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Pedagogy: A lexical oddity

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Despite the games we often play with words, they are seldom defined by their derivations (etymology), more frequently their meanings are governed by their usage in sentences (semantics). Once we do that, we discover that the *paidagōgos* was not and never was a teacher. That is why the choice of ‘pedagogy’ for the English meaning, ‘the art of teaching’, is so odd; it’s derived from a Greek word and custom that had little to do with the noble art of education. True, the *paidagōgos* led or followed his charge to school, but this was simply one of the many places to which he accompanied the child, and such a role was hardly educational.

Introduction

Most education faculties have courses with units in pedagogy, and many even use the term itself in their subject listings. Books in the field of education frequently use ‘pedagogy’ and cognates in their titles. Avondale College of Higher Education Library has sixty-seven books in its collection that contain the term ‘pedagogy’ or related words in their title.¹ This is a rather modest total compared with Sydney University Library and The National Library of Australia, which list respectively 1,930 and 2,070 titles.

English usage

The earliest usage listed in the OED for ‘pedagogy’ is the date 1623 with the meaning ‘skoole-masters-ship’.² Even earlier, William Tyndale in 1526 rendered the Greek text of Galatians 3:24–25 (*paidagōgos*) with ‘schoolmaster’.³ This was followed by the Authorised Version of 1611. Given the widespread and prolonged use of the Authorised Version, both in public and private worship, it is not surprising that the Greek term *paidagōgos* entered the English language as ‘pedagogue’, or ‘pedagogy’ with the meaning ‘schoolmaster’.

Webster’s 2nd edition of 1968, though giving ‘a teacher’ for the word ‘pedagogue’, adds an historical note.

Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, [the *paidagōgos* was] a slave who attended the children of his master and conducted them to school, often acting as a tutor.

For ‘pedagogy’ Webster’s dictionary, without qualification, provides “the profession or function of a teacher; teaching”. The same dictionary also offers “the science or art of teaching; especially instruction in teaching methods”. This is echoed almost verbatim in the 4th edition of the Macquarie Dictionary (2005). Indeed, it suggests for ‘pedagogue’, “teacher of children, a school teacher”. The Concise Encarta (2001) reflects the same definitions, though it too reminds us that the Greek *paidagōgos* was a “slave who leads a child to school”.

Dictionaries and other educational sources often unpack the etymology of the word ‘pedagogy’ by pointing out that it derives from the Greek *paidagōgos*, which is formed from *pais* (‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘child’)⁴ and *agein* (‘to lead’, ‘to bring’). Hence, the conclusion is usually drawn that the *paidagōgos* led his charge to school. The application to the role of the modern teacher often then proves irresistible: that is, to define the modern Christian teacher’s task as gently leading children to understanding, or to wisdom, or even to Christ as per Galatians 3:24 (Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, KJV).⁵ In fact, the *paidagōgos*, carrying his charge’s musical instrument or texts, more often walked behind the student.

The *paidagōgos*

To understand the role of the *paidagōgos* in antiquity we must examine ancient sources. The person of the pedagogue, as opposed to his role, often attracted the ridicule of the philosophical Greeks. Firstly, he was usually a household slave, generally foreign, and often a prisoner of war. Hieronymus, the Peripatetic, reportedly censured fathers for placing their children into the care of barbarous pedagogues.⁶ Since they were foreign prisoners of war, the pedagogues gave their admonitions in poor Greek, which was derided by those who had Greek as their mother tongue, and that no doubt included the children in their care.⁷ Because the younger and stronger slaves were more productively used for manual labour, the pedagogues were frequently old (by no means always) or damaged. The numerous terracotta figurines of a pedagogue are usually grumpy-looking old men.

