

The school on a sofa

By Sarah Harris, Sunday, 28 October 2007

¹ Picture a school with no walls. At this school there are no smelly changing-rooms, no lumpy gravy, no bullies, or *detentions* and you can turn up to lessons in your pyjamas and Snoopy slippers if you feel like it. It's called InterHigh – and it's the UK's first ever internet school, founded four years ago by former teachers Paul and Jacqui Daniell, in response to a growing demand for 'more choice'.

² Choice is a thorny issue this month, as the annual *furore* over secondary school places reaches fever pitch. Anxious parents wring their hands and wait to hear whether their precious *offspring* have been accepted into the institution of their choice. Ofsted reports inform us that more than half of England's secondary schools are not good enough. Frankly, it's hardly surprising that roughly 55,000 of British children are now being home schooled. In the light of this mood of disaffection with mainstream schooling, maybe virtual schooling is the perfect solution to education in the digital age?

³ Emily Price, 13, and her 15-year-old brother Ben are both pupils of InterHigh. They log on to school at 9.15 sharp every morning, each on their own laptops, and complete around two-and-a-half hours of lessons in virtual classrooms. Both

pupils are equipped with a headset so they can communicate with their teachers and fellow classmates – some of whom live as far away as Australia and Africa. There is also a whiteboard, Power-Point facility and 'follow me' browser, which every student can see from their screens. And, should they need to ask the teacher something, there is no reluctant hand-raising: they can simply fire off a question via the private instant-messaging service.

'the perfect solution to education in the digital age?'

⁴ Sceptics might consider virtual schooling a techie buzz-phrase for 'virtual *skiving*' – but according to Emily and Ben's mother, Angela, there is no question of slacking off in the Price household. There are no endless hours spent eating biscuits and watching Neighbours: the teenagers spend the afternoon completing homework projects and research, while Angela runs her business from another laptop elsewhere in the house, 'so it's a very busy wireless network'.

⁵ Angela and Ian Price admit they hardly fit the stereotype of the typical home educators. Ian was *adamantly* opposed to the idea when Angela suggested it and dismissed it as something for people who 'lived in a tepee, off brown bread and lentils and made their own clothes' – but technology is rapidly changing the face of home education, making it an increasingly viable alternative for parents whose children don't fit within the structure of a mainstream school.

⁶ The Prices decided to look into home schooling when Emily, who has mild learning difficulties, had problems adapting to the demands of her 3,000-strong local comprehensive. 'It was like watching her walk into a lion's den every day,' Angela recalls. 'Because of the class sizes, the teachers didn't have the time to commit to her. After the first term she was so *distraught* that she couldn't face going in anymore. Things were looking very, very bleak for her.' But working from home allows Emily to do things at her own pace. 'She can stop and start when she needs to, and as a result her learning has improved dramatically,' says Ian.

⁷ There's also the financial benefits. 'With Ben, we were paying thousands in school fees and all ➡

English in Mind Second edition

Level 5 Unit 3

Article

THE  INDEPENDENT

➡ he was doing was messing about. We decided he'd be better off at InterHigh and he works much harder now – his predicted grades have gone up to mostly A's.

⁸ According to a 2006 study by the Department for Education and Skills, the growing popularity of home schooling is due to factors including varying ability, dissatisfaction with the quality of education and bullying. As a result, education supplements are *arwash* with cutting-edge home-schooling methods, from 'flexi schooling' to home-schooling 'co-ops' and 'family schools' – all *endeavouring* to provide the perfect answer.

⁹ One of the more revolutionary methods is being explored by Dr Peter Twining, head of the Open University's Department of Education, who is examining the possibilities of virtual environments as an alternative to the traditional constraints of 'buildings, subjects, classrooms, 30 kids and a teacher'. According to Twining, a *chasm* has emerged between what is being taught in schools (science, IT, geography, etc.), and what pupils are experiencing in their daily lives (Facebook, music downloads, social networking). He believes using virtual environments could, 'create a system that meets the changing needs of 21st-century society'.

¹⁰ Twinings' latest research project, Schome, is an 'education system for the digital age'. It brings 150 students of varying ages, to a closed

island in the virtual world, Second Life, and allows them to build their own physical community, system of government and social structure with the help of a team of experts (or teachers). Instead of teaching and assessing students to pass exams in 'hard' subjects, such as maths and physics, Schome teaches skills such as leadership, collaboration and communication, by solving 'real' problems in their virtual world.

'It's better to try something new than be unhappy'

¹¹ But however technologically advanced we become, will it ever be possible to simulate the benefits of genuine social interaction? While InterHigh provides its students with a 'common room' and Facebook-style social network, there is still a real fear that we could be raising a generation of screen-addicts, with none of the social skills necessary for the world beyond the virtual classroom.

¹² Sarah Tough, education researcher at government think-tank the Institute for Public Policy Research, says that virtual learning could mean that students miss out on the development of non-cognitive skills, such as confidence, motivation and communication. 'They might come out with better

GCSE results,' she says, 'but have they got the social skills that are so important in the workplace?'

¹³ Professor Peter Kutnick, chair of psychology and education at King's College, agrees. 'If a child doesn't see the person they are interacting with,' he says, 'it could *foster* insecurity, making them less likely to ask questions and discuss new ideas. Going to school gives children more experience of a larger range of people from various social strata. They will learn about the essence of friendship and collaboration and therefore be provided with a better platform for working in the real world. Home schooling is unlikely to do that.'

¹⁴ It would be a mistake, suggest the experts, to assume the virtual world can mimic the richness of personal contact and the daily knocks of playground politics – but the internet has certainly opened up the education system to much-needed scrutiny. 'Technology has allowed us to raise the bar in terms of what we expect for our children's education and the choices we can consider,' says Jacqui Daniell, co-director of InterHigh.

¹⁵ Emily Price presents a compelling argument for the benefits of virtual schooling. 'It's better to try something new, than be unhappy,' she says. To paraphrase: perhaps it's better to open our minds to the possibilities offered by technology, than to stagnate within a system we may have outgrown.