



Chess for Schools

From simple strategy games
to clubs and competitions

Richard James

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Introduction

I wonder what comes to mind when you hear the word ‘chess’. Maybe you learnt the moves when you were younger, as many children do. Do you see it as a slow, boring game? Watching a game of chess is often compared to watching paint dry. Or perhaps you’ve heard about Bobby Fischer and think all chess players are eccentric or difficult, if not crazy.

On the other hand, you may well have read articles claiming that ‘chess makes kids smarter’, that playing chess improves children’s maths and reading scores, their problem-solving abilities, their concentration, their creativity, their critical thinking. Perhaps that’s why you’re reading this book now. You might also be aware, through reading articles about prodigies and champions, that many children worldwide, often very young children, participate in competitions.

Individual stories may only tell single tales, but they also have tremendous power. In this book I’ll tell you the story of how chess transformed my life. You’ll find out later how chess can transform the lives of children in your school, and, in the epilogue, how it has transformed other lives as well as mine.

I decided to devote much of my life to helping children through chess and was fortunate enough to spend 30 years running the strongest children’s chess club in the UK. But once I started working in primary schools, I soon realised that what was happening there wouldn’t have helped a boy like me. I spent a quarter of a century investigating what schools were doing with chess, researching alternative approaches and questioning how, why, where, when and by whom chess should be taught. I eventually came up with a radically different, holistic approach to chess in schools that was designed to benefit all children. What’s more, it’s (virtually) free, doesn’t require valuable curriculum time and doesn’t need professional chess tutors like myself.

I’ll start off by telling you something about this wonderful game. Perhaps you’ve never learnt the moves yourself but, inspired by

watching *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix, you'd like to learn – and teach your pupils.¹ You may know the rules of chess already. Or you may think you know the rules but are unsure or unaware of, for example, the *en passant* rule. If you want to make good decisions about chess in your school, you might want to familiarise yourself with the rules, or refresh your memory. While you're doing so, ask yourself at what age you think the children in your school would be able to understand the concepts of checkmate and stalemate, and therefore be able to play a complete game.

At various points in the book, I make reference to ratings – relative indications of players' strengths. In the appendices, I provide an explanation to help you understand what I'm talking about, as well as definitions of some of the terms I use to describe different types of chess. You may be surprised to learn that chess is by no means the only game you can play with a chess set.

You may want to run competitive chess within your school, or encourage children who excel at the game to play competitively outside school. Appendix 3 explains briefly what competitive chess is all about.

Chapter 1 provides background information about what chess is and what it isn't. It also describes a little of the game's history and the history of children within chess, in order to contextualise what's happened in school chess since the 1990s.

Chapter 2 follows my journey into the world of education, looking at what currently happens in schools: the popular after-school clubs as well as the idea – promoted by local, national and international chess organisations – of putting chess on the curriculum. Are these effective in terms of generating in children a long-term interest? Are the claims made for the benefits of chess in enhancing children's cognitive abilities justified?

As I spent more than a decade on the staff of a new school, I started reading about child development, education, parenting and much else. I came to realise that there were many more ways in which schools could make use of chess. Chapter 3, the heart of the book,

1 *The Queen's Gambit*, dir. Scott Frank [Limited series] (Netflix, 2020).

looks at different ways in which primary schools can use the elements which constitute the game of chess. Games, puzzles and other activities using subsets of chess can be utilised in many ways for many purposes, providing social as well as educational benefits for many children. As such activities can be learnt in a few minutes, they are accessible for all schools and teachers.

There will be children in any school who will gain particular benefit from chess: most notably children with a wide variety of special needs. How can you use chess to help these children? In my opinion, because of its complexity, playing a full game of chess is, by and large, more suited to older than younger children, so I explain how secondary schools can encourage children to continue playing the game or take it up for the first time. Given the wealth of resources available online, this needn't cost you anything at all: all you have to do is get the message across.

