

# **While This is Difficult for an Adult, A Child Can Handle It Easily**

*F. Todd Goodson*

I attempted to learn to play chess when my daughter was in middle school. At that time, she joined an after-school chess club sponsored by a teacher she admired, and I felt obligated to follow her into the game. She assumed the role of teacher, and she instructed me in the game. As background, I grew up in a checkers culture, and even though the boards appear the same from a distance, those games appeal to different layers of American society that are hard to define but unmistakable. Checkers culture is rural, working class. Chess is something entirely different.

After a few months working with her, I teetered on the edge of going all in on chess, and I could sense very well the looming presence of the 10,000 Hour Rule (Gladwell, 2008). Eventually, my daughter moved on to a point where she no longer required my services as her student, and I made a conscious decision not to invest more time in chess. I either wanted to be good, or I didn't want to continue, and I knew becoming good would take more time than I felt being good at chess was worth.

In this issue of *Educational Considerations*, we have a provocative piece from a European scholar who has caused me to reconsider chess. Gulcin Karakus offers a comprehensive review of the impact of chess on student learning, and I will confess my initial response was skeptical. I immediately thought of the connections we have made over the years between courses like algebra or activities such as instrumental music. I have sat in meetings and heard speakers attest, for example, that mastery of algebra is the most important indicator of student success, so we need to double down on teaching algebra to everyone. Along those lines, I have for many years encountered sources that correlate participation in high school band programs with things like grade-point average, attendance, graduation rates, and so on.

To be clear, I think both algebra and band are very good things.

Having said that, I usually dismiss those attempts to connect either with other markers of student success because of the obvious potential fallacy of causality. It is a mistake, for example, to assume that if we just forced every high school student to participate in marching band that attendance rates or discipline referrals or grade point averages would go up. To be sure, some students who would not otherwise have chosen to play an instrument would discover a lifelong passion, and for those students, I would expect the corresponding positive academic outcomes. Other students would bristle at being forced to participate in the activity against their will, and if anything, I would expect negative results from the experiment. To force all students to play an instrument through middle and high school would without a doubt enhance the education of a few students, but it would also risk alienating others who are deaf (pun intended) to the rewards of the activity.

So, it was with that healthy and nuanced skepticism that I approached Karakus' manuscript. What he attempts is both ambitious and novel in that he has prepared a comprehensive literature

review connecting chess to cognitive, emotional, and social structures; and he has pulled together all available evidence to support the playing of chess in order to enhance student learning.

I was gratified and a bit relieved by his brief discussion of the differences of learning chess as an adult versus as a child. My personal evidence is strictly anecdotal, but I remember well the contrast between my daughter's naïve boldness and my own intellectual paranoia as we looked across at each other over the chess board. She was perfectly happy to make mistakes and to enjoy the moment. I struggled with the vulnerability that comes with being a novice. In a line dripping with understatement, Krakus notes, “. . . while this is difficult for an adult, a child can handle it easily.” I can attest that this is true. For a middle-aged man who made his living as a university professor, stumbling in the learning process of an activity as layered and complex as chess was humbling indeed.

I can also wholeheartedly recommend Krakus' work in this issue because, at least in my case, it caused me to rethink one of the fundamental problems of education, one that was outlined many years ago in a forgotten classic in education scholarship (Callahan, 1962). Over 60 years ago, Raymond Callahan outlined what he termed the “cult of efficiency” in American education. In a nutshell, he traced the imposition of principles of scientific management borrowed from industry upon schools and schooling. Callahan's work is perhaps more relevant today than it was in the 1960's because it illustrates for us how we got to where we are, how fundamental approaches to management and social science research have created our data-driven culture in which all things must be validated scientifically and, once so validated, must be applied systematically.

Without question, I support the collection, dissemination, and wise use of data and principles of good management in education.

Having offered that disclaimer, I believe we too often use data to paint ourselves into corners of practice through an all-or-nothing mentality. To return to the example of chess, if we ever could, through rigorous, controlled scientific research demonstrate that teaching students to play chess increases test scores in, say, reading or mathematics, why then the policy makers and curriculum mappers would be close behind mandating that all students must play chess!

The problem is that we will never prove that chess *caused* those hypothetical improved test scores. We might be able to demonstrate correlation beyond what we would expect from chance (typically 95% of the cases studied), and that would be a powerful thing. However, even in instances where a practice has been scientifically demonstrated to correlate to improved test scores, that correlation will never be 100%. We will always have cases in which the intervention fails. Despite that, our contemporary cult of efficiency would suggest that we should continue to rely on officially validated methodologies (again and again, over and over) for all students.

