HEN Newsletter

winter 2021/2

The unschooling approach | My experience of home education | Creative writing activity | Routine, or lack thereof | Our day: Thoughts on homeschooling | Nature activity | Swedish cinnamon buns | Art activity | Cover competition

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Editor's message

I hope this issue brings a bit of mid-winter comfort to you and your family. If you enjoy the magazine, please continue to send us your contributions and suggestions at newsletterhen@gmail.com. We are always on the lookout for a review of a book, resource, podcast, etc. A tried-and-tested recommendation can be a real leg-up when getting to grips with a new topic or area we feel less familiar with as educators.

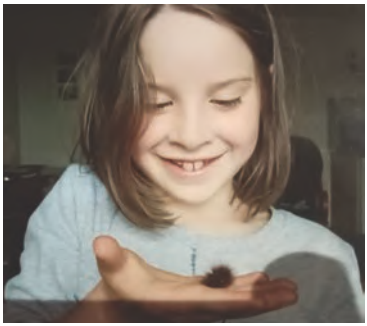
In the year ahead, we will continue with our usual articles including the 'Our Day' series and the arts, writing and science/nature activity ideas, so feel free to share what you get up to!

A huge thanks to Liz at The Little Red Pen for the time she spends on putting this magazine together and its beautiful graphics and design. Congratulations to the *Chicklit* team – Christine, Juliet and Donnacha Ring – for doing such a great job on their first two issues. They are looking forward to hearing more about how your flock are exploring and enjoying their free-range education in 2022: chicklit.hen@gmail.com.

I would like to thank all HEN volunteers (past and present) who manage to keep this organisation afloat. In the midst of raising a family, the gift of your time is a generous one, and valued by many. If you feel you could help the team, please drop one of them a line.

Finally, I wish each and every family a happy and healthy 2022. However diverse, we are all doing our best for our families in a challenging time in history. Let us strive to be a caring and tolerant community.

Gráinne



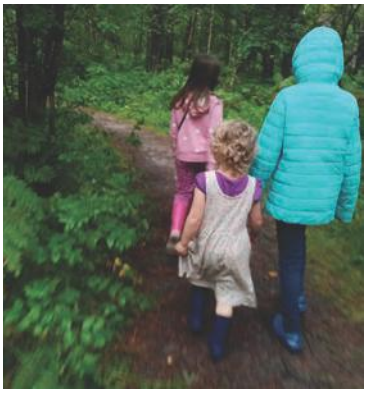
Exploring education: The unschooling approach

If we consider how children gained an education throughout our evolution, it would most likely be at odds with what became largely an institutionalised affair in relatively recent times. Before there were written words, everything humans learned was, of course, passed on by word of mouth, actions and images. While learning what was necessary for survival was no doubt top priority, I also imagine there were things beyond the absolutely necessary, activities that appealed to particular individuals, enriched their well-being and provided entertainment to our ancestors. Any acquisition of skills would surely have been motivated by the individual themselves to meet their own needs and to contribute to the community they belonged to and relied on for survival.

When trying to explain the concept of unschooling to interested listeners, I find myself using the example of how we do not 'teach' our babies to sit up, crawl or walk but act rather as facilitators to support this most natural and instinctive progression in our young. If we apply the same philosophy to education, it








is possible to see how, by providing the space, time and resources to enable our children to learn, it will unfold as a natural part of their development.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of being the facilitator of unschooling may be accepting the pace at which an individual learner acquires certain educational milestones. There can be massive faith and effort required to unlearn our own internalised ideas informed by the institutional and societal expectations we are more familiar with. However, if we investigate the theory of contemporary education in more depth, we can find many advocates of an alternative approach. For example, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that human beings are innately good and that children are naturally motivated to learn. In the late nineteenth century, reformer Francis Parker began to attack the use of grades and corporal punishment as motivators and argued for creating challenging, self-directed learning environments.

In the 1970s and 1980s, psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's research on motivation informed a theory identifying two main types. These can be described in simple terms as follows: extrinsic motivation, where we are motivated to perform an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment; and intrinsic motivation, where we are motivated to perform an activity for its own sake and personal rewards. In an unschooling approach, children are led by intrinsic motivation, which is acknowledged as the most effective and meaningful drive for learning.