“The person of the pedagogue often attracted the ridicule of the philosophical Greeks”

When Pericles once saw a household slave fall from an olive tree and break his leg, he cynically commented, “a new pedagogue has just appeared”.⁸ Hieronymus complained that Greek fathers gave the most important task—the training of their sons—to the least costly (that is, old or injured slaves).⁹ Plutarch regarded as stupid the Greek custom of appointing the most talented slaves to positions such as stewards and money managers, while leaving their sons to the oversight of the wine-bibber, the glutton and the most useless slave.¹⁰ Of course, not all *paidagōgoi* (plural) were of this character, but many were and thus were not the best model for the modern teacher of children.

Four aspects of the ancient *paidagōgos* will be explored in this discussion. After noting the temporary nature of the role of the *paidagōgos*, this paper will discuss the role of the *paidagōgos* as a disciplinarian, a protector and an educator.

The temporary nature of the role of the *paidagōgos*

When the boy was about six or seven years of age, or when he had some understanding of speech, the *paidagōgos* took over the care of him from the nurse.¹¹ He remained in the *paidagōgos*' care until just after late puberty.¹² Thus, the boy was in the care of his twenty-four-hour minder for approximately twelve years. Hence, when the *paidagōgos*, Charidemus, tried to control the youthful Martial, the latter asserted his independence by boasting of the growth of his beard and his prowess with his mistress.¹³ When Socrates found it puzzling how the youthful Lysis, though heir of all, could still be under the control of his *paidagōgos*, a slave, Lysis explained, “I have not yet come of age.”¹⁴ Once of age, the lad was free of his *paidagōgos*.

Xenophon expresses the nature of the transition.

When a boy ceases to be a child, and begins to be a lad, others release him from his *paidagōgon* and from his teacher; he is then no longer under them, but is allowed to go his own way.¹⁵

If one was an *ephēbos* (a youth), one was no longer under the control of a *paidagōgos*, whose charges were babes (*nēpioi*) and boys (*paides*).¹⁶ It was a common jibe, if one wished to ridicule someone's maturity, to accuse them of still being under the care of a *paidagōgos*.¹⁷ Ideally, the transition to manhood involved the recasting of the controlling principle; a hired slave (*paidagōgos*) is replaced by reason, the divine guide (*theion hēgemonā*).¹⁸

The *paidagōgos* thus had clearly defined limits regarding the duration of his control of the child, to that degree, he was similar to today's teachers.

The *paidagōgos* as a disciplinarian

The *paidagōgos* was type-cast on the stage in general as a strict killjoy. Whilst, some *paidagōgoi* were gentle with their charges (like Mary Poppins), others were severe and cruel. They pinched and threatened, shouted and ranted, and cuffed and caned.¹⁹ “Your anger hardly leaves off the cane”, complained Martial of his *paidagōgos*.²⁰ Libanius likened the pounding of a boat's oars on the sea to the *paidagōgos*' lash on a boy's back.²¹ Claudius' *paidagōgos* was a former muleteer, who was appointed expressly to administer punishment. His former trade eminently qualified him for his latter role, since he was adept with the whip. Indeed, the leather strap was a standard accessory for the *paidagōgoi*.²²

Libanius confesses to having a dread of the *paidagōgoi*'s strap, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, a Father of the early church, noted that “students are scared of their *paidagōgoi*”.²³ Quintilian's frank admission is understandable.

I blush to mention the shameful abuse which scoundrels [that is, the *paidagōgoi*] sometimes make of their right to administer corporal punishment.²⁴

A popular disciplinary technique with the *paidagōgoi* was to twist the boy's ear.²⁵ Photo 1 depicts an angry *paidagōgos* ready to punish a naughty boy, who is running away on the other side of the vase.

As the boy entered puberty, curtailment of youthful hormones was also part of the *paidagōgos*' task: “You don't allow me to frolic, nor do you allow me to woo”, lamented Martial to his *paidagōgos*.²⁶ When accosted by an irate father concerning his son's wanton behaviour, the philosopher protested that he was not the lad's *paidagōgos*.²⁷ Physical punishment was commonplace in the classical world, and the *paidagōgoi* were not the only ancient disciplinarians: nurses, teachers, trainers and even fathers meted out corrective force on their charges.



