

## Education in the Ancient Greek Civilization—Lessons from the Past

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**Abstract:** Looking into the past for framing the prospects of a bright and happy future is always decided in the present. Despite its significance, the present is always dependent on the lessons learned from the past. This is true in every aspect of the human life; hence, education system is no exception to this rule. Today, every education system is subservient to the history of education. Therefore, for a better tomorrow, the human family needs to peep into the past, and mould the future in the light of the human experiences. With this philosophical approach the present study is carried out to explore the nature and structure of the education system of the ancient Greek Civilization with a view to extract some lessons from the past for the modern era. The objectives are to highlight the philosophical approach of the ancient Greeks towards the: aims, curriculum, methodology, and learning environment in their system of education; and to pinpoint the practicable lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century globalized context. The methodology adopted for the study is historical cum analytical. The most authentic sources were consulted to explore the very nature and structure of the education system of the ancient Greeks including such factors as the: aims, curriculum, methodology, and learning environment. After thorough investigation some pertinent lessons in the form of recommendations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century are also presented as a conclusion.

**Keywords:** Greek civilization, Education system, Greece, Global citizenship

### Introduction

Since the dawn of human civilization the need and importance of education is felt. Education has remained the most powerful tool for securing growth and progress ranging from personal to group, community, state, and even at grand cultural and civilization level. It has remained one of the most influencing factors of any known human civilization from around the world. The ancient Greek civilization possesses a towering position among all ancient civilizations. The reason behind the intellectual dominance of the Greeks lies in their relatively more viable and stronger education system as compared to its counterpart or any closer civilization.

The civilization of Ancient Greece emerged into the light of world history in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. Normally it is regarded as ‘coming to an end’ when Greece fell to the Romans, in 146 BC. However, major Greek kingdoms lasted longer than this. As a culture Greek civilization lasted longer still, continuing right to the end of the

ancient world ([http://history-world.org/history\\_of\\_education.htm](http://history-world.org/history_of_education.htm)).

The ancient Greek civilization consisted of a number of small city-states out of which the two prominent city-states were: Athens and Sparta. Hence, after a general description of this cherished civilization, the researchers may refer to the education systems of these two city-states due to their peculiarities and relatively prominent position among all city states of ancient Greece.

### Education System in Greece—a panoramic view

Except Sparta, over all, the formal mood of education in ancient Greek, especially in Athens, was primarily meant for males and restricted for slaves (Downey, 1957). This is evident from the fact that some city states officially prohibited education for slaves (Plutarch, 1960). However, the Spartans also taught music and dance, which was meant for strengthening the maneuverability of soldiers to prove as professional defenders (Ed.

Sienkewicz, 2007).

In the city state of Athens, the young children received their education at home, or on occasions they were taught through a 'pedagogue' in individual capacity. Usually moral education was imparted at this stage. Reading and writing together with drawing and counting were also taught to children. Memorization of poetry was also rampant (Mavrogenes, 1980). Furthermore, for the general folk up to elementary level education was available but higher education was not for all and sundry (Downey, 1957). Similarly children of higher social class had better chances of receiving education as their parents could afford their kids' education (Plutarch, n.d). Contrary to this, the poor had little chances of education due to their financial constraints (Plutarch, n.d). Furthermore, poor families used to indulge their children in work for life-earning.

#### *Aims / Goals of Education*

The prime objective of education was to impart Physical training which was thought as a pre-requisite for developing and strengthening one's appearance, potential and endurance for war, and sound health (Plutarch, n.d.). Overall the Greeks believed in preparing the individual for adult activities as a good citizen. Of course, the city states differed from one another in some respects; however, the overall aim was almost the same. Together with this uniformity there was relative difference among the various city states' approach to education such as the authoritative and military-minded Sparta and the democratic Athens where the aim of education was 'good defenders' and 'good citizens' respectively ([http://history-world.org/history\\_of\\_education.htm](http://history-world.org/history_of_education.htm)). Athenians were more interested in producing such individuals that may have spiritual, moral, and physical strength (<http://www.eduvinet.de/eduvinet/gr001.htm>).

