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CONTRIBUTIONS OF ANCIENT SOCIETIES TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF FORMAL EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The contributions of ancient societies such as Chinese, Egyptian, Hindu, Hebrew, and Sumerian societies to the development of formal education are often ignored in the literature. Discussions about the development of formal education in many textbooks on the foundations of education often begin with ancient Greek education. However, formal education had been conducted in ancient Mesopotamia, North Africa, the sub-continent of India, and the Far East for about 1,500 years before Greek education began around 500 B.C.E. (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, and Dupuis, 2005/2011). As a matter of fact, education in ancient Egypt was so advanced that great Greek philosophers, educators and mathematicians including Plato, Lycurgus, Solon, and Pythagoras completed their education in Egypt (Johnson et al., 2005).

Contemporary educational systems worldwide have borrowed heavily from the character, languages, philosophies, organization, and implementation of educational systems of ancient societies. For example, the high value placed on education as the key to future success has been passed down to our contemporary world from ancient societies (Johnson et al., 2011). The medium of instruction in many educational institutions today evolved from the Sanskrit language developed by the Hindus as a language of instruction and religion. Out of the Sanskrit language evolved the Indo-European languages which are used as media of instruction in many institutions worldwide today. The practice of several students “learning at the feet” of one instructor came from ancient societies.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the contributions ancient societies have made to the contemporary educational enterprise. The thesis of this paper is that without the educational foundations laid by ancient societies, formal education would not be what it is and as advanced as it is today. Ancient Chinese education and ancient Egyptian education and what they contributed to contemporary education have been selected as foci for discussion.

Introduction

Ancient societies have contributed immensely to what modern education is today (Guttek, 2001; Hunt & Colander, 2011). However, the contributions of ancient societies such as Chinese, Egyptian, Hindu, Hebrew, and Sumerian societies to the development of formal education are often ignored in the literature. Conversations about the historical development of formal education in many textbooks on the foundations of education often begin with ancient Greek education (Pai & Adler, 2001; Pulliam & Van Patten, 1999). Many historians and anthropologists have found that formal education had been conducted in ancient Mesopotamia, North Africa, the sub-continent of India, and the Far East for about 1,500 years before Greek education began around 500 B.C.E. (Johnson, Musial, Hall, Gollnick, and Dupuis, 2005). As at the time formal education began in Europe, educational systems in other parts of the world were highly advanced. In fact, education in ancient Egypt was so advanced that some great Greek philosophers including Plato and Pythagoras completed their education in Egypt (Johnson et al., 2005).

Educational systems worldwide in our contemporary times have borrowed heavily from the character, languages, philosophies, organization, and implementation of the educational systems of ancient societies. For example, the high value placed on education as the key to future success has been passed down to our contemporary world from ancient societies (Johnson et al., 2011). The medium of instruction in many educational institutions today evolved from the Sanskrit language developed by the Hindus as a language of instruction and religion. Out of the Sanskrit language evolved the Indo-European languages which are used as media of instruction in many institutions worldwide today. The practice of several students “learning at the feet” of one instructor came from ancient societies.

The subject matter of this paper is to explore some of the contributions ancient societies have made to the contemporary educational enterprise. The thesis of this paper is that without the educational foundations laid by ancient societies, formal education would not be what it is and as advanced as it is today. In this paper, the contributions of ancient Chinese and ancient Egyptian education are selected for discussion. The characteristics of ancient Chinese education and ancient Egyptian education will be explored and the contributions they have made to modern education will be outlined in this paper.

Ancient Chinese education

Ancient Chinese education began around 2000 B.C.E. after the invention of writing around 4000 B.C.E. and recording of knowledge led to the founding of the first schools. Chinese education was characterized by tradition, formality, and conformity and was designed to assist students function in mechanical predictable routines. (Johnson et al., 2005). Children who had the privilege to attend school were taught to conform to the norms and traditions of ancient Chinese society, which included the development of one’s potentials for the good of the society. Ancient Chinese society focused on the community rather than the individual. As a result, communalism rather than individualism served as a basis for ancient Chinese education. Education was underpinned by the belief that educational goal should aim at developing the total individual to his or her fullest potentials and those potentials were to be utilized for the common good (Johnson et al., 2005). This ancient Chinese educational aim has influenced

modern educational thought in terms of the contemporary view that education is for the preparation of the individual for the future, a preparation that entails knowledge, skills and dispositions development to be employed for the benefit of the individual and society.

