

EDUCATION IN ANCIENT GREECE: STRUCTURES, PRACTICES, AND INFLUENCES¹

A educação na Grécia antiga: estruturas, práticas e influências

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Abstract

Education in Ancient Greece played a crucial role in shaping Western society. This article analyzes the various dimensions of the Greek educational system, from its origins to the practices and ideals that shaped its culture. It discusses the significant differences between the city-states of Athens and Sparta, the pedagogical methods employed, and the philosophical influences that permeated education. Through critical analysis, this study examines how these educational systems reflect the values and priorities of each polis and their lasting impact on the development of contemporary societies.

Resumo

A educação na Grécia Antiga desempenhou um papel fundamental na formação da sociedade ocidental. Este artigo explora as diversas facetas do sistema educacional grego, desde as suas origens até às práticas e ideais que moldaram a cultura. Serão discutidas as diferenças entre as cidades-estado de Atenas e Esparta, os métodos de ensino e as influências filosóficas que permeavam a educação. Através de uma análise crítica, este estudo investiga como esses sistemas refletem os valores e prioridades de cada *pólis* e o impacto duradouro que tiveram nas sociedades posteriores.

Keywords: *Education; Ancient Greece; Athens; Sparta; Philosophy; Pedagogy.*

Palavras Chave: *Educação; Grécia Antiga; Atenas; Esparta; Filosofia; Pedagogia.*

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INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greece is often considered the cradle of Western civilization, standing out for its contributions in areas such as philosophy, arts, politics, and especially education (Jaeger, 1944; Dodds, 1973). The Greek educational system played an essential role in the cultural and political formation of its city-states, shaping the values, behaviors, and mentalities that marked the society of the time and influenced future generations.

The Greek educational model was not uniform, varying significantly between the different city-states. While Athens prioritized holistic education, centered on the intellectual, moral, and physical development of individuals, Sparta focused on military discipline and preparation for war (Vernant, 1980; Cartledge, 2003). These two systems reflect the distinct priorities and values of each city-state, offering a comprehensive view of the educational dynamics of the time.

Furthermore, Greek education was deeply influenced by philosophy, being marked by the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and excellence (Plato, n.d.; Aristotle, 1996). Philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle not only shaped the critical and ethical thinking of their time but also laid the foundations for Western educational systems. The Socratic method, for example, introduced the practice of questioning as a way to stimulate reflection and learning (Dodds, 1973).

This article aims to explore the educational structures and practices of the main city-states of Ancient Greece, as well as their philosophical and cultural influences. It will analyze the differences between Athens and Sparta, the pedagogical methods used, and the relevance of education in the formation of the Greek citizen. Therefore, it intends to highlight the importance of education in Ancient Greece as a pillar of civilization and a legacy that endures to this day.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Education in Ancient Greece evolved significantly over the centuries, reflecting the social, political, and cultural transformations that shaped the Greek world (Gomes, n.d.; Dodds, 1973). Initially, during the Mycenaean period (1600-1100 BC), the transmission of knowledge was oral, with an emphasis on traditions and heroic values that perpetuated the memory of ancestors. This phase was characterized by a strong link between education and mythology, which served as a moral and cultural foundation (Arnold, 2023).

With the collapse of Mycenaean civilization and the advent of the Dark Ages (1100-800 BC), education became limited, centered on local communities and survival. It was only in the Archaic period (800-500 BC) that city-states began to emerge, establishing the foundations for more structured educational systems. This period was marked by the development of the Greek alphabet and writing, which allowed the preservation of literary works, such as those of Homer, fundamental to the cultural formation of Greece (Taylor, n.d.).

During the Classical period (500-323 BC), education reached its peak, reflecting the needs and values of the different city-states. Athens, known as the cultural and intellectual center of Greece, developed an educational system focused on civic education, rhetoric, and philosophy. On the other hand, Sparta, with its militarized society, structured education to prepare disciplined warriors loyal to the state. This duality reflects the diversity of Greek experiences and the way education was adapted to the priorities of each city-state (Vernant, 1980; Cartledge, 2003).

Greek education was also influenced by interactions with other cultures, such as Persian and Egyptian, which brought new knowledge and techniques. In the Hellenistic period (323-31 BC), after the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek culture expanded to the Middle East and North Africa, promoting a fusion of traditions and educational practices that further enriched the Greek legacy (Arnold, 2023).

In short, the historical context of education in Ancient Greece reveals a constant evolution, shaped by the social and political needs of each era. This trajectory demonstrates how education was not only a reflection of social structures, but also an engine of cultural and political transformation, whose impacts endure to this day (Jaeger, 1944).

2. Education in Athens

2.1. *Educational Structure*

In Athens, education aimed to form democratic citizens, capable of actively participating in civic life and public debates. This system encompassed different stages, adapted to the physical and intellectual development of young people, and reflected the emphasis on *paideia*, the Greek ideal of excellence and balance (Jaeger, 1944).