#### *Curriculum*

Curriculum included various subjects such as biology and chemistry from natural sciences. Rhetoric or oratory, geometry, astronomy and meteorology constituted the curriculum at secondary school level (Aristophanes, 2002). The pursuit of these subjects was highly valued in Athens as the Athenians thought the study of these subjects is necessary for the all-round development of individuals. Furthermore, better academic performance was considered the fundamental force for gaining recognition, reputation, and prominence in political and military endeavors (Plutarch, 1960).

Besides the above-mentioned subjects, epic poems like Homer's 'Odyssey' and 'Iliad'--were thought significant for study. Memorization of the text of such poems, followed by mock performance on the stage was a common practice in Athens ([http://history-world.org/history\\_of\\_education.htm](http://history-world.org/history_of_education.htm)).

#### *Methodology*

Besides the afore-mentioned methodology where inductive and deductive approaches were suggested by the prominent scholars, still the habit of rote memorization was prevalent in nearly all city states. This was coupled by a fear of punishment was a sort of motivation to be disciplined and law-abiding. This was in a sense similar to an ancient Egyptian inscription of a child which goes thus, "Thou didst beat me and knowledge entered my head." ([http://history-world.org/history\\_of\\_education.htm](http://history-world.org/history_of_education.htm)).

#### *Learning Environment*

Spartan boys were supposed to spend most of their time in the school. For formal schooling children were detached from their parents to remain in the military Barracks which was sometimes a very terrible experience for the young children. For almost 5 years children had to stay with adult military men in the barracks (Adkins, 2005). The most alarming situation was

that the children were intentionally kept in scarcity of food and dress so as to compel them to go for theft because it was considered a necessary skill to be used in military life. Punishment and severe physical activities were the routine of their daily life (Adkins, 2005). Similarly in mock performances the learners were expected to successful maneuver against the Helot and kill the same (Ed. Sienkewicz, 2007).

### *Women Education*

Women education was another differentiating aspect between the Athenian and Spartan models. As Spartans believed to impart the same type of education to the girls so that they may serve the nation against any aggression. This was supervised and controlled by the state. They were trained in throwing discuss, javelins, wrestling and running. Competitive events for women were arranged on annual basis at Heraea of Elis, (Pomeroy, 2002). Besides physical training girls were taught singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments (Pomeroy, 2002).

### *State Patronage*

In most of the city states of Greek there were little public-funded schools, except Sparta. Well up families usually carried out the education of their children on their own. Only the Spartan system was state controlled while the rest of city states had no direct and organized, state-sponsored education system (<http://www.timemaps.com/civilization-ancient-greeks>).

### **The Athenian Model**

**Gymnasium:** This word is typical with Greek civilization. As physical strength was the main objective of almost all city states, hence initially some people kept their children under the supervision of a private teacher called *paidotribe*. This was followed by a more systematic training in *gymnasium* (Ed. Sienkewicz, 2007). At around 420 BC secondary education expanded which

gave birth to a very serious controversy between traditionalists and the then progressives. The former resisted intellectualism as according to their opinion this would harm nationalist interests (Aristophanes, 2002). However, the modernists advocated their stance by the argument that besides physical strength, the intellectual growth of the individuals is of immense importance (Downey, 1980).

In the next phase boys continued their education in the *ephebic* training. This stage was completed at the age of 18 (Ed. Sienkewicz, 2007). At around 5<sup>th</sup> century *ephebic* training turned into a complete military education, which was carried to perfection with an additional 02 years military service. This paved the way for a more advanced schooling system (Ed. Sienkewicz, 2007).

As poor families had relatively rare access to education, hence, one of the cherished leaders (*Solon*) at Athens tried to reform the situation by offering vocational training for their children (Plutarch, 1960). This way the poor people in Athens were somehow projected to a better position.