Unschooling can encourage a cooperative approach to learning. Children can learn from one another, in groups and from their families. When there are no standardised testing or grades involved, a greater cooperation is fostered between learners. If we remove the time spent in an institution from a child's life, there are more opportunities for integration in the community, field trips, apprenticeships, parents, community resources such as the local library, festivals, etc. These can all form part of a real-life hands-on education that is not as heavily reliant on textbooks and passive learning experiences.

A major positive associated with unschooling is the possibility of a *truly* child-centred approach to learning in an open and unstructured environment, where children can be individuals and have the freedom to pursue their own interests in their own time. As in real life, learning will naturally be interdisciplinary, and the full facilitation of a child's development – including the emotional, artistic, social, vocational, physical and spiritual, and not just the intellectual aspects – are equally valued.

As an educator, it can sometimes be hard to validate an unschooling approach. How exactly do I document and monitor my nine-year-old's learning progress who can grow, harvest and cook her own food, demonstrate compassion to others and animals yet cannot write fluently, is enjoying the simplest early-reader-type books but has an expansive vocabulary and skillset beyond some adults? Perhaps here a journal or visual diary may serve as a testimony of what is going on behind the scenes of an ordinary extraordinary day in the life of an unschooled child.


‘It is nothing short of a miracle that
the modern methods of instruction
have not yet entirely strangled the
holy curiosity of inquiry.’
—Albert Einstein

Moving on from home education

Enya Quaid

Hi. My name is Enya Quaid. Many of you probably know of the Quaid family – or at least of my mother, Margaret Quaid. I am the seventh child out of eight children. Every single one of us was home educated for most of our childhood. I am nineteen years old now and have never been to primary or secondary school.

The first glimpse I had into the Irish education system was in 2018 when I decided to do my Junior Certificate as an external student. I studied and prepared for the subjects that I wanted to do. These were Maths, Irish, English, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Music. No Science to be found! I walked into the school, took the exams and walked straight back out again. I waited the few months it took for results to be published and was over the moon with what I achieved.

These results directed the path of my future. I clearly loved languages, and getting an A in the exams I sat was a real confidence-booster and pushed me to research careers and university courses involving languages. I knew that I definitely wanted to go to college. So that was where I started my research. I found a few language courses in DCU, Maynooth and Limerick. My heart was set on the DCU course Applied Languages and Translation Studies. My sister was doing that course at the time so she was able to give me all the inside information and her personal opinion (which was a positive one).

Now that I had found the university course I wanted to do, I started researching how to get into that course. I had zero interest in going into school for fifth and sixth year, and I wasn't too eager to sit exams all over again. So I headed down the FETAC Level 5 route. I found a course in European Studies and Languages in Pearse College, Crumlin, in Dublin. This would bring me straight into the DCU course, provided I got a distinction in five modules. It was the only FETAC course in Ireland that did European languages. So, although it took over two hours to get there by public transport, I decided that this would be the route for me. I applied, had an interview, was refused a place because of my age, sent another email saying how I was passionate about languages, etc., was reinterviewed and eventually accepted onto the course.

In October 2019, when I was sixteen, I started my FETAC Level 5 course. This new life was a huge change for me. It was my first taste of structured classes and another sample of the education system. My class was small, with only seven people, so I thankfully wasn't thrown straight into classes with thirty students. There was a mixture of people from all different backgrounds and ages, which was brilliant.

On top of this new experience was the inevitable change of lifestyle. My new daily routine involved waking up at 5 a.m. to catch the bus at 6 a.m. Most evenings I wouldn't get home until 8 p.m. It was not an easy routine and involved a lot of studying (or sleeping) on the bus. The winter days were definitely the hardest as it was usually dark when I left home and dark again when I returned. But I got used to it and really enjoyed the experience. Sadly, my trips to Crumlin were short-lived because after six months we came to an abrupt finish. Due to COVID-19, in-person classes were no longer an option. My classmates and I finished the course with online assessments and exams, but thankfully I got distinctions in all eight modules.

In September 2020, as CAO zero-round offers were being released, I was accepted onto the Applied Languages and Translation Studies course in DCU along with four other people from the FETAC course. These were the five places that were set aside especially for people coming from the FETAC route.

