ECU Education Commission

Survey on Chess in Schools 2015/16

INITIAL FINDINGS

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http://www.europechess.org/commissions/educational-commission/
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1. Introduction to the Survey

The Education Commission of the European Chess Union (ECU) was established in 2014. Our role is to develop and promote chess as part of children's education. We seek to make a strong and successful programme in each member country by sharing knowledge and resources and encouraging international cooperation. We contribute to public discussion and lobby for chess.

We must support our arguments with evidence. Ultimately, we seek to obtain quantitative data on the number of schools offering chess and the number of children learning chess in each country. This will enable us to measure progress and report developments to the federations and educational funding bodies.

We decided to conduct a survey of the 54 member federations from summer 2015. The purpose is to gather information about the situation in each country. Basic information about the federations was also gathered to provide some context. This is the first time that the ECU has conducted a survey (FIDE conducted a survey previously) and we have learned a great deal from the process.

In what follows, we shall use “CiS” to refer to the “Chess in Schools” movement. We found that chess is widely regarded as important for children’s education, particularly in primary school (up to the age of 11). CiS is being implemented in every ECU country.

We have received 33 completed questionnaires with 21 still to come i.e we have 61% of the total. We are grateful to the national chess federations and the CiS organisations which made the effort to respond. Some important countries are missing but we hope to obtain them all eventually.

CiS is largely a grass roots movement with initiatives often led by enterprising individuals. The federations may not be aware of some CiS projects within their own territories. Some CiS projects were established on a private commercial basis and may be unknown to the federations. We aim to capture the main projects but there will inevitably be some gaps within each country.
2. Two CiS Models

There are two approaches to teaching chess in schools which may be denoted as Formal Instruction and Informal Supervision. Formal Instruction involves an expert teaching children how to play chess and the associated mental skills of logical reasoning. Informal Supervision typically school teachers encouraging the children to develop thinking skills by engaging in play and introducing them to a set of chess-related games and puzzles. The two different approaches are summarised in the table.

Both approaches have demonstrated a positive impact upon the educational achievement of children. Both approaches may be used in the same CiS project e.g. the children with greater chess talent may be given formal instruction whereas the other children may receive informal supervision. It is necessary to clarify which model of chess is being used in order to compare projects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MODEL</th>
<th>FORMAL INSTRUCTION</th>
<th>INFORMAL SUPERVISION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Led by</td>
<td>Chess experts</td>
<td>Class teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIDE name</td>
<td>Education for Chess</td>
<td>Chess for Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Developing expertise</td>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examinable</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Formal chess</td>
<td>Deconstructed chess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chess variants</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Welcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
<td>Optional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use clocks</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Strong chess players</td>
<td>General problem solvers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Education v Competition

There is an ongoing debate about the value of chess for children. The traditional view of federations was that chess is about competition and its educational benefits emerge automatically without any special pedagogical intervention. This view is found amongst some chess experts who are keen to produce strong players. The modern educational view is that chess presents a problem-solving environment in which children can play and learn for themselves.

For a project to be conform to the CiS concept, it must have an explicit educational purpose with specific didactic methods. Many competitions are organised for schools and they are very popular. However the educational, as opposed to the sporting nature, of these events is often unclear. The educational benefits, if any, may only apply to a few children.

Informal supervision uses chess as an educational intervention to suit the specific requirements of children. Chess is used to improve social behaviour as well as cognitive skills. This model is more recent in origin. Educators who want to bring the benefits of chess to all children favour the informal approach.

Formal instruction was developed in Russia which still treats chess as an academic discipline. This model emphasises chess as a game involving concentration, memory and mental calculation. The benefits of chess are said to arise from the mental discipline required to play well. It tends to be favoured in countries with a strong chess playing tradition. In these countries, chess federations typically take the lead in CiS projects and officials are familiar with the formal teaching approach.

Formal Instruction typically requires children to play competitive chess outside the classroom. Competition is regarded as a test and a motivator. Children who develop their chess skills under Informal Supervision are not obliged to play competitively. Winning a game is not regarded as the most important determinant of how a child has been learning. There is also evidence that losing demotivates children and they may abandon chess prematurely.
4. Chess Federations

There is a widespread commitment across the European Chess Union to integrate chess into the educational experience of children particularly in primary schools. Federations are trying to catch up with the growing level of demand. As an indication of the potential, 2.5 million children are learning chess in Turkey which does not have such a long chess tradition.