The chapter also contains a lot of advice on the different ways in which you could run school chess clubs and provide opportunities for competitive play, either within or outside your school community. Finally, I provide you with my complete (at the time of writing) minichess activities pack: games and puzzles suitable for use within primary schools.

Chapter 4 offers a wide range of further resources: organisations, links to websites, books and films – any or all of which might inspire you to take the wonderful game of chess further and help your children discover this exciting and engrossing pastime.

Chess transformed my life, and there will be children everywhere whose lives will be transformed by discovering the excitement and beauty of the game. Just saying 'let's do chess' and starting a club really won't work. Chess in schools will only be effective with a more proactive approach, and I hope that reading this book will convince you that it's both cheap and easy to offer children a lifetime of pleasure and intellectual stimulation. As Dr Siegbert Tarrasch, one of the greatest players of the late 19th century, wrote: 'I always have

a slight feeling of pity for [anyone] who has no knowledge of chess ...
Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make [people] happy'.²

² Siebert Tarrasch, *The Game of Chess* (New York: Dover Publications, 1988).

Setting the Scene

Starting out in chess

I was born in July 1950 and grew up in south-west London. Although I was brought up in a middle-class family, my parents both had working-class origins. My father started his working life as a painter and decorator, served in the Royal Artillery during the Second World War and later qualified as a teacher of arts and crafts.

At the age of 5 I went to the local Church of England primary school. It was immediately obvious that I wasn't like my school-mates. I'd already learnt to read from bus adverts and road signs (my mother always said I taught myself) but struggled socially, having difficulties connecting and communicating with other children. I also had serious problems with physical activities that involved both gross and fine motor skills, balance and coordination. Today, children like me would be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), but in the 1950s these things were not yet understood. The only diagnosis I received was of a speech disorder, and for a time a speech therapist visited my house to provide help and support. As it was, I spent my childhood being physically and emotionally abused by my father (a good man with one fault – a short temper – who did what was thought to be right at the time) and bullied at school for being unable to do things that others took for granted.

I did well academically and won a free place at Latymer Upper, one of London's top academic schools. At first I showed an aptitude for learning languages, as a result of which I took my public examinations a year early. But then I hit problems: it became clear that I had what you might consider a higher-level learning

disability which would probably best be defined today as a form of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Although I read a lot and remembered most of what I read, any sort of serious study would make my brain freeze. I only achieved low grades in my O and A levels and ended up studying computing at what was then a college of technology. Although I just about completed my degree, I had no idea how – or even if – I was going to get a job due to my poor interview skills. As it happened, I was lucky enough to get the first job I applied for and stayed in the same job until chess took over my life, but that's a story for another time.

While academia may have been a struggle, I fortunately had a parallel life in chess where I was accepted for what I was and encouraged to take part in matches and tournaments. For Christmas in 1960, Santa brought me a pocket chess set. My father knew the moves but nothing else: once I could beat him, he wouldn't play me anymore. My mother never learnt nor had any interest in doing so. On my first day at Latymer the following September, my parents advised me to take my pocket set with me as a communication tool. If I stood there holding it, another boy would challenge me to a game. They were right as well: I soon found an opponent; however, the first game I played, he captured all my pieces and mated me with two rooks. I also played on the train to and from school, and when my parents saw that I was becoming seriously interested they bought me a book so that I could teach myself to play properly. Within a few years I was able to beat everyone in my form at school, so I was taken along to Richmond & Twickenham Chess Club: I'm still a member now.

I never felt I belonged in the real world, but in the world of chess I was able to make friends with whom I had much in common. I never wanted to be a grandmaster but was more than content to be what I was: a reasonably proficient club player (I've played at about 2000 strength since the mid-1970s). By the time I finished my studies, I knew that chess was going to be my life.