I started my four-year journey at DCU with online orientation, online classes and an enormous amount of Zoom meetings. Little did I know starting out that I wouldn't set foot on campus once during my first year at college.

So, in September 2021, I nervously started my second year of college. My first time on campus – my first time meeting lecturers and my first time meeting most of my classmates – was a very strange and surreal experience, but one which I enjoyed. Here I am, walking into my second year of university, having never been to primary or secondary school.

Instead of spending twelve years of my life in a classroom, I had freedom. I'm not saying school is a prison. It's not. School is the perfect choice for some people. But for me, I could never imagine myself there. At home I had the freedom to choose what to study, hence my delving into languages and barely touching a science book. I didn't need to study science, and what I did need to know had either been taught to me informally through life experiences or I had been curious enough to find out from what my sisters were learning.

Instead of spending these years socialising with classmates, I spent time with people of different ages and backgrounds. I helped out with elderly people at the care centre, little ones in primary school and, of course, spent time with my friends who I met through so many different ways other than school. I made friends from all over Ireland and all around the world, thanks to being able to travel while everyone was in school. Home education worked so well for me throughout my whole life.

A FETAC course was the perfect option for me as I could focus on my passion. And now here I am, with three years of college ahead of me, studying to become a translator of French and Spanish. To whoever is reading this, this is how home education worked out for me. It wasn't all a bed of roses as such, but looking back now, I was happy, and I am very proud of where it has brought me today.

Creative writing activity: Winter story starters

These prompts can be used by more experienced writers, or you can encourage your child to create a visual story using drawings, stickers or cut-out images. Once they are finished, they may like to dictate their story for you, or you could write it down alongside their illustrations.

- What are your favourite things about winter and why?
- 'If I could live anywhere in the world during wintertime, I would live in …'
- Write instructions for how to build a snowman for someone who has never seen snow before.
- 'When I look out of the window during winter, I see …'
- What would happen if it was winter all year long?
- 'If the power went out during winter, my family and I would …' (How would you stay warm? What would you do without TV and electronics? How and what would you cook?)
- What is your favourite memory of winter?
- 'If I were a snowman …' Write a story about your experiences being a snowman for a day.

Routine, or lack thereof

Catherine Monaghan

Generally speaking, we are not very 'routine' in our home. We like to go with the flow, and we need variety. We have a loose structure, but our average day depends on the weather, who's around, and what kind of mood we're in. If there are friends around, we may seize the opportunity to catch up. When we've had a few days at home, we'll be eager to get out and about. And after periods of hectic socialising, we're always in need of some downtime with books and dogs. Overall, we probably achieve a natural balance.

I used to wish I was the mother who could do the daily routine, making schedules and sticking to them, reliably ticking boxes every day for an entire term, semester, year. It could all be so neat and tangibly productive. Kind of Mary Poppins style, or, on closer inspection, perhaps more Stepford Wives.

I've tried. We have always, up until recent years, gone in and out of phases of routine – sporadic routine if you will, the type of routine where we would have particular work scheduled for particular days, and, yes, there would be boxes to be ticked.

We would start each term with such good intentions. Well, I would. The boy would be far too busy with books, building, drawing, creating and playing to even contemplate such silliness. (Wise boy.) I won't deny that it was satisfying crossing items off that to-do list, but I invariably over-scheduled so we would end up working very hard for a few weeks and then need a break during which we would read lots, play, create, go on excursions and generally have more fun – learning just as much in the process.

I don't necessarily regret the way we did things in those early years. We laid a great foundation, and we did have fun too. It's just that neither of us relished those scheduled days. If I could speak to my younger self, I'd tell her to chill a little. (I don't think I know a homeschooling parent who wouldn't advise their younger self to chill out.)

I love the planning. I love researching books, projects, curricula and talking with my homeschooling friends about this stuff. Usually I'm brimming with plans, ideas, hopes and dreams. There is so much that I want to pass on to my boy, so much I want to do with him and share with him. A productive schedule with lots of boxes to tick used to seem like the only way I could ensure that we'd get it all done. The thing is, I am doing it for him, and so I must do it in a way that is enjoyable, fulfilling and enriching for him. A way that works for him. And

that way is definitely not a rigid schedule that looks something like school. He's not a vessel to be filled with knowledge. He needs to be free to engage with places and people and information and ideas in his own way and at his own pace. That is the whole point of homeschooling.

