



A Second Scottish Enlightenment?

By Dr. Tim Redman
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Aberdeen, Scotland hosted the third university conference devoted exclusively to the study of chess as a social good. The first was held at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in the 1990s and the second at the University of Texas at Dallas in 2001. Although there have been many workshops held on chess and education, they are usually held by chess groups like the U.S. Chess Federation or the Texas Chess Association, or are short, practical affairs sponsored by school districts. But serious study of the educational benefits of chess now stretches back more than thirty years to a study done in Zaire.

The USCF has a vital stake in the use of chess in education. Scholastic players make up the largest component of our membership; national and state scholastic tournaments regularly attract more than a thousand members. Many USCF members earn good livings by teaching chess to children. Research studies that demonstrate that chess helps students succeed are cited endlessly as part of the dogma and doctrine of the church of chess.

Some studies do exist. They show promising results but they can hardly be called definitive. And they are few—fewer than ten. And they are methodologically flawed, though only slightly for the most part. Dr. Joseph Eberhard, co-chair of the USCF Chess in Education Committee, warned in a talk given during a chess-in-education workshop in Oakbrook in August of 2006 that we are making claims that we cannot fulfill. In our fever to pitch the product, we chess players often lose our most vaunted characteristic, our objectivity. With so much invested in the outcome, we're not sure we want to know the answer.

A university conference on chess and education advances the level of seriousness for any inquiry into the claimed social benefits of chess. Disinterested research is one of the two major functions performed by universities in our society. Speakers with international credentials are invited; proposals for papers are solicited and some are turned down.

I was thus eager to attend the Aberdeen conference. I also felt honored to be speaking at King's College where the great 18th-century Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid, had taught.

How to Promote Chess

Back in the early '80s, when Florencio Campomanes was president of FIDE, I asked him to tell me the secret of promoting chess. "A local hero," he replied. Grandmaster Jonathan Rowson, three-time champion of the United Kingdom and a Ph.D. candidate in education at the University of Bristol, was the local hero returning for the conference to his native city.

Chess in the Schools and Communities International Conference, Thursday

The conference started with a welcoming dinner for about thirty at a posh restaurant in the newer section of Aberdeen. Jerry Nash, the Scholastic Director of the USCF, and I walked the two miles to it from the university, which is in Old Aberdeen. We were joined shortly by USCF Chairman GM Susan Polgar and USCF VP of Marketing and Communication FM Paul Truong, and then others from Aberdeen and a dozen nations.

The first speaker in plenary session was Janet Shucksmith, professor of public health at Teeside University. She spoke about the need to consider the whole child. She cautioned us about the pressure placed on research in chess in schools and communities to impress chess program funders and observed that the research to date is characterized by evangelical fervor and enthusiasm rather than systematic endeavor. Professor Shucksmith noted that there were few peer-reviewed studies and that they focused on cognitive gains and skill development in order to lever investment in chess in education. She warned that schools are alienating our students, who survive by developing subversive behaviors. In our press to pursue "standards, standards, standards" and the government pressure to audit education, she said, we forget that what students remember years later was the school play, the sporting event, and the class trip. Professor Shucksmith stressed the need for research not just on the cognitive benefits of chess but also how it can affect children's sense of agency and well-being. She also called for long-term research on the educational benefits of chess to examine "sleepier effects."

Professor Fernand Gobet of Brunel University is, I believe, the most important researcher in the field of chess and education. For my edited book, *Chess and Education: Selected Essays from the Koltanowski Conference*, I commissioned two essays especially for the volume. One was a bibliographic essay by Dr. Robert Ferguson (www.amchess.org), and the other was a critical review of existing research in the field by Gobet and Professor Guillermo Campitelli. Much of Professor Gobet's talk was an update of that essay. He noted that the three best studies are those on chess and cognitive development by Christiaen and Verhofstadt-Deneve (1976, 1981), on

chess and aptitudes by Frank and D'Hondt (1979, 1981) in Zaire, and on the effect of learning to play chess on cognitive, perceptual, and emotional development in children (undated) by Fried and Ginsburg. Gobet observed one point that was most germane to the conference focus on community: children who play chess are more extroverted than non players; adults who play chess more introverted. A book of his collected essays on chess and cognitive psychology is forthcoming.

Concurrent sessions were held each day. My own talk, "Chess and Syntax: An Hypothesis," is based on my ongoing work. Perhaps the most counterintuitive result from chess and education research, one noted also in the Aberdeen study by Dodd Forrest et alia (2005), is the effect chess has in improving reading scores. I am intrigued by this, it impacts an area where I have some competence, and I am both trying to account for it and suggest a way of teaching chess in grades 2-6 that will enhance it. In my session, held twice, I did get to hear an interesting highly original paper given by Malola Prasath of India which took a systems engineering approach to enhance beneficial interactions among students in a chess classroom.

