



School Students and their Performance in Ancient Egypt

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Keywords

**Ancient Egypt,
Education,
School,
Student,
Teaching.**

Abstract

Education can be described as a deliberate or unintentional process that is psychological, sociological, scientific, and philosophical in nature. Its primary aim is to prepare individuals for their roles within society. It is worth noting here that the family in Egyptian society played an important role as the first educational institution, as it was able to instill social values in children before they received them from external sources. The educational system in ancient Egypt aimed to training scribes officials to ensure administrative continuity and cultural transmission.

This paper aims to shed light on the school students in ancient Egypt and explore their performance as well as determine the aims of the educational system in ancient Egypt. A descriptive and analytical methodology was applied to achieve the aims of this study. The most significant result of this paper that children acquired practical skills from their families, before receiving formal education in schools.

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1. Introduction

Education can be described as a deliberate or unintentional process that is psychological, sociological, scientific, and philosophical in nature. Its primary aim is to prepare individuals for their roles within society, ensuring social stability and cultural continuity.

In essence, education focuses on shaping the individual in accordance with their personal needs and the demands of the society to which they belong¹. Education is a social process whose role extends beyond merely preserving cultural and social heritage, it also seeks to enhance and expand it.

In ancient Egypt, learning often occurred through social interaction, imitation, and practical engagement within family and institutional contexts. It is obvious that members of the peasant class had no opportunity for male education, while evidence suggests that some upper-class girls, particularly in the New Kingdom, may have received instruction. No evidence is excavated to assure that there was a sect of society during the Old Kingdom it is called students since the children were taught by their fathers². The kings entrusted the education of their sons and daughters of royal blood to specialized tutors. Craftsmen and officials sent their children to study under the guidance of teachers, and in some cases, a number of students were gathered under the supervision of a single teacher. Noble families also sent their children to learn in classes alongside the children of the kings.³

It is worth noting here that the family in Egyptian society played an important role as the first educational institution, as it was able to instill social values in children before they received them from external sources. Parents paid special attention to raising the child properly, teaching them to respect their elders, for example, not sitting while they were standing, and not behaving disrespectfully or lacking reverence in their presence. At the top of those who must be respected and honored were the elders⁴. This paper aims to shed light on the school students in ancient Egypt. There are many previous studies dealt with this topic such as:

Hagen (2005), who examined ostraca, literature, and teaching practices at Deir el-Medina. Hagen's study does not provide a comprehensive picture of the overall educational environment of the period.

Zinn (2012). Education, Pharaonic Egypt. Zinn emphasizes that, unlike in modern societies; children in Ancient Egypt were integrated into adult life early on sometimes

¹ Kumar, S., & Ahmad, S. (2008). Meaning aims and process of education. *School of Open Learning*, 3.p.3

² Lloyd, A. B. (Ed.). (2010). *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* (Vol. 52). John Wiley & Sons.p.3.

³ عبد الحليم نور الدين (2008)، التربية والتعليم في مصر القديمة، ص7. انظر أيضا: سمير أديب موسوعة الحضارة المصرية القديمة، ص.282.

⁴ جيمس بيكي (١٩٣٢)، مصر القديمة، ترجمة: نجيب محفوظ، مطبعة مجلة الجديدة، القاهرة، ص ٣١-٣٢.

as young as age five. Play gave way to practical skills, and learning occurred primarily through modeling and imitation of parents or elder relatives. Zinn didn't refer to any behavioral attitude or strict rules for student's uniform or outfit.

Fahim and Zoair (2016), Education in Ancient Egypt till the End of the Graeco-Roman Period: Some Evidences for Quality. This study aimed to compare between the modern and ancient concepts of education quality.