Some federations have taken a leading role whereas others have allowed specialised CiS organisations to develop. There may be several providers of CiS programmes in each country, some of which may be private organisations. The federations cannot favour one programme over another without conflicts of interest arising. It is not uncommon for the relationships between the federations and the CiS organisations to become fractious. One reason for this is the economic importance of school chess. CiS projects have much higher budgets: it is not unusual for the CiS budget to be many times greater than that of its federation.

The balance of power is shifting from chess as a sport to chess as part of education. Some federations see chess through the prism of competition and have failed to grasp the significance of chess as a school subject. Some federations have continued to apply chess training standards which are inappropriate for schools. Funds intended for CiS may be diverted to conventional chess.

Although federations often provide financial support to Junior competition teams, they cannot afford to extend this to school chess without additional sources of funding. Furthermore, decision making in the federations is conservative because they do not have a suitable structure and their management expertise is lacking. Each federation has its own way to organise chess: it can be organised by region or clubs or players. As a result, in some countries the number of clubs is unknown, in other countries the number of players is unknown. In most countries, the number of children playing chess in school is not captured by any system and estimates are very imprecise.
5. School Chess Instructors

The growth of Chess in Schools requires many more classroom teachers to be able to teach chess. For this purpose it is necessary to deconstruct the game to make it more accessible to teachers thereby to children. Although winning is the purpose of a chess game, this does not imply that the learning environment should be competitive. Most teachers are not convinced of the need for competition. Many children resist the competitive aspects preferring instead to engage in pure play and like smaller scale games (mini-games) and problem-solving exercises. Losing a game can be a trigger to abandon the game.

Chess does not form part of the teacher training requirements in the education of teachers. Most countries provide some teacher training for teachers who are already working in schools. The level and duration varies widely.

Many federations have identified teacher training as the area in which they require most assistance. The most frequently mentioned requirement is for a curriculum for teacher training. Several federations are interested in developing a European standard.

School chess instructor training ensures that a basic level of knowledge and skills has been achieved but it does not confer any teaching rights. Chess instructors typically give chess lessons outside the official timetable i.e. chess in the morning, lunchtime or afterschool. Where chess is taught during the school day, then the instructor is regarded as a classroom assistant and the teacher is still in charge. If chess lessons are a mandatory part of the school curriculum, then the educational authorities and the teaching unions will insist that the instructor should also be a qualified teacher. In some countries, there is a requirement for a police record check for a school chess instructor.
6. Junior Clubs

Once their chess lessons at school have finished, there is no clear path forward for many children who want to continue playing chess. There is a limit to what can be achieved in school lessons - talented children need to be stretched beyond what their school can provide. Many children and their parents regard adult chess clubs as unfriendly with their strict rules e.g silence. Federations admit that chess clubs are facing a crisis: members are getting older and membership levels are dropping. It is necessary to encourage and recruit young people. Junior chess clubs could provide a safe and comfortable environment for children to develop their chess skills separately from adult clubs and school clubs. Only a few countries have junior chess clubs which could become a useful extension of any CiS Programme.
7. Conclusions so far

This report is intended to stimulate debate on chess in schools. It is not possible to draw general conclusions from the survey at this stage except that each country is different. Fortunately, we have enough information to prepare a profile of CiS within the ECU. We decided that the data should be presented in map form to show the patterns of activity in a convenient way. The remaining pages of this report show the status of countries regarding the major CiS issues.

We hope that some federations will revise and update their questionnaires having seen that the data will be used to inform policy decision-making. We also hope that those federations that have not yet replied will be spurred into activity. We need to get good explanations about what is happening in each federation to form a complete and accurate picture. Note that the data shown is from the survey only and may differ from other sources which should give rise to further debate.

In our next report, we will build upon the foundations created by this survey to describe the operation of chess in schools.

