The Role of Games in the Moral Education of Children from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, we will examine moral education through games from an Islamic perspective. To this end, we will first present a discussion of virtue ethics as the theoretical framework of our discussion since a major part of Islamic moral education can be explained through it. As we will explain, virtue ethics emphasizes the effect of following moral patterns in character formation. Then, we will discuss the place of games in the moral education method of the Prophet of Islam and the Shia Imams and show how they paid attention to the moral education of children through games. We will then look at some new games designed by Islamic education experts for this purpose. Finally, we will discuss some theoretical mechanisms to explain the efficacy of these games and examine an empirical case study conducted in this field.

Research Objectives: To explore the role of games in the moral education method of the Prophet of Islam and the Shia Imams.

Research Methods: A qualitative documentary method to study the place of games in Islamic moral teachings and methods.

Research Results: A major part of Islamic moral education can be explained through the virtue ethics framework, which emphasizes the effect of following moral patterns in character formation.

Keywords: Islamic games; moral education; Islamic education; religion.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will examine moral education through games from an Islamic perspective. To this end, we will first present a discussion of virtue ethics as the theoretical framework of our discussion as a major part of Islamic moral education can be explained through that framework. As we will explain, virtue ethics emphasizes the effect of following moral patterns in character formation. Then, we will discuss the place of games in the moral education method of the Prophet of Islam and the Shia Imams and show how they paid attention to the moral education of children through games. We will then look at some new games designed by Islamic education experts for this purpose. Finally, we will discuss some theoretical mechanisms to explain the efficacy of these games and examine an empirical case study conducted in this field.

By moral education in this research, we mean the acquisition of prosocial characters. Different religions contribute to fostering a spirit of prosociality (Batson et al., 1993), including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam —all pay attention to helping, donating, and charity, although religious social ethics is claimed to target in-group members (Shariff, 2016). We think, however, that this claim, which Saroglou (2013, cited in Cross, 2017) calls minimal prosociality, does not apply to all religions and depends on the content of specific religious instructions.

The word morality or ethics in Arabic is derived from the root "*kholq*," which means character: the traits established in human personality. According to the Shia mystic and philosopher of the 11th century AH[3] (17th century AD), al-Fayd al-Kashani (2003 [1423 AH], p. 59), morality is the properties and stable states in the human soul that lead to actions without the need for thinking. If these traits take root in the human soul, corresponding actions will emerge from the human unconsciously. The common understanding of ethics among Islamic religious texts and ethicists is close to virtue ethics. According to this view, morality refers to the traits formed and established in human personality as a result of

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[3] The lunar Islamic calendar

repetition and practice (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 236). The concept of morality in the West, at least in the modern era, is different from the above concept. Virtue ethics under the influence of Aristotle emphasizes the role of moral traits in distinguishing the moral from the immoral. The major rival of virtue ethics, deontology, emphasizes compliance with the rules determined by reason, rather than the formed personality and character.

Just as virtue ethics emphasizes the formation of moral character, Islamic ethics introduces one of the goals of the prophets to cultivate good traits in people: "The one who cultivates his soul will truly find prosperity and salvation" (Quran, Surah 87: Verse 14). Islamic ethics places a strong emphasis on controlling the desires of the soul, known as major jihad, as compared to minor jihad, which involves combatting external enemies. Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shiites, states "The Prophet sent a group to jihad, when they returned, admired them for accomplishing minor jihad, while the major jihad remained ahead of them. They asked the Prophet about the meaning of major jihad, to which the Prophet elucidated it as struggle against one's own soul" (Koleini 2008 [1429 AH], Vol. 5, 12). Imam Ali also holds: "The criterion of religiosity is to oppose the temptations of the soul" (Amedi, 1990 [1410 AH]: Hadith 4894), and "The most virtuous jihad is jihad against the soul" (Amedi, 1990 [1410 AH]: Hadith 4907).

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: VIRTUE ETHICS

In the modern era, moral philosophers have mainly focused on moral rightness and determining the principles of moral duties and obligations; however, virtue ethics was preserved and revived. In recent years, we have seen a significant revival of virtue ethics (Slote, 1992, p. 87). Virtue ethics refers to theories in ethics that emphasize the role of character and virtues rather than performing moral duties or producing good outcomes. From this point of view, knowing moral virtues and achieving good results is possible only with the development of a well-formed personality. Kantian rationalism and dry utilitarian calculations are not sufficient methods for distinguishing moral action. The acquisition of moral virtues is a necessary condition for knowing moral duties (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 236).