And so, over time, we've developed our own way of doing things. A very flexible routine interspersed with our own little rituals. A few daily rituals that keep us grounded. A couple of weekly activities that give our week some structure. Monthly home-ed meetups that help us mark the passage of weeks. And annual traditions, both personal and cultural, that remind us to come together and take stock because the years are ticking on. Within and around this framework we are free to create, engage, listen, read, explore. We need both: the structure and the freedom. Like so much of life, it's about finding the balance.

My modus operandi has changed dramatically since those early years. Although I still love to research, and I must confess a weakness for buying books and resources, I tend to make looser plans and avoid schedules. At the beginning of the year, I look at where we are right now, and I work forward from there. I figure out what's coming next and find the books, resources and equipment we will need to keep moving forward. And then we do just that – we keep moving forward and learning.

We don't need to be at a certain point by the end of the month or term or year just because the boy is thirteen, or because he would be in first year of secondary school. The name or number given to his stage is arbitrary. We may be ahead in some areas, or we may be behind. It's not relevant to us. We are happy, and we are learning, and we'll continue to do so until he is ready to move on to the next phase. That may be when he's sixteen, or eighteen, or twenty.

Strict routines, ticked boxes and children all clean and in bed at the same time every night do not a perfect life make. Learning and play, reading, creating … these things don't always happen at times that are convenient or scheduled. There are days when we're tired or feeling a little fragile, when we need to cuddle on the sofa with a pile of books or a movie. Or when the weather is just perfect and the woods or the beach beckons.

I realised quite quickly that holding myself to someone else's standards or ideals was a bad idea. It's easy when homeschooling – or parenting in general – to look around and feel like everyone else is doing more and better. People may appear to have it all sorted on Facebook or Instagram, or even when you meet them out and about, but *nobody* actually does. We are human, and our children are human. We're messy and complicated creatures. We don't fit neatly into boxes. We cannot control each other.

It's great to have goals and plans, but it's important to be realistic and flexible. Find your own groove. Find what works for your family. It might take time and experience and plenty of trial and error, but by paying attention and keeping an open mind you'll get there.


The Magic of Reality
MATHEMATICAL MINDSETS
RICHARD DAWKINS
ILLUSTRATED BY DAVE MCKEAN
HOW WE KNOW WHAT'S REALLY TRUE
The Story of Science
A WORLD OF POETRY
Paragraph Town

Our day: Thoughts on unschooling

Jennifer Poussin

A recent day of ours involved going to the edge of the airport to watch planes land and take off. My sons explained how the control tower functioned. Back home, I helped my youngest obtain the brand-new evolution he wanted for one of his Pokémon. He watched *Camp Cretaceous* while his brother played his world-creating game and decided when to stop and skip the episodes he didn't like or change the show when he felt like it.

My eldest discovered how to create islands, grow them, destroy parts and rebuild them, dealing with numbers, letters and choices. They chose what to eat. They played outside with the neighbours in pullovers and coats. My eldest drew dinosaur footprints with chalk on the road in front of our house. *T. Rex* and *Argentinosaurus* footprints – small to enormous ones. He was so proud, pushing himself to try further, bigger. We went in when it got dark.

Over pizza for dinner, our conversations ranged from how rules differ in different countries – dinner times in this instance – as their dad was visiting family abroad. That Antarctica is bigger than the Arctic, that the Arctic's and Antarctica's ice is melting, and how it is an issue for polar bears and penguins. Water has air, but it is oxygen we can't access as we don't have gills.

It was a lovely day. I asked myself, is it enough? Am I doing enough? This has been my obsession in past weeks. Am I doing enough for the boys, for their education, for their development – moral, academic, mental, physical, social? Are we doing enough? This question has led me to question everything. I got wrapped up in it and the possible answers and solutions, to the point that, while talking of overwriting our lives, I often forgot the question.

While the autumn days were still long, we were sick, and when the school holidays started, we hid in the house. The cat was badly hurt, and I had to take her to the vet, again and again, for checks. It was shocking – I expect I have some form of PTSD from the three weeks that followed her injury. I injured my neck, and it is still not right. While our cat couldn't go out, we ended up doing the same. Aside from pre-scheduled fortnightly forest-school sessions and our drama classes, we didn't go anywhere.

