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Perspective

Avicenna's Educational Views with Emphasis on the Education of Hygiene and Wellness

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Abstract

Today, on the contrary of the last ten decades, the necessity of teaching hygienic issues, and caring the children's health, is pretty obvious. Avicenna (10 AC), the famous Iranian physician and philosopher, scrutinized the health and hygiene with a deep insight to the matter. He considered the wellness not only as the recovery from the disease, but emphasized the maintenance of health by suggesting special points and instructions. In Islamic education, paying attention to cleanliness, health and physical strength is very important and considered as the intermediate goals for the achievement of "pure life", which is the ultimate goal. Avicenna paid special attention to physical purity, health and wellness, and devoted the major parts of his book to them. The present article analyzes the Avicenna's educational opinions, specially his viewpoints regarding hygiene and health in three stages of childhood, teenage years, and youth.

Keywords

Avicenna, Education, Hygiene, Health

Introduction

Avicenna, best known as Shaykh-al-Raees, was born in the village of Afshana in the vicinity of Bukhara (in what is now Uzbekistan), in 370 AH (980 AD). As his family was concerned with intellectual sciences and philosophical inquiry, all of this had an effect upon his scientific career (1).

The most significant book of Avicenna in medicine is Canon which influenced all medical books in the Islamic World and Europe throughout centuries due to its chapter divisions, firm content and intellectual discipline. This book, as an authentic source, was taught in scientific centers such as Montpellier and Louvain Universities (2).

In addition to being a preeminent figure in medicine, he also took a very high position among the scholars of education in the realm of Islamic thought. This position lasted for a long time that some of the scholars claimed that, he was the first among the Muslim scientists who made comments about education and training (3).

Although there have been many researches concerning Avicenna's medical point of view, his educational and nurturing

opinions about health and hygiene have received little attention. The other reason which necessitates the research in Avicenna's educational points of view concerning health and hygiene, is to reconsider the aims of Islamic education. The ultimate goal in Islamic education is to achieve the pure life. The realization of this goal depends on providing certain grounds and capabilities that are the intermediate goals; among them, are "purity, health and physical strength", to achieve the pure life (4). In the present article, Avicenna's educational points of view are studied, and among them, his opinion about health and hygiene from childhood to adolescence is investigated based on the *Canon*, *Al-siyasah* and *al-Shifa* books. The issue of health covers different dimensions including physical, spiritual and mental aspects, but in this article only the physical dimension of health that is known as wellness, is taken into account.

Avicenna's rational system

Avicenna's point of view about "human", and his attitude concerning "human and education"

Human is the subject of education and so, before the other topics, Avicenna's opinion concerning human should be discussed. Avicenna considered human as a fact, which includes soul (*Nafs*) and body with attributes and characteristics like intellect, that gives him a special position in the cosmos and makes it distinct from the rest of animals. His soul is spiritual and abstract and while it includes various faculties and different actions, it is a fact of unity that does not become mortal after separation from the body but it continues its eternal life (3). This way of looking at human is the Islamic perspective. In the educational issues, he also considered the Islamic educating viewpoints and applied them.

Pure life

Human aims to have a blissful life, and at least, to preserve his biological life. Pure life in Islamic term is referred to the lifestyle which is attained in relation to God, and when achieved, all aspects of human existence would be away from devil. These aspects include body, thought and belief, desire, will and action (4). In other words, based on the relation that he has with God,

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the rest of the relations, even the relation with oneself, would be adjusted.

The first manifestation of the pure life will emerge in the realm of body. One of the meanings of the purity is getting away from the filthy things, which ensures health and strength. "In Islamic texts, the same concepts of pure (*tayyeb*) and evil (*khabeath*) are used in relation to the physical things. When these concepts are used for things, this usage indicates that the things are healthy or ruined" (5). On the whole, a pure life in terms of its bodily dimension refers to providing a healthy and hygienic condition in which the body gets strong and capable of doing the good deeds (5).

Muslim intellectuals have studied the pure life in different aspects in their educational points of view. Avicenna also emphasized the purity and clearing the body from filth to achieve the physical wellness, which is the subject of our study.

Education from Avicenna's points of view

The general definition of Islamic education

The root of the word '*tarbiyah*' (education) is '*ra-ba-wa*'. This root implies the meaning of abundance, and the latter can be followed in its different derivatives. Thus, the word '*tarbiyah*' with regard to its root, means the preparation of the ground for abundance and nurturing. Therefore; it indicates feeding the baby (6). And the following definition could be suggested for Islamic education. "To know God as the unique Lord of the human and the world, to select Him as one's own Lord, to undertake His guidance and regulations and to avoid those of others" (6).