In concurrent sessions the following day I presented Dr. Alexey Root's paper, "Integrating Chess in the Curriculum." Those familiar with her highly successful book, *Children and Chess: A Guide for Educators*, know her pragmatic approach, well grounded in theory, to chess instruction that develops learners first and chess players second. Her paper reviewed two recent chess curricula, those developed by the Kasparov and Polgar Chess Foundations. Dr. Root's new book, *Science, Math, Checkmate: 32 Chess Activities for Inquiry and Problem Solving*, will be available in February. An appendix will contain her review of the two curricula. Along with presenting Alexey's paper, I also heard, twice, a paper by Professor Steve Tobias of James Cook University in Australia and his collaborators on practical methods of using chess to teach math. They cited Todd Bardwick's book, *Teaching Chess in the 21st Century: Strategies and Connections to a Standards-Based World*, as particularly useful to their work.

Thursday afternoon plenary sessions gave us important talks by GM Susan Polgar of SPICE at Texas Tech University, and Fritz Gaspard of New York Chess in the Schools Foundation. GM Polgar spoke about the SPICE Program at Texas Tech and on the different attitudes to chess shown by boys and girls. Fritz talked about the New York City Chess-in-the-Schools Foundation which will reach 75 schools and 20,000 students this year at the cost of four million dollars. He also reported on their innovative College Bound Program where students receive assistance in completing their college applications, tutoring, college tours, mentoring, cultural enrichment programs, as well as chess instruction. Since both programs are well known to *Chess Life* readers, I have chosen to focus on other plenary session talks. Due to my double booking and double presentations I was unable to attend Jerry Nash's talk, "Strategies to Introduce Chess as an Educational Tool: Coordinating the Five Communities," given in a concurrent session Friday. I had heard a longer version of it at Texas Women's University just a week prior to the Aberdeen conference and I can recommend it highly. I'm sure Jerry will continue to present it in the United States.

The Lord Provost's Reception

The Lord Provost of Aberdeen, Peter J. Stephen, invited the group to an elegant reception Thursday night at the Aberdeen Town House in the newer port area of town. When we arrived we ascended an elegant spiral staircase of the Scottish-Gothic structure, whose walls were covered with oil portraits of notable figures in the city's history. We arrived at an elegant paneled reception room with carved coats of arms on the ceiling. It turns out that the room was only the waiting room. An attendant in livery gaveled us into an even more impressive room where drinks were served. The Lord Provost announced the creation of the new Jonathan Rowson medal for chess attainment and the three children who were its first recipients were presented with the award. I chatted with the Lord Provost, an astute and diplomatic man who was eager to gauge visitors' reactions to his city. Afterwards a nice buffet supper was served. Judging from the generous and unstinting hospitality we were shown, I think conference attendees were very impressed with his city. It reinforced our impression that in Aberdeen, chess is an integral part of the community.

Conference Sessions, Friday

Virginia Morris, of the Institute for Education at the University of London spoke first in plenary session on "Children and Social Capital." The unique value of this conference, from my perspective, was its sociological perspective on chess. I was unaware of the power of this argument for introducing chess in schools and communities. The basic idea behind social capital can be traced to the influential French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1897 work, *Suicide*, an investigation of its causes in anomie. Durkheim found that involvement with others and social support worked against such woes of an increasingly urbanized and industrial economy. I learned that another French researcher, Pierre Bourdieu, advanced the discussion in his 1986 work, *Distinction*, about how elites form and transmit their values, and an American, Robert Putnam, produced groundbreaking work in this field with his 1993 *Making Democracy Work* about the huge difference between the north and the south of Italy, the well known "*il problema del mezzogiorno*," and particularly with his key book, *Bowling Alone* (2000).

The concept of social capital is contested. It has received widespread attention in the United Kingdom, particularly from those of a New Labour perspective. It stresses that the well being of any community is due

not just to the economy and employment, but also to social and psychological factors that work to bond people within a community. A low level of social capital causes problems for the health and wealth of any group. Putnam's book about bowling leagues documented that their decline was indicative of community collapse. Of the three types of social capital discussed, bonding, bridging, and linking, the introduction of chess had the most positive potential effect on the second, with chess serving to bridge divisions in social class, ethnicity, gender, and age. Other kinds of capital, economic, cultural, and symbolic all function to reproduce social inequalities; chess as a means of pursuing social capital can work to lessen inequality.

Dr. Steve Tobias, a senior lecturer in math education from James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, Steve Carroll of Castlemaine Secondary College, Harry Poulton of Castlemaine Community House Chess Club, and Sam Grumont, coordinator of the Castlemaine Innovations and Excellence Project presented "Chess: Just a game or a powerful teaching strategy for learning mathematics?" Dr. Tobias, a math educator, spoke about the Australian government initiative, "Enterprise Education," developed to make its citizens more entrepreneurial, "to identify, initiate, create, and successfully manage personal, community, business, and work opportunities." The chess component of this effort helps develop strategic partnerships and stakeholder relations; in other words, to develop the kind of community identity that was a major focus of the Aberdeen Conference. Professor Tobias warned about "add-ons," where teachers are asked to take on more and more responsibilities. The Australian group escaped that problem by using chess to teach math as part of the school curriculum. They recommended that the way to get teachers involved is not by giving workshops but by going into the classroom so that teachers see the changes that take place in their own students as a result of chess. In that scenario, the classroom teacher does classroom management and the outsider does chess instruction. His group avoided that problem by making chess a part of the math curriculum (curriculum.edu.au).

