

A place of learning

Denise Smith looks at an alternative to mainstream school in Canterbury

Parents who want their children home schooled but with extra specialist help have found a tailor-made solution thanks to a small but dynamic learning community in Canterbury.

Lernejo (pronounced "Ler-nay-oh") is the Esperanto word for 'a place of learning' and was formed in 2007 by four families to educate just five pupils as a realistic alternative to mainstream school. It began in parents' homes, but has now found a permanent base at the Prince of Wales Youth Centre in Military Road.

Lernejo is now run as an association and educates 15 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 16, operating from a classroom, plus a sports hall, meeting room and café.

Lernejo is essentially home tutoring with extra help. It is aimed at families who are unhappy with mainstream schools - sometimes because of issues such as bullying or under-achieving, or for children who

have been supported at home through their primary years but now need to engage more with their peers as they become teenagers.

It offers structured classes throughout the week, taught by professional tutors, with parents bringing in additional expertise - teaching, providing transport or organising fundraising - home education support does not receive public funding. Tuition costs £6.83 per hour, although Lernejo recently received grants for a drama project and a field trip to Scotland.

But is this form of teaching a real alternative? Founder member Meridy Harris says it is. She points out that the tutors at Lernejo are all experts in their fields. She says: "We provide academic subjects such as English, maths, science and business studies, but we also offer practical things like art and cookery. Teachers bring a personal passion and interest in their specialised subjects."

Tutors are certainly well


qualified. Science teacher Hellen Jeans has an honours degree in analytical chemistry and toxicology, Stephanie Albrecht, who teaches maths, has an honours degree and Lynn Revell splits her time between Lernejo and lecturing at Canterbury Christ Church University. Meridy has 40 years' experience teaching in secondary and higher education backed up by a BA (Hons), two Masters' degrees and a PhD.

Whilst the emphasis is not on taking tests, Lernejo is a registered exam centre with the AQA, Cambridge International, OCR and Edexcel, with students able to take GCSEs and A levels in a variety of subjects.

Classes are small with flexible age ranges and mixed ability. However, tuition is customised to each individual, with students selecting the courses of their choice.

Meridy says: "The community learning environment is best suited for self-directed, intrinsically motivated learners who actively participate in their education. Our students are a relaxed, friendly bunch. There is an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust and youngsters are encouraged to help and support each other."

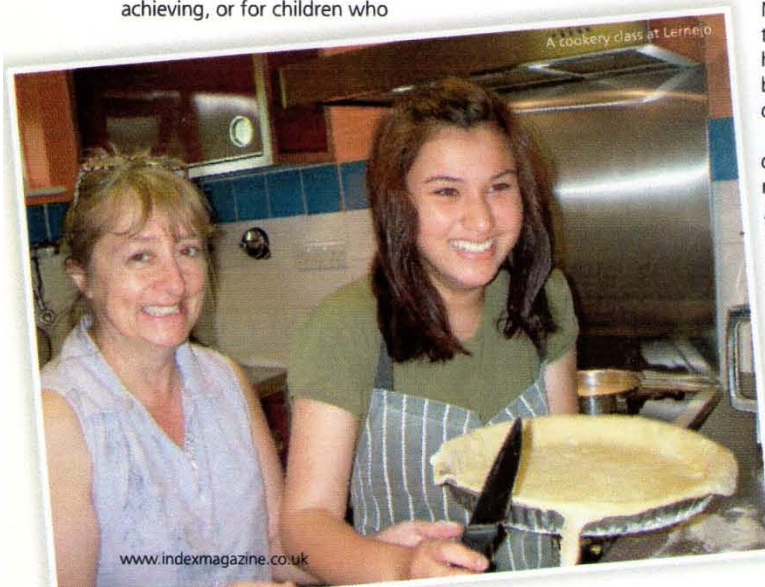
Parent Hannah Hedges Bowen agrees. She says: "Canterbury Lernejo has been a lifesaver for our family. Our son has found sincere friends, friendly tutors and an environment where he can really thrive and achieve without pressure."

Canterbury Lernejo is currently running at full capacity and will not have vacancies until September but there will be "taster days" in July and Meridy is keeping a waiting list of people who are interested. 



Some things the children like about Lernejo:

- Good mix of friends in different age groups
- Good communication between teachers and children
- I like the way in a play we each get a main part
- It's good because we get more done
- I love the teachers and it's fun
- The feeling of actually learning something
- The chilled approach
- Everyone is friendly - they accepted me straight away.
- I'm a lot more confident now



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