Avicenna's definition of education

Avicenna did not clearly define education and training but according to his views, we can say that the essence of the education and training from his viewpoint is: "social and personal planning and activities for family health, child growth and making decision about social affairs so that human attains felicity in this world and after death" (3). The definitions, which are derived from Avicenna's works, correspond with the definition of Islamic education and both insist on the concept of growth.

Group education

Avicenna emphasized on group education and believed that children should receive education and training along with their peers. He said: "it is appropriate for the child to be with the other children of elites with good manner and pleasant habits in a school because a child learns from a child" (7). He brings some benefits for this: ethical education, mental growth and nurture, social education and satisfying the spiritual and mental needs (7).

The content of child education

Avicenna considered five factors in child education: faith, good manner, wellness, literacy, art and profession. Not only does he consider wellness in child education but he also counts on cleanness and hygiene as the teachers' characteristics. He believed: "the teacher ought to be religious, honest, wise, fair, clean and dignified, know how to socialize and be familiar with children training and educational methods and their moral edification" (7).

Medicine, health and wellness

Avicenna defined medicine in the first Canon book as: "medicine is a science; by which, one can become aware of the quality of human body" (8) and believed that, the aim of medicine, when we are healthy, is wellness; and when we are sick, the restoration of the wellness. Avicenna's view of health is a character or state in which the body functions and his view of illness is distancing from health.

Health will be gained through the interaction and balance between the body and the environment; and exercise, good sleep and proper diet are considered as the preventing factors from illness and balancing factors of the body. In this part, we first discuss the educational stages with emphasis on hygiene and wellness and then demonstrate that these stages are compatible with the Avicenna definition of medicine and health.

Stages of education

The stages of education in any educational system have an utmost importance, without which, the system would be incomplete and incapable. The educational aims, principles and methods all depend on defining the stages. Considering the growth stages of a child, Avicenna described a special educational plan for each growth stage. According to the Avicenna's viewpoint, the educational planning should be performed in accordance with the child's physical and mental growth stage. Based on the Avicenna's points of view, we can describe the educational stages as follow:

The first period of education: from birth to six-year-old

Avicenna considered the embryonic period as the beginning of the educability of human. Pregnant women should avoid seriously from nervousness and physical tensions because they have inappropriate impacts on the fetus. Choosing a good name is the first duty of the parents so that he/she will not feel humiliated when grown up (7). Avicenna believed that the parents should take the responsibility of educating and raising a child. He said: "It must become a tradition that mother and father take the responsibility of training the child; mother in the special issues related to her/him and father in the expenses" (9).

The role of nanny in educating a child

Avicenna preferred mother to a nanny in child's education and believed that the mother's milk is the best feed for the newborn (10). He talked about the amount of mother's milk, the number of daily breastfeeding, and the appropriate time for it.

He emphasized that the nanny should be hired in special situations. In the case that the nanny looks after the child, she must be extremely moderate and healthy. Her age, physical body and appearance, personal character or habit, the quality of her milk, characters and sex of her own child are all important in selecting her. Avicenna's attention to the physical appearance of the nanny, roots in his belief that the appearance of the nanny has influence on the appearance of the child (8). This point is the pick of Avicenna's belief in the impact of environment on child, rather than the heredity.

He believed that the nanny's manners and behaviors transfer to the child and would affect him/her. That is why he emphasized on this fact that the nanny should be good tempered and not react easily in negative psychological conditions, such as anger, sorrow, fear, etc. Because according to Avicenna, being rapidly influenced by these passions, would vitiate the temperament

and it can be passed to the infant through milk. In this regard there is a saying (*hadith*) from Prophet Mohammad (PUH) who stated that “a mad cannot be a nanny”. Avicenna also believed that moralities not only influence the child’s spirit, but they also could impact his physical growth: “Improvement and the integrity of the moralities have a profound influence on physical strength” (8).

He paid a lot of attention to the issues related to nannies and even suggested some procedures for changing her milk quality, in the case of a bad temperament.