I had plans. In the meantime, the number of hours of light per day reduced, combined with the hour change. The days were now shorter. It got colder. It rained. Plans to go to new places and places we hadn't been in a long time didn't get realised. I didn't get us to move, they didn't want to go.

Instead, we have spent hours playing Pokémon: Let's Go Pikachu, then Pokémon Diamond. I have discovered Pokémon. I have watched my sons challenge themselves, understand new things, evolve Pokémon and choose low-level ones to give themselves many level-up opportunities, play pretend afterwards, organise their Pokédex, their budget. It was amazing. I feel guilty, worried. Am I doing enough?

We have chats about geographical locations, imagining going to the Super Nintendo World theme park in Japan and how complex it is. We question why do we say this and that? We discuss how budgets work, or politics. Subjects spring up, and we reply as best we can, as truthfully as we can, some days more readily than other days. Is it enough?

My eldest son watches TV shows, sometimes obsessively. I see myself in this. The show holds all his attention for a couple of days or more, he finishes it, then moves on to something else. Trying to make him slow down only makes him stop from switching off or discussing it with me if something bothers him. Stubbornly, he will stop the show when I say that he should, for a little while, only to put it back on as soon as my back is turned. When I lift the pressure, he discusses what he sees, asks questions, explains what is happening, listens to my perception of what is going on. Other activities feature in his days,

like Pokémon, dinosaurs, or world-creation games on the tablet. He plays on the electric piano and makes up his own sounds. He helps in the house and helps his brother with his games. He talks of his fears. He loves forest school and asks questions, builds and participates. Once in the forest, he forgets about time, playing with his friends while the mums chat instead of going home once the session is over. He enjoys his drama classes and the games they play. He is focused. The group is small, and the teacher is amazing at including everyone. He will sometimes show his brother the games he learned in the days following the classes.

My youngest child prefers playing games to watching TV. If invited by the neighbours to play outside, he will almost always say yes, get ready and go out. He is beginning to form opinions about whom he prefers playing with depending on the games played or the children involved. He may fight with his brother or shelter him from our disapproval for behaviour towards his younger brother that we felt was unfair.

He wants to help in the house. He looks for our presence for board games, video games, chats and hugs. He makes up games with various materials in the house and shares his toys, his food. He decides on the characters he wants to have in his Pokémon team, considers the ones he wants to evolve and the moves he wants them to learn. He likes to use fruit to attract new Pokémon, experiences the success of winning a contest against a whole gym of five Pokémon. He has grasped the basic principle of budgeting: when you run out of cash, you can't buy new Poké Balls to catch new Pokémon; therefore, you need to work to earn more money to spend.

I have been making plans. To visit museums. To go to a concert they might like or might find too crowded and too long. To drive to a science museum and a space observatory. To go see raptors fly. To visit old cities, or maybe rent a mobile home near some mountains instead. Perhaps visit Paris on our way to see the family abroad. Part of me would like to do even more, to become world schoolers and take them to the Great Wall, to Japan, to Iceland, the Himalayas, the USA and Canada, Tanzania. If we found a way to do it, would they enjoy the flights and journeys? Or would they prefer a week of camping closer to home? How will their taste change as they grow?

I ask myself, what will make the best memories for them? The best moments together? The best education from us? What would help us grow more patient and accepting of each other and laugh more? What do we really want them to learn? What do they really need? Could I find a more constant middle ground between always home and out all the time? Or not make plans and allow them to focus on whatever interests them from day to day, allowing ourselves to switch gears as they grow?

Perhaps what we do is enough. I could stop overthinking, for now. They have friends in our street, at forest school and at drama. We can return to the places that they like because they are close by. They can stay home when it is cold and sit up late talking or playing cards at night, then rise later in the morning. I get to watch them learn from us, from each other, from everything they find.

Nature activity: Fat balls for the birds

Szymon and Emilia Szmanda

Makes 12–14

Ingredients

- 1 pack of lard
- 1 big handful of breadcrumbs
- a good handful of sunflower seeds, nuts, dried fruit, porridge oats

Equipment

- Saucepan
- Grinder or food processor
- Wooden spoon
- Fridge
- Small paper cupcake cases

Method

1. Slowly melt the lard in a saucepan.
2. Grind up all the other ingredients in a food processor.
3. Add to the melted lard and mix well.
4. Divide the mixture evenly into the paper cases and leave to cool.