By training and correcting the feelings, which is done through the repetition of good deeds, the agent first acquires a habit of doing good deeds, and then by establishing these traits in his personality, he acquires a kind of moral sensitivity that would be his guide in moral judgment and action (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 236). Therefore, in virtue ethics, there is a lot of emphasis on character formation, especially during childhood and youth. The ingrained moral traits help the person recognize the requirements of moral action in different situations. In other words, the development of virtues acquires a cognitive aspect and gives the person a capacity for moral decision-making. This moral insight cannot be reduced to a set of general moral principles (McDowell, 1979, pp. 331-332).

According to virtue ethics, the formation of moral character precedes moral understanding and insight. During childhood, the child does not face philosophical questions in the field of ethics. During this period, character and moral conscience will be constituted, which may be philosophically explained, articulated, or even revised in the next stages. In Charles Taylor's terms, "significant others" are influential in constituting the child's moral character (Taylor, 1991, p. 33). The child adopts the concepts of good and bad from important others such as parents, teachers, and relatives.

In religious traditions, the flexibility and malleability of personality in childhood are also emphasized. From an Islamic perspective, the formation of character begins even before the birth and coagulation of the child's sperm, in such a way that it is believed that even the thoughts and desires of the parents and the nutrition of the parents before the birth of the child affect his moral capacity and destiny (Sajedi, 2021 [1399 AHSH[4]], p. 75). For this reason, the role of the companion in acquiring moral virtues has been emphasized in Islamic religious teachings. They instill values in us by direct and indirect induction. According to Islamic teachings, every human being is born with inherent divine tendencies, which are not derived from the environment, but their growth and flourishing require the right environment and education; as the Prophet of Islam says: "Every newborn is born with the divine nature, that is, with the knowledge that God is his creator, but his parents change this nature" (Koleini, p.

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[4] The solar Islamic calendar

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2008 [1429 AH], Vol. 3, 35). After this brief introduction to the general structure of Islamic ethics, we will discuss the role of games in the moral tradition of the Prophet and Imams.

CHILDREN AND PLAYING

Children understand moral concepts and values and recognize good from bad behavior, in part through playing. Although the child is introduced to moral values at home and school, the internalization and consolidation of moral standards at home and school are never as strong as in games. The child learns that if he wants to be accepted in games, he must be honest, fair, and just, and abide by the game's rules (Beheshti & Manteqi, 2012 [1390 AHSH], p. 106). He also finds that his fellow players are less tolerant of his mistakes than his parents. Therefore, during games, he faces the necessity of moral principles more completely than in other ways of moral education.

From the Islamic perspective, an important rule about children's playing is "giving him access as much as possible." The first point that should be observed by parents is not to delay unreasonably the meeting of children's need to play. The practice of the Prophet in engaging with children serves as a clear illustration of this point. It has been reported that when the Prophet was on his way to the mosque to perform the congregational prayer, he was asked by children to play. He started playing with children, even though the prayer was delayed. The Prophet in response to Bilal, one of his companions, who came after him, said: "O Bilal, it is better for me to miss the special time of the prayer than to miss the hearts of children" (Aufi, 1962 [1340 AHSH], p. 30). While on the way to a destination with his companions, the Prophet came across his grandson Hussein. He then left his companions to spend some time playing with his grandson. Imam Ali holds in this regard, "The child must be free for seven years, educated for seven years, and employed for seven years" (Majlesi, 1983 [1403 AH], Vol. 101, p. 96).

Playing with children strengthens the intimate relationship between parents and children and makes the child feel that the parents are paying attention to him. During games, the child learns rule-based behavior because he realizes that he has to follow the framework of the game (Sajedi, 2021[AHSH], p. 197).

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According to religious teachings, playing is one of the efficient methods for children's spiritual development. In Islam, playing has a high educational and moral position. The Imams used to play with children. The Prophet of Islam used to ride his two grandsons, Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein, on his shoulders and said, "What a good vehicle you have and what good riders you are." Imam Sadiq, the sixth Imam of Shiites, has introduced childhood as one of the most important periods of people's lives and play, in the first seven years of life, as a source of human growth and prosperity in later ages (Sajedi, 2021 [1399 AHSH], pp. 197-8). In this regard, Imam Sadiq states that you should let your child play freely until the age of 7 and make him obey afterward (Tabarsi, 1991, p. 222). The Prophet of Islam narrates: "Have fun and play because I do not like to see strictness in your religion" (Payandeh, 2004 [1382 AHSH], p. 259).