Kindness and good behavior with children and its impact on his/her body and spirit

Avicenna did not believe in hard and strict methods of education for children, but he talked about lenity and amenity. He said that in order to have a healthy well-grown baby, two points should be respected during the infancy: gentle cradling the baby, and humming a song when you want to put him/her to sleep. “When the infant first sits up or creeps over the ground, he should be placed on a soft surface, to prevent injury by roughness of the floor” (8) Because the infant’s skin is so sensitive and tender, which hurts in any rough and hard surface. He goes so far in his belief about being kind and gentle with children that said: “Fulfill all they wish, and get them away from anything they dislike” (8).

Referring to the Avicenna’s holistic view on human, he believed in the mutual influences of soul and body on each other. So he mentioned two benefits of being kind. “The first is the spiritual one, since the baby from his very start of growth is exposed to good and merciful behavior, it fixes in him; the second is that the body is also benefited, since the bad temperament can result in grouch and misbehavior, the reverse path is also possible” (8). So being kind to the child and having good behavior result in the improvement of the body and soul. On the other side, depriving a child from his demands and imposing what he does not like, leads to anger, fear or sickness in him.

He suggested moderation and gentleness in the behavior with the children, and believed that the moderation is the rule of the nature (8). Child growth should be natural and he opposed forcing the child to sit and walk (10). The behavior and personality of a child form at the end of the childhood and beginning of the youth, so he believed that we have to be careful in these stages to have the child’s behavior and manner, good and moderate.

Child’s playing, correct nutrition program, taking a bath and exercise

From educational point of view, the basic feature of the early years of life is to let the child be free which results in her/his playing. Avicenna commented about the playing of children: “before feeding a child and after his bath, the child should be left alone to play with his toys for an hour” (8). Being alone while playing, suggested by Avicenna, results in the flourishing of the creativity in children, and timing it after bathing and before feeding which both are not within his own authority, provides some times for him to do whatever he wishes. Since children usually do not like taking a bath or being fed, if this plan is repeated daily, the child will learn that he can play (which is of all children’s interest) after taking a bath (which is mandatory). Playing after feeding is also suggested by Avicenna more than before it.

Avicenna’s attention to the child’s playing, and diversity in his/her daily program shows his deep concern regarding child’s needs and education. Although he lived in 10 AC, he emphasized some issues that psychologists are discussing today, such as letting the child to be free and paying attention to the importance of child training in his/her early years of life (10).

Exercises in youngsters should be kept moderate. Avicenna shows the role of exercise in child’s training and education and its importance in his life and explains how the exercises vary based on the children’s age and capabilities. Regarding the amount of exercise, he states that: “the exercises should not be practiced so much as to make the skin hard and rough and also the body be affected and turns hard, because if the athlete is a youngster, he/she would stop physical growing. This is also harmful for teenagers but not as much as youngsters” (8).

He suggested more than one bathing for children under six, everyday (8) and the proper time for it, is after a long sleep. But the bathing becomes less frequent after six years old.

Avicenna’s educational views in this stage, focuses on a happy childhood with bodily, mental and behavioral health and we can summarize them as follows:

1. Paying attention to exercise and child’s need to play for the improvement of his physical activity.
2. Keeping him away from mental damages to improve his moralities.
3. Singing and playing music for the child to improve his/her mental growth and making him ready for the next stages of life (learning poems)

From six to fourteen

Teaching politeness and manner begins from six-year-old by the teacher. It is the time when the child can talk, hear and be inculcated.

Teacher’s manner

About the teacher’s manner, Avicenna said: “Teacher should keep the child away from bad deeds and make him choose good friends, sometimes encourage and sometimes threaten him and if the threatening did not work then punish him. Be a moderate teacher, means not being so strict that the child does not dare to pose a question or ask for an explanation and not being so mild that the child becomes so bold and ignorant to the teacher’s statements and orders or to degrade them. The teacher must know the child and evaluate his nature and talents and examine his intelligence so he can choose an art and a career which is appropriate for the child’s talent and intelligence, consider the child’s enthusiasm in choosing an art and make him get accustomed to earn a livelihood through an art or a career that he has learnt” (6).

Avicenna in his *al-Shifa* has mentioned six kinds of teaching that the teacher must apply in an appropriate time: mental teaching; in which, the teacher states a general subject for his students and through that general subject changes an unknown to a known. Industrial education, through which, the usage and applications of instruments are thought. Inculcation teaching that is applied for learning through inculcation. Disciplinary teaching that means learning the good habits through advices. Imitative teaching in which the student accepts the teacher’s words immediately and without reason. Punitive teaching which informs the student of daily observed secrets, reasons,

consequences and accident (9).

