

THE INTEGRATION OF CHESS INTO REYKJAVIK'S SCHOOLS

2008-2014

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Preamble – Goodwill towards chess

Icelanders' interest in chess has rather deep roots. The Icelandic sagas, taking place almost thousand years ago, reveal some signs of chess being played. Therefore the presence of chess in the country seems to be traceable back to the settlement of Iceland. In the earlier part of the 20th century Icelanders had many strong chess players, and chess was rather popular. The Reykjavík Chess Club was founded at the beginning of the century and soon became the strongest chess club in the country. The Icelandic Chess Federation was founded in 1925 by a number of chess clubs. One of Iceland's largest victories was the victory of its national team of the Final Group B in the Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1939. It can therefore be concluded that Iceland had a fairly vibrant chess life in the earlier part of the century.

But then the large chess explosion in Iceland occurred with the advent of Friðrik Ólafsson. Around 1950 this 15 year old boy had become one of the strongest chess player of the country. He became the Nordic Chess Champion in 1952 and in 1956 he played an exhilarating match against Bent Larsen. The match took place in the Seafarers' School which

was full to the brim with spectators. The enthusiasm was such that those who could not find room on the inside of the school gathered outside to try to watch the match through the windows. The following years in Mr. Ólafsson's career were outstanding and among his best performances was finishing no. 5-6 in the famous Interzonal tournament in Portoroz in Yugoslavia in 1958, where Fischer and Tal were among participants.

In those days Iceland was a young republic. Those who stood above their peers strengthened the self-image of the new state and were greatly admired by the nation. Along with Mr. Ólafsson it fell to track athletes and Nobel Prize-winner Halldór Laxness to achieve such accomplishments and victories as to earn them a place on the pedestal of heroes in the minds of Icelanders. They were covered in news-stories and had many admirers, as the match in the Seafarer's School clearly demonstrates.

Ólafsson had an illustrious chess-career but played fewer matches as time progressed. He became president of FIDE in the year 1978, at a time when a new generation of Icelandic chess-players was emerging onto the scene. That generation was to form Iceland's best national team ever, often succeeding brilliantly in the Olympiad, for instance when it reached the sixth-place in Dubai in 1986.

Ever since Ólafsson's starting years, chess has had a special place in the minds of Icelanders. It is held in high regard and supported financially by the state. That can no doubt be traced back to Ólafsson's achievements and the hero-status he won in the minds of Icelanders in the years following the republic's inception.

The founding of the Reykjavik Chess Academy and its first year

Chess-education had, by the year 2008, taken place with varying frequency and taken on different forms. It usually depended on the vigour of the chess-movement's leaders at each time. Most of the country's chess-players had come to the game through the various chess-clubs, particularly the Reykjavik Chess Club, which was for decades a giant in the Icelandic chess-community and by far the country's largest chess-club. The Icelandic Chess Academy was established in 1990, having had several predecessors. Since then it has offered various courses and, first and foremost, seen to the training of all the country's most promising chess-players with good results.

Prominent in chess-education in the city's schools were a few, but nevertheless robust, schools. Chess was not part of the students' curriculum but chess-practice took place after school. Some schools were known for their outright "production" of good players, for instance

The Teacher Federation's Practice School. A common feature of many of the schools which "produced" strong players was that one person in the school oversaw all chess-activities and that person's zeal became the backbone of the school's chess-activity. Examples abound of chess-activity crumbling completely when the chess-instructor retired. The entire culture of chess was thus predicated on the character and motivation of one man, but was not an integral part of the curriculum, as the teaching of other subjects.

The Reykjavik Chess Academy was established in 2008 after about a year of preparation. Its principal role since the beginning has been the integration of chess and chess-education in the city's schools. The Academy has taken part in various other initiatives, such as participating in the planning and executing of the Reykjavik Chess Tournament, the teaching of children in kindergarten and chess-integration in swimming-halls and other public spaces. The Academy has also planned and thrown numerous school-events for children and adolescents, often in association with The Icelandic Chess Federation.

Its founders were the city of Reykjavik and three companies. The initial capital was 20 million kronur and a contract had been concluded providing that 20 million additional kronur would be put into the operation in the three following years. This contract is by far the largest sponsorship-deal made in Iceland's chess-history. No doubt three things will have contributed most to the achievement of such a large sponsorship-deal: Goodwill towards chess in Iceland since the days of Friðrik Ólafsson, great economic prosperity in Iceland at the time of signing, and personal connections within the public and private sectors.