Swedish cinnamon buns

Cliona Brophy

I've used this recipe over the years successfully but unfortunately don't remember where I got it. They are surprisingly easy to make, and as the recipe makes loads you can freeze them and then defrost in a microwave to eat when you want. They make great gifts for friends and neighbours if you can bear to part with any. The recipe makes about 40. Enjoy!

Ingredients

110 g butter
400 ml milk
2 × 7 g sachets yeast (2 tsp)
110 g sugar
½ tsp salt
750 g plain flour
½ tsp baking powder

Filling

110 g butter
90 g sugar
2 tbsp cinnamon

Topping (optional)

Sugar and 1 beaten egg

Method

1. Melt the butter, then add to the milk so the milk gets lukewarm.
2. Add the yeast, sugar and salt to the liquid and mix.
3. Transfer to a large mixing bowl. (A stand mixer is best.)
4. Add flour and baking powder, one cup at a time, while beating in the stand mixer. It looks like batter at first. Continue to add all the flour, cup by cup. The mixture begins to resemble bread dough and gets stiff towards the end.
5. Turn out and knead for 10 minutes.
6. Leave to rise for 45 minutes or until doubled in size.
7. When the dough is ready, turn on the oven at 220°C.
8. While it is heating, prepare the filling. Melt the butter, add the sugar and cinnamon and mix.
9. Turn out the dough and cut in half. Roll out the first half into a rectangle, about 30 × 20 cm in size and ½ cm thick.
10. Spread with half the filling and roll up from the long side.
11. Cut into 15–20 pieces, each about 2 cm thick, and place side-up in bun cases on a baking tray.
12. Coat with egg and sugar (if desired).
13. Repeat with the second half of the dough and mixture.
14. Cook for about 10–12 minutes until golden brown.

Art activity: Hand-painted jar lanterns

Materials

- Selection of clean glass jars
- Basin or sink and washing-up liquid
- Metal brush or scouring pad
- Glass paints
- Glitter (optional)
- Paintbrushes and pieces of sponge
- Newspaper
- Small amount of sand
- Tealight candles or battery-powered alternative

Steps

1. Soak jars overnight (or for a few hours) in a sink or basin of warm water and washing-up liquid.
2. Remove the labels using a metal brush or scouring pad if needed.
3. Dry the jars or allow to dry.
4. Apply the glass paints using brushes and sponges. Glitter will stick!
5. Allow to dry overnight.
6. Bake in the oven, following the directions on your make of glass paints.
7. Place some sand and a tealight in the jar.

Note: Remember to wash your brushes promptly so they do not dry out and harden. You could also use this technique to decorate your own mug or drinking glass.

Win a watercolour illustration inspired by your child!

A series of photographs will be selected as inspiration for the seasonal cover illustrations of the *HEN Magazine* in 2022/3. Winners will receive the original watercolour painting inspired by their image following publication.

Send in a good-quality colour photograph of your child enjoying their home education. Photographs must be sent by email to newsletterhen@gmail.com (as attachments) with the subject line: 'Cover Competition 2022/3'. Each entry must be accompanied with the following information: first name, surname and email address. You will receive a confirmation email of your entry being received.

Rules

Open to current HEN members only. Deadline for entries is 14 February 2022. Images submitted will not be published as photographs and will only be used for inspiration purposes by the artist. They will be deleted from the email account following the selection process. You may enter a maximum of four photographs (in colour). Hard copies cannot be accepted. By submitting images, entrants are giving permission as guardians of the minors or events/properties photographed (for GDPR compliance). By submitting images, the entrant grants *HEN Magazine*/the artist the licence to use/edit/publish/broadcast the resulting illustration in any marketing or other promotional activity including press and other publicity purposes.

The artist will choose the winning entries. The decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into. The artist will use the image as inspiration and is not obliged to produce an exact reproduction of the submitted image. The illustrations are copyright of the artist.

All winning entries will be notified. Prizes (watercolour illustration) will be made available following publication only. Any entry/winner in breach of the rules will be withdrawn.

HEN Committee

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Home Education Network

www.henireland.org