2011

Pedagogy: A Lexical Oddity

Norman H. Young
Avondale College, norm.young2@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.avondale.edu.au/teach
Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This Teaching & Professional Practice is brought to you for free and open access by ResearchOnline@Avondale. It has been accepted for inclusion in TEACH Journal of Christian Education by an authorized editor of ResearchOnline@Avondale. For more information, please contact alicia.starr@avondale.edu.au.
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 paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos 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-mastership’.² Even earlier, William Tyndale in 1526 rendered the Greek text of Galatians 3:24–25 (paidagôgos) 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 paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos, which is formed from pais (‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘child’)⁴ and agein (‘to lead’, ‘to bring’). Hence, the conclusion is usually drawn that the paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos, carrying his charge’s musical instrument or texts, more often walked behind the student.

The paidagôgos
To understand the role of the paidagôgos 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
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 paidagōgos.22 Libanius confesses to having a dread of the paidagōgos’ strap, and Theodoret of Cyrrhus, a Father of the early church, noted that “students are scared of their paidagōgos”.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.

The many headstone inscriptions that praise and identify a man’s former paidagōgos indicate that neither their names nor the early affection was forgotten.

---

Photo 1

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

---

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.
It is not that long ago that many schoolteachers followed the paidagôgos’ 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 paidagôgos, today’s teachers are expected to act as disciplinarians.

The paidagôgos as a protector

Cicero points out that the first persons a man loves are his nurse and his paidagôgos.28 The paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos indicate that neither their names nor the early affection was forgotten. Given the widespread pederasty of the classical world, the paidagôgoi acted as a fortified wall or guard that protected the child from such abuse. The paidagôgoi 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 paidagôgos to die in defence of his charge. Appian tells the touching account of how a paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos.

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

The paidagôgos as an educator

Although some children were fortunate that the slave appointed as their paidagôgos 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 paidagôgos. Even though they assisted the child with any homework (see Photo 4) and sat in on the teacher’s lessons (see Photo 5), the paidagôgos’ instruction was mostly limited to social trivia.

And yet what do the paidagôgoi 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 paidagôgos’ 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 paidagôgos’ advice is in the same vein: “Walk thus and so; eat thus and so, this
is conduct proper for a man and that for a woman; this for a married man and that for a bachelor.”

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.

**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, Ecfr. 121 (Wachsmuth 2.233).
7 Aristides, Or. 2.380 (Behr); Plato, Lys. 223A.
8 ap. Stobaeus, Ecfr. 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.
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 Verlagsanstalt, 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).