One of the businesses went under in the economic meltdown so the contract was altered to 15 million in the following three years. A manager was hired at the time of the founding and got to work immediately. According to the Memorandum of Association, one of the Chess Academy's main roles was to be responsible for the running of the Reykjavík Open tournament each year. Planning for the tournament was therefore started early in the year 2009.

Along with planning for the Reykjavík Open tournament, plans had to be made for chess-education in the coming school-year. But just how much chess-education was there in schools in Reykjavik when the Academy was founded?

Chess was taught in under ten of the city's 45 schools. In the schools where chess-education took place it was usually done by a school-employee. The city's schools were contacted and offered free chess-education. This was accepted by 14 schools and chess-

education there usually took place after the traditional school-day, open to those students who were interested. Everything having to do with teaching chess was handled by the Academy; finding teachers for the job and paying their salaries, setting up the curriculum, etc. Besides those schools who accepted the Academy's free service were several schools that provided chess-education independently, that is, had an employee of the school teach chess there.

These courses met with approval among school-administrators in the first year. The business-side ran smoothly because a large sponsorship-deal had been concluded when the Academy was founded. However, the manager and the teachers ran into several obstacles with regard to the planning of chess-education within each school. In particular the teachers felt as though the chess-classes were to be seen as any other after-school hobby, and even as a kind of day-care!

The school-year 2009-10

In preparation for this school-year, importance was attached to trying to fit chess-education into the students' time-table, so as to make it an integral part of the school-day, as opposed to an option for interested students after regular school-hours. During this school year chess was taught in 21 schools and in a few of them it was part of the curriculum. The Academy hosted the Icelandic Tournament of primary-school teams that year and an attendance record of 51 teams was set, which still stands.

The school-year 2010-11

For this school-year continued emphasis was put on integrating chess-education into students' timetable. Chess was taught in about 20 schools - much like the winter before. The author of this article took over as manager on March 1 in 2011. The operation of the Academy had been difficult that winter because grants had been paid late. This took its toll on the operation, which was mostly limited to chess-education in the schools, which had not increased since the previous season. It became clear that it was necessary to undertake individual fund raising activities and a renewal of sponsorship deals would need to take place as soon as possible.

The school-year 2011-12

In the first three school-years the Academy had always paid the teachers' salaries; the schools got the classes for free. In the year 2011 the good old initial sponsorship-deal was about to expire and it was clear that it wouldn't be renewed, except perhaps in the case of Reykjavik. What to do? The schools were asked to provide a fee of 50.000 ISK for each of the school-

year's two semesters. Some administrators saw it as odd that they should suddenly have to start paying for the service. But they were told that the Academy had to come up with a new means of income in order to carry on the operation and they were quite understanding. Chess was taught in 30 schools that year and was placed almost everywhere in the students' timetable. At the Christmas Tournament of the schools an attendance-record was set, with 36 teams participating. In organising the chess-education priority was placed on getting it instituted in the third grade, a goal which was achieved in about half of the schools. But, as before, the chess-education was organized within each school in association with its administrators and adapted to each school's circumstances. Often various other considerations in each school determined the grades in which chess was taught during the school-year. In the planning-stages for this school-year it was deemed important that it should take place in the spring, so as to complete it well in advance of the coming school-year.

In this school-year and the summer before, a lot of effort went into raising funds. Events were planned to call attention to the great forward momentum of chess-education in the schools.

The school-year 2012-2013

The funds of the Academy were further depleted before this school-year - despite the gains won by the increased visibility, coverage of chess-education and the arrival of new grants. The gains won this time were nothing in comparison with the initial sponsorship-deal.

Therefore, at the start of the school-year there was really no other choice but to try to remove the burden of teacher-salaries squarely from off the shoulders of the Academy. As the manager met with school-administrators in the spring of 2012 to make plans for the coming winter a new and different approach would be needed.

The administrators were, as ever, interested in continuing with the chess-program and a few new ones had expressed interest in including chess in their curriculum. But then the bomb-shell hit: "you will have to hire the chess-teacher as a paid employee of the school." Remarkably enough, this stopped only a few schools from being able to teach chess. To be sure, the administrators were perhaps a little hesitant, scratching their heads, wondering where they were going to be able to find the money for this. But as it turned out they really didn't want to cancel the program, at least not without trying every avenue to continue it.

