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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING FREESTYLE WRESTLING EXERCISES AND GAME-BASED ACTIVITIES IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION FOR GRADES 5–9

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Abstract The development of physical fitness in middle school students is a key objective of modern physical education. This study proposes a conceptual framework for integrating freestyle wrestling exercises with game-based activities to enhance the effectiveness of physical education for students in Grades 5–9. The paper is based on the analysis and synthesis of contemporary research in physical education, sports pedagogy, and motor learning. The proposed framework emphasizes learner-centered instruction, age-appropriate teaching, and the integrated development of strength, agility, coordination, balance, flexibility, and endurance. It also highlights the educational value of combining wrestling exercises with game-based activities to increase student motivation, active participation, and motor competence. The study provides methodological guidance for physical education teachers and contributes to the theoretical development of innovative approaches to physical fitness education in schools.

Keywords: freestyle wrestling, physical education, physical fitness, game-based learning, middle school students, pedagogical experiment.

1. Introduction The development of physically active, healthy, and socially competent students is one of the fundamental objectives of modern school education. Physical education (PE) contributes not only to the improvement of physical fitness but also to the formation of motor competence, self-confidence, teamwork, and lifelong healthy habits. In response to the growing prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, reduced physical activity, and declining physical fitness among adolescents, educational systems are increasingly seeking innovative pedagogical approaches capable of enhancing the effectiveness of school-based physical education.

Students in Grades 5–9 represent a particularly important age group for the systematic development of physical qualities. During early and middle adolescence, rapid physiological growth, neuromuscular maturation, and psychological development create favorable conditions for improving strength, speed, agility, coordination, flexibility, and endurance. At the same time, learners become more responsive to varied instructional methods that combine physical challenge with motivation and active participation. Consequently, the selection of appropriate teaching strategies has become a central issue in contemporary physical education pedagogy.

Among the various sports incorporated into school physical education, freestyle wrestling possesses considerable educational potential. Unlike activities that primarily emphasize isolated physical qualities, freestyle wrestling integrates multidirectional movements, balance control, body coordination, reaction speed, spatial orientation, and decision-making within dynamic movement situations. The technical and tactical characteristics of wrestling require students to coordinate complex motor actions while simultaneously developing physical and cognitive abilities. These features make wrestling exercises suitable not only for sports training but also as versatile educational tools for promoting comprehensive physical development in school settings.

Game-based learning has likewise emerged as an effective pedagogical approach for increasing student engagement and improving learning outcomes in physical education.

Educational games create meaningful movement experiences, encourage cooperation, reduce anxiety associated with skill acquisition, and foster intrinsic motivation. When physical tasks are presented in playful and competitive formats, students demonstrate greater participation, sustained attention, and higher levels of enjoyment. Moreover, game-based activities support the development of social communication, problem-solving, creativity, and emotional regulation alongside physical competence.

Although the educational value of freestyle wrestling exercises and game-based teaching has been widely acknowledged individually, these two approaches are rarely integrated into a unified pedagogical framework for general secondary education. Existing studies mainly investigate wrestling from the perspective of athletic performance or analyze game-based learning independently of sport-specific movement systems. As a result, insufficient theoretical attention has been devoted to explaining how wrestling exercises and educational games can complement one another to create an integrated methodology for developing students' physical fitness within the regular physical education curriculum.

Addressing this gap requires a comprehensive pedagogical perspective that considers the educational functions of movement, age-related developmental characteristics, principles of motor learning, and learner-centered teaching strategies. Rather than viewing wrestling techniques solely as competitive skills, they may be interpreted as educational movement resources capable of enriching school physical education when combined with structured game-based activities. Such integration provides opportunities to diversify learning experiences, increase students' motivation, and create developmentally appropriate environments that simultaneously foster physical, cognitive, and social competencies.

The purpose of this study is to develop a conceptual framework for integrating freestyle wrestling exercises and game-based activities into physical education for students in Grades 5–9 and to substantiate the pedagogical principles, methodological components, and educational mechanisms through which this integrated approach contributes to the development of physical fitness.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Physical Fitness Development in Middle School Students

Physical fitness is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct that reflects an individual's ability to perform daily physical activities efficiently while maintaining physiological health and functional capacity. Within the context of school physical education, physical fitness extends beyond athletic performance and serves as an essential indicator of children's overall development, health status, and readiness for lifelong physical activity. Consequently, improving physical fitness has become one of the principal objectives of physical education curricula across many educational systems. The period between 11 and 15 years of age represents a critical stage in human development characterized by significant biological, psychological, and social changes. Rapid growth in skeletal structure, muscular development, neuromuscular coordination, and cardiovascular function creates favorable conditions for the systematic improvement of physical qualities. At the same time, adolescents demonstrate increasing cognitive maturity, enabling them to understand more complex movement tasks, tactical situations, and cooperative learning activities. These developmental characteristics require physical education programs to employ instructional approaches that are developmentally appropriate, pedagogically meaningful, and sufficiently varied to maintain students' motivation.