The objectives of the study are:

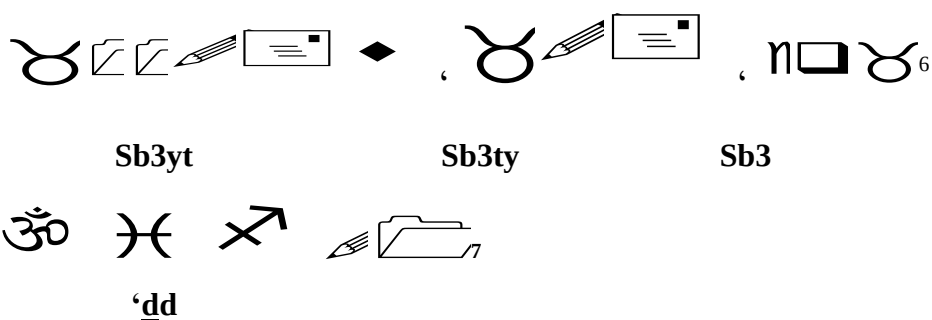
- To identify students, their ages, tools, stages of learning
- To explore the student performance and their assessments
- To specify the aims of the educational system in ancient Egypt
- To shed some light on the sect of students in Ancient Egypt.
- To investigate the sides of the Educational process

A descriptive and analyzing methodology is used. Descriptive, focused on systematic, objective documentation of the sources .Analytical, focused on interpreting the data to understand human behavior, cultural practices, and historical development. Data will be collected from texts and scenes of papyri, ostraca (especially Deir el-Medina), wisdom literature, tombs and temple.

1-Students

1-A- Term

Student is the individual who is enrolled in an education programme for the purpose of learning. The term pupil may be used for students under the age of 18-20 years who attend school.⁵



1- B- Age

The ancient Egyptian child began his first educational stage within the family through mimicking parents. The family was the first supporter of the child by mentioning the common verdict such as "lucky man puts science in his heart."

⁵ <https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/student> 23-2-2025

⁶ Faulkner, R., (1991) *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Oxford, p. 219.

⁷ Wb 1:1, p.242.

There are some who stated that the child went to the school for the first at the age of 10 years, and most researchers agreed that the education levels were three⁸:

- From 5 to 10 years old, he/she learnt to read and write
- From 10 to 15 years old, he/she learnt the skills of copying and the simple information of some sciences.
- From the age of 15 to 20, this was the stage of specialty.⁹

1-C- Gender

Most of the students were male, and they were the frontrunners in the educational process. Only a small number of females could read and write. Their education was inside the house. But the princesses' education was compulsory and necessary where they obtained highest positions¹⁰. The name of princess Meketaten, daughter of king Akhenaten, was found inscribed on one of the scribe's palette. The princess Nefrure daughter of queen Hatshepsut, queen Nefertari, the wife of the king Ramses were among those who obtained a high position.¹¹

1-D- Characteristic

Some of the disciplines required students of certain qualities. To name but a few, students who studied medicine were chosen to be least talkative, with plenty of courage, patient, circumcised as a sign of purity and must obtain a preliminary religious education in the temples so as not to mix up with bad mannered comrades.¹²

1-E- A Name List

Name of the Student	The source	Name of the Student	The source
Inena	- p. Anastasi IV ¹³ - p. Anastasi VI ¹⁴ - p. Anastasi VII ¹⁵ - p. Sallie II ¹⁶	Amenkhau	- p. Sallie IV
Pabes	- p. Anastasi III ¹⁷ - p. Koller (Berlin 3034)	Pawehem	- p. Bologna 1094

⁸ إبراهيم نصحي (١٩٧٥) تاريخ التربية والتعليم ج ٢ عصر البطالمة الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب ، ص. ٦٨ .
⁹ علي & فاطمة . (٢٠١٤) . العلم والتعليم في مصر القديمة . مجلة كلية الآثار بقنا - جامعة جنوب الوادي . 9(1) , 291-312 .
¹⁰ علي & فاطمة . (٢٠١٤) . العلم والتعليم في مصر القديمة . مجلة كلية الآثار بقنا - جامعة جنوب الوادي . 9(1) , 291-312 .
¹¹ Ayad, M. F. (Ed.). (2022). *Women in Ancient Egypt: Revisiting power, agency, and autonomy*. American University in Cairo Press. p.14.
¹² El-Gammal, S. Y. (1993). Pharmacy and medicine education in ancient Egypt. *Bull Inst Hist Med Hyderabad*, 23(1), 37-48.
¹³ Vinson, S. (1997). On Hry. t," Bulwark," in P. Anastasi IV, 7/9-8/7. *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 124(2), 156-162.
¹⁴ Popović, I., & Ferjančić, S. (2013). A new inscription from Sirmium and the basilica of St. Anastasia. *Starinar*, (63), 101-114.
¹⁵ Goedicke, H. (1987). Papyrus Anastasi VI 51-61. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, 83-98.
¹⁶ Dawson, W. R. (1949). Anastasi, Sallier, and Harris and their papyri. *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 35(1), 158-166.

