

Interview with James Corrigan, Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC)

Tell us about CSC's history?

The charity got going in 2010, we were very small to start off with, working in 10 schools in Liverpool and Newham. We have enjoyed healthy growth every year since. What started in just schools and libraries has expanded to include chess provision in colleges, youth centres, prisons, old people's homes and hospitals.

What was the reason for launching the charity?

The charity's founder Malcolm Pein learned about the transformative affect chess can have on young people's lives and learning skills when he first taught schoolchildren in Tower Hamlets back in the 1980s. He was glad to be able to establish a charity dedicated to that cause in 2010 and spread the good work nationwide. I see the effect it has on children first-hand and it is a testament to the tutors that young people are able to learn and benefit so much from the game. Pupils who might otherwise struggle in class for other subjects and possibly perceive themselves as 'inferior' find that with a bit of effort they can actually excel at something. This does wonders for their self-confidence and critical thinking.

Are there similar charities in other countries?

Yes. We know the cultural advantage chess in schools has enjoyed in the former Soviet Union – Armenia for example has compulsory chess lessons for children aged between 5-8. And other western countries like Spain United States have started fostering chess in their schools. In the USA, Chess in The Schools (chessinschools.org) work with Title 1 (low income intake) New York City schoolchildren and foster their chess progression all the way up to College. We operate a little differently. We don't focus as much on chess in the older years and we don't just operate in one area, we work nationwide. It means we can reach more children from a wider variety of backgrounds so no one region of the country is left out of harnessing chess opportunities. We are proud of the fact that whilst we are a much newer charity than our American counterpart, we provide chess lessons to more schools than they do. However our efforts are dwarfed by America's Foundation for Chess based in Seattle who have produced a curriculum for use by teachers.

What are the charity's main functions?

The charity exists to improve children's educational outcomes and social development by introducing the game of chess and providing opportunities for mass participation. Learning chess helps develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, concentration, spatial awareness as well as good sportsmanship – healthy skills for kids to learn.

The game promotes critical thinking, concentration, spatial awareness and good sportsmanship – healthy skills for kids to learn.

Whilst 80 percent of our work is in primary schools, the fastest growing side of the organisation is with communities. We work in old people's homes to get them playing chess and keeping their minds sharp, our oldest regular chess player in Upminster is 97! Chess in Schools and Communities has started providing chess to youth centres, children's hospitals and prisons. HMP Wandsworth and Belmarsh are the two we have established, and we will be announcing a third soon. Prisoners yearn for a positive outlet that is competitive and the prison staff welcome the behavioural improvement they see.

How many children around the UK are you working with?

We reach about 47,000 schoolchildren every year through chess lessons, equipment, and borough tournaments. As of now we currently teach in over 300 schools nationwide, most of our work is in the urban areas but we are working to expand our provision.

Are any of the youngsters you are working with playing regularly in competitive chess? Please give examples.

We don't have favourites at Chess in Schools and Communities, we just have excellent chess players. There are a few that spring to mind. I had the pleasure of playing Shajahon (one of our players from a Newham school) in a recent Rapidplay tournament, he only had the cheek to checkmate me in 20 moves! We are proud that quite a few of our pupils go on to represent their county and even some represent the country.

What kind of reaction have you had among educational experts about the role chess can play in education?

As a researcher, part of my job is to study the academic work on chess in education. There is plenty of literature on the subject and plenty more research currently underway. We have collaborated with Age UK and University of to investigate the relationship between chess and the degenerative effects of Alzheimer's disease among the elderly. We are expecting the results of the study to be published soon. The other kind of educational experts are of course teachers. They are the presence on the ground and we work with them in the classroom when teaching chess to maximise benefits. Many teachers and teaching assistants have approached us and told us just what a transformative effect chess lessons have on their pupils, particularly in getting children better at *focusing* on a particular task and good behaviour. There is much published research on chess and its benefits to children and we have posted a good selection on our website. We are also about to embark on a research study of our own.

Do you have to be a strong player to become a tutor with CSC?

Not at all, whilst we do have some chess coaches who are phenomenal chess players (some even have FIDE titles). It is not a requisite, as long as you have an essential grounding of the rules of chess and a yearning and an aptitude to teach then we can train you up to become a chess tutor.

What is your annual budget and how do you raise money?

Our income in 2016 was about £1.7 million and our expenditure was just a little less than that. The majority of our funding comes from donations, we also generate (and spend) a fair bit of money on the London Chess Classic.

How can ECF members get involved?

However an ECF member may wish to be involved; be it getting chess started in their school/local area or become a chess tutor or volunteer with us. The best way is to take a look at our website and get a further understanding of what we do. Fill out the appropriate form and you will be put into contact with one of our regional coordinators and start the processes of joining us. You can always give me a call at Chess in Schools and Communities if you have any questions. We encourage clubs to develop junior sections and we can provide support. We will also back anyone who wants to encourage local schools to start clubs or classroom lessons.

For further information please visit chessinschools.org.uk

Email: info@chessinschools.co.uk