

Isocrates, the Athenian educator and writer of speeches, had a profound effect upon education in the ancient Greek world. Both the methods and objectives of schooling were altered thanks to his considerable contributions. And his theory of education affected not only the training of the young, but also changed the way in which Greek thinkers spoke and wrote.

Born in 436 BC, Isocrates was influenced by two important fifth century thinkers, Gorgias and Socrates. Gorgias was the *Sophist par excellence*, a highly successful teacher of the art of persuasion. It is from him that Isocrates acquired a high estimation of the value of rhetoric in public life. From the famous philosopher Socrates Isocrates acquired a love for teaching and the belief that learning is a prerequisite for a meaningful life. Incorporating the thoughts and methods of especially these two men, Isocrates sought to develop a formal system of education as had not been done before.

Isocrates did maintain some of the traditional Greek views on education; for example, he shared the widely-held conviction that all training should prepare one for a life that contributes to the well-being of the *polis*. He reinforced the objective in education of developing a person's moral and intellectual qualities. According to Isocrates, a person who is properly educated is someone who is able to respond well to the situations of daily life; who knows how to react to particular concerns and issues that may confront one unexpectedly; who is decent and honourable in dealing with others; and who is not easily affected by extreme fortune or disaster.

Acquiring the ability to reason and speak well is the main goal of Isocrates' educational theory. In fact, he believed that the art of persuasion should serve both one's intellectual and moral development. This high view of rhetoric was different from the popular attitude against the Sophists, who suffered bad press for their apparent relativism and overly pragmatic, selfish use of eloquence. Seeing value in the Sophists' teaching of critical reading, effective writing, and good speech, Isocrates took over many of their methods while maintaining the conviction that proper behaviour and good morals belong to the domain of education. He

went so far as to state that people become "better and worthier" if they learn how to communicate well. For rhetoric helped one not only to understand and appreciate others better, but also to assist in finding one's own position in relation to them.

The best measure of the success of education, according to Isocrates, was the student. Students who are esteemed by their fellow-citizens, who know their place in the city-state and contribute to it, and who conduct their own affairs without reproach, testify to a good schooling. Accordingly Isocrates places great emphasis upon the role of the teacher in the training of the young. Rather than developing a system, he stressed the 'magisterial' approach, in which the character, behaviour, and speech of the teacher is critical. This approach was not novel, for it had long been the Greek view that education was based on a close relationship between a (senior) teacher and a (junior) student. It may be worth noting that as a teacher Isocrates enjoyed a tremendous reputation.

As was stated above, rhetoric was deemed crucial for the development of moral character and intellectual advancement. Other subjects, such as geometry, music, grammar and astronomy, were considered to be of secondary importance, as they were not employed (so Isocrates believed) in daily life. These subjects are nevertheless useful, as they help to develop discipline, thus functioning as a propaedeutic for others. The lesser subjects help one to work out specific problems, and so to focus the mind on particulars. Such "gymnastics of the mind" exercise the brain cells and prepare them for serious applications in real life.

As to the method of education, Isocrates held that imitation, *mimesis*, was the basic rule. Rhetoric and writing skills were best taught by example and practice. And not only was the student to copy the material, he was instructed also to imitate the teacher. Of course Isocrates did not believe that "nurture" could alter "nature", but he did hold that the example of the teacher directly affected the development of the character of the student. As a consequence, the value of education for society increased, and with it greater commitment to the formal, public schooling of the young.

In part due to his emphasis on eloquence, Isocrates appropriated the educational value of poetry for prose. This was a new development with considerable consequences for the writing of Greek prose works. While earlier generations had employed the epic poetry of Homer, the lyric

poetry of religious and civic festivals, and other verse as the material for education, Isocrates promoted the shift to studying historical writings, speeches, and the like. This shift was destined to affect the way in which Greek was written and spoken, as the qualities of poetry were now to be ascribed to prose. Furthermore, philosophy and history became distinct subjects in Isocrates' educational system, although they were not so much pursued in a scientific manner as with an eye to their educational value.

Lastly, a note about the larger goals of education according to Isocrates. While he maintained the conviction that schooling should serve the interests of the individual city-state, Isocrates also believed that education should serve the Greek-speaking world as a whole. Living in an age of change and, to some extent, decline, Isocrates hoped that education would assist all Greeks in forming their identity as a "nation". Sharing with others the same culture, history, and ideals, Greeks would become united through a common system of pan-hellenic education. In this way, he hoped, the future of Greece would be brighter than its present.