Religious education through games facilitates children to learn religious concepts, and as this training occurs at a young age, it will be entrenched in them. As Imam Ali states, a teenager's heart is like an empty earth, it accepts whatever is thrown into it (Sharif al-Radi, 1993 [1414 AH], p. 393). He also holds that "acquiring knowledge in childhood is like carving on a stone" meaning that what is learned in childhood is fixed and engrained in human beings (Dilami, 1998 [1408 AH], p. 84). In the next section, we will refer to some collective physical plays that are explicitly mentioned in Islamic hadiths and the practice of the Prophet and Imams. We will, then, refer to some games designed based on Islamic norms by educational psychologists.

EXAMPLES OF CLASSIC ISLAMIC GAMES

- PLAYING WITH SOIL: This play has been so favorable that the Prophet considered it as one of the reasons for his love for children. He ordered parents not to prevent children from playing with soil: "The soil is the spring of children" (Qaza'I, 1983 [1361 AHSH], p. 89).

- SWIMMING: This play, like soil play, is so valuable that is mentioned as the best amusement for a Muslim. That is why the Prophet ordered the Muslims to train their children to swim and considered it as one of the rights of children over their fathers: "Train your children swimming and shooting" (Koleini, 2008 [1429 AH], vol.6, p. 47).

- RIDING AND HORSE RACING: By studying the practice of the Shiite Imams, it can be seen that one of the favorite and recommended games for children is horse riding. It is mentioned that the Prophet used to play the role of a camel for his grandsons. Hasan and Hossein, the Prophet's grandsons, were so interested in this play that even during prayer and prostration, they would ride on the shoulders of the Prophet and the Prophet would not prevent them. The Prophet said to one of his companions who was surprised by this, "If you believed in God and Her Messenger, you would have mercy on children." (Majlesi, 1983 [1403 AH], vol.43, p. 296; Beheshti & Manteqi, 2012 [1390 AHSH], p. 106).

- REGULAR ENJOYABLE GAMES : Some of the Prophet's games with children were only for the sake of enjoyment and happiness. This purpose is mentioned in the Islamic hadiths. The Prophet stated: "Indeed, there is a house in heaven called the house of happiness, no one enters it unless he has made children happy." In this regard, it is also mentioned about Imam Baqir, the fifth Shiite Imam, that he allowed his son Imam Sadiq to have fun and play with children. As a child, Imam Sadiq engaged in mental plays with his friends in addition to practical ones. For example, in one of the games, he became a teacher, and other children became his students. He asked about the name of a fruit that grows on a tree or on the ground. Its color is red and it tastes sweet or sour and its season is this season. Whoever responded properly, would become the master and lead the group (Beheshti & Manteqi, 2012 [1390 AHSH], p. 100).

Making children happy and entertained through play helps develop their mental and emotional capacities. However, it is possible to insert some content into these games that advance their moral education. In fact, instead of direct commands and prohibitions, moral content can be transmitted through games. In this case, the sweetness of the game makes this moral content attractive.

In the next section, we refer to some new plays designed by Islamic education specialists and analyze their moral content. In the book "Educational Games for Developing Moral Qualities (8-14 years old)" (Keshani & Abedi Dourche 2018 [1396 AHSH]), 40 games are designed with an Islamic attitude. Among these, we will focus on 3 games and analyze them. Firstly, we will describe these games and then analyze them.