Photo 1

[Photograph: Norman Young; Reproduced courtesy of the Soprintendenza Archeologia della Puglia, Taranto, Museo Nazionale, Bari]

“The many headstone inscriptions that praise and identify a man's former *paidagōgos* indicate that neither their names nor the early affection was forgotten”

This aspect of the *paidagōgos*, the duty of care, is one worthy for modern teachers to emulate

It is not that long ago that many schoolteachers followed the *paidagōgos*' pattern of discipline. I can recall the names of some very brutal teachers in my time as a student. Thankfully, discipline measures have changed in most western countries. However, as it was with the *paidagōgos*, today's teachers are expected to act as disciplinarians.

The *paidagōgos* as a protector

Cicero points out that the first persons a man loves are his nurse and his *paidagōgos*.²⁸ The *paidagōgos* often took the blame for some childish misdemeanour so as to spare the child any parental punishment. The many headstone inscriptions that praise and identify a man's former *paidagōgos* indicate that neither their names nor the early affection was forgotten. Given the widespread pederasty of the classical world, the *paidagōgoi* acted as a fortified wall or guard that protected the child from such abuse. The *paidagōgoi* were as "barking dogs to wolves".²⁹ Hence, they accompanied their charges to the athletic field, the theatre, the courts, and to school or lectures (see Photos 2 & 3). They were twenty-four-hour minders; even from bedtime to rising at dawn, the attendant slave was always present.

It was not unknown for the *paidagōgos* to die in defence of his charge. Appian tells the touching account of how a *paidagōgos* threw his arms around his orphaned charge and would not release him to his would-be murderers. This occurred en route to school and both were killed.³⁰ Libanius praised the *paidagōgos* as the most devoted of all a child's influences: he supervised the child's studies more constantly than either the father or teacher; when the child became sick, he acted as a nurse and

tended his charge more tenderly than the mother; and if the child died, he mourned more genuinely than the dutiful parents.³¹ On reaching adulthood, it was common for men to emancipate their former *paidagōgos*.

Whilst some *paidagōgoi* were harsh and punitive, others were gentle with and devoted to their charges. This aspect of the *paidagōgos*, the duty of care, is one worthy for modern teachers to emulate.

The *paidagōgos* as an educator

Although some children were fortunate that the slave appointed as their *paidagōgos* was well educated, this was more often by chance than parental design. However, Roman fathers did try to obtain a Greek speaker for their son's *paidagōgos*. Even though they assisted the child with any homework (see Photo 4) and sat in on the teacher's lessons (see Photo 5), the *paidagōgos*' instruction was mostly limited to social trivia.

And yet what do the *paidagōgoi* teach? To walk in the public streets with lowered head; to touch salt-fish with but one finger, but fresh fish, bread, and meat with two; to sit in such and such a posture; in such and such a way to wear their cloaks.³²

Aristides provides a verbatim catalogue of the *paidagōgos*' chidings.

'It is not proper to stuff yourself full', and 'walk on the street in a seemly way, and rise for your elders, love your parents, do not be noisy, or play dice, or 'cross your legs'.³³

Seneca's report of a *paidagōgos*' advice is in the same vein: "Walk thus and so; eat thus and so, this

Photo 2

[Photograph: Norman Young; Reproduced courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad]

Photo 3

Heracles being followed by his nurse, Geropso, as his pedagogue.

[Photograph: Norman Young; Reproduced courtesy of the Staatliches Museum, Schwerin]



is conduct proper for a man and that for a woman; this for a married man and that for a bachelor.”³⁴

As apposed to the limited educational role of the *paidagōgos*, today’s teachers aim to develop the whole person (mentally, physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually).

