

Education in Athens

by: Phyllis Young Forsyth

The subject of education has been prominent in the news of late: students, teachers, and parents alike are all concerned with the impact of a declining enrolment, with the closure of neighborhood schools, with a lack of positions for young and well-trained teachers, even with the very goals and philosophy of education itself. At such a time of concern, it is perhaps of interest to look into the past, and examine what "education" meant in classical Athens, a place where many of our educational roots may be said to lie.

To an ancient Athenian education was paideia, a term which can be translated as "the art concerned with children". The chief aim of this "art" was an ethical one: to provide a morally-rich education that would turn Athenian boys into good and useful citizens ready to participate in their democratic city-state. The means to this noble end was what we would call today a liberal education, that is, a non-vocational type of training that tried to educate the "whole man" and not turn out a highly skilled specialist. Indeed, to an Athenian, the ideal of the "well-rounded man" was all-important, and the teaching of specific trades/skills was left to various apprenticeships outside the formal scholastic atmosphere.

The first, or elementary, stage of this paideia began at the age of six, when Athenian boys were introduced to the basic curriculum of reading, writing, arithmetic, music and poetry. At about the same time, physical education also began, since the Athenians were convinced that a sound body was as important as a sound mind. A boy would go to the palaestra (wrestling-ground) to practice wrestling, boxing, running, jumping, and even dancing. This physical education would normally take place in the cooler mornings, while the afternoons were reserved for attending the open-air "classrooms" of the elementary school.

Elementary schooling would usually end at the age of fourteen. At that age, poorer boys would become apprentices and learn a trade; boys from wealthier families, however could afford to enter the secondary level of education. Here they would engage in advanced study of mathematics, rhetoric, and literature; equally important was the study of civic life, and these students would regularly attend public meetings and the law courts in order to prepare themselves for their own future roles in Athens. Secondary education came to an end at eighteen, when Athenian youths would receive two years of basic military training--a citizen, after all, was expected to defend his city-state as well as participate in its privileges.

Athenians who desired a post-secondary education could, if they had the money, hire itinerant teachers called Sophists to instruct them. Unfortunately, these Sophists were of uneven quality, and while some were true seekers after higher knowledge, others were teachers of expedience who taught their pupils "how to win friends and influence people" through the use of persuasive rhetoric. There arose, however, an alternative form of higher education when the philosopher Plato opened his Academy, a school which has often been called the first European university. Later, Aristotle would found his university, the Lyceum.

An Athenian, however, did not have to enrol in a formal school to get a "higher education", for the city of Athens itself was full of educational opportunities: the finest drama of Greece could be seen in its theatres, men like Socrates walked its streets to share ideas with others, poets and artists from all over the Greek world flocked here, turning Athens into the intellectual centre of the classical world. Indeed, to be an Athenian was to live in an atmosphere of continuous education.

Nonetheless, there were problems in the Athenian educational system. As must be obvious from all that has been said, education was available to men and not women, who were expected to learn only those domestic skills needed by an Athenian wife; in addition, higher education was for the wealthy elite and not for the children of poorer families. Schools were privately run and tuition fees were high, making even elementary education a burden on the poorer members of society. But, if it was not perfect, still the Athenian educational system was advanced for its time and laid the foundations for much of Western education as we know it today. We have received the heritage of Athens, and, like the Athenians, we must continue to strive for true excellence in education at all levels.