

Early School Dialogues and Texts: From 2500 BC to AD 1000

The first fictional portrayals of English school life appeared in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, firstly in a dialogue by Aelfric, widely recognised as the greatest prose writer of the period, and then in a series of dialogues by one of Aelfric's former pupils, Aelfric Bata. These were written as teaching aids, designed for novices and young monks who were obliged to learn Latin in order to work and serve in their abbey. Even though there is no narrative, these dialogues still paint a vivid picture of life in a monastery school, and the dialogues of Aelfric Bata, in particular, reveal how pupils lived, worked and played, and the relationship between pupils and their master.

These were not, however, the first dialogues of their type. Written dialogues and other texts set in schools and designed as teaching aids can be traced as far back as at least 2000 BC, used by the Sumerians (in what is now part of Iraq), followed by the ancient Egyptians, and, later, the Greeks and the Romans.¹

1. For a summary of texts specifically written for children in the ancient civilisations of Sumeria, Egypt, Greece and Rome, and medieval texts, see Gillian Adams, 'Ancient and Medieval Children's Texts', in Peter Hunt (ed.), *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).

The Sumerians

The Sumerians developed the world's first technological civilisation, with many inventions that are still in use today. At the same time, they originated a system of writing on clay, and most of what is known about their land, Sumer (which was later known as Babylonia), and their society is based on the thousands of complete and incomplete clay tablets that have survived.² Sumerian writing emerged as a way of formalising and organising Sumerian society, which was developing a system of government, establishing institutions and technologies, and needed a skilled bureaucracy to administer the state and its activities. However, writing also became important in other areas, especially education, where texts were used to teach language and writing, and then to teach concepts such as morals, behaviour and ethics. In developing writing as a means of communication, the Sumerians created their own literature, which grew to cover religious texts, myths, tales, proverbs, fables and essays.

Amongst this Sumerian literature is a range of texts that were sometimes partly and sometimes exclusively aimed at children, and the claim has been made that these constitute the very beginnings of children's literature.³ Many of these texts were written for use in schools, and a few, like the educational compositions of later writers such as Aelfric (see later in this chapter) and Erasmus and John Brinsley (see chapter three) reveal a great deal of what daily school life at the time was like. In addition, as examples of fictional writing, in which the writers exercised a degree of imagination, these can legitimately be described as being the very first pieces of school fiction.

Sumerian School Texts

The Sumerian school system began to mature and flourish around 2500 BC. Clay tablets from this time which have been linked to schools consist largely of lists – of gods, animals, objects and an assortment of words and phrases. Tablets from later millenia contain an assortment

2. For a comprehensive description of Sumerian society and a discussion of the research into their writings, see Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: Thirty-Nine Firsts in Recorded History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958), and *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

3. See Gillian Adams, 'The First Children's Literature? The Case for Sumer', *Children's Literature* 14 (1986), pp. 1–30.

of exercises used by pupils as part of their daily school work, including compositions, essays and dialogues. As well as tablets containing the original texts, written by teachers, hundreds of practice tablets have been found, produced by pupils of varying ages and abilities.

The Sumerian school was known as an *edubba*, meaning ‘tablet house’. The head of the school was the *ummi*, or ‘expert’, also known as the ‘school father’, while the pupil was called the ‘school son’. The head’s assistant, whose duties included writing new tablets for pupils to copy, examining the copies, and hearing pupils reciting studies from memory, was the ‘big brother’. There were also other teachers, for example, those who taught drawing and language, and there were also monitors in charge of attendance and a ‘man in charge of the whip’, responsible for discipline.

The curriculum developed to consist of two main elements – scientific and scholarly, and literary and creative. The latter consisted primarily of studying, copying, memorising and imitating the growing quantity of literary compositions that had originated when writing first appeared. These ranged from simple proverbs to fables, essays, myths and epic poems, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* being one of the best-known today. Alongside these works grew a number of original school texts, written by teachers and which provide a picture of daily Sumerian school life. These show that the pupil attended school from sunrise to sunset; on arrival at school he studied the tablet he had prepared the previous day, while the ‘big brother’ prepared a new tablet which the pupil then copied; and finally the copy would be examined and the pupil tested on its content. Discipline was harsh, with teachers relying heavily on the cane as a means of correcting faults as well as a means of punishment for wrongdoing.