Conclusion

What relevance does the ancient role of the *paidagōgos* have for twenty-first century teachers? The teacher, like the *paidagōgos*, has a temporary role. The lessons learned in school must nurture the child towards independence and the love of learning. Most importantly, as teachers fulfil their duty of care, they must have a purposeful intention to foster schools as safe places for children. Teachers are called to be protectors of children. In addition, *paidagōgoi* were sometimes likened to shepherds or a ship’s pilot because of their role in guiding the children. In a society where many are looking for direction, teachers can perform this vital role. **TEACH**

Endnotes

- ¹ This includes variant forms such as ‘pedagogical’.
- ² The OED also gives a reference from 1583 meaning ‘instruction’, ‘discipline’.
- ³ This is retained in the editions of 1534 and 1536.
- ⁴ The stem of the noun *pais* is *paid*; the dental ‘d’ is dropped when the nominative singular ‘s’ is added.
- ⁵ This is an inaccurate translation in two serious ways: “Schoolmaster” should read “slave child-minder,” and “to bring us unto Christ” should be rendered “until the time of Christ.”
- ⁶ *ap. Stobaeus, Ecl.* 121 (Wachsmuth 2.233).
- ⁷ Aristides, *Or.* 2.380 (Behr); Plato, *Lys.* 223A.
- ⁸ *ap. Stobaeus, Ecl.* 121 (Wachsmuth 2.233).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Plutarch, *Mor.* 4B; Julian, *Mis.* 352C.
- ¹¹ Plato, *Prot.* 325C.
- ¹² Teles *ap. Stobaeus, Flor.* 72 (Wachsmuth 5.848F).
- ¹³ Martial, 11.39.
- ¹⁴ Plato, *Lys.* 209A.
- ¹⁵ *Lac.* 3.1. Cf. Plutarch, *Phil.* 4.1.
- ¹⁶ Plato, *Laws* 808E; Ps.Plato, *Axioch.* 366D–367A; Teles, *ap. Stobaeus, Flor.* 72 (Wachsmuth 5.848F). For boys seventeen was usually considered the age of puberty, and thirteen for girls.
- ¹⁷ Lucian, *Jup. Trag.* 29.5; Philo, *Flacc.* 15; *Gaium*, 26.
- ¹⁸ Plutarch, *Mor.* 37D–E; Philo, *Quod Det.* 146.
- ¹⁹ Quintilian, 6.1.41; Plato, *Lys.* 223A; Libanius, *Ep.* 139.2.
- ²⁰ 11.39.
- ²¹ *Ep.* 1188.3–4.
- ²² Diogenes, *Ep.* 29; Libanius, *Or.* 2.380 (Behr), 58.9.
- ²³ Libanius, *Ep.* 911.2; Theodoret, *Ep.* 36.
- ²⁴ Quintilian, 1.3.17 (Loeb).
- ²⁵ There is a terracotta image of a *paidagōgos* from Myrina doing just this (C. Daremberg and E. Saglio [eds], *Dictionaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines IV/1*, 1907. Reprinted Graz: Akademischen Druck und Verlagsanhalt, 1969) IV.272, figure 5449. See also Plutarch, *Cat. Mal.* 20.4.
- ²⁶ 11.39.
- ²⁷ Lucian, *Herm.* 82.
- ²⁸ Cicero, *De Amic.* 20.74.
- ²⁹ Libanius, *Or.* 58.7.
- ³⁰ Appian, *BCiv.* 5.30.
- ³¹ Libanius, *Or.* 58.8–11.
- ³² Plutarch, *Mor.* 439F–440 (Loeb).
- ³³ Aristides, *Or.* 2.380 (Loeb). Cf. Xenophon, *Lac.* 3.2f.
- ³⁴ Seneca, *Ep.* 94.8–9 (Loeb).

Photo 4

[Photograph: Norman Young; Reproduced courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum, London]

Photo 5

[Photograph: Norman Young; Reproduced courtesy of the Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (West)]

