

Malcolm Pein is a man with a mission – to bring chess back into state schools. Max Watson met him at NEU conference.



Photos by **Lennart Ootes & Koïs Miah**

# Checkmates

MALCOLM Pein was a professional chess player – an International Master – before he started teaching the game in schools.

He began giving lessons in Tower Hamlets, east London, mostly to the children of immigrants who spoke little English.

Malcolm tells me: “They quickly became

very good and started winning national championships, beating all the private schools.

“It was sensational. We’re talking about one of the most deprived areas of London. I thought ‘this is absolutely incredible’.”

Not only were the children good at the game, but it seemed to “improve the children’s

educational outcomes and social development by introducing them to chess”.

Malcolm says: “The game promotes key intellectual skills such as problem solving, logical thinking, pattern recognition and concentration.”

**continued on page 20**

# Feature

## continued from page 19

He set up charity Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC) in 2009, to promote the benefits of the game and focus on teaching it in state schools.

I meet Malcolm and fellow chess coach Natasha May at the union's annual conference.

He enthuses about the benefits to learning: "There is copious research demonstrating benefits, both academic and 'softer', of teaching children chess."

For example, studies in Italy and Denmark have demonstrated higher maths scores in schools that teach chess.

### Open to everyone

Natasha, who has been a coach for six months, was initially attracted by the fact that CSC teaches a class of 30 rather than working solely in chess clubs.

This is the key to the group's methods – making it open to all: girls, boys, lower level attainers, those with English as an additional language.

"Everyone can play chess," she says. "The benefits transcend simply playing competitively and the individual pleasure of it. It's much broader than that."

Other benefits include "lovely intergenerational bonding. I have a lot of children who play with their grandparents every week. There are lots of social benefits."

It also helps with behaviour, says Natasha. "All of us have had experience of support staff telling us how much a child's concentration and focus has improved. And they credit chess."

### Positive impact on behaviour

Andrea Scarisbrick, a teaching assistant at Our Lady of St Edwards in Birkenhead, is a convert to chess.

"Children can be quite impulsive," she says. "Chess gives them tools to think about positive decisions and the consequences. It gives them control. The positive impact in our school has been absolutely amazing, both in and outside of the classroom."

Andrea's colleague Katey Hogan says they're focusing on building up children's resilience through chess: "We place great emphasis on losing graciously and being a good sport."

"It helps with their confidence too. Some pupils whose experience at school is often negative take to chess and start to build up something really positive in school."



**"One male coach talks about how chess is very much a girl power game because the queen is the strongest piece. They feed into that. They love it."**





Malcolm Pein and Natasha May enjoy a game of chess at this year's National Education Union annual conference

CSC focuses on bringing the game to state schools and particularly promotes learning in deprived areas.

"There is such an imbalance in terms of the funding that private schools have for chess clubs and coaching," Natasha says. "We try to address that imbalance. Chess shouldn't be elitist."

### Girl power

Teaching chess to a whole class also encourages boys and girls to mix. Natasha says they are keen to eradicate the stereotype that it's a boy's game and encourage girls to play.

Malcolm explains this is why he modelled CSC around the classroom approach as opposed to chess clubs. "You've got to give girls extra encouragement. Once they're doing it they realise they can be great at it. They can be as good or better than the boys, and enjoy it."

"If you just announce there is going to be a chess club, there will be 30 children, 27 boys, and three girls."

But, according to Natasha, what matters most is the attitude and the mindset of the tutor. She gives the example of a male coach who uses the lesson about the queen's moves to talk about "how chess is very much a 'girl power' game because the queen is the strongest piece. They feed into that, they love it."

Everyone can participate, Malcolm says. "There's something about the universality of chess. Children who are disabled can participate and those who are deaf or blind. We have a few blind children in our programmes with special chess sets where they feel the top of the pieces."

When Malcolm started the charity, chess in state schools had "more or less disappeared". When he approaches head teachers, they often remember playing it at school.

"What head teachers sometimes underestimate is how popular it is with parents," says Malcolm. "Particularly in

disadvantaged areas, the parents will grab any extra opportunity they have for their children – they recognise intuitively it will be beneficial."

### Bringing people together

CSC started with just nine schools but now teaches at 340 every week and supports another 700.

"The only thing that stops us expanding is money," says Malcolm. The classes are heavily subsidised and he spends much of his time fundraising. CSC also works with older people and is branching out to work in prisons.

He adds: "Anyone can get involved and learn a new skill. It's also great for community cohesion. When you have a library chess club, you see people from very diverse backgrounds playing each other. It brings people together and that can only be a good thing."

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