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In the Name of God

The Educational Impact of Traditional Games: the Role of Zurkhaneh Sport in Educating Children

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Abstract

Games, and in particular traditional games, can be seriously studied as the most important and attractive way of improving physical, mental, affective, and social health of members of society. Playing traditional games maintains physical health, improves spiritual and mental state, and institutionalizes cultural values.

Zurkhaneh sports are among the most popular traditional sports that have long been practiced by people of Iran. Iranians' emphasis on magnanimity, bravery, integrity, nobility, and moral fiber has contributed to the long life of a great Iranian heritage, namely zurkhane sport. Zurkhaneh became known as a place where the most elegant characters, like magnanimity, forgiveness, sacrifice, altruism, combating ignorance, and adherence to moral principles and virtues, were fostered. Every single element of zurkhaneh sport is imbued with moral teachings. Respecting veterans, observing moral principles, praying, caring for the needy, and encouraging politeness and sportsmanlike behavior in addition to physical improvements are among the prominent features of this traditional sport.

The present paper aims to explore the educational impacts of zurkhaneh sports on children by drawing on attractive features, background, and potentials of this traditional game.

Keywords: Traditional Games; Zurkhaneh; Persia (Ancient Iran); Culture

Introduction

Historical background of traditional games together with previous studies indicates that games and sports have always formed an integral part of social life of humankind. Various games and sports have emerged in different regions depending on climate and geography of those regions. Some of these games and sports have spread into and manifested themselves in neighboring areas. In a traditional society, “game” referred to activities with two main functions: (1) improving physical stamina and (2) practicing rituals. People in ancient societies used physical activities to gain the strength they needed in battlefields. This physical strength did not serve personal purposes; rather it was employed in a far more critical situation, namely war. On the other hand, traditional games involved actions imbued with religious and mythical tints for observing rituals. Of course, in addition to the functions mentioned above, games were used in performances before social and political figures to entertain them. These games combine aesthetic features with purposefulness and effectiveness to relieve physical and mental fatigue, foster cooperation and unity, and bring about valuable educational impacts.

Sport in Persia

In ancient times, Persia (Iran) was the greatest country among the major countries of the east that emphasized sport and physical education in their education systems. Persian people had recognized the significance of physical health and abilities as an important way of providing victorious and brave troops.

The oldest manuscripts on sport in Persia were written by Herodotus and Xenophon- two Greek historians, who recorded instances of Persian athletic competitions and educations, including equitation and archery, and particularly moral and educational aspects of sport in Persia. Herodotus, the famous Greek historian, wrote that, through their educations that started at the age of 5 and continued to the age of 20, Persians learnt three things: horseback riding, archery, and honesty. In addition to theoretical educations, the young people were required to learn the skills needed in different sports.

By the dawn of Islam, different types of sport gained popularity since Islam stressed sports such as horseback riding, archery, sword fighting, wrestling, swimming, and old versions of track and field sports.

In their treatises, physicians of the Islamic era, including Avicenna and Abubakr Bokhari, a pupil of Zakarya Razi, emphasized the contribution made by sports to physical and mental health; but an important point to note about the Persian people was how they differed from the Greek in terms of their views on sport. Persians did not regard sports merely as means of leisure or entertainment; rather, they viewed sports as a ritual of moral behavior for spreading humanitarian virtues, magnanimity, altruism, honesty, and good deed – a view comparable to the ideas involved in the modern Olympics. In addition, Persians linked sport closely to determination, fervor, hate for cowardice, support for the nation, nobility, generosity, magnanimity, patience, friendship and mutual understanding, honesty, modesty, bravery, and edification as well as religious beliefs. Persians pursued sport to foster ethics and fairness, altruism, and honesty, and they did their best to disseminate such values into other nations.

A prominent type of popular sports in Persia was zurkhaneh sport which dates back to over three thousand years ago. Iranians are well familiar with zurkhaneh sport and its historical background. As one of the oldest sports in the world, zurkhaneh has found its ways to other

countries as a sport closely linked to Iran and its customs, traditions, language, and features. Prominent poets, like Ferdowsi and Sadi, made references to zurkhaneh sport and champions in their works. The *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in Paris features a manuscript of Ali Akbar ben Mehdi from Kashan, illustrated with 83 pictures, that dates back to 1875 and consistently describes zurkhaneh sport, exercises, massage techniques that made use of almond oil, break periods, and *morsheds* who sang, ringed bells, and played *zarb* (drum) in zurkhaneh. The author particularly notes the wrestling and boxing competitions held after regular zurkhaneh exercises.

In the First Symposium on Introduction to Scientific and Cultural Roots of Zurkhaneh, Paul Chartier, a Canadian expert in traditional games, noted: “Ancient sport systems reflect a perfect combination of synchronized motions, magnanimity, beauty, and good deeds. These motions foster reason, integrity, and power in both physical and spiritual dimensions. Athletes are asked to protect moral, ethnic, and mystic values of Iran. They invite those who hold power to modestly serve their society. Such values represent the highest levels of ideals followed by the human; loyalty, bravery, sacrifice, humanity, modesty, and selflessness. These values attracted me to ancient sports”.

Impacts of Zurkhaneh Sports on Development

Impacts on physical development

As reliable tool for growth of the youth, zurkhaneh sports can assist coordination among muscular and nervous systems, help the human body to physiologically adapt itself to different functions, and assists autonomous control system to regulate these functions. Different moving parts of body are involved in doing zurkhaneh exercises, and this improves strength and stamina of all muscles. Coordination, balance, agility, flexibility, responsiveness, and quick reaction are among other physical fitness factors that can be remarkably improved through zurkhaneh sports. This strength and coordination among body parts lead to proper fitness and increased efficiency. Athletes can also improve their five senses, especially sight, hearing, and touch by harmonizing their movements to the sound of bell and drum.