### **Social Aspect of the Educative Process**

Civic and socio-cultural aspect was also kept in consideration during education and training. In this connection music, dancing, and playing various musical instruments such as: lyre, harp, and flute, were included in education (Aristophanes, 2002). The Athenians did this with a hope to maintain and transmit their cultural traditions to the next generation so as to protect their values and traditions.

### **The Spartan Model**

Spartans were more interested in military dominance; hence they established such a system of education that may cater for their nationalist taste. In this respect the training at *Agoge* was of special significance.

**Agoge:** This was a sort of military camp as the children were initially trained in basic physical activities followed by rigorous training (Adkins, 2005). During this long training session, the intellectual aspects of reading, writing, and arithmetic was not that much valued.

**Ephebe:** The learners who undertook graduation from agoge at the age of 18 were termed as ephebes. This was followed by practical orientation in the use of weapons of war (Ed. Sienkewicz, 2007). At the age of twenty the trained individual was now ready to be an active and loyal soldier of Sparta (Adkins 2005).

### **Some Specific Characteristics of the two Models**

The following points highlight the outstanding traits of the two systems of education.

The Spartan System was an old-fashioned Greek style of education in which the state was in full command of the system. Individual was to be prepared for securing national interests against the threats neighboring city-states. This seemed as if the Spartan society was a war-mongering one.

The aim of education was to prepare the citizens for war. Military professionalism was the prime objective of the educative process.

Curriculum was meant for enhancing the physical strength of the learners. Physical activities such as: running, leaping, jumping, javelin throwing, boxing, military training, wrestling, and hunting. Intellectual aspect was given secondary position which was developed through: music, religious ceremonies, and exposure to the discussions of elderly and experienced people so as to improve their debating and conversational capacities. Religious education was altogether neglected. Physical education through physical activities was emphasized.

Despite rigorous style of discipline that prevailed

in nearly all institutions, there are evidences of friendly relationships that existed among the teacher and the taught, (Tanveer, 2005).

Religious was not that much decisive in the routine life of the Spartans. It was least appealing to them as compared to nationalism. Hence, there was no such emphasis on religious education. Fostering nationalism and rule of law was the main concern (Tanveer, 2005).

Ethical education of the learners was more dependent on the parents. Heroic stories, often legendary, were told to the young learners that consisted of ethical messages. In simple words the ethical aspect of the learners was addressed by parents at home where heroic stories were used for inculcating ethical and moral values among the learners.

As mentioned earlier that the focus of education was the preparation of strong defenders, so immediate after the age of 18, students were offered training in the use of various weapons of war. Furthermore, they were to serve in military for 20 to 30 years so as to be remembered as good citizens.

As far as the nature and structure of *Primary Education* is concerned, usually the young children were taught at homes till the age of 7 years. Afterwards, such children were taught in boarding houses that were under state control. There, the children were taught how to abide by the law, to be nationalist in orientation. Training in such aspects continued till the age of 18, after which purely military training was to start. There was a little difference in the Spartan and Athenian model of education.

### **The Athenian Education System**

Up to the age of seven years, usually all children had to stay at home where their parents were supposed to supervise them. Afterwards they were admitted to primary schools where they were offered training in physical activities such

as: athletics, dancing and music, literature together with drawing, arithmetic, reading and writing skills. This stage continued till the attainment of the age of fifteen, (Tanveer, 2005).

Despite having state-controlled picture, the Athenian system of education was not just state controlled because the Athenian thought that other aspect of the learner's personality was also important. Here, civic responsibility was preferred as compared to their Spartan counterparts who wanted to prepare just good defenders. The Athenians were more concerned about preparing good citizens rather than just good defenders. This way a relatively more balanced education system was prevalent in Athens. Girls education was somehow restricted to household matters which was in sharp contrast to the Spartan model where girls were also involved in military training etc. The methodology was based on the principles of 'learning by doing'.

Relatively the educative process was more relax as there was a cordial relationship between the teacher and the taught.