Pentawert	- p. Sallie I - p. Sallie III ¹⁸	Wenemdiamun	- p.Lansing
Kawiser	- p.Leiden 348		

Fig. (1) A name list. (After Erman. A. 1925. *Die ägyptischen Schülerhandschriften*. APAW, 1-32)

2- Types of Stages

2-A-Primary Education

Children in early age were not required to undergo formal education with structured rules and guidelines. Instead, family life played a key role in shaping their basic social values, helping them develop a sense of right and wrong through the everyday behaviors and interactions they observed around them¹⁹. Primary education, also known as elementary education, gives students a foundational grasp of different subjects and equips them with essential life skills. It focuses on teaching core abilities such as reading, writing, and spelling, which are used throughout a person's life²⁰.

2-B-Secondary Education

In ancient Egypt, secondary education was a specialized phase of learning that followed basic literacy and numeracy acquired in primary schooling. It was typically available to boys from elite or literate families, such as scribes, priests,²¹ and government officials. Secondary education focused on preparing students for professional careers in administration, religion, and skilled trades. The curriculum included²²:

- Advanced hieroglyphic and hieratic writing
- Mathematics for accounting and surveying
- Legal and religious texts
- Moral and ethical instruction (often through "instructional" literature)
- Specialized training in fields like medicine, priesthood, or craftsmanship

3- Tools

Since the students were young, their tools were simple and inexpensive. When the learners became older, they could use more expensive or high quality tools. The skills of the beginners started to rise therefore they used potsherds or flakes while expensive

¹⁷ Ibid, 158-166.

¹⁸ Ibid, 158-166.

¹⁹ Bloomer, W. M. (Ed.). (2015). *A companion to Ancient Education*. John Wiley & Sons.p.152-158.
²⁰ هلموت برونر (٢٠١١) *التربية والتعليم عند المصريين القدماء* ، ترجمة مصطفى عبد الباسط ط١، المركز القومي للترجمة، ص ٧٢-٦٩.

²¹ السيد عبد الخالق بدران & ياسر. (٢٠١٩). *المكانة السياسية للمرأة في مصر القديمة من خلال التربية والتعليم*. مجلة البحث العلمي في الآداب، 20، العدد العشرون الجزء الرابع، ٨٦-٧٣.

²² Bloomer, W. M. (Ed.). (2015). *A companion to Ancient Education*. John Wiley & Sons.p.152-158.

papyrus or wooden plaster covered planks were the tools of junior learners²³. The students went to their schools with their tools to help them complete the educational process well. Students took care to have their tools used during the school day. These tools included²⁴:

- A Slab made of limestone, often made of wood covered with a layer of plaster. (For Classwork Exercise)
- A Slab made of limestone. (For Homework Exercise) Fig. (2)
- Ostraca
- Reed Pens Fig. (3)
- Black and Red ink