That which had at first been free of charge had since become so important in the schools that the administrators had become willing to pay the entire salary of the chess-

teacher provided to them by the Academy. But if the chess-teachers had now been officially employed by the schools, what had become of the role of the Academy? Although the salaries were now paid by the schools, all planning was still really handled by the Academy; the manager and the teachers. Chess was taught that winter in a total of about 30 schools in the city.

The school-year 2013-14

This school-year there was a continuation of the arrangement that the teachers were hired by the schools but that the planning would take place within the Academy. However, little by little the schools and their staff assumed a greater role in the organization and planning of chess-education. Especially in those schools where chess-education had been around for a few years. Chess was taught in over 30 schools in the city.

The state of things in September of 2014

Looking back and assessing the future

By now we have had some experience of the Academy's operation, which has evolved in the past few years. In the current school-year about 28 of the city's schools have weekly chess-classes. In 20 of those schools the arrangement is such that the same students are taught chess on a weekly basis. In eight of the schools the arrangement is that students take chess-class for a few successive weeks and then move on to another subject. In a few schools students are taught chess every other week. In about 11 schools the Academy will provide a chess-course for part of the year, in which the set-up varies. Chess-education in one form or another will take place in 39 schools out of 42.

It is clear that the integration of chess into the schools has succeeded in as much as a vast majority of the city's schools now provide chess-education.

But what are the subject's distinguishing features? What might be improved? Which tasks are up next? And to answer these questions it may be necessary to ask: what is the goal?

Strengths

- **A very good group of teachers.** The teachers are chess-players with a chess-rating ranging from 1500 to 2200. The teachers' main attribute is their determination to do their job well; they believe in the efficacy of chess-education for children and adolescents and are passionate about it. The group is also very harmonious and exchanges ideas and the teachers inspire each other.
- **Experience.** In the past few years, experience has accumulated in the Academy with the planning and the integration of chess in the schools. The manager of the Academy has formed a personal bond with the school-administrators in Reykjavik.
- **Goodwill within the schools.** Chess has proved its worth within the schools. That is best demonstrated by the fact that a great number of schools has provided chess-education for several years.

The following are the most important things to consider with regard to the continuation of chess-education: Good teachers, experience and goodwill among administrators, teachers, students and parents.

But there are warning signs and chess-education in schools is not a sure thing. There are opportunities to further strengthen the program in the schools with weekly chess-education.

But what are these opportunities? Which improvements might take place?

Chess in the general primary school curriculum!

For this school-year several schools had to drop their chess-education or limiting it to a part of the year because of lack of funds. But do they drop math because of lack of funds? Have children stopped going to gym-class because of lack of funds? No!

In the run-up to this school-year it became evident that chess is one of the subjects excised by administrators when they lack money. And why? Because chess isn't in the general curriculum. To be sure, school-administrators have room for chess-education and have made use of that room, as has been pointed out in this article. But the problem is that they don't have to, according to the general curriculum, which they must follow as they plan each school-year.

What else would the inclusion of chess in the general curriculum achieve?

Organization! The organization of chess-education within each school is a collaborative effort between the principal of each school and the Academy's manager. It is suggested to school-administrators that to start chess-education in the third grade would be ideal. It is furthermore most common for schools to choose that grade for chess-education. But that is far from being the case in a vast majority of the schools. In reality, chess-education takes place at all ages.

The organization of chess-education in the past few years has always been contingent on other organizational factors in the schools. For instance, convenient class-sizes, the convenience of placing chess-education opposite some other subject, the fact that chess-education serves well the function of allowing the supervisory teacher to have fewer teaching-hours and enthusiastic students in some grade.

With chess-included in the general curriculum, chess-education would start at a certain age. This would entail numerous advantages with regard to materials, teachers' level of education, school-tournaments, research and many other things.

Let's imagine a practical example of what would happen:

The creation of lesson-materials: A large volume of books could be printed if chess-education were to start with a large number of students at the same age. Today it is not feasible to do so because the classes take place in various age-groups and its scope in the coming years is impossible to predict.

Research: It would be possible to start a large research-project with a large, significant sample; because all the students would be of the same age. Today such a project could be significantly compromised by some schools falling out of it in the middle of it, because of lack of funds; cancelling/reducing their chess-education.

What to do if chess doesn't make it into the general curriculum? Chess needs to be a traditional feature of the school-curriculum - or as near as can be managed, and that should be our goal.

The process of getting chess into the general curriculum may be a long and arduous one. Education in Iceland has been evolving a lot in the past few years; according to a conversation with an expert in the Ministry of Education there have been ideas of many new subjects in the

general curriculum. In other words: many are trying to get their particular subjects into the general curriculum.

So the spokesmen of chess-education in Iceland's schools have to fight for getting chess into the general curriculum without assuming to be successful. Other means must be sought for continuing to integrate chess into the schools. But which means?

Chess needs to be a traditional feature of the school-curriculum, just as other subjects are. But what does that mean? Chess needs to be seen in the same light by administrators, teachers, students and parents as other subjects are. Chess cannot be seen by these people as a remarkable and/or fun addition to the curriculum. In keeping with this endeavour great stress was placed on getting chess-education placed in the school's timetable, as opposed to after school-hours.

If chess is seen as any other subject in the curriculum it becomes less likely that it will be downsized as soon as funds run low. It is also easier to promote it in new schools if there is a perception of it being an integral part of the curriculum in other schools.

But how best to earn a place for chess similar to that of other school-subjects? In order that it may be thought of as one of them. A lot can be done to achieve this:

Example:

- 1) Keeping chess-education on the student's timetable so that it isn't taught after school-hours.
- 2) See to it that news of these classes appear on the school's website and in newsletters sent to parents.
- 3) The teacher needs to be a functioning part of the school-work; attending faculty meetings, socializing and getting acquainted with other teachers, etc.
- 4) Writing a text about chess-education for the principal to place in the school's curriculum.
- 5) Making the same requirements for accommodations as teachers of other subjects do.
- 6) Linking chess with other subjects so that it will be noticed.
- 7) Winning a place for chess in each school's own curriculum.

- 8) Increasing the participation of the school's regular teachers in chess-education and providing courses for them to be able to teach chess.

This is my own theory, based on prior experience; if chess is an integral part of the curriculum just as other subjects are, it is less likely to receive separate treatment when cutbacks have to be made. Experience has showed this to be the case in the schools where the Academy has been teaching for several years and chess-education has become an integral part of the curriculum. In those schools a meeting isn't even required for the planning of the coming school-year; it's quite enough to pick up the phone, asking: "shall we just keep it the way it has been?"

Summary of the integration of chess into schools in Reykjavik in the years 2008-2014

- Goodwill towards the game of chess since the days of Friðrik Ólafsson, a very prosperous economy and connections within both the public and the private sector brought about a very sizeable sponsorship-deal for the Reykjavik Chess Academy.
- Schools were offered free chess-education.
- Schools were happy with the chess-education.
- Schools started taking on part of the cost of paying the teachers and little by little chess-classes found their way into students' regular timetable.
- The schools hired the teachers outright and paid their salaries but the Academy oversaw all the planning.
- Chess-education does not stand on solid ground because administrators are not obligated to include it in their schools and may drop it when finances get rough.
- The task is to make chess-education an integral part of the curriculum and, eventually, to get it included in the general curriculum, with the benefits already stated.

Observations made by administrators and teachers

In addition to being an entertaining game, I am certain that chess trains the minds of children, developing and sustaining mental and physical discipline.

Björn Pétursson, principal of Melaskóli.

Hlíðarskóli is a special school in Akureyri for children who have not been able to thrive in regular schools and have no chance of doing so, all of them having behavioural problems and just about every kind of disorder, for instance dyslexia, ADHD and so on. These are 20 kids and some spend years here. We took chess on last year as an optional subject 2-3 times a week and, long story short, chess really does the trick, they achieve calm and train their concentration and realize that a game of chess must be won slowly and calmly.

These are children that no one would have thought able to sit still for half an hour or an entire hour, pondering over a chess-board and there are always lots of students who sign up for chess, some of them explaining that it's so peaceful and one gains so much confidence, so here chess is played most days but, obviously, the talent for it varies and depends on their level of maturity, but first and foremost it makes them feel good, which is most important. I thought it would be just appropriate to send you this message after seeing the letter regarding the day of chess.

Reynir Hjartarson, teacher in Hlíðarskóli.