Spartan approach was, in a sense, autocratic in nature. Students were subjected to state philosophy and strict external discipline where reasoning was prohibited. In sharp contrast the Athenian model was democratic, relatively more relax and student-oriented. State involvement was lesser as compared to Sparta. Reasoning was the foundation of learning in Athens. Spartans prepared individuals for war, while the Athenians prepared the students both for war and peace. Spartans believed in physical training while Athenians emphasized the training of the mind. Furthermore, Spartans offered uniform education both for boys and girls, but the Athenians believed in separate style of education for both the genders as per their relative strengths and potentialities (Tanveer, 2005).

The Greeks exerted tremendous impact on the

rest of World civilizations even to the present day. This is because the ancient Greek produced some un-surpassing philosophers who are regarded as the torch-bearers of knowledge even to the present day. The most influential scholars were: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—to name a few.

Among all Greek scholars Socrates (469-399 BC), possesses a towering position as he is considered the pioneer of laying the foundation of philosophical inquiry to search for 'truth' in this universe. Born in the skirts of the city state of Athens in 469 BC, he remained an outstanding intellectual of Athens. It is said that he possessed a sort of ugly complexion, yet having very beautiful nature. His father, Sophroniscus, was a sculptor; hence he learned this art but soon gave it up as he was interested in finding out 'truth' in this universe. He was often seen in contemplation. On occasions, he remained busy with young people discussing matters related to morality, governance, and politics. He was an excellent defender and participated in a war against Sparta in 432 BC, wherein he exhibited exceptional feats of bravery. He was regarded as the wisest person in Athens. People used to rally round him for asking questions. Many of his works were not properly recorded. However, he discussed nearly all aspects of human life including education. Regarding education, he believed that the very aim of education is to dispel error and to find out Truth. About knowledge he believed that it is the only real virtue which is necessary for freedom, right action, and for the art of living. Furthermore, its acquisition is possible only through contemplation and rigorous thinking coupled with life experiences. Questioning method is associated with Socrates, hence he appreciated pertinent questions. He believed that students are not passive learners; hence they are not to be subjected to blind adherence to authority. They must be given ample freedom to raise questions regarding any human matter and the teacher is supposed to answer and

satisfy the learner in the most passionate and affectionate manner. Students were supposed to search for 'truth' by asking questions, discussing issues of life, and carrying out such conversations that are meant for academic purposes. Students should discover 'truth' and 'reality' by themselves rather than following others blindly. They should be able to observe, analyze, and duly draw conclusions based on the rigor of reasoning (Tanveer, 2005).

This method is so universal that it is prevalent in the educational circles even today. It is most appropriate especially for reaching generalizations after analysis, classification and interpretation of various ideas. Socrates ushered forth some very prominent disciples, Plato being the most outstanding.

Plato (427 – 348 BC) was born in one of the most respectable family of Athens. He got fame in his early life as a mathematician, musician, logician, debater, and as a poet. He was an exceptional wrestler. He participated in three battles and won fame as a warrior. With the execution of Socrates, Plato left Athens and wandered for about twelfth years during the time in which he studied mathematics and geometry. At the age of 40 he founded his academy where he taught till his death. He is the author of a book, 'The Republic', a masterpiece especially in governance and politics (Tanveer, 2005). With Plato the aim of education was the welfare and goodwill of individuals as well as society. Being a rationalist he believed in the finality of wisdom. He thought of knowledge as fixed entity, while ideas are changeable.