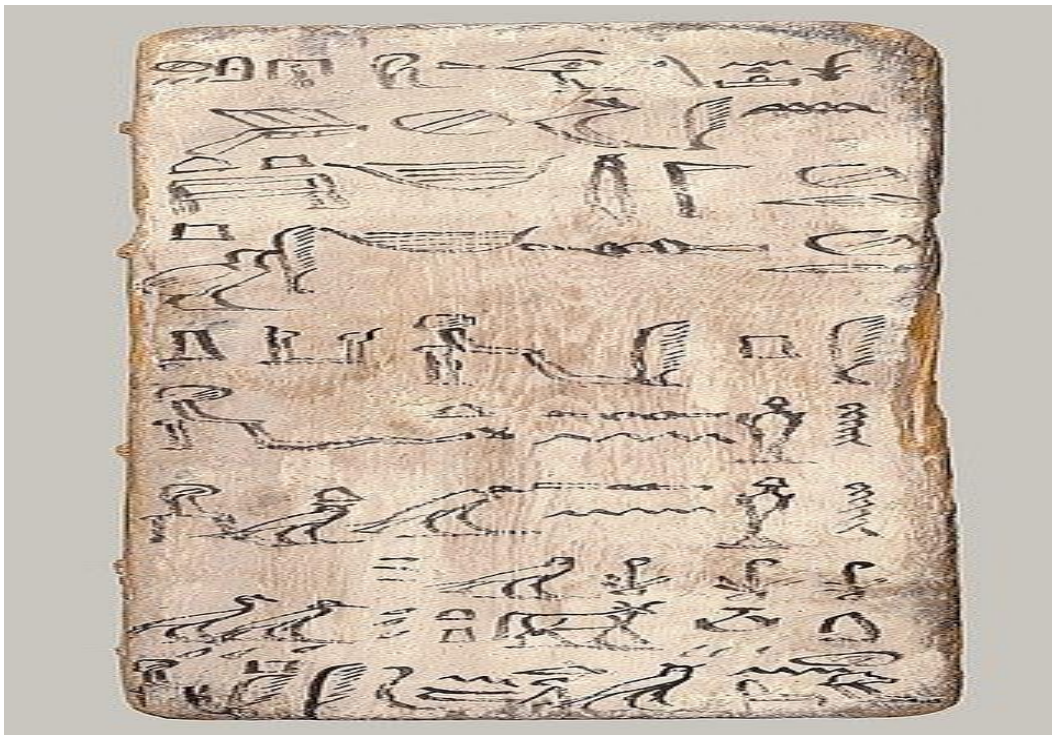


Fig. (2) Writing board of an apprentice scribe. First Intermediate Period
Dynasty: Dynasty 11 or earlier. Wood, whitewash, ink. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²³Zinn, K. (2012). Education, Pharaonic Egypt.p.4

²⁴ جورج بوزنر وآخرون (٢٠٠١) معجم الحضارة المصرية القديمة، ترجمة سيد توفيق ، ص. ٧٣.



Fig. (3) A scribal palette dates back to Late Middle Kingdom, Mid-Dynasty 12 to Dynasties 13/17 (c. 1907-1550 B.C.E). It is made of Wood and reeds. Tomb S.F. 170 Sheikh Farag, which is part of Naga ed-Deir cemetery, across the Nile from Abydos.²⁵

4- Performance

A student's level of achievement can be measured by monitoring their performance through assigned questions, homework, or tasks given by the teacher to complete in a specific manner. It can be seen clearly in the Instruction of Kagemni. In ancient Egyptian scribal schools, students were given copies of wisdom literature to read, memorize, and copy repeatedly. The Satire of the Trades, where a teacher compares the hardships of other professions to the benefits of being a scribe and says:

*"Be a scribe... it will save you from hard labor. Copy, read, and repeat"*²⁶

4-A- Academically

4- A-1-Studying Times

Mostly, student spent a long school day from the morning until midday. He/She was getting some rest in the middle of the day in the form of a break. In this break, they can eat the food which the mother brought and they can play too.²⁷

4-A-2-Classwork

Students were trained to write on gypsum board and copy specific texts, Fig. (4). Sometimes students were asked to resolve specific mathematical issues, or write what the teacher dictated them.

²⁵ <https://www.memphis.edu/egypt/exhibit/palette.php>. 3-4-2025

²⁶ Thuault, S. (2023). *Social Hierarchy in the 'Satire of the Trades': Scribal Considerations on Crafts in Ancient Egypt*.

²⁷ محمد أبو التحاسين عصفور (1987) «معالم حضارات شرق الأدنى القديم»، دار النهضة العربية، بيروت، ص126، 124.