Impacts on mental development

Zurkhaneh sports always came hand in hand with moral teachings and a spiritual atmosphere to ensure simultaneous development in terms of physical and mental aspects, the latter being involved with the following particularly important features:

- 1- Improving mental and spiritual strength and capabilities to overcome sensual desires, envy, arrogance, self-centeredness, and spite;
- 2- Balancing emotions and managing and controlling undesirable mental states such as anger, rage, fear, and affection;
- 3- Eliminating conditions that result from worries, isolation, depression, disappointment, and fears;
- 4- Creating balance in competition and openness to reasonable rules and principles in everyday life; and
- 5- Achieving vivacity and high-spiritedness as important elements in continuous development

Impacts on affectional development

A 3-to-7-year old child openly expresses his or her feelings and gradually begins to identify them. Obviously, abrupt expression of anger or fear by a child at this age is quite normal, and fear plays an important role in this stage of life because of the heightened sense of imagination in children. Furthermore, children constantly face new situations which appear unfamiliar to them. It should be noted that the environment in which a child lives and experiences learnt through playing games strongly influence how that child express his or her emotions.

Zurkhaneh sports along with diverse situations presented in this type of sport can improve affectional development in children by:

- 1- Providing mental development and fostering independence, patience, determination, and sacrifice;
- 2- Promoting strong inspirations, bravery, boldness, strength, endurance, perseverance, and high spirit;
- 3- Encouraging positive behaviors and directing them into perfection and good;
- 4- Emphasizing dignity and self-control when facing difficulties and corruptions (e.g. addiction and perversion)
- 5- Introducing religious and humanitarian responsibilities and encouraging commitment to such responsibilities; and
- 6- Improving the capabilities for making reasonable and quick decisions.

Impacts on social development

Children play games to express and satisfy their feelings and discover the connections between these feelings. From the age two to three, children usually begin playing with others. However, if their intrinsic talents and social awareness have not been developed, they will not be able to adapt to others' interests and may lose their interest in playing games or maintaining social bonds. By playing games and imitating what grownups do, children not only practice how to modify their social behaviors, but also they find opportunities to modify and develop the ways in which they behave socially. In this way, a child gets up the courage to join the society and learns how to live in society and find solutions to and overcome the problems she may face. The atmosphere in zurkhaneh gives children an opportunity to practice social relationships while they are still young and apply what they learn to their adult lives.

Impacts of personality development

Zurkhaneh sports are extremely effective in personality development in children. Games are means of gaining valuable experiences that help fostering emotional, social, and mental development. Behavioral models are shaped when a child plays games. These models will provide children with examples for the rest of their lives. Through playing games, a child recognizes, experiences, and practices numerous interconnected and delicate models of human life and learns these models by measuring how they are connected to each other since he will inevitably face them when he starts to live in the society as an adult. Given the improvements that zurkhaneh sports can bring to different aspects of human life, they can play an effective role in personality development in children and teenagers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Playing traditional games maintains physical health, improves spiritual and mental state, and institutionalizes cultural values. Games are considered valuable tools to shape an individual's national and religious identity, and to organize his values and beliefs. If rooted in the society's culture and traditions, games can determine a person's true identity which is a combination of history, past traditions and customs, and cultural position of that person and his country in the past and the present.

Zurkhaneh sports are among the most prominent traditional sports in Iran that have been regarded as valuable sports in towns, cities, and villages and have long been practiced in the country. In Persia (Ancient Iran), Zurkhaneh provided a place for sport activities in communities and towns where athletes practiced old methods in sport and exercises. Zurkhaneh sports date back to pre-Islam era, but then it was mixed with Sufism as the practice became popular in Iran. Zurkhaneh, in its present form, emerged and achieved a pinnacle after the Mongol invasion of Persia. Persians never tolerated dominance by others and always attached great importance to protection of their lives, properties, and soil against invaders. Zurkhaneh was a house of worship and also a place where people did exercises and improved their physical strength to fight enemies. Throughout its history, zurkhaneh has nurtured great noble men and has played a significant role in freeing people from tyrannies.

The emergence of Islam and its introduction to Iran gradually brought more popularity and reputation to zurkhaneh as its practices matched Islamic teachings and criteria as well as religious rules. Zurkhaneh has withstood the test of time because of its deep emphasis on religious attitudes and interests. Iranians' care for magnanimity, bravery, integrity, and honesty helped this traditional sport last for a long time. Zurkhaneh became known as a place where the most elegant characters, like magnanimity, forgiveness, sacrifice, altruism, combating ignorance, and adherence to moral principles and virtues, were fostered. Every single element of zurkhaneh sport is imbued with moral teachings. Respecting veterans, observing moral principles, praying, caring for the needy, and encouraging politeness and sportsmanlike behavior in addition to physical improvements are among the prominent features of this traditional sport.

Given the special features of zurkhaneh sport, not only it is regarded as a perfect type of sport but also it is considered a sport which roots in a particular culture that emphasizes magnanimity and noble-spiritedness above anything else. The educational impacts of zurkhaneh sport on morality, personality, and physical and cultural aspects along with prominent cultural and historical figures that practiced this type of sport can provide the youth with a great model which helps people maintain desirable characters. In aggregate, it follows that zurkhaneh sports, with their particular features, can serve as a valuable educational tool to significantly improve all-inclusive development in children.

Conflict of Interest

The author has not declared any conflicts of interest.

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