It was now the summer of 1972, the time of the World Championship match between the Soviet champion Boris Spassky and his controversial American opponent Bobby Fischer. Chess was on the front page of all the papers and suddenly everyone wanted

their children, or at least their sons, to learn. Several of my parents' friends asked if I could teach their children to play. After the bullying I'd suffered at school I vowed never to have anything to do with children again, but I'd also learnt that it was better to avoid trouble by saying yes rather than no. So, reluctantly, I became a chess teacher.

Much to my surprise, I enjoyed teaching and my pupils made, in some cases, considerable progress. When I was a child, many of my peers had despised me because I was different, but now I was an adult it was precisely because I was different that children liked me. I started thinking it would be good to start a children's chess club; another member of Richmond & Twickenham Chess Club, a remarkable man called Mike Fox, was also involved in teaching chess to children and had the same idea as me. In autumn 1975 Richmond Junior Chess Club (RJCC) opened its doors for the first time. The full story of RJCC is again a tale for another time. Let's just say that, although Mike left 4 or 5 years later when his job took him to Birmingham, the club became successful beyond my wildest dreams.

What chess isn't

Chess transformed my life – and it can transform other lives as well. If you're a teacher, there will be children in your school whose lives could be transformed by chess in so many ways. In order for you to find and encourage them, it will be helpful if I give you some idea about the nature of chess.

Many people, including parents and teachers, have a rather negative opinion of chess as a game, and also of those who play it (nerds, loners, antisocial, almost exclusively male) – but when encouraged, as we'll see, by national and international chess organisations, they perceive it as something that is 'good for children', that 'makes kids smarter'.

I'm sure you've often heard sports commentators saying, during cagier passages of play, 'it's a game of chess out there'. This might

make you think that chess is a slow game where not a lot happens, which perhaps makes it rather dull.

Then there's what you might think of as Schrödinger's Chess: chess is simultaneously a very hard game only suitable for brainboxes, and a game which is so simple and trivial that it's suitable for mass participation by very young children. This reminds me of the quote sometimes attributed to the great pianist Artur Schnabel with regard to Mozart: 'too simple for children but too hard for artists'.¹

Let's look at some of these views.

Chess is slow

Chess may indeed not always be the quickest game. If you want, you can play by email (in the past, people even played by post!) with several days allowed for each move. On the other hand, you can play online 'bullet chess' where each player might take a minute, or even less, to play the complete game, which might equate to 1 second or less per move. It really is your choice: you can play at whatever speed you choose. Chess games certainly can be long: a typical game might last 40 moves or so (in chess we count a move as White's turn followed by Black's turn, so 40 moves can be seen as 80 turns). This is one reason why you might think it's not always suitable for very young children.

Chess is boring

It's true that nothing will appeal to everyone. Some people find football boring while others don't. The point about chess is that, unlike football, and unlike many other activities, it's knowledge

1 Artur Schnabel. In Susan Ratcliffe (ed.), *Oxford Essential Quotations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Available at: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00009185>.

based. Knowledge is not just the rules of the game but information accumulated over the past thousand years or more about the best way to play; in the computer age, that knowledge is increasing incrementally. You can enjoy watching a Premier League football match without being good at football, or appreciate a Beethoven symphony without knowing anything about music, but you really need to be a reasonably good player to appreciate a chess game. Having said that, there are many brilliant online broadcasters whose commentaries, either in real time or after the game, will be both informative and inspiring for anyone rated around 1500+ or, in some cases, 1000+.

Chess is for young children

Large-scale chess tournaments for pre-teens down to 5-year-olds are certainly very popular and are promoted for various reasons. The promoters might want to introduce more people to competitive chess. They might see it as a way of making the game more inclusive and less elitist. They might want to identify prodigies and champions. Sometimes they might want to make money (well, we all have bills to pay). Most of these aims are admirable, but my opinion – based on many decades’ experience of junior chess competitions – is that a lot of promoters are well intentioned but misguided. Although academically inclined young children with supportive parents will benefit from these competitions, I believe that, because of the game’s complexity and reliance on domain-specific knowledge, serious competitive chess is, in general, more suitable for children of secondary school age and adults.