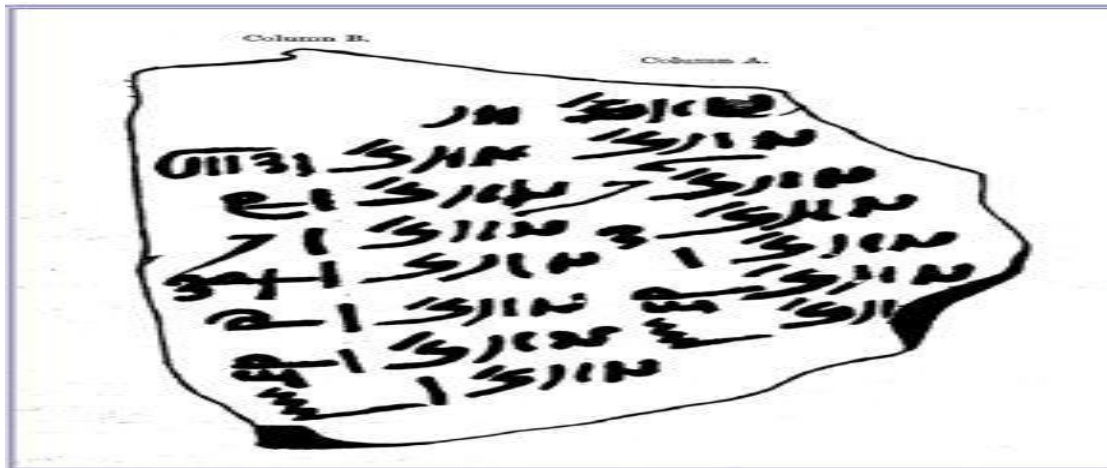


Fig. (4) An example of an Egyptian school exercise can be read as: (I said
You said He said She said)

Column A of the Demotic ostracon (published and translated in Reich 1924). (After Reich 1924: 286) Students sometimes wrote their exercise on reused papyri as in Deir el-Medina.

4-A-3 Homework

The homework was given to return in the next session to be corrected by the teacher. Upon completion of the homework, the solution was copied on the papyrus paper. Sometimes the students mistake were mishearing of the dictated phrases " h_3 r mdt ntt r.s " you should fight against a matter that is against it was heard as " h_4 kmt nt r. s"t Egypt should stand against that which is against it²⁸. Among the exercises were complete with words and dictation which refers to the skill of memorizing²⁹. The homework sometimes was in the form of modeling. The students were asked to imitate or copying a sketch like that one which was found in Deir Al Medina: remains of draftsman work. This kind of exercise improved the skill of visual analysis, particularly for painters and workers during the New Kingdom (1315-1081 BCE)³⁰. The school system was harsh and strict, and classes typically ended around midday. Students cared deeply about their notebooks, which were so valued that they were buried with them.³¹

4-A-4-Exams

No exams in the current sense were found. But there may be assessments similar to schoolwork that may measure specific skills of the learner, such as memory, analysis, and application skills. In oDeM 438, teacher Piay sends an ostracon to his student

²⁸ Lloyd, A. B. (Ed.). (2010). *A companion to Ancient Egypt* .p.739.

²⁹ Zinn, K. (2012). *Education, Pharaonic Egypt*. p.3.

³⁰ Cooney, K. M. (2012). Apprenticeship and figured Ostraca from the Ancient Egyptian village of Deir el-Medina. *Archaeology and apprenticeship: body knowledge, identity, and communities of practice*, 145-70.

³¹ محمد أبو التحاسين عصفور (1987) ، *معالم حضارات شرق الأدنى القديم* ، ص 124-126.

Amenmose, informing him that a third chapter is ready for copying. Amenmose replies via the same medium, confirming he will complete the task. Piay then responds again, instructing the student to visit him once he finishes the assignment. This exchange aligns with the content of the ostrakon, which shows that the teacher assigned a chapter for the student to copy as a way to assess his ability to recall the correct sequence of the text³². The exam system was not known before the Ptolemaic era.

Concerning certificates, one officer's education certificate was found, dated back to 1500 BC.

4-B-Behavioral

The educational system in ancient Egypt relied partly on discipline and physical punishment. The school discipline regulation included several procedures which began with advising and guiding then beatings on different areas of the body such as: (back, foot and hand) and at the end detention until the student completed the required tasks. *"I'll whip you with a hippopotamus hide. Don't waste your day in laziness. If you spend your day being lazy, I'll whip your back, and then you'll listen well."*³³

Physical punishment wasn't the first type of punishment, but it comes after advice and guidance have failed.