MODERN ISLAMIC GAMES

1. ETHICAL DART:

In this game, players earn points by throwing darts at moral traits printed on the board. The purpose of the game is to create awareness and enthusiasm for these moral traits. A dartboard is installed and the desired moral characteristics are drawn on it in the form of circles. Any moral trait that is thought to be more important will be drawn at the middle of the circle so that the ball that hits it will earn more points. The students compete in two teams. Any team that scores more points in total will win. In the dartboard below, the following moral traits are drawn from the center to the outside, respectively: Honesty (5 points), Forgiveness (4 points), Helpfulness (3 points), Cleanliness (2 points), and hardworking (1 point) (Keshani & Abedi Dourche, 2018 [1396 AHSH], p. 28).
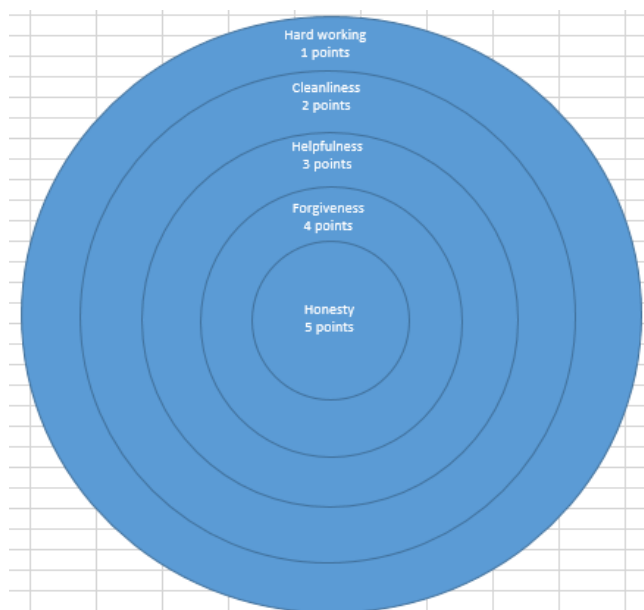
MORAL LESSONS OF THE GAME:

In addition to being fun and strengthening children's motor skills, this game also provides moral education, some of which are mentioned below.

- By playing in groups, children's communication skills are strengthened. They understand teamwork and realize that they must work together to acquire moral qualities. In this way,

their sense of competitiveness is controlled. This reflects the Qur'anic verse (5:2) "Help one another in acts of righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and transgression."

- By earning points as a result of throwing darts at hoops, and realizing the sweetness of success, these moral qualities also become enjoyable for them. In other words, they feel a kind of association between winning and the corresponding moral characteristics, and so they are indirectly attracted to these characteristics.

- Students understand that to acquire moral qualities, just like earning points in darts, one must show effort and endure the hardships of the work.

- According to the nested ethical circles in the dart, the students get to know the issue of ethical conflicts and prioritization in ethics. He understands that some moral principles such as honesty are central to the moral system. This would help them decide on moral dilemmas.

2. DOUBLE DODGEBALL

In this game, players in two teams try to catch the moral ball and escape the immoral ball. The purpose of this game is the symbolic practice of acquiring virtues and avoiding moral vices.

In this game, two balls of different colors are provided for the students. One ball belongs to the moral virtues and the other to the moral vices. Each student writes a moral virtue on the virtue ball and a moral vice on the immoral ball with a marker. The students are then divided into two equal groups. One of the groups stands in the middle of the field and the other group surrounds them. Both balls are given to two people standing on one side of the field and they will throw the two balls simultaneously toward the middle group. The middle group should try to catch the moral ball and escape the immoral ball. Each time they catch an ethical ball, they get 5 positive points and when they are hit by the immoral ball, they get 1 negative point. After 10-15 minutes of playing, the two groups change their places. The one with the highest total score wins (Keshani & Abedi Dourche, 2018 [1396 AHSH], p. 35).

MORAL LESSONS OF THE GAME

- The participation of the students in writing moral virtues and vices on the balls is a way of reminding them of their knowledge of moral virtues and vices. Students are familiar with these features and are reminded about them by writing them on the balls.

- Like the previous game, this game requires teamwork and strengthens the spirit of cooperation.

- The fact that the reward for receiving the ethical ball is higher than for hitting an immoral ball reflects the Qur'anic point that good deeds are rewarded several times higher than bad deeds: "Whoever will come to Allah with a good deed shall have ten times as much, and whoever will come to Allah with an evil deed, shall be requited with no more than the like of it. They shall not be wronged" (verse 6: 160).

- The fact that the students in the middle of the field should always be wary to catch the moral ball and run away from the ball of vices creates a kind of awareness in them, which means that in real life they should always be aware of good and evil and be prepared to make moral decisions in different situations.

- The students learn that in some cases, acquiring virtues and avoiding vices coincide with each other, so people need more care and skill.

3. **THE MAGIC ROPE**

In this game, the players try to earn points by pulling the rope of moral virtues into their area. The purpose of this game is to learn about moral virtues and is a symbolic effort to obtain them. The procedure is that 25 moral virtues cards are prepared in dimensions of 10 x 10 cm. A moral virtue is written on each card along with its score. According to the knowledge we have about the players, we rank the moral virtues. We write the virtues that need more attention on the 100-point cards, the second-ranked virtues on the 80-point cards, and the third-ranked virtues on the 60-point cards so that in the end there will be 5 cards of 100 points, 10 cards of 80 points, and 10 cards of 60 points. These cards will be stuck on both sides of the rope with equal distance. The two groups of students with almost equal strength take the two sides of the rope and pull them towards themselves. The game continues by

drawing all the cards (Keshani & Abedi Dourche, 2018 [1396 AHSH], p. 31). The group with the most points wins.