Education in Athens was divided into several phases, beginning in childhood and progressing into adulthood:

- **Childhood (up to 7 years):** During this phase, education was informal and domestic. Mothers or nannies cared for the children, transmitting basic cultural values and preparing them for formal education. For boys, parents ensured that, from the age of 7, they received adequate instruction outside the home (Gomes, n.d.).
- **Elementary School (7 to 14 years):** At this stage, boys attended schools called *grammatikoi*, where they learned fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, music played a central role, teaching ethical and cultural values through instruments such as the lyre and singing (Taylor, n.d.).
- **Secondary Education (ages 14 to 18):** From the age of 14, education became more specialized. Young people were introduced to the study of philosophy, rhetoric, and physical education, which became crucial for the formation of competent citizens. Physical practices took place in *gymnasiums*, which also functioned as centers for socialization and debate (Plato, n.d.).
- **Ephebia (18 to 20 years):** This was a transitional stage to adulthood. *Ephebes*, young men of military age, underwent rigorous training that combined military instruction, citizenship practice, and participation in religious and political ceremonies (Vernant, 1980).

3. FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF EDUCATION

Educational methods and content in Athens were diverse, encompassing pedagogical practices, arts, and moral education.

- **Teaching Methods:** Teaching methods in Athens valued interaction between teacher and student, encouraging intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. The Socratic method, which was based on dialogue and the formulation of questions, was widely used to promote reflection and self-knowledge (Aristotle, 1996). This model contrasted with more authoritarian approaches, common in other contexts.
- **Arts and Music:** The arts, especially music and poetry, were considered essential elements for character development. Music, in particular, not only provided aesthetic training but also helped in discipline and the construction of ethical values. The works of poets such as Homer were used to teach heroic and civic virtues (Jaeger, 1944).
- **Women's Education:** Women's education in Athens was limited and focused primarily on domestic tasks. However, women of upper classes could access some private instruction, learning to read and manage the household. The exclusion of women from formal education reflects the restrictions imposed by the female social role in classical Athens (Cartledge, 2003).
- **Private Education and Teachers:** Education in Athens was predominantly private, and parents hired tutors to teach their children. Grammatistés taught reading and writing; kitharistés taught music, and paidotribés were responsible for physical education. Philosophers such as Socrates and, later, Plato and Aristotle also played crucial roles in higher education, founding schools that shaped Western thought (Dodds, 1973; Aristotle, 1996).

4. Education in Sparta

4.1. Educational Structure

Spartan education was deeply structured to meet the needs of a militarized society, being considered one of the most rigorous in Ancient Greece (Cartledge, 2003). From an early age, young Spartans were immersed in the Agoge system, a state program that molded boys into disciplined warriors, physically fit and morally aligned with the values of loyalty and sacrifice for the State (Vernant, 1980). The following are the stages through which age ranges were also important:

- **Childhood (up to age 7):** During the first years of life, boys remained at home under the supervision of their parents, but were already subjected to strict discipline and basic teachings of obedience and resistance (Cartledge, 2003). From the age of 7, they left the family environment to join the Agogé.
- **Agoge (7 to 20 years):** The military training regime included several phases:
 - **Physical training:** Young people performed intense exercises to develop strength, endurance, and agility, such as running, wrestling, swimming, and combat with weapons (Jaeger, 1944).
 - **Moral training:** Ethical and disciplinary training aimed to instill values such as courage, self-control, and loyalty to the State (Vernant, 1980).
 - **Intellectual training:** Although the focus was on military practice, the boys also learned to read and write enough to understand orders and laws, in addition to being educated in music and dance, used in religious and social contexts (Cartledge, 2003).
 - **Survival tests:** Young people were frequently subjected to extreme tests, such as starvation or facing physical adversity, to stimulate resilience and cunning (Taylor, n.d.).
- **Military Service (20 to 30 years):** After completing the Agoge, men became members of the Spartan army. During this phase, they continued to train and live in military communities, dedicating themselves entirely to the defense of the polis (Vernant, 1980).

5. FUNDAMENTAL ELEMENTS OF EDUCATION

The education of Spartan women was remarkably advanced compared to other Greek city-states (Cartledge, 2003). Although they did not participate in the military system, women were encouraged to practice sports and maintain physical health, as it was believed that strong mothers would give birth to strong children. Furthermore, they received basic training in reading and domestic management, reflecting the importance attributed to their role in the perpetuation of Spartan society (Vernant, 1980; Jaeger, 1944).

6. PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES

Philosophy was one of the greatest contributions of Ancient Greece to Western education and culture, shaping the critical thinking and pedagogical methods of several generations (Dodds, 1973). Three thinkers stood out for their significant impact on educational practices and teaching ideals:

- **Socrates:** Known for developing the Socratic method, Socrates introduced a form of teaching based on dialogue and inquiry. This method encouraged students to question, reflect, and seek the truth through questions and answers, promoting active and critical learning (Dodds, 1973). Socrates' influence was significant in the ethical and moral formation of individuals.
- **Plato:** A disciple of Socrates, Plato founded the Academy, considered the first institution of higher learning in the West. In his work *The Republic*, Plato described an ideal vision of education, in which rulers should be philosophers trained from childhood. He advocated a hierarchical education, focusing on moral and intellectual development, aimed at creating wise and just leaders (Plato, n.d.; Jaeger, 1944).
- **Aristóteles:** Aluno de Platão e tutor de Alexandre, o Grande, Aristóteles enfatizou a importância da lógica, da observação empírica e da experiência prática na educação. Fundador do Liceu, desenvolveu um currículo abrangente que incluía ciências naturais, ética, política e retórica. Para Aristóteles, a educação deveria ser equilibrada, promovendo o desenvolvimento do corpo, mente e caráter (Aristotle, 1996; Jaeger, 1944).

- **Aristotle:** A student of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great, Aristotle emphasized the importance of logic, empirical observation, and practical experience in education. Founder of the Lyceum, he developed a comprehensive curriculum that included natural sciences, ethics, politics, and rhetoric. For Aristotle, education should be balanced, promoting the development of body, mind, and character (Aristotle, 1996; Jaeger, 1944).

The influence of these philosophers transcended temporal boundaries, providing the foundations for modern Western thought and educational systems (Dodds, 1973). Their ideas on knowledge, virtue, and citizenship continue to inspire contemporary pedagogical practices.

7. TEACHING METHODS

Teaching methods in Ancient Greece were characterized by interaction between teachers and students, promoting critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and moral development (Jaeger, 1944). These practices varied among the city-states, but some common characteristics can be highlighted:

- **Socratic Method:** Developed by Socrates, this method was based on dialogue and constant questioning. Socrates believed that knowledge emerged through reflection and debate, encouraging students to explore their own ideas and challenge assumptions (Plato, n.d.). This method is considered one of the pillars of critical teaching and continues to influence modern pedagogical practices.
- **Learning Through Imitation:** In primary education, young people learned by observing and imitating their teachers. This method was especially used in artistic activities, such as music and poetry, where students repeated verses and melodies until they had completely assimilated them (Taylor, n.d.).
- **Physical and Moral Education:** The integration of physical education and ethics was central to the Greek educational system, especially in Athens. The practice of sports in the academies not only strengthened the body but also promoted values such as discipline, respect, and cooperation. Masters, known as paidotribes, supervised these activities, ensuring that the students' character was shaped in parallel with their physical development (Cartledge, 2003; Jaeger, 1944).

- **Use of Literature and Poetry:** Texts by authors such as Homer played a fundamental role in education, being used to teach heroic virtues, civic responsibility, and love for the homeland. Teachers encouraged the memorization and recitation of these texts, considering them essential tools for moral and cultural development (Taylor, n.d.).
- **Private Education:** Education in Athens was predominantly private, with specialized teachers hired by parents. Teachers, such as the *grammatistés*, taught reading and writing; the *kitharistés*, music; and the *paidotribés*, physical education. This segmentation allowed students to receive more diverse and in-depth training in different areas of knowledge (Vernant, 1980; Jaeger, 1944).
- **Debates and Rhetoric:** Training in rhetoric was a prominent feature of secondary education in Athens. Young people were trained to speak in public, to formulate arguments, and to defend ideas—essential skills for political and civic life (Plato, n.d.; Dodds, 1973).

These teaching methods stood out for integrating practical, intellectual, and ethical disciplines, reflecting the Greek ideal of balance between body, mind, and character (Jaeger, 1944).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Education in Ancient Greece was an essential pillar for the cultural, political, and social development of its city-states. Both the Athenian model, with its focus on the integral development of the citizen, and the Spartan model, centered on military discipline and loyalty to the State, represent distinct but complementary views on the importance of education for society (Jaeger, 1944; Vernant, 1980).

The emphasis on critical thinking, civic education, and the balance between body, mind, and character stand out as enduring ideals that transcend time. These values, deeply rooted in Greek education, have shaped not only Western civilization but also modern pedagogical thought. The influence of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle continues to inspire contemporary educational systems, promoting the pursuit of knowledge, truth, and virtue.

Furthermore, the diversity of Greek educational systems offers valuable lessons on the need to adapt education to the social and cultural realities of each context. The balance between the Athenian and Spartan models illustrates how different approaches can coexist and enrich the educational legacy of a civilization.

Reflecting on education in Ancient Greece, it's possible to recognize its invaluable contribution to building a more just, ethical, and balanced society. This legacy serves as inspiration for contemporary education to continue evolving, valuing both the individual and the collective.

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