Summary of comments from the federations:

1. Chess must be regarded as a modern pedagogical tool on the national and international level.

2. Continued research on the impact of chess on academic performance is vital, not the least to support Conclusion 1.

3. A professional centralised organisation is needed to develop, support and promote CiS in Europe/ECU.

4. Every country is struggling to raise money to expand chess in schools and train teachers.

5. An accreditation system for teaching chess in schools is essential to professionalise CiS.

6. A regular publication on chess pedagogics would be welcome to CiS practitioners.

7. An online platform for schools to play each other would encourage more children to play.
8. Chess in Schools Activity

The number of children learning chess at school is expanding rapidly. Almost every ECU member has a “Chess in Schools” programme. The exceptions are some countries with a small population – Finland, Latvia, and the Celtic countries. We are informed that these countries are interested in introducing a programme.

The CiS programmes vary in how they are managed and financed. An important distinction is between those countries in which the federation takes the lead and those countries in which the CiS programme is run by a separate organisation. In several countries, there are also private CiS providers which are typically small and localised. Due to the difficulty in obtaining data, these projects have not been included in the analysis unless they are part of a structured national programme.

CiS requires conventional school teaching skills embracing all children in the class and not just the talented minority. Federations are aware that they cannot rely upon training structures designed for producing competitive junior players. It has been necessary to develop new teaching materials.
9. Public Funding for CiS

The public funding of chess in schools is now common across the ECU countries. Public funding indicates that society places value on the contribution made by chess to education. Public funding was long established in Russia and East Europe, much less so in the West. The increasing awareness of the educational benefits of chess has led to funding becoming available from new sources.

Public funding refers to the direct receipt of funds from central or local government to the federation or CiS organisation. For these purposes, funding from schools or parents, charities or trusts, is not included.

Some of the smaller federations, Moldova and Slovakia, have received funding from FIDE. Italy receives funding from their Olympic Committee and Israel from the Sport Ministry and the Lottery fund.

Public funding can look very different from country to country. It can be provided as a fixed budget or it can be connected to the quantity of clubs, members or activities. It is clear that federations must become better at understanding and pursuing the possibilities for public funding.
10. National Chess Curriculum

Most countries have a recommended chess curriculum suitable for their schools. Usually the school or the teacher has discretion to choose the material. Chess is mandatory in Armenia but is an optional subject in several other countries e.g Hungary.

The most influential curriculum is from Russia which has been adopted in several countries particularly in Eastern Europe. Russia’s curriculum is rigorous and stretches several years. Countries vary in how far the curriculum stretches e.g. three years (Slovakia), two years (Romania), one year (England).

In Western European countries there is less consensus on a recommended curriculum. Pedagogical research is being undertaken to make chess more accessible so that schoolteachers, rather than chess experts, can teach chess comfortably. There is also an effort to produce better integration of chess with other subjects e.g. mathematics.
11. Federation involvement

In most countries, federations take control of the CiS programmes. The centralised control of chess has historical foundations in Russia and the Eastern European states. The authorities who provide public funding insist that there is strong financial control. Therefore, federations in receipt of public funding have been given the responsibility of organising CiS programmes. Federations cannot afford CiS projects without public funding.

Federations usually do not have the educational expertise required to integrate chess into schools. Hence federations will often work alongside other organisations delivering the CiS programmes.
12. Junior Training Squad

All federations devote energy and resources to junior training. Junior events are encouraging for the children and produce a new generation of club players. Federations may organise training camps and practice events with analysis by titled players. Chess coaches will often accompany squads to international competitions and help them to prepare. This level of support is expensive.

Federations in Western Europe seek parental contributions and will try and supplement this with sponsorship income. In Russia and Eastern Europe, the state is more willing to cover the costs of training juniors. One reason for this is that many parents cannot afford to cover the costs of sending their children to play abroad.

Italy, exceptionally for a western European country, funds its junior training squad because of support from its Olympic Committee.
13. Chess as a Sport

Most ECU countries treat chess as an official sport, the notable exceptions being Scandinavia, the British Isles and Belgium. Their national Olympic Committees in Austria, Greece, Israel and Latvia do not recognise chess even if it an official sport. Note that the European Sports Charter defines sport as a physical activity.

Funding often follows sports status e.g. in Italy, there is funding for chess from their Olympic Committee. In Israel, chess receives funding from the Sport Ministry even thought it is not officially a sport. However, being officially classified as a sport this does not guarantee official funding or support e.g. in France, chess is officially regarded as a sport but does not receive funding from sports sources and in Germany, the federal government withdrew funding from chess although chess is still supported by regional government.

Classifying chess as a sport may also confer a status that can make it more accessible to children e.g. chess may be available as an option during the sports periods at school.