a special interest in their efforts and arranged visits to

proper newspaper houses, giving their own workshops on journalism to the kids. This provided much of our writing component and was a good way for getting the children to make arrangements, talk to people and be part of something that became a village feature! They ran "The Owl Advertiser" for about three years.

At one point, I decided that if I ever made a bumper-sticker it would say: "The worst thing about home schooling is that your mother does it!"

It was a real concern to me that in keeping my children at home, in a relatively isolated environment, they would get too much of me. My intention in teaching my children - my vision for their early education - was very clear. I wanted them to be creative above all. By this I mean able to think creatively and openly. To me, creativity is the secret, is the key. But to be creative in the true sense one needs to be free. To be free you need to be open, uncluttered, happy, secure, comfortable and at peace.

I was very sure that I wanted my children to be able to be themselves, to be able to realise their own individual potentials and to form their own opinions and feel safe to stand by their own principles.

By keeping my children at home I was able to make my basic principles their own, but I was very aware that by being their only teacher and their main influence, they would easily inherit my own prejudices, worries and limitations - these things children absorb as if by osmosis! Children cannot truly grow and be and learn if they are worried that mother is watching too closely, criticising or even praising too much. And so the village answered my concern with a barrage of teachers! My children had a group of teachers - for four and a half years who taught Latin, Afrikaans, art and recorder, singing, beautiful embroidery, horse riding, ballet.

And so, all in all, my basic belief really is that children belong to all of us. A school, or a child, ideally is a part of a community, as we all are. In a little village in the Sneeuberg, I found an ideal scenario for my children - people who loved the village children and who were pleased to share their talents with them. Those people are also all of us, and in home schooling I think, that is the challenge, and the ideal, to make the child part of the community too. To involve children with other people of all ages, from all walks of



life, with plenty to offer. To make children feel safe to interact with a community and realise that that empowers them.

The best thing that home schooling does is to involve children in real-life and teach them that way.

We started every day with Maths, English, Biology or Science or Geography. The children had their own places at a big table, their books were covered and they had all the school equipment that they would have had at school. Brainline helped me get on my feet and made me secure in the thought that if they ever needed to go back to school they would be at the same stage as their peers. However, I discovered the world of resources that exists! Beautiful books, fabulous ideas, masses of wonderful information and great textbooks. I used whatever inspired us. We turfed out the TV early on and reading exciting setworks in our classes inspired the kids to read all afternoon. We chose things that just appealed to us to examine closely. We did arts and crafts and cooked and sewed - but we always started on time, and worked till it was time to finish, and did the Maths and English and Science properly. We did not take days off (unless it snowed!) - and if we ever did, we made it up later. We always wrote tests and exams, and had end of year concerts, prize givings (for all 9 of them) and handed out reports. School was serious. Once a year the 9 kids gave a concert. We'd spend term four doing drama and play practice in our project and poetry slots. The village was then invited to our plays. We did the Wizard of Oz one year and Snow White another.

At the end of 2004 the last of the other home-schoolers went to school. I continued home-schooling for 2005. I'd always encouraged my kids to be honest with me and made them understand that it was important that they were happy in our arrangement too. By home schooling I had not intended

to remove them from society, keep them to myself, or teach them my ways only - it had simply seemed the easiest, most sensible and most enjoyable way of educating at that point.

By September 2005 they announced that they were lonely and wanted to go to school. Grace was in Grade 8 and the twins had managed to squeeze an extra year in somewhere in the 4 ½ and were doing Grade 7.

Teenagers are challenging in a home school, let me tell you, so our arrangement had progressed very naturally to the point where they simply needed much more. Home schooling should broaden children - and parents - and when it seems as though it threatens to stunt a child's (or parent's) growth, it is obviously not an option. Lonely or frustrated children cannot learn.

My kids went back to school (boarding school to boot) in January 2006. I think it was really scary for them, and it took a long time for them to really find their feet in a strange environment, but there they are! By the first exam, Gabriel was top of the standard academically, and they've managed fine. There are times, however, when I forget the efforts I made to instill independence and firm belief in their own opinions and I ask fiercely: "Do you think you're 24? Are you talking to me?" and then I remember that I made a determined effort to foster that and that sometimes a home schooled child does feel a little older - and yet, when he's in a school uniform it's easy to think he should be kept in his place! There's the challenge! Perhaps schools could take a few tips from a home school! But the bottom-line is, we're a community, and we all learn from each other - eventually.

I wouldn't trade my 4 ½ years for anything. It was worth a salary. And I'm so glad my kids had it.

Response by Normal school educator,

Louise Vorster



As both an educator and a mother who had so send children to boarding school, I would like to try and give you a balanced perspective on home-schooling vs. traditional schooling.

I firmly believe that the best place for any child is with his parents. Nothing can replace the security of a happy home in the upbringing of a child. However, many farmers are in the difficult situation where they simply cannot get their children to a school on a daily basis and boarding school is their only option.