Teenagers' educational program

The study program of a junior is more about religious and Islamic culture lessons from *Quran* and Arabic poetry, while the child should learn to write through drawing the image of alphabets. Teaching the poems which state the virtue of decorum and admire knowledge, in addition to the improvement of reasoning, memory, mental readiness and child's level of understanding, encourages him to good manner and behavior. This general stage is performed for everyone and then the teenage is ready to get more specific studies.

According to Avicenna the teenage must practice moderate exercises and also follow moderation in his reading and writing, no compulsion should exist in child's training and the tuition must be given gradually: "He should not be compelled to read and write continuously at school because the teenage would become thin and weak and his physical and spiritual power would be out of moderation, he should not be forced to read the book all at once" (7).

Teenage exercises

Avicenna leaves a place for practicing exercises in teenage curriculum and believes that until fourteen, the child's time should not be completely spent on learning but we have to open up a space for exercises. According to his point of view, the exercises that children can practice are marching, jumping, playing balls, jump roping, running, wrestling, horse riding and fencing. The benefits that he counts for exercise are as follow:

1. The exercise would clean the body regularly from the waist materials which remain after each digestion.
2. The bones and joints become harder with more strength and would be safe from injuries.
3. The organs become ready for better food absorption because the waist materials are cleaned out and leave space for nutrients.
4. The organs soften and the small pores of the skin dilate.

Youth

This stage is a gate to adolescence. When the teenage received the primary education, he is ready to learn a profession and then he can choose a proper career. Avicenna emphasized this fact that, the young man should choose a career, which he is interested in; and for which, he has the proper facilities. He should evaluate his own capabilities and know that people differ in their mental and physical capabilities and personal characteristics and these personal differences should be considered in selecting a profession (7). The teacher also should not impose any special careers and make him follow a profession by force. Avicenna's suggestion to the teachers is to get to know the children from early childhood and discover their interests and talents so that they can guide the children to find an appropriate career.

When the young man receives the professional education and becomes proficient in the career that he is interested in, he has to earn income and live on with his own wages. This holds some benefits: first the young man will not quit the job midway and second he can enjoy self-esteem and will not have an eye on his father's wealth. Avicenna assumed that the proper time for marriage is after acquiring a skill and considers marriage as the end of a child's dependence to the beginning of an independent life (6).

In this stage (youth) Avicenna insists on exercise and generally he regards practicing exercise as a common program for adolescents.

Taking the principles of health into consideration in educational stages

Avicenna's definition of medicine and health is corresponding with the educational stages because he considered the principles of health in three issues: importance of exercise, food and sleep. He points to the appropriate type and characteristics of these parameters for every age and stage in life. Among these three parameters, he has more emphasis on exercise. Because practicing exercise "is the basis for the wellness program of healthy people" (7). It is worth knowing that he was the first one who considered exercise as a way of preventing some kinds of illnesses (11).

Avicenna's health advices are not limited only to the educational stages (childhood, teenage years, youth), rather he provides some suggestions for older people as well which are beyond the scope of this article.

Conclusion

Avicenna believed that, since the essence of the child is impressible, and forming the habits and manners begins from infancy and even prepartum period (embryonic period), so we have to do our best regarding his health, hygiene, education, and teaching from very early stages of his life. In addition, the nurturing is a slow and gradual process, and paying attention to the cares and lessons given to the child from the early stages of life is essential in the process of education. These lessons can augment his mental and physical growth, which have a mutual correlation with each other.

The other point to be considered is the effect of the child's society and environment in forming his morale. The child has to interact with others, as early as the birth. Since he is impressible from the environment, choosing people who are in direct relation with him, like nannies, teachers, classmates, playmates, etc., should be done from among those with high level of morality and manner. The teacher is not just a transferor of knowledge, but his values and beliefs, characteristics and behaviors, will be transferred to the student during imitative teaching with no efforts made by her/him or even being noticed. So we have to be very careful about the characteristics of the teacher as a role model.

Studying Avicenna's viewpoints of the midlife period, the health, hygiene of elderly, and also a comparative study of his views with other Muslim scholars are the issues which need further investigation in other articles. This article presents only the physical aspects of health while as we know health has different and diverse aspects. Avicenna pointed to the differences of aspects and discussed them in his works, so it is recommended to other researchers to consider these subjects in their future works.

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Ethical issues

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

MBN initiated the idea and contributed to the drafting of the initial manuscript. MR and MMO contributed to the literature review. All authors contributed to the editing and revising of the final manuscript.

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