Among several long but incomplete texts⁴ is one called by Samuel Kramer in his work, *The Sumerians*, ‘Schooldays’, which reveals the day-to-day activities of a schoolboy as recounted by a former pupil (an ‘old grad’). Originally written around 2000 BC, its depiction of the schoolboy’s behaviour and misbehaviour, his dislike of lessons, fear of punishment, and of his father’s hopes and aspirations for his future,

4. As is typically the case, fragments are missing, and the condition of those that have survived is such that an accurate transcription is not always possible. The extracts quoted here are taken from Kramer, *The Sumerians*, but without the gaps and question marks inserted by Kramer to indicate undecipherable or missing text and words or phrases where the translation is uncertain.

echo down the centuries, with school dialogues written in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries having an identical flavour.

The text opens with the former pupil being asked what he did at school, and replying:

I recited my tablet, ate my lunch, prepared my new tablet, wrote it, finished it; then my model tablets were brought to me; and in the afternoon my exercise tablets were brought to me. When school was dismissed, I went home, entered the house, and found my father sitting there. I explained my exercise tablets to my father, recited my tablet to him, and he was delighted, so much so that I attended him with joy.⁵

However, the following day does not go as planned:

When I arose in the morning, I faced my mother and said to her: 'Give me my lunch, I want to go to school!' My mother gave me two rolls, and I set out. ... In school the fellow in charge of punctuality said: 'Why are you late?' Afraid and with pounding heart, I entered before my teacher and made a respectful curtsy.⁶

He is then caned by various members of the school staff – for not finishing his homework, for loitering in the street and looking untidy, for talking without permission, for misbehaving in assembly, for leaving the school without permission, for taking something (the tablet is unclear on what was taken) without permission and, finally, he is caned by the headmaster for poor handwriting. Consequently, the pupil begins to hate the work he is being given and his teacher loses interest in teaching him. Aware, however, that he must learn in order to become a 'big brother' and then a scribe, he asks his father whether he would butter up the headmaster. His father agrees to invite the headmaster to dinner (in a passage where the author has changed the narrative direction and describes the events as an eyewitness):

The teacher was brought from the school, and after entering in the house, he was seated on the 'big chair'. The schoolboy attended and served him, and whatever he learned of the

5. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, pp. 237–38.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

scribal art, he unfolded to his father. Then did the father in the joy of his heart say joyfully to the headmaster of the school: 'My little fellow has opened wide his hand, and you made wisdom enter there; you showed him all the finer points of the scribal art; you made him see the solutions of the mathematical and arithmetical problems, you taught him how to make deep the cuneiform script.'⁷

The father then orders his servants to anoint the headmaster with oil and announces that he wants to dress him in new clothes, give him extra salary and put a ring on his finger. The headmaster finally addresses his pupil, expressing his hope that he will go on to become a successful scholar and a leader of his fellow pupils.

As Kramer remarks, this episode records the first case of 'apple-polishing' in the history of literature.⁸ Gillian Adams also points out in 'The First Children's Literature? The Case for Sumer'⁹ that the message that it pays to be good to your teacher may account for the popularity of this particular text – 21 copies are known to exist – which was originally written by a teacher for pupils to copy. It is also an assertion that success at school will bring tangible rewards, not least a career as a scribe but also respect and obeisance from fellow pupils and others. Alternatively, it may have been intended as a satire, on materialism and the greed and gullibility of headmasters.

A second school composition, called by Kramer 'School Rowdies', depicts an argument between two students, Enkimansi and his older brother, Girnishag, who appears to have attained the position in the school of 'big brother'. The quarrel begins when Enkimansi refuses to do as instructed by his brother, before launching into the first of a series of insults, which both brothers are happy to trade: 'You dolt, numbskull, school pest, you illiterate, you Sumerian ignoramus, your hand is terrible, it cannot even hold the stylus properly; it is unfit for writing and cannot take dictation. And yet you say you are a scribe like me.'¹⁰

Girnishag responds by accusing Enkimansi of being a useless scribe and an incompetent tablet writer. In turn, Enkimansi accuses Girnishag of being lazy, careless and a hopeless mathematician. The argument carries on, although the text is poorly preserved and it is difficult to

7. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

8. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, p. 43.

9. Adams, 'The First Children's Literature?', p. 20.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

ascertain who is speaking. Finally, someone, probably a monitor, appears and severely admonishes Enkimansi, threatening to beat him and have him locked up:

Why do you behave like this? Who do you push, curse, and hurl insults at each other? Why do you raise a commotion in the school? ... Why were you insolent? Inattentive? Why do you curse, and hurl insults against him who is your 'big brother' and has taught you the scribal art to your own advantage? Even the *ummia* who knows everything shook his head violently saying 'Do to him what you please.' If I really did to you what I pleased – to a fellow who behaved like you and was inattentive to his 'big brother' – I would first beat you with a mace ... and having put copper chains on your feet, would lock you up in the house and for two months would not let you out of the school building.¹¹

Adams has pointed out that this, and the other school texts, were written to demonstrate what would-be scribes should be striving for, both in and out of school.¹² Young boys enjoy exchanging insults, and Adams suggests that the writers of these dialogues were deliberately trading on this in order to promote good behaviour and hard work. A further possibility, of course, is that the creators of these dialogues and texts used the exchange of insults and derogatory remarks, and the frequent references to physical punishment, seen safely from a distance, as a means of combining instruction with entertainment, in an effort to make learning enjoyable.