Chess is for brainboxes

If you promote competitive chess in primary schools, the children who are playing regularly at home against parents who are knowledgeable about the game will come out on top. They will very often also be the children who are top of the class, typically – but

not always – excelling at maths. If you promote the game in secondary schools, when children have become independent learners and can (if they're interested) teach themselves, anyone can do well. I have a lot of friends from non-academic backgrounds who developed an interest in chess at secondary school (even those who weren't academically strong enough to get into grammar schools) in the 1960s and 1970s, later becoming excellent players and remaining active in the chess world today.

Chess is for nerds

If you look at junior chess tournaments, it certainly isn't the case that all participants could be categorised, however affectionately, as nerds. Very often the school chess and football teams comprise many of the same children.

Chess isn't for girls

Sadly, the vast majority of competitive players are male, and there are various reasons why this might be the case. Chess clubs as we know them today have their origins in the gentlemen's clubs of the late 18th and 19th century; the game later became popular in working men's clubs as well, so it has always been associated with male rather than female spaces. As a result, even today, fathers will sometimes teach the moves to their sons but not their daughters. You might also consider that the warlike nature of the game – a battle between two armies – may be more attractive to boys than to girls. In my day, certainly, it was boys rather than girls who enjoyed playing with toy soldiers.

My view is that there's no reason why girls can't play chess just as well as boys. Schools can and should play a part in getting more girls involved in chess, perhaps by running separate competitions for girls or by ensuring that chess teams are mixed.

*

An approach to teaching chess in schools through a series of minigames which will enable all children to better understand and enjoy this magnificent game.

Chess is a game of extraordinary excitement and beauty and all children should have the opportunity to experience it. Indeed, many claim that playing abstract strategy games such as chess provides a wide range of cognitive and social benefits – such as improvements in problem-solving ability and communication skills.

However, Richard James argues that, because of the complexity of chess, most younger children would gain more benefit from simpler chess-based strategy games and incremental learning. In this practical handbook, Richard provides a wide range of games and puzzles based on these principles which are appropriate for primary schools, and explains how teachers can identify children who would benefit from starting young.

Richard also sets out how this approach can engage the whole community, including working with children with special needs, getting parents involved in learning and playing, and developing partnerships between primary and secondary schools.

An ideal resource for primary and secondary school teachers wanting to introduce their pupils to chess.

I would strongly recommend *Chess for Schools* to any chess teachers, parents and others with an interest in chess pedagogy.

Peter Wells, Grandmaster, FIDE Senior Trainer and co-author of *Chess Improvement: It's All in the Mindset*

Rooted in deep personal understanding and decades of experience, this approachable, practical guide will help you establish a chess culture that seeps through your school.

Ellie Dix, Board Game Designer, owner of The Dark Imp and author of *The Board Game Family*

This brilliant book is so well structured that you do not need to read it from end to end and you do not need ever to have touched a chess piece to find it worthwhile.

Tim Bartlett, former Head Teacher

Chess for Schools provides the terminology and the resources to move from beginner to competitive chess player. Schools now have a road map for their chess journeys.

Dr Alexey Root, author of *Children and Chess: A Guide for Educators and United States Women's Chess Champions, 1937–2020*

A veritable treasure chest of ideas, advice, opinions and resources.

Professor Barry Hymer, former Chief Science Officer, Chessable, and educational consultant

Richard James has been teaching and organising chess for children since 1972. Between 1975 and 2006, Richard ran the highly successful Richmond Junior Chess Club, whose members included Luke McShane, Jonathan Rowson and other future grandmasters. He is also the author of *Chess for Kids* and *The Right Way to Teach Chess to Kids*, and has written extensively on chess history and trivia. @chesstutor

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