Modern educational theories emphasize that physical fitness should not be regarded solely as the outcome of repetitive physical exercise. Instead, it develops through meaningful learning experiences that combine movement, cognition, motivation, and social interaction. From this

perspective, physical education should create environments in which students actively construct movement competence while simultaneously developing confidence, responsibility, and positive attitudes toward physical activity. Therefore, contemporary pedagogical approaches increasingly advocate learner-centered instruction, active participation, and diversified movement experiences rather than teacher-centered demonstration and repetition alone.

Motor learning theories provide additional support for this educational perspective. According to contemporary models of skill acquisition, effective learning occurs when learners repeatedly solve movement problems under varying environmental conditions. Such variability promotes adaptive motor behavior, enhances coordination, and strengthens long-term retention of movement skills. Rather than practicing isolated technical actions, students benefit from learning environments that encourage exploration, decision-making, and continuous adjustment of movement patterns. These principles correspond closely with the educational objectives of school physical education, where the primary aim is not elite sports specialization but the development of broad motor competence.

Another important theoretical consideration concerns the relationship between physical fitness and motor competence. Research consistently indicates that students possessing higher levels of motor competence are more likely to participate regularly in physical activity and achieve better health outcomes throughout adolescence and adulthood. Fundamental movement skills—including running, jumping, balancing, rotating, pushing, pulling, and object manipulation—constitute the foundation upon which more specialized sport-specific skills are developed. Therefore, physical education should prioritize activities capable of simultaneously improving multiple movement competencies rather than focusing on isolated physical qualities.

Within this framework, diversified movement experiences assume particular pedagogical importance. Activities that combine locomotor, non-locomotor, and manipulative movement patterns provide richer opportunities for neuromuscular adaptation than monotonous exercise routines. Furthermore, varied movement experiences contribute to students' cognitive engagement by requiring continuous perception, anticipation, decision-making, and interpersonal interaction. Such integrated learning environments facilitate the simultaneous development of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social competencies, reflecting the holistic objectives of contemporary education.

The educational effectiveness of physical fitness development also depends on the pedagogical principles governing instructional design. Among the most significant are the principles of developmental appropriateness, progressive overload, individualization, variability, continuity, active participation, and intrinsic motivation. These principles ensure that learning experiences correspond to students' age-related characteristics while providing optimal conditions for sustainable physical development. Importantly, they also encourage teachers to organize learning situations in which students remain active participants rather than passive recipients of instruction.

Consequently, the theoretical foundations of physical fitness development support the integration of pedagogical strategies that combine diverse movement experiences, meaningful engagement, and age-appropriate learning tasks. This perspective provides a scientific rationale for incorporating sport-specific movement systems and game-based educational activities into school physical education. Such an integrated approach has the potential to enrich students' movement experiences while promoting the balanced development of physical fitness through enjoyable, motivating, and educationally purposeful activities.

3. Pedagogical Potential of Freestyle Wrestling Exercises in School Physical Education

Freestyle wrestling is traditionally regarded as a competitive sport that requires high levels of technical proficiency, physical preparedness, and tactical decision-making. However, within the context of school physical education, wrestling should not be viewed exclusively as a specialized sport discipline. Rather, its educational value lies in the diversity of movement patterns, functional motor tasks, and developmental opportunities that can be systematically adapted to students' age, physical abilities, and educational needs. From a pedagogical perspective, freestyle wrestling exercises constitute an effective movement resource capable of supporting the comprehensive development of physical fitness while simultaneously enriching students' learning experiences.

Unlike conventional conditioning exercises that frequently isolate individual physical qualities, freestyle wrestling incorporates integrated motor actions involving the coordinated activity of multiple muscle groups. Basic wrestling movements—including stance control, movement in different directions, body positioning, balance maintenance, gripping, pushing, pulling, lifting, and controlled falling—require students to coordinate strength, speed, flexibility, agility, balance, and reaction simultaneously. Consequently, wrestling exercises contribute not only to the improvement of isolated physical capacities but also to the development of integrated movement competence that reflects real-life movement demands.