Similar dialogues include 'The Disputation between Enkita and Enkihegal' and 'The Disputation between Two School Graduates', both of which are a series of insults, boasts and vituperative remarks, the latter ending with one of the pair verbally abusing the other for no fewer than 28 lines.

The Ancient Egyptians

Education in ancient Egypt usually began at the age of four, when childhood was deemed to have ended, and boys went to schools which had a specific purpose, be it providing training for a post in a government

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 242–43.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

department, or temple, or the military, or as a farmer, engineer, doctor etc., with reading and writing being taught in scribal schools. One of the basic types of text from which pupils learnt to write was the model letter, along with ‘instructions’, in which a father instructed his son by means of a series of maxims, urging precepts such as self-control, moderation, generosity, kindness and truthfulness.

One model letter, from a father to his son, told him how to behave at school:

I place you at school along with the children of notables, to educate you and to have you trained for this aggrandizing calling. ... When you receive your daily task be not idle ... and read diligently from the book. When you work in silence, let not a word be heard. ... Write with your hand and read with your mouth. Ask counsel of them that are clever. Be not slack, and spend not a day in idleness, or woe betide your limbs! Enter into the methods of your teacher and hear his instructions.¹³

Warnings and admonitions to pupils are widespread in surviving texts – typical was the following:

They tell me that you have forsaken writing, and you have departed and fled; that you have forsaken writing and used your legs like horses of the riding-school. Your heart is fluttered, you are like a hy-bird. Your ear is deaf; you are like an ass in taking beatings.¹⁴

Discipline was strict – many surviving fragments of school texts carry sentences, written by schoolboys, such as: ‘I was with you since I was a child; you beat my back and your instructions went into my ear. ... The youth has a back; he attends when it is beaten. ... Spend no day in idleness or you will be flogged.’¹⁵

13. From the *Anastasi Papyrus*, cited in Adolf Erman (ed.), *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966; originally published in Germany, 1923), p. 189.

14. Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Hieratic Papyri: Series I: Literary Texts of the New Kingdom: Part I* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1911), p. 192.

15. From the *Anastasi Papyrus*, cited in Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, trans. H.M. Tirard (London: Macmillan, 1894), pp. 329–31.

Whilst beating was the usual form of physical punishment, especially recalcitrant pupils were tied to a block. One boy wrote: 'You have made me buckle to since the time I was one of your pupils. I spent my time in the lock-up; he bound my limbs. He sentenced me to three months, and I was bound in the temple.'¹⁶

Ancient Greek and Roman School Texts

Thanks to the wealth of written records that have survived from Greece and Rome – texts written on clay and wax tablets and on papyrus – it has been possible to build up a very detailed picture of education in these societies. As was the case with the Sumerians and the Egyptians, and with later medieval schools, pupils learnt the rudiments of language and the art of conversation by using specially-written texts and dialogues, many of which portrayed school life. In addition, further fictional pictures of school life have been provided by playwrights and poets.¹⁷

Schools in Ancient Greece

Schools emerged in Greece between 600 and 500 BC. The earliest schools were simply rooms, often at the back of shops, hired by a teacher. Some early schools were set up on the street or under colonnades, a practice which was later followed in Rome. Pupils, who were almost always boys, girls being educated at home by their mothers, were generally accompanied to school by a *paidagogus*, a slave who carried his master's equipment and remained with him throughout the school day, watching over him, punishing him if necessary and being responsible for his moral education and inculcating good manners. The role of the *paidagogus* was illustrated in Plato's *Lysis*, a fictional dialogue written around 380 BC, about friendship, with the main characters being Socrates and two boys, Lysis and Menexenus. Socrates, the narrator, meets Lysis at a wrestling school, and begins questioning him about his activities and his family. Lysis reveals that his parents will not allow him to do as he pleases, and that they employ slaves, such as a charioteer and a muleteer.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

17. For a comprehensive study of education in ancient Greece (and Rome), see Henri Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (London: Sheed & Ward, 1956).