MORAL LESSONS OF THE GAME

- Students are reminded of the moral virtues

- This game, like the previous games, is a group game and shows the necessity of cooperation to achieve moral virtues.

- The difficulty of pulling the rope indicates the difficulty of acquiring moral virtues

- The different scores of moral virtues indicate the importance of situational assessment and the necessity of applying virtues according to different situations.

There is an important point in comparing these two types of games, i.e., the classic games of the early Islamic period and the modern games. The games conducted by the Prophet and the Imams —such as horse riding, dirt or soil games, and swimming—were mostly among the common games of the time and based on physical activity and vitality without explicitly promoting a specific moral content. As if in these games, the underlying thought had been that the child would achieve a healthy upbringing by participating in these games, draining their energy, gaining vivacity and accepting the rules of the game; while in the new educational games, some moral content is inserted more clearly. This may be explained in terms of the simplicity of the early Islamic society and the complexity in the modern era. In the modern era, the child is exposed to more diverse and conflicting messages. Maybe for this reason, in addition to simple physical games, there is a need for more explicit intellectual and moral games.

After describing and analyzing these two categories of games, we will discuss the underlying theoretical mechanisms of these games that explain why we think these games will have a moral impact.

THE THEORETICAL MECHANISMS OF ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL GAMES

Modern Islamic games, some of which were described above, invoke moral reminders. This educational style is based on the idea of the innateness of moral tendencies, which also

Actual. Pedagog. Bogotá (Colombia) N.° 82, julio-diciembre del 2023
ISSN: 0120-1700 - ISSN-e: 2389-8755 (en línea)
Online First

ISSN 0120-1700
e-ISSN 2389-8755

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accounts for its effectiveness. According to this idea, moral tendencies are rooted in human nature and there is no need to create these tendencies from scratch. Instead, when a conducive environment is established for the development of these inclinations, they will thrive and become active. This approach is in line with the Aristotelian essentialist view that upholds the existence of potential capacities in humans. According to Aristotle, ethics is a set of instructions that actualize these powers (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 53). Moral reminders act as primes. Children have conceptual representations of moral concepts either through socialization or by nature. When they are primed with these notions through games, these notions become activated, which can lead to moral behavior (Batara et., 2016).

In Islamic moral thought, the term "*Fitrah*" is used to refer to these inherent moral tendencies: "Be devoted to the upright religion. It is harmonious with the nature which God has designed for people. The design of God cannot be altered" (Quran, 30:30). Fitrah is an Arabic word from the origin of "fatar" which means to create something from scratch. The rhythm of "fe'ilah" in Arabic, which is seen in this term, denotes the manner of doing something. For example, the word "jelsah" means a way of sitting. Based on this, "Fitrah" refers to how human beings are created and the quality of their existence, which means that humans are created in a special way and have some inherent tendencies. But what are these tendencies?

Two kinds of characteristics, positive and negative, about human beings, can be found in Islamic texts. Some positive attributes of man in the Qur'an are as follows: The human being as the caliph of God (Quran, 2:30); human beings are created in the best form (Quran, 95:4); human beings have dignity and superiority over many other beings (Quran, 17:70). Some of the negative attributes of Human beings are as follows: Human beings are created weak (Quran, 4:28), are ungrateful, hasty, narrow-minded, and miserly (Quran, 17:67).

The abundance of the negative description shows that the condemning approach to human nature outweighs the admirable approach. Although the human being, according to the Qur'an, is created in the best form and has abundant talents, he has not acted satisfactorily in terms of using these talents and actualizing them. However, what distinguishes childhood from other stages of development is the flexibility of his personality. By laying the

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groundwork and creating a suitable environment, the positive capacities embedded in human beings will flourish. Based on this, some Islamic thinkers like Morteza Motahari (2011, Vol. 22, p. 716) consider education as a kind of nurturing, and not of building. In nurturing, nothing is created from scratch, but the existing capacities flourish.