Education was deemed extremely critical to the advancement of ancient societies. In ancient China, Emperors and Empresses in the various dynasties including the Xia (2100 – 1600 B.C.E.), Shang (1600 – 1046 B.C.E), Zhou (1045 – 256 B.C.E.) dynasties, noblemen and noblewomen, philosophers, educators, and priests were actively engaged in formal education. For example, educational ideas were greatly influenced by philosophers like Lao-Tsze who lived in the sixth-century B.C.E. and the great educator and philosopher, Hkung-Tsze (Johnson et al., 2005) who is more commonly known as Confucius who lived between 551 – 478 B.C.E. (Hunt & Colander, 2011). Confucius is credited as the founder of education for the masses due to his saying that education must be provided for all people without discrimination and the efforts he made toward educating them. He devoted his life to private education and taught over three thousand students including 72 sages who spread the philosophy of Confucius as Confucianism: a philosophy that embraces benevolence in living and diligence in learning (Travel China Guide, 2012).

An example of the impact that philosophers had on ancient Chinese education is that all students were taught Confucius' five cardinal virtues (universal charity, impartial justice, rectitude of heart and mind, pure sincerity, and conformity) and the saying that disobedience to one's parents is the worst of the over 3,000 crimes not to be committed by humanity (Johnson et al., 2005). All students were required to adhere to these principles which have influenced Chinese education until today. There is no doubt that modern education has taken a strong cue from Chinese education and educators in terms of the fact that literally all who matter today including politicians, philosophers, educators, and the average person consider education in society as their business to ensure the advancement of education and the continued survival of humanity.

A system of imperial examinations (*keju*) was developed during the Sui dynasty (581 – 618 C.E.). The imperial examinations were utilized as the method by which talented people were recognized and selected for future positions in the civil service. This practice lasted for over 1,300 years into the Qing Dynasty when the last of such placement examinations were held (Travel China Guide, 2012). The imperial examinations had two parts which were the arts examination and the *wushu* examination. The arts examination included composition, study of classical books, laws, and calligraphy while the *wushu* examination included tests on military subjects for selecting military officials (Travel China Guide, 2012). It is believed that Chinese royalty was so involved in education and testing that Empress Wu Zetian is reputed to have questioned candidates herself, which initiated the interview process, and created some parts of the *wushu* examination in subjects including the use of firearms (Travel China Guide, 2012). It is important to observe here that modern education has borrowed these and other types of examinations (some of which are still utilized in China today such as the interview) from Chinese society.

State education, private schools and private education are known to have thrived during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.E. – 476 B.C.E.) in Chinese history. Numerous private schools were established during this period to especially promote the

teachings of the philosophies of Confucius who, as noted above, devoted himself to private education and Tao, whose philosophy was developed into Taoism as a religion which promotes tranquility, benevolence, virtue, and learning. Today, state and private education are the norm in all societies around the world, two types of education that have come to us via ancient societies. Academies known as *Shu Yuan* were first established during the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 C.E.) and thrived through the Song (960 – 1279 C.E.), Ming, and Qing Dynasties (China Travel Depot, 2012). The Academies were schools founded to cultivate talented people, to encourage devotion to learning, and to spread culture and were the harbingers of higher education in China (China Travel Depot, 2012). Contemporary academies serve similar functions.

Unfortunately, it was not every child who had the privilege to attend school in ancient China. Thus, education was a privilege for some children (Carr, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005/2011), especially males from the higher echelons of Chinese society and not a right for all children. Most children had to work hard all day in the fields due to their station in society and could not attend school. Boys who attended school started elementary school when they were about six years old and took several examinations until they completed their education (Carr, 2012). Chinese girls and women were denied education until around 500 B.C.E. The curriculum was different for boys and girls until contemporary times. Contemporary schools have borrowed these practices from ancient Chinese education. Historically most societies in our contemporary world denied education to girls, women and those deemed of lower status in society at the beginnings of the development of formal education until much later in their educational histories, a practice that was embraced from the ancient world.

Ancient Egyptian education

Ancient Egyptian education, like ancient Chinese education, began as a result of advances in written language, the recording of knowledge and the desire of Egyptian leaders and educators to pass on knowledge in more formal ways. Ancient Egyptian society was steeped in a caste system which rendered formal education a privilege and not a right due to the fact that it was mainly privileged males from the higher castes who attended school while girls, women and those of the lower castes were excluded from education for hundreds of years (Johnson et al., 2005). When girls and women (from the royal and noble families) were eventually provided access to education, they were initially exposed to curriculum which would prepare them to be “good wives and mothers”. It is important to note that over the centuries, there has been a dramatic shift in Egyptian education, as there has been in Chinese education, due to cultural change and its concomitant advantages and disadvantages. Today, girls, women and the average person in both societies are granted relatively equal access to education and relatively equal educational opportunities.