Plato identified certain stage of education and presented the relevant mechanism of how to carry out the educative process for the same. The first stage was from birth to 06 years during which children were to stay with parents for moral education and to remain free to play with other children. The second stage starts from age seven

to seventeen years. This age is marked by rigorous physical practices together with a study of literature, music, and basic arithmetic. The third stage was from age 18 to 20 which was meant for military orientation. Students had to develop professionalism in warfare. The fourth stage is from the age of 20 to 30 where advanced mathematics was to be mastered by the learners so that it can be used for exploring mathematics relationship with the outward reality and truth. Regarding higher education, Plato is of the view that only brilliant students be admitted to this level who have the potential to contribute to the society (Tanveer, 2005). The fifth stage is from 30-35 which as per Plato's views, is reserved for the study of dialectics because the study of dialectics requires ample maturity on the part of the learner so as to grasp the fundamental principles of reality. The next and final stage is from age 35 to 50 in which the individual is in a position to address practical life as a philosopher ruler. At the age of 50, contemplation on the essence of truth and reality is the focus of the individual together with a practical orientation and participation in social and political life. Regarding teaching methodology Plato detested outward or external compulsions and strongly advocated that education should be sort of amusement. He thought, "it is better for a learner to be a free man than to be a slave in the acquisition of knowledge", (Tanveer, 2005). Plato practically demonstrated this principle in his academic life as he was an idealist but his pupil was in sharp contrast to him a realist—Aristotle.

**Aristotle (384 – 322 BC):** Born in Stagira in a physician's home, Aristotle had exposure to the royal court as his father was a close friend of the king of Macedonia. At the age of 18, he was admitted in the famous learning center, 'Plato's Academy' in Athens. Due to his intelligence, he was called by Plato as 'the mind of the school'. He was the teacher of Alexander—the Great. He

established a school of his own in Athens. He is regarded as the founder and pioneer of idealism. His thoughts are the foundation stones equally in the academic and socio-cultural, and political aspects of life. He presented some practicable ideas related to education.

He believed that the aim of education is to spend a happy life. He thought of education as, “creation of a sound mind in a sound body”. In the sphere of educational curriculum, he suggested: Gymnastic for sportsmanship, appetite, and control on one’s passions; Music and Literature for moral and intellectual refinement; Mathematics for sharpening deductive and inductive reasoning; Physics and Astronomy together with citizenship training was also suggested to be part of the curriculum, (Tanveer, 2005).

The teaching methodology as proposed by Aristotle is based on his realist outlook. He believed in seeking truth and reality in the material objects of this universe together with the ground realities of the social life of man. In this connection, deductive and inductive reasoning was his main weapon which he applied to both objective and subjective phenomena. He is regarded as the father of modern sciences. He believed in almost the same stages of education as presented by his great teacher—Plato.

### **Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The study of human civilization, especially the ancient Greece reveals that they were the most intellectual people ever lived on earth at that time. Their thoughts and ideas are that much accurate and real that the same are applicable even in this postmodern era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Greeks, despite their division in many small city states, were one people, distinguished from the rest of civilizations. As compared to any other counterpart civilization, the Greeks had a more

potential system of education. The aims and objectives; the content or curriculum; the teaching methodology; teaching environment; state involvement or patronage, that were discussed in this article reveals that the Greeks were in the real sense of the term the precursors of educational thoughts and ideas. They established their education systems as per the demand of their respective city state. They strictly followed the prevalent systems of their city state so as to achieve their nationalist ideals. Especially the Athenians had the most sophisticated and modern system of education as it was based on the cherished ideals of democracy.

Keeping in view the nature and structure of the ancient Greeks, it can safely be concluded that any educational system that does not meet the fundamental concerns of the respective society, is susceptible to failure. Furthermore, the educative process must be restriction-free; it should develop the potentialities of the learners so as to enable the individual to leave a happy life. The knowledge, skill, and attitudes of the learners be developed to meet the existing and the emerging challenges of this globalized World. The lessons can be numerous, however, for the sake of precision some of these may be: determining philosophical ideals to be achieved through education; inculcating respect for cultural diversity, tolerance, and human rights; democracy and governance; global citizenship and international understanding; and justice and peace. More importantly, learning from the past is possible only when the good and bad decisions of the past are analyzed in the specific context and to reach a reasoned conclusion. So the ‘text and context’ aspect needs to be considered in selecting the fundamental aspects of the educative process such as: aims, content, methodology, learning environment etc.—to name a few.

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