According to Islamic education experts, religious education should start from childhood, because at this age the child is ready to accept religious beliefs and education. The internalization of religious meanings and morals begins with indoctrination and imitation to gradually become fixed traits in them. In some Islamic hadiths, it is stated that you should make your children pray from the age of 7 and fast at the age of 9, and let them break their fast if they are overcome by thirst. The last point shows that religious education should be done in early childhood and with lenience and tolerance (Koleini, 2008 [1429 AH], Vol. 4, p. 124).

If education is considered as the cultivation of traits that are rooted in human beings, the work of education becomes easier, especially during childhood, because although the roots of negative tendencies are present in humans, there are also tendencies towards good traits. This tendency towards good traits makes moral education easier. This is the reason why in these games, a simple reminder of moral qualities can be effective. Simple reminders make the child's mind aware of moral qualities and serve as the foundation for moral education. These moral reminders will be more effective on children when they are combined with the joy of games. Moral education should be done naturally and with gentleness. As Imam Ali said: "Hearts have desires and tendencies, try to enter from the side of the desires of the heart, because the heart becomes blind if it is forced."

According to the above points - that is, the inherent tendencies towards goodness in human nature, the flexibility of the child's personality, and the enjoyment of the game - it can be expected that religious games, some of which were mentioned above, have a high impact on the moral development of children.

ISSN 0120-1700
e-ISSN 2389-8755

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MEASURING THE EFFECT OF EDUCATIONAL GAMES

There is a lack of research on measuring the impact of religious games on children's moral development. Due to the frequent closures of schools as a result of air pollution, following the shutdown during the Corona epidemic, it was impossible for us to conduct experimental research in this field. However, conducting such research is part of our recommendations and future research programs. Nevertheless, the impact of some similar games, without specific reference to religious content, has been measured, one of which will be described below.

Jalaei et al. (2019) have experimentally investigated the effect of a game based on moral intelligence on strengthening the qualities of conscience, self-control and responsibility. The statistical population of this research consisted of fourth, fifth and sixth-grade students of a primary school in the 3rd district of Tehran. 30 intelligent students were selected according to the teacher's opinion and Gardner's multiple intelligence scale. The researchers divided the intelligent students into pre-test and post-test groups, who played 9 moral games like "Which work is good, and which one is bad?", and "The moral police" with the post-test group. In the latter, the students were presented with a set of words and sentences that described good and bad jobs, and they were asked to distinguish the good from the bad. In the moral police game, good conduct in the areas of responsibility, conscience and self-control was explained to the students. During the game, students were given a green card for any good work, and a yellow card for any bad work. In the end, the one with more green cards wins and chooses a prize.

The results of this study show that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in terms of responsibility, conscience and self-control (Jalaei et al. 2019, p. 79). After the games, the average score of conscientiousness in the experimental group increased from 42.38 to 45.37, the average score of restraint increased from 26.87 to 29.81, and the average score of responsibility increased from 66.94 to 75.38. The highest increase was observed in the responsibility component and the lowest increase was in the self-control component (Jalaei et al. 2019, p. 76). As stated, more empirical research is needed in this field.

ISSN 0120-1700
e-ISSN 2389-8755

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CONCLUSION

The examination of the religious games, both those derived directly from the religious tradition and those inspired by the Islamic tradition and religious values, shows that group physical games play a significant role in the transmission of religious values and ethics. Mere participation in a collective game, regardless of its content, facilitates religious values and morality, because it requires accepting the rules of the game and cooperation. Accepting the rules of the game by itself limits the selfishness and one-sidedness of a person, and so, it promotes religious ethics and prosociality which is valued in Islamic and, more generally, religious morality. The regularity that is taught in collective games is the minimal function of collective games. In the next step, the content taught directly or indirectly in games plays an effective role in values education.

The role that games play in this regard can be explained in the framework of the theory of virtue ethics. As mentioned above, according to virtue ethics, moral virtues are acquired as a result of following moral models and repetition and practice. Human character is mainly formed in childhood by following moral exemplars. On this basis, indirect and implicit moral education has a greater effect than direct or formal education. In games, this indirect education is combined with the joy of group play and the sweetness of winning, and as a result, it helps transfer and consolidate these values in the child's personality.

By participating in collective games, the authority of the teacher and the pleasure of playing with the peer group form the basis for the promotion of values. In such an environment, the student is not offered reasons for following these values, but their necessity is granted and he enters into cooperation to acquire them. This practice is based on the premise that children or human beings, in general, know intuitively the moral virtues and have an inherent tendency to them, but need an appropriate environment to cultivate them.

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