Jonathan Rowson started the afternoon's plenary session with "The Rewards of Self-Control and the Joys of Concentration: What Chess Might Teach Us About Learning." GM Rowson is finishing his Ph.D. in the University of Bristol's Graduate School of Education with a focus on cognitive psychology. Rowson addressed the question, "Why Chess?" He quoted Gerald Abrahams' remark that "In chess, one realizes that all education is ultimately self-education." Rowson's own best answer to his question is that chess is a form of active meaning-making through consequential decisions. Rowson's talk was wide-ranging and speculative, more notes for an outline for a book than a focused academic paper. The challenges for chess in education, he acknowledged, were the need for either impressive evidence for its good effects and/or excellent political connections within a community. The dangers, in an era of crowded timetables and scarce funding, are trying to do token things; "a little of everything" being Howard Gardner's greatest enemy of education, he said. I learned a new term, "NABIS", clearly one invented by a teacher, not an administrator: Not Another Bloody Initiative. His recommendation: either we need to get a clearer idea about our message or align ourselves with people who already have one. But my favorite remark was that in the chess player coming to love mental intensity and concentration, we find the best links between chess and education.

Kate Philip of the University of Aberdeen spoke on "Children's Health and Well Being: The Process of Mentoring and Coaching in Informal Education." She stressed what I will call the Aberdeen approach to chess in education, one grounded in a tragic sense of decline of community. The need for mentoring arises from fears about and for youth, Dr. Philip said. She invoked Putnam's idea of social capital to note that chess can offer an important tool to counter decline in intergenerational relationships and neighborhoods. She cautioned, however, that planned mentoring often was explicitly based on a deficit model of young people, and that there was a clear need for better and more longitudinal research in this area, that many claims for the benefits of mentoring have been overblown and the evidence weak.

Fernando Moreno's "Using Chess in a Counseling/Mentoring Approach for Students" was the perfect complement to Dr. Philip's talk. His talk was based upon the methods he outlined in his book, *Teaching Life Skills through Chess*. He agreed that we need more research, but added: "Can we wait?" He challenged each member of the audience to be willing to mentor someone in our community.

Dr. Iain Davidson, in his "Conference Summary," had the difficult task, at the closing plenary session, of summarizing for us a conference that we had all just attended. He accomplished it with considerable aplomb. He noted the astonishing mood of the conference and believed that some kind of critical mass had been achieved. He said that the development of the whole child had underpinned the entire conference and acknowledged the importance of the idea of social capital in the United Kingdom. At the same time he cautioned that we still lack evidence for the widely perceived benefits of chess in education. In a conversation at the St. Machar Bar on High Street, to which we adjourned, he proposed that the University of Aberdeen should hold a similar conference again in two years. After the magnificent candlelit dinner for the participants later that evening, I, for one, would enthusiastically second his suggestion.

Selected conference papers can be found at www.abdn.ac.uk/rowangroup/

Chess in Aberdeen

I interviewed David Leslie to ask how chess had taken such strong root in Aberdeen. Its being GM Rowson's native city helped, but that alone couldn't explain everything. As is often the case, things started with a volunteer. David had played chess at a local club in the '70s. His interest rekindled when his son and some of

his son's school chums started to play at their primary school. David started a chess club there and when they needed more competition, he found other schools and ran tournaments. In 1995, he invited members of the city council to attend. Liking what they saw, the council gave him the use of a local school to use for an evening club. In a month they outgrew their sixty-player capacity. Aberdeen, with 6% of the population in Scotland, soon had 40% of its under-fourteen chess players.

David met Dodd Forrest who ran a local community center with a club and in 1998 Dodd asked him to run the club. Of course all of these activities were occupying a lot of time: David worked as a taxi driver and had a family to support. He and Dodd found money from the public sector, the New Opportunities Fund, £100,000 (about \$206,000) for a three-year pilot chess program.

Teacher evaluations and comments were very positive. In the middle-class, learning is often part of the family culture; that is much less frequently the case in poorer families. The chess spirit transcended inter-school rivalries and the program was renewed for two more years. At the same time Dodd Forrest led a research team consisting also of Dr. Iain Davidson, Janet Shucksmith, and Tony Glendinning to do a study of the pilot program in its final year, 2003-2004. "Chess Development in Aberdeen's Primary Schools: A Study of Literacy and Social Capital" was sponsored by the Scottish Executive Education Department and the Aberdeen City Council and published in 2005. Later, continuing funding was provided by Aberdeen's Children's University, Lord Provost, and the city council.

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