One of the principal pedagogical advantages of freestyle wrestling lies in its capacity to promote functional strength. Most wrestling activities rely on body weight rather than external resistance, allowing students to develop muscular endurance, postural stability, and dynamic strength through natural movement patterns. Such exercises reduce dependence on specialized equipment while encouraging safe and developmentally appropriate physical loading within the school environment. Moreover, body-weight exercises enable teachers to differentiate learning tasks according to students' individual capabilities, thereby supporting inclusive participation during physical education lessons.

Freestyle wrestling exercises also provide valuable opportunities for improving coordination and balance. Maintaining body control while changing direction, responding to an opponent's movement, or recovering from unstable positions requires continuous neuromuscular adaptation. These movement situations stimulate proprioceptive awareness and spatial orientation, both of which are essential components of motor competence during adolescence. Enhanced coordination contributes not only to improved sports performance but also to greater confidence and safety during everyday physical activities.

Another important educational characteristic of freestyle wrestling is the development of agility and reaction ability. Wrestling drills frequently involve rapid changes in movement direction, immediate responses to external stimuli, and quick transitions between offensive and defensive actions. Such dynamic movement environments encourage students to process information efficiently while executing coordinated motor responses. This integration of cognitive processing and physical performance corresponds to contemporary educational perspectives emphasizing the inseparable relationship between movement and thinking in physical education.

From a pedagogical standpoint, wrestling exercises also foster the development of self-regulation, discipline, and interpersonal responsibility. Many activities require students to work in pairs, cooperate with classmates, respect rules, and ensure each other's safety during practice. Unlike purely competitive situations, educational wrestling tasks emphasize mutual learning, controlled interaction, and shared responsibility. Consequently, students develop communication skills, empathy, cooperation, and respect for others while participating in physically demanding

activities. These social and emotional learning outcomes reinforce the broader educational mission of school physical education.

Importantly, the educational application of freestyle wrestling differs substantially from competitive wrestling training. School-based programs should prioritize simplified movement patterns, progressive task difficulty, safety-oriented instruction, and inclusive participation rather than advanced technical specialization. Teachers are not expected to prepare future wrestlers; instead, they should utilize selected wrestling exercises as pedagogical tools for promoting holistic physical development. This educational reinterpretation expands the role of wrestling beyond sport performance and positions it as an effective component of competency-based physical education.

Furthermore, the adaptability of freestyle wrestling exercises enables their integration into various instructional models. Individual drills, partner activities, cooperative challenges, movement circuits, and modified educational games may all incorporate wrestling-based movement patterns while remaining aligned with curriculum objectives. Such flexibility allows teachers to organize engaging learning experiences that accommodate different class sizes, available facilities, and students' developmental characteristics.

Therefore, the pedagogical potential of freestyle wrestling extends far beyond the acquisition of technical sport skills. Its educational value emerges from the ability to integrate physical, cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning within meaningful movement experiences. When appropriately adapted to school contexts, freestyle wrestling exercises become an effective pedagogical resource for promoting comprehensive physical fitness, strengthening motor competence, and increasing students' active participation in physical education. This perspective provides a theoretical foundation for integrating wrestling exercises with game-based instructional strategies, thereby creating a more engaging and educationally meaningful physical education environment.

4. Game-Based Activities as a Pedagogical Strategy for Developing Physical Fitness

Game-based activities have become an essential component of contemporary physical education due to their ability to combine learning, physical activity, and student motivation. Unlike traditional drill-based instruction, educational games create dynamic learning environments where students actively participate, solve movement tasks, and interact with their peers. This learner-centered approach not only increases engagement but also supports the development of physical, cognitive, and social competencies.

From a pedagogical perspective, game-based activities contribute to the development of fundamental physical qualities, including speed, agility, coordination, endurance, and muscular strength. Their effectiveness lies in providing varied movement experiences that encourage continuous adaptation to changing situations. Such activities also promote decision-making, spatial awareness, and reaction speed, which are essential components of motor competence during adolescence.

An additional advantage of game-based learning is its positive influence on students' motivation. Enjoyable and meaningful activities reduce anxiety, increase participation, and encourage sustained involvement in physical education lessons. Students are more willing to perform physically demanding tasks when these are presented in playful and cooperative formats rather than repetitive exercise routines. