

USING CHESS TO INCREASE SOCIAL CAPITAL AND DECREASE SEGREGATION

Johanna Valentin, Sweden, Stockholm, Utsiktstornet, Founder and CEO

Introduction:

Utsiktstornet [1] (The Vantage Tower) is a non-profit organization founded 2012 with the aim to use chess as an educational tool to give children a playful opportunity to develop, both socially and intellectually. Utsiktstornet has a close cooperation with the Swedish Chess Federation and in this particular project with Stockholm Chess Federation.

Sweden has traditionally been a very homogenous country. The last 40 years Sweden has faced an increase of immigration from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, which has led to segregation and tendencies of growing racism.

Segregated neighbourhoods and changes in the primary school system have had the effect that children from different areas and with different socio economical background rarely meet. By using chess related activities in a new way we wanted to create natural meeting points where children could meet on equal ground, indifferent of background and prerequisites.

The aim of the project is to create natural interaction where children from different social and ethnical backgrounds and/or religious beliefs can meet on equal terms to enhance respect, to bond and feel affinity. By using team-spirit as a driving force, we want to focus on collective measures rather than the individual focus chess normally has. The project opens up for children to interact and create relations with other children, whom they otherwise never would meet. Chess offers children a possibility to explore and experience both each other and each other's neighbourhoods. The aim is not only to decrease prejudice but also to teach the children to be open minded, respectful and curious when it comes to unfamiliar customs and cultures.

Methods:

In order to enhance interaction, collaboration and communication we developed and designed two programs for schools; Chess Battle and Chess Mate. The concepts have mainly been practiced by grade 4 and 5, children age 10-11. The pupils need to know the very basics of chess. eg. how pieces move and their start positions. The teachers were in advance educated to teach the pupils the basics.

Methods used for evaluation of the projects were surveys asking pupils how they experienced the meetings, their attitudes towards the other pupils and what learning they got out of

it. Qualitative interviews were made with both pupils as well as with participating teachers. The Stockholm Chess Federation conducted the survey and qualitative interviews with the participating children of Chess Battle. The results were presented in a paper by students at the first Nordic University Course of Pedagogy of Chess. [2]

Chess Battle

Chess Battle is a whole day event, where children from different schools compete in mixed teams. Focus is on having a fun, positive and collaborative experience together with children they have never met before. The pupils compete in teams of 4-6 persons coming from 2 or more different schools.

Chess Battle consists of four different parts:

1. Action Chess

The teams are placed at different sides of the table, each person with a chess board in front of them. Only the pawns are placed on the board. The winner is the one that manage to get one of his pawns to his competitor's last row. Every minute there is a loud sound and the children have to move one step to the right, hence getting a new opponent and a new board with an already on-going game, and then continue playing. The goal is to get the team members to come together, enhance the group feeling and have fun.

2. Brain Twist.

The team receives a number of chess related tasks, like "Write a song about chess", "Solve these chess problems" or "Draw your own chess board", and shall solve as many tasks as possible in a specific period of time. The goal is to get the team members to cooperate and solve tasks together.

3. Game of Thrones

Ordinary chess game. The goal is to create a space of concentration for each pupil and to collect points to the team.

4. Team Battle

The team plays together a game of chess against a number of simultaneous players. The goal is to get the children to discuss and decide together which move they should do.

Beside the chess related tasks Chess Battle also offers a whole day experience with music artists, shows and other activities.

On February 6, 2014, 1000 pupils from 23 different schools in the Stockholm area participated in a Chess Battle. The event took place at Tom Tits Experiment - a famous Swedish Science Centre in a huge building filled with experiments for young and old to try out together during the day. [3]

Chess Mate

Chess Mate is a development of Chess Battle where pupils from two different areas, one with mostly ethnical Swedes and one with predominately immigrants, visit each other's schools on a continually basis during a semester. The program consists of chess associated activities designed to deepen the relations between the pupils and develop their collaboration skills and to make them explore their team mates backgrounds and neighbourhoods.

Each meeting has a main subject; Friendship, Prejudice, Collaboration and Equal rights. The topics are chosen to enhance the relations between the pupils and to create a better understanding of themselves and others, all in accordance with the Curriculum for the compulsory school. [4] The subjects are explored through specially designed chess activities where the children practice, discuss and reflect.

The children are mixed into groups of 4-8 from both schools. The groups work together over the whole semester to make the pupils feel comfortable and to create stronger relations between the group members. Chess mate combines practical exercises with discussions and reflections to be used both in and outside the school.

During autumn 2013, 100 pupils from two schools in the immigrant area of Rinkeby and the wealthy middle-class area Mälarhöjden met three different times. [5]

As we speak, another 400 pupils from eight different schools participate in the program.