I would suggest a few relatively simple points to bring much needed wisdom to our use of data across education.

**We should recognize the importance of exploratory opportunities.**

Krakus' literature review on the potential of chess in education provides ample evidence, I think, to force us to take exploratory studies much more seriously. The positive impacts of chess outlined here are persuasive, even if they will never be scientifically correlated in a robust way to student test scores. In every arena from basic sportsmanship to critical thinking to literacy and numeracy, Krakus convinces me that chess is at the very least a powerful experience for *some* students. I would extend this argument to many other areas as well. From gaming through all of the arts, we need to be much more purposeful in providing exposure for our students to activities capable of enriching their lives. The narrowing of the curriculum caused by our testing culture (e.g., Berliner, 2011) is well-documented, and every time we remove enrichment from the educational menu available to students and families in favor of much more prescriptive activities aligned to standards and test, we are diminishing the educational experience in ways we have not yet begun to map. Nevertheless, I believe we can and should define diversity of intellectual experience toward personal enrichment as a reasonable educational goal and rededicate ourselves to teaching more than just the defined standards. We should acknowledge and accept our responsibility to connect students to activities and areas of study that can transform individual lives.

### **We should not limit exploratory opportunities to particular grade levels.**

Historically in American education we have viewed the middle school years as a place for exploration. I would argue that is far too limited. The issue is not what age level is best for exploratory opportunities. As individuals, we encounter new pursuits throughout the life cycle, and these activities routinely enrich not only individuals but the larger social groups. As two examples, we could point to the mid-life discovery of painting by Winston Churchill and George W. Bush. Their public exhibitions and publications of their art are powerful examples and impact the discovery of new areas of study can enrich individual lives. Beyond the personal value to the individual, however, is the impact the art produced by these two world leaders has had on those who have experienced their paintings. Beyond art criticism and reviews, we lack ways to reliably map the impact of art in society, but that hardly lessens the value the works of individuals such as Churchill and Bush shared with the larger culture. Just because we cannot predict the impact of enrichment activities on individuals, that does not negate the importance of making opportunities available.

### **Our research and policy should account for powerful examples of individual impact.**

As noted above, educational research is more or less adept at demonstrating correlation between interventions and testing outcomes. While we have qualitative methodologies that effectively track impact within selected cases, all qualitative researchers are taught to clearly state their work cannot be generalized to larger populations.

That may be true, but I would argue we need to be much more assertive in charting the impact of those individual cases on the larger group. To return once again to chess, I don't believe we will ever make a claim for chess as an established pedagogy for improving reading scores across the population. What we could do, however, is document in rich detail individual cases, individual lives, transformed by activities such as chess, and we can document to some degree the impact those transformed lives have had on society.

Interestingly, the one arena where this is most well-developed today is in athletics. We take it as an article of faith that participation in organized sports is good for students in ways that extend well beyond the sport itself and into life as a larger construct. Mostly this comes from testimonials of athletes and coaches with a degree of notoriety who offer their stories through the mass media.

I do not mean to question or diminish these attestations to the power of sport. On the contrary, I want to learn from them.

We can all point to examples of schools cutting elective programming to make additional space for teaching to tests. Very few of us can point to examples of schools reducing athletic programs to devote more time to test preparation.

There is an important lesson for us here.

What could gifted qualitative researchers learn from the public narratives that celebrate the positive impact of athletics on individual lives? These narratives are powerful because they resonate with contemporary audiences. They touch nerves, as it were.

Perhaps we could learn to find compelling stories of lives transformed by participation in high school theatre programs or instrumental music groups or visual arts or any of the other areas of interest that lie beyond the boundary of tested knowledge. Perhaps we could learn to gather and frame these stories in ways that resonate.

Krakus concludes his manuscript with the obligatory call for more research on the impact of chess on learning. I could not agree more, but I would extend that call beyond the traditional quantitative measure of correlation. I believe the deeper issue is that of enriching lives through pursuits (such as chess) with long, honorable histories of making lives more than they would have been without the activity. Using the public genres that sustain athletics within educational institutions as a roadmap, I could imagine a time in which we celebrate extra-curricular, co-curricular, and exploratory programming with full recognition of the value these activities add to individual lives and how that impact radiates out from the individuals to their larger social groups.

## References

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