

The Rewards of Teaching Bridge to Children by Douglas Wright

We often start with teaching our own children and their friends, and even perhaps our grandchildren. We often learnt as children ourselves with a grandparent teaching us Pontoon, Patience, Knockout Whist, Solo Whist and other card games.

So why should we consider teaching other children, school pupils and perhaps in a Youth Bridge Club. It is simply the pure delight that children obtain, the fun times had by all, the appreciation of how quickly youngsters learn and indeed overcoming some interesting challenges. Yes, that is why we teach youngsters.

How do we go about finding these rewards?

We can initially find them with our bridge playing friends and our bridge club members. We can invite their children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, (and of course their friends), to a card / bridge Taster Session. Everyone has a ball. I have had the pleasure of doing this on numerous occasions, including at the Bourne Club and Roehampton Club. Other teachers I know have also had great success at the Wimbledon BC and Richmond BC. There is also a superb incidental knock on effect in that some parents of the children also decide to take up bridge, as well, so you have a group of new players in their 30s / 40s.

Some of us just like the idea of teaching in schools and creating a school bridge club. A fabulous advocate of Primary School Bridge Clubs is Joan Bennett. Over the years Joan has created over 40 Primary School Bridge Clubs and recruited 100s of volunteer helpers in Berks & Bucks, Oxfordshire, Hertfordshire and Dorset. I am choosing not to delve further into her great success which can be found elsewhere, I would like to share some of the rewards, triumphs and challenges which I have personally experienced.

We can target 11 year olds, who have just joined a Secondary School or who are still in a Preparatory School, since that year 7 group provide pupils who pick up the game very quickly and provide perhaps 4 to 5 years of ongoing bridge playing in a school environment. I can remember writing to 52 Secondary Schools, hosting / running all day, Taster Sessions for the whole of the Year 7 Group in 8 Schools and creating 3 School Bridge Clubs. The experiences in each School was different; the Taster Session varied from 120 pupils in the dining hall sitting at 30 tables, for a couple of hours; up to 300 pupils with each class of pupils having a double period of bridge; through to 120 pupils playing bridge all day. The creation of the Bridge Club followed on, starting with that age group and continuing to grow with other age groups. The enthusiasm in one school was such that we even taught bridge during 6 double maths lessons to both Year 7 pupils and also to Year 9, gifted, pupils. The Headmaster and Head of Mathematics readily saw the benefits to improved mental arithmetic and logic processing.

There is a common theme which contributes to the success of Bridge in schools and that is there is a requirement for 3 aspects to be present with equal emphasis. I always relate this to a 3 leg stool, with each leg needing to be the same length for it to function and balance.

The 3 aspects are:

Buy in by Headmaster / Headmistress plus a School Teacher who champions the bridge

A parent who advocates bridge and harnesses support from other parents

An enthusiastic and empathetic Bridge Teacher

You, the enthusiastic and empathetic bridge teacher need to be mindful of the other 2 legs so that it is worth your while investing in the Taster Session, the creation of the Bridge Club and the ongoing continuity within the school, year on year. I like to think, since there has been a great team of influential people in place in Weydon Secondary School, Farnham, it is an excellent example of this working model.

The rewards of being part of this, is to see the youngsters periodically win the Minibridge Surrey Cup, to enter the Bridge Salver competition and the Surrey Cup for the first time, and for some of the pupils to take their bridge and actively play in their Sixth Form College. We must not forget what a joy it is to teach School Teachers how to play, so that they can share their enthusiasm with pupils. I even had the pleasure of teaching 3 generations of students from the same family.

These core pupils are also the foundation for Bridge Holiday Activities, to which other pupils are invited, and the Youth Bridge Clubs are formed.

I would not expect any individual Bridge Teacher to be crazy like me and approach 52 Secondary Schools, however I wanted to share with you the challenge of getting bridge into 1 School. If you wish to be successful in 1 School then perhaps you do need to approach about 10 local schools, so that you can find one balanced 3 leg stool.

I would just like to finish with some anecdotal stories highlighting some specific rewards.