Results

Collaboration

We could see that 87% of the participating pupils had a positive experience of collaboration with their team. The interviews showed that the pupils were not only collaborating with their new team mates but also connecting and talking about things that did not deal directly with chess activities. A majority of the children connected on a personal level and 83% answered they had got new friends from the other school. "I have realized that we are similar. Even though they are dark skinned and don't speak fluent Swedish, we are not different! We have the same hobbies and we learn the same things. We live in the same way!" Evelina, 10 years. [6]

Connection

The activities worked out well as a bonding instrument for the children. Their interaction through the activities and the program led to deeper levels of social connection. "It worked excellent, a lot of the teams small talked about all kinds of things between the exercises. They would love to be part of it again." Anette Söderberg, teacher. [6] Both teachers and pupils asked for more free time, to be able to connect even more outside of the school frame.

Attitudes

Also the attitudes changed. Many of the pupils were afraid the first time they were to visit the other school and neighbourhood, especially the children from the wealthy area who visited the suburb. After the first meeting many of the pupils said that it had been their best day in school and that they were longing to come back to visit. At the end of the program, no children were afraid to visit each other's schools and neighbourhoods anymore.

Many of the participants exchanged telephone numbers and social media information. This is a great success for the effort to break segregation, create interactions between the pupils and enhance their social capital. [7]

Discussion

In our opinion the programs have been a great success. It was easy to find schools who wanted to participate. Chess has shown to be a great meeting point for natural and positive interaction, that has increased relationships outside the chess game. The project has succeeded in creating social capital for the children outside their regular environment, not only by visiting new places but also through getting new friends with a different social and socioeconomic background. As many of the children have shared their personal social media contacts, they have also gained greater insight and have received access to communities with a different background. They can both benefit from new social networks in a practical way as well as get a greater understanding of different lifestyles and cultures. [8] Social media and friendship is two ways of growing social capital and decrease segregation.

To secure the maintenance and the continuation of the interaction, the program can be deepened by more meetings between the participants, ongoing collaborations between the schools, more chess related events outside schools as chess competitions and chess camps. This will deepen the learning of mutual respect and understanding.

An important thing has been to use very basic chess for all the pupils to be able to participate and also for the teachers to take an active role. Using chess on a low level has been a great way for a natural meeting point where the pupils have been able to meet on equal grounds and grow relationships.

Our aim now is to develop the project, inspired by the study in Aberdeen, into a community project with a systemic perspective, bringing in more segments of the neighbourhood like parents, unemployed youngsters and companies to develop social capital and build a sustainable and strong community where chess is the hub. [7]

Summary

Utsiktstornet, a non-profit organization, has in collaboration with The Swedish Chess Federation and The Stockholm Chess Federation developed and conducted two concepts using chess as a tool to decrease segregation and increase social capital for pupils from different areas. The concepts are called Chess Battle and Chess Mate, where pupils from different schools meet and work in mixed teams to know each other and learn how to collaborate through chess associated activities. The result has showed that chess makes meeting natural and fun and lets the children meet on equal grounds, indifferent of prerequisites and socioeconomic background. This has led to new plans for scaling up the concepts to involve community development.

1. Homepage of Utsiktstornet/The Vantage Tower

www.utsiktstornet.se

2. Palmblad, J and Sandbom, J (2014): Chess Battle - Schack som integrationsinstrument,

<http://www.schack.se/pdf/projektarbeten2014/Chess%20Battle%20Jonas%20Sandbom%20o%20Jan%20Peter%20Palmblad.pdf>

3. Article in LT Södertälje (2014)

<http://lt.se/nyheter/sodertalje/1.2379745-lt-play-tusen-elever-mottes-i-schack-battle>

4. Curriculum for the compulsory school (2011)

http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/publikationer/visa-enskild-publikation?_xurl_=http%3A%2F%2Fwww5.skolverket.se%2Fwtpub%2Fws%2Fskolbok%2Fwtpubext%2Ftrycksak%2FRecord%3Fk%3D2687

5. Article in Liljeholmen Älvsjö (2014)

<http://www.utsiktstornet.se/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Liljeholmen-A%CC%88lvsjo%CC%88-artikel.pdf>

6. Valentin, J (2013): Social impact report for Reach For Change

7. Forrest, D et al. (2005): Chess development in Aberdeen's primary schools: a study of literacy and social capital

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/930/0009711.pdf>

8. Steinfield, C et al. (2012) Online social networks sites and the concept of social capital

https://www.msu.edu/~steinfie/Steinfield_Internetat40.pdf