

What Might Chess Teach Us About Learning?



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Positional Problems



- What do chess and education have in common?
- Both are insecure.
 - Educational Research is extremely difficult.
 - ‘More difficult than finding a cure for cancer’ - BERA
 - Teachers lack ‘warrant’.
 - Chess does not have a proper stake in society.
 - Great game, but not classified as a sport, nor an academic subject, nor an art form.

Conference Vibes



- ‘Evangelical Fervour’ – Janet Schucksmith
- Inspiring Anecdotal Evidence – Fritz Gaspard
- Personal Experience– Susan Polgar
- Paucity of *Persuasive* Data – Fernand Gobet

How We Might Sound To Others...



- Are we in danger of becoming a ‘NABI’?
 - Not Another Bloody Initiative!
- Other ways of saving the world...
 - Sport, Civic Pride, Outdoor Education, Teaching of Thinking, Go, Scrabble, Yoga, Charity Work, Meditation etc.
- **What’s so special about Chess?**
 - The persistent question we need to answer for ourselves before we can convince others.

What Do We Want?



- A Chess ‘Virus’
 - A chessboard in every living room?
- Social Justice
 - Use chess to Increase social and intellectual capital?
- Cognitive Acceleration
 - Use chess to improve thinking skills?
- Educational Recognition
 - Chess *on* the curriculum or *in* the curriculum?
 - ‘add on’ or ‘infusion’?

Why Chess?



- **Universal**
 - (Better than Esperanto!)
- **Inclusive**
 - All ages, colours and genders; affordable, egalitarian
- **Meritocratic**
 - No luck, no excuses
- **Weather-independent**
 - Important in Scotland!
- **Ideal for Internet Age**
 - ‘Fits’ climate of globalised technology
- **Unique Symbol System**
 - Chess notation, chess ‘literature’

Yes... But Why Chess?



- It is not enough to highlight chess's positive attributes.
 - We also need to promote the game's *unique* combination of attributes and show why they are educationally important.
- 'In chess, one realises that all education is ultimately self-education'
 - Gerald Abrahams, 1958
- Why self-education?

Meaning-Making



- “Meanings cannot be dispensed. They cannot be given or handed out to children. *Meanings must be acquired; they are capta, not data.* We have to learn how to establish the conditions and opportunities that will enable children, with their natural curiosity and appetite for meaning, *to seize upon the appropriate clues and make sense of things for themselves...* Something must be done to enable children to acquire meaning for themselves. They will not acquire such meaning merely by learning the contents of adult knowledge. They must be taught to think and, in particular, to think for themselves. *Thinking is the skill par excellence that enables us to acquire meanings.*” (Lipman et al, 1980, my italics.)

So Why Chess *In Particular*?



- **Making meaning through consequential decisions**
 - “The child how has gained proficiency in thinking skills is not merely a child who has grown, but a child whose very capacity for growth has increased.” (Lipman 1980)
- Competitive decisions in a benign context
 - Deciding literally means ‘to cut off, or away’
 - Soviet support for chess based on the belief that chess strengthens *the will*.
- Properly understood, competition is cooperative.
 - Competition literally means ‘to seek with or together’
 - ‘Win with Grace, Lose with Dignity’ - Susan Polgar

Strategic Considerations

(Or, if it's such a great idea why isn't it happening already?)



- What are the rules of the policy game?
 - Chess may be diminished by the prevailing educational frames
 - ‘Targets, Skills, Standards’.
- Challenges
 - Need for impressive evidence and/or political connections
 - The impact might be delayed (‘sleeper effect’)
 - Crowded Timetables; over-stretched Teachers.
- Even if we succeed there are dangers:
 - ‘Coverage’ - Howard Gardner
 - ‘The Token Investment Strategy’ - David Perkins

Building Ammunition



- Who are our allies?
 - Participants and Witnesses.
 - Children, Parents, Teachers
 - Educationalists who place a premium on personal development rather than merely improving results.
- Chess's role in education needs to be explained in a supportive educational language
 - Building Learning Power (Claxton)
 - Meaning-Making (Lipman)
 - Dispositions (Perkins, Ritchart)

Chess is not just in the mind...



Concentration (experience)

Crowd (social)

Water (body)

Internet (technology)

Character and Dispositions



- *What transfers?*
 - ‘Skills’ are necessary but not sufficient.
 - They rarely transfer and quickly become obsolete.
- **Chess makes the greatest impact at the most general level.**
 - Attitudes, Habits of Mind, Inclinations, Character, Dispositions
 - Becoming more resilient, resourceful, experimental, curious etc.
 - Chess teaches us that thinking can be pleasant and productive.
 - This general level is arguably the most important.
- **Dispositions?**
 - ‘The Soul of Intelligence’-Perkins
 - A word to capture this complex level where chess makes most impact
 - Don’t like the word ‘disposition’?
 - ‘Character’ might be a reasonable substitute.

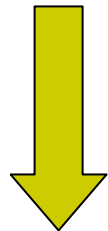
Levels of Engagement:

When is the educational value greatest?



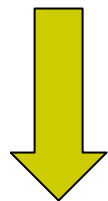
- **Activity**

- Can play. Knows the rules. Familiar with experience.



- **Ability**

- Grasp of basics. Happy to play when opportunity arises.



- **Proclivity**

- Cares about playing well. Seeks to play in local community.

- **Generativity**

- Enjoys learning to play better, familiar with chess notation, seeks challenges away from home community.

- **Vital Engagement (Csikszentmihalyi)**

- Deepening appreciation, part of ‘identity project’, desire to know more about whole game.

Personal Experience



- **Activity(5-7)**

- Learned moves, played with family

- **Ability(8-10)**

- Chess Club, Primary School
- Inter-school competitions, Annual Beach Ballroom Event



- **Educational value of chess really kicked in around 11**

- Self-directed learning

- **Proclivity(11-12)**

- You mean there are books about chess?
- You mean I can go twice a week to a place where everybody is playing chess?
 - Providence: You mean I won an award giving me £250 of chess books?



- **Generativity(12-14)**

- Russell Family, Aberdeen Grammar School, trips to Central Belt.

- **Vital Engagement (14 onwards)**

- Rating system, trips abroad,
- The importance of trainers, mentors and organisers:

Summary



- Keep on asking yourself: Why chess?
 - My current answer: Making Meaning through consequential decisions.
- Chess probably makes the greatest educational impact at the level that is most difficult to measure!
 - Dispositions, character, habits of mind etc
- Chess is not just ‘a mind thing’
 - We need a much more holistic approach, emphasising the emotional, cultural, social and technological aspects of the game.
- We need to be Tenacious!
 - Despite the anecdotal evidence, making the case for chess in schools and communities is not easy, but is definitely worthwhile.

Thank you!



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