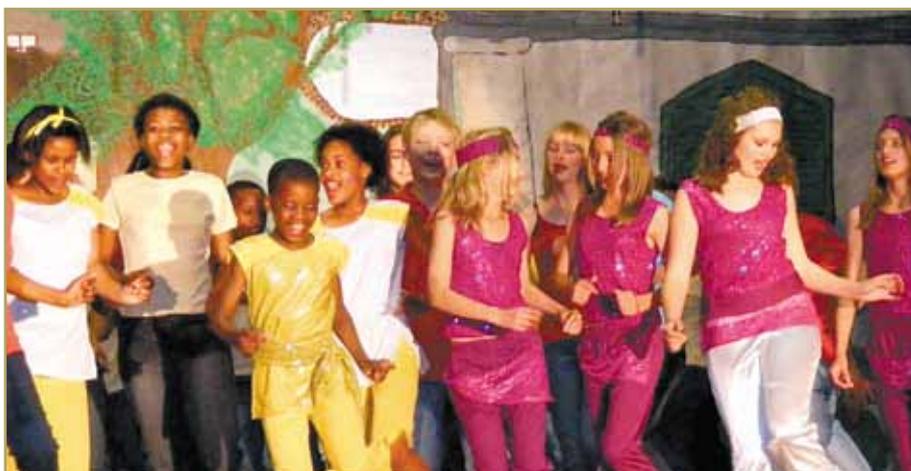
The boarding schools, of which I have some knowledge and experience, certainly provide for and look after the children in their care, in an exemplary way. They are well fed, homework is supervised, routines established and adhered to, and plenty of affection dealt out. Parents should not feel guilty if they choose boarding school over home-schooling.

There is, however, a side to boarding school on which one can't quite put a finger. It is a tough place. Children need to learn to stand up for themselves from an early age - (boys and girls) as boarding school is not for sissies. There is a pecking order amongst children; there always has been and always will be. A very sensitive child may struggle.

In the new rainbow nations of South Africa, all boarding schools are multi-cultural. By tradition, our cultures are different, and behavioural patterns differ amongst our different ethnic groups. As parents, we must be sure our children are equipped to deal with these differences and maintain their own identity, should we decide to send them to boarding school.

As an educator, I have seen and experienced Grade 1 farm boys arrive at boarding school with tears flowing, absolutely heart-broken at being sent away from home. Three or four years later, they are the happiest little fellows with a crowd of friends who are always busy playing touch rugby or mini-cricket games or whatever is flavour of the month. A child is very resilient and will adapt and cope with what is expected of him in 99% of cases.

There is, however, a very real place in our rural communities for home-schooling. But parents who decide to home-school





must realize that it is a full time job and commitment. Not all parents are able to make this commitment and shouldn't feel guilty if they can't, but must know that they shouldn't then opt to do it only half-way. It would be better to rather send a child to school.

The success of the Nel's home-schooling experience is due to a variety of factors. Jenny had taught (albeit only high school) and was aware of the level of commitment, the necessity for structure and the need for consistent routine. Most importantly, the Nel family made theirs not just a home-schooling project, but a community one. We should never underestimate the importance of social development in a child. This can only come about through regular contact with other children and is vital for the development and well-being of any child.

As an Educator, I have taught children who have been home-schooled for 5 or 6 years. Most of these children are academically fine and their parents have done a great job. The areas in which these children struggle are the social areas. Many find it difficult to follow instructions in a classroom situation. They haven't ever played a rugby, cricket or hockey match and felt the camaraderie of the "team." School children also develop a language of their own and words like "kiff, slick" or whatever the latest "in words" may be, are totally foreign to home-schoolers coming into a normal school. The

older the children are, the more difficult it is to catch up.

In conclusion, the choice is obviously entirely in the hands of the parents. If they are willing to make the necessary sacrifices and commitments to home-school, they can do so very successfully. I would however suggest if they do, that around Grade 5 or 6 would be the best time to go into normal schooling. Children are still young enough to develop social and sporting skills that might be lacking, and be fully integrated with their peers by the start of high school.



The Laws of Life

Law of the Workshop

Any tool, when dropped, will roll or slide to the least accessible location.

Law of Probability

The probability of being watched is directly proportional to the stupidity of your act.

Law of the Telephone

If you dial a wrong number, you never get a busy signal.

Law of the Alibi

If you tell the boss you were late for work because you had a flat tyre, the very next morning you will have a flat tyre.

Variation Law

If you change lines (or traffic lanes), the one you were in will start to move faster than the one you are in now (works every time).

Law of the Bath

When the body is fully immersed in water, the telephone rings.

Law of Close Encounters

The probability of meeting someone you know increases dramatically when you are with someone you don't want to be seen with.

Law of the Result

When you try to prove to someone that a machine won't work, it will.

Law of Mechanical Repair

After your hands become coated with grease, your nose will begin to itch or you'll have to wee.

Law of Biomechanics

The severity of the itch is inversely proportional to your ability to reach and scratch it.

Law of the Theater

At any event, the people whose seats are furthest from the aisle will arrive last.

Law of Coffee

As soon as you sit down to a cup of hot coffee, your boss will ask you to do something which will last until the coffee is cold.

Murphy's Law of Lockers

If there are only two people in a locker room, they will have adjacent lockers.

Law of Rugs/Carpets

The chances of an open-faced jelly sandwich landing face down on a floor covering are directly correlated to the newness and cost of the carpet/rug.

Law of Location

No matter where you go, there you are.

Law of Logical Argument

Anything is possible if you don't know what you are talking about.

Brown's Law

If the shoe fits, it's ugly.

Oliver's Law

A closed mouth gathers no feet.

Wilson's Law

As soon as you find a product that you really like, they will stop making it.

Doctors' Law

If you don't feel well, make an appointment to see a doctor, and by the time you get there you'll feel better. Don't make an appointment and you'll remain sick.