1-Students

Term- Age- Gender- Characteristics- Name List.

2- Types of Stages

Primary Stage- Secondary Stage

3- Tools

A slab of Limestone- Ostraca- Reed Pens- Black and Red Ink

4- Performance

A: Academically
Studying Time- Classwork- Homework- Assesment
B- Behavioral

Fig. (5) The above chart explains the different sides of the student's educational and pedagogical process.

³² J. Černý, (1951) *Catalogue des Ostraca Hiératiques Non littéraires de Deir el Médineh*, tome V (Nos. 340 à 456), Cairo, 26–7, pl. 26.

³³ عبد العزيز صالح (١٩٦٦) التربية والتعليم في مصر القديمة، القاهرة. ص ٣٤٦.

Conclusion

The educational system in Ancient Egypt aimed to cultivate a knowledgeable and conscious generation capable of fulfilling their responsibilities effectively. It also intended to foster intergenerational communication and the exchange of knowledge and skills—both through formal education in schools and informal learning within family settings. Moreover, the ancient Egyptians recognized the importance of aligning educational content with the student's cognitive development and their ability to grasp the material.

In Ancient Egypt, students were regarded as members of the societal elite, with education serving as a tool to shape and regulate their behavior by emphasizing its importance and penalizing carelessness in different ways. From an early age, children recognized the value of learning, and various methods were employed to assess their academic progress. However, archaeological evidence has not provided clear information regarding a specific dress code for students during that time.

The environment and atmosphere surrounding students played a significant role in motivating them and guiding them toward the right path—one that led to suitable careers or trades, whether inherited or independently chosen. The ancient Egyptians were eager to promote education and discourage neglect, encouraging individuals to pursue learning. However, once they became part of the educated class, they were held accountable for their efforts, with little tolerance for abandoning educational responsibilities.

The practical side of education was considered just as important as the theoretical component. In fact, the structured and disciplined system contributed to building a strong educational environment. Additionally, the multi-level educational framework was optional rather than mandatory.

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طلاب المدرسة وأدائهم في مصر القديمة

محمد عبد الغني محمود عبد الغني

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المستخلص

كان النظام التعليمي في مصر القديمة يهدف إلى تدريب الكتبة والمسؤولين لضمان استمرارية الإدارة ونقل الثقافة. ويمكن وصف التعليم بأنه عملية مقصودة أو غير مقصودة ذات طابع نفسي، اجتماعي، علمي وفلسفي. ويهدف بشكل أساسي إلى إعداد الأفراد لأدوارهم داخل المجتمع، بما يضمن الاستقرار الاجتماعي واستمرارية الثقافة.

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تسليط بعض الضوء على نهج وسلوك طلاب المدرسة في مصر القديمة وكذلك أيضا التعرف على المناخ التربوي الذي أحاط بالطلاب أثناء العملية التعليمية وذلك من خلال إتباع المنهج الوصفي التحليلي للمصادر الأثرية والوثائق المكتشفة. تبين هذه الدراسة العديد من النتائج الهامة مثل تعاليم خيتي لإبنه بيبى والتي تشجع الطلاب على طلب المعرفة وعلى اكتساب السلوك الإيجابي تجاه التعليم، بل وأيضا إحترام مصادر التعليم وأدواته. إن الطفل يستطيع ان يكتسب بعض المهارات العملية منذ أن كان بإستطاعته تقليد الأبوين في سن الخامسة من عمره وما بعدها.

وقد تم استخدام منهج وصفي وتحليلي؛ حيث ركز المنهج الوصفي على التوثيق المنهجي والموضوعي للمصادر، بينما ركز المنهج التحليلي على تفسير البيانات لفهم السلوك البشري والممارسات الثقافية والتطور التاريخي. كشفت هذه الورقة عن نتائج مهمة، مثل المهارات المختلفة التي اكتسبها الطلاب. فقد كان الطفل قادراً على اكتساب بعض المهارات العملية منذ سن الخامسة من خلال تقليد الوالدين أو أداء بعض التمارين المختلفة.

الكلمات الدالة

مصر القديمة
التعليم
المدرسة
الطالب
التدريس