Ancient Egyptian education was organized and controlled by priests who held the highest positions next to royalty (the Pharaoh and his family) and nobility, and provided instruction in philosophy, astronomy, geometry, law, history, medicine, etc. (Johnson et al., 2005; McNergney & Herbert, 1995). Like ancient Chinese education, emphasis in ancient Egyptian education was on moral and communal development due to the heavy influence of the religions and philosophies of the time. Punishment was emphasized, was

cruel, and served as a vehicle for molding the hearts and minds of students to conform to the norms of society and to become productive members of society.

To demonstrate how the philosophies of the time impacted education and the punishment of students, an anonymous ancient Egyptian philosopher is reputed to have stated, “The ears of a boy are on his back. He hears only when he is beaten”. In other words the only way to engender attention from a boy in order to educate him is by beating him. In our contemporary world, emphasis on moral development and punishment (sometimes cruel and unusual punishment) as part of the educational process is the norm in many societies especially in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, a practice that has been inherited from the ancient world. Interestingly in the United States today, punishment, particularly cruel punishment including paddling, in public schools is illegal in many states. In the states where paddling is allowed as a form of punishment, permission has to be obtained from a student’s parents or guardians before paddling can be administered.

The system of ancient Egyptian education began at the elementary school and advanced to higher education. Between the ages of 4 and 14 boys (and later girls and women from noble families and much later girls from ordinary families) attended school where they learned to read and write, and do mathematics. Students who would be selected to become doctors or lawyers, or scribes studied ancient sacred writings called *hieroglyphics* developed over 5000 years ago (Egypt Quest, 2012; Parillo, 2006). Students could progress (be promoted) to more advanced levels only after they had mastered the basics at the elementary level and demonstrated evidence by passing a series of tests which mainly included copying of texts including the classics of ancient Egyptian literature particularly the wisdom texts filled with pronouncements on morals and behavior for young men (and later young women) who expected to accomplish higher social mobility (Crystal Links, 2012). Over the centuries several schools (state sponsored and private) and institutions of higher learning (Johnson et al., 2005) including the famed Al Azhar University were established at various levels of education. From the foregoing in this paragraph, it will be noted here that modern educational systems have borrowed the various levels of education, elementary to higher education, and testing for promotion from one level to another from ancient societies with modifications to suit each society.

Contributions to modern education and conclusion

From the above discussion of the characteristics and contributions of ancient Chinese education and ancient Egyptian education, the following is a summary of the contributions of these two and other ancient societies to modern education:

- Ancient China and ancient Egypt passed down the value for education to our contemporary world (Johnson et al, 2005).
- Respect for authority and advances in written language were borrowed from both societies (Johnson et al., 2005).
- Both societies and other ancient societies made substantial contributions to the development of knowledge, education, and schools worldwide (Johnson et al., 2011).

- The ancient Chinese educational aim of developing the total individual to his or her fullest potentials for those potentials to be utilized for the common good has influenced modern educational thought in terms of the contemporary view that education is for the preparation of the individual for the future, a preparation that entails knowledge, skills and dispositions development to be utilized for the benefit of the individual and society.
- There is no doubt that modern education has been heavily influenced by Chinese education and educators in terms of the fact that literally all people today including politicians, philosophers, educators, and the average person consider education in society as their business to ensure the advancement of education and the continued survival of humanity.
- Modern education has borrowed different types of examinations including placement examinations, interviews, copying of texts, etc. (some of which are still utilized in China and Egypt today) from both societies.
- Today, state and private education are the norm in all societies around the world, two types of education that have come to us via ancient societies.
- The ancient Chinese Academies were schools that cultivated talented people, encouraged devotion to learning, and spread culture, and were the harbingers of higher education in China (China Travel Depot, 2012) and other parts of the world. Contemporary academies all over the world serve similar functions.
- Historically most societies in our contemporary world denied education to girls, women and ordinary people at the beginnings of the development of formal education until much later in their educational histories, a practice that was embraced from the ancient world.
- In our contemporary world, emphasis on moral development and punishment as part of the educational process is the norm in many societies especially in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, a practice that has been inherited from the ancient world. Interestingly in the United States today, punishment, particularly cruel punishment including paddling, in public schools is illegal in many states. In the states where paddling is allowed as a form of punishment, permission has to be obtained from a student's parents or guardians before paddling can be administered.
- Modern educational systems have borrowed the various levels of education, elementary to higher education, and testing for promotion from one level to another from ancient societies.

Finally, in conclusion, it will be posited that education in our contemporary societies owes a depth of gratitude to ancient societies and the educational systems they

developed, particularly the two societies discussed above. Modern education has definitely been greatly shaped by the contributions of ancient societies.

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