At the Roehampton Club youth Taster Session, there were a mix of kids, parents and grandparents. During the second hand of Minibridge, Oscar, 7 years old, pipes up I know where the missing King is. All the parent and grandparent bridge players looked on in amazement. How do you know that Oscar? Well Oscar replies, "He started with 4 points and he has already played the Jack, so he must have the King". Yes, in all my Youth activities I am hoping to find the next world champion.

I was quietly pleased when one of my 16 years old students, played with his mother at the Bourne Club for the first time. They came 2nd.

On a day Taster Session at the Carshalton High School for Girls, I will always remember at the end of the first double lesson, which I thought had gone exceptional well, one of the girls who was dressed as a Goth, put up her hand and asked the question, "Please Sir, are we going to do the same during the next lesson", I replied "Yes, I thought we would play a few games, and why did you ask" She gingerly replied "Bridge was boring". I thought on my feet and replied, "Well I will do my best to not make it boring during the next lesson, will you give it a try?" She nodded yes and I duly found her to be the most receptive student for the rest of the day. We were both really rewarded by the end of the day.

In one Primary School we held 3 one hour, Taster Sessions for 24 pupils in three different age groups. School teachers, bridge teachers and pupils had a very enjoyable 3 hours. 17 pupils joined the Bridge Club. Children just love a fun, challenging game.

There is absolutely no reason why every bridge player should not be able to teach a handful of children the wonderful game of MiniBridge.

Quite often the Bridge Teacher just has to be the catalyst in the mix, and it is right and proper to finish with an interview by Tim Warren and Helen Attenborough, Headmistress in a school, which highlights the Rewards in a school.

In a significant move for English bridge, and a first for Surrey, Claremont Fan Court School has adopted bridge as part of the academic curriculum. Claremont is a private school in Esher, and Head of the Prep School, Mrs Helen Attenborough, made that change when she took up the role in September 2017. The Prep School covers the ages of 7-11, and the weekly curriculum lesson, led by school teacher Deb Casey, operates during the pupils' final year. There's also a separate lunchtime club, led by Meena Samani. Tim Warren spoke to Mrs Attenborough, to find out what attracted her to the teaching of bridge. TW: You've said you love card games yourself – did you play card games as a child? HA: Oh, yes, lots! The first one I remember is learning crib: my father played the game with friends, and brought me into it as soon as I was old enough to hold the cards and understand what was happening. (My parents also played bridge at home, but alas I missed out on that one...) I'm a scientist – my background is in mathematics and technology – and I know that cards did as much as anything else to underpin my sense of number.

TW: What made you want to bring bridge into the curriculum? HA: Of course, card games help children learn numbers and develop memory skills, and the children get to a stage where they have to work out probabilities, for instance, even if we don't call it that at the time. But the benefits are much deeper than that, and more important. I believe strongly in 'stealth learning' - teaching children without them realising they're being taught; you might also call it the invisible ink of education, where 'soft' life skills are acquired through the experience of learning. Card games are an excellent way of having fun, but while you're playing, you're learning, too: how to collaborate as a team, how to think about things from other people's point of view, how to make a plan, and rethink that plan if it doesn't quite work out the way you expected; in other words, perseverance. All these things help develop your social interaction skills. There's considerable emphasis now on supporting the mental and emotional well-being of children, and bridge helps here, too; we promote competition, certainly, but within a healthy atmosphere and a non-threatening environment. Our school has a strong ethos, and we place importance on developing the character of our pupils. Having to think more broadly than just themselves helps the children develop their sense of values, and become well-rounded individuals; it contributes to the kind of person they are. We might not make that learning objective explicit in the bridge sessions, but it's very much there. Bridge enables a broader range of children to represent their school. Not everyone is sporty, and not everyone's outgoing and able to interact with others as confidently as they might. Don't underestimate how children can come out of themselves and grow in stature, as they find that they, too, are good enough to be selected for the team. Overall, bridge brings a greater richness to the curriculum. TW: How might county associations like ours help you make the most of bridge? HA: Schools are always on the lookout for good sessions for INSET days. Why not design and run one on teaching bridge? I already know how good the game is as a learning aid, and you could use such a session to introduce it to other schools. TW: Thank you very much for talking to us, Mrs Attenborough, and we wish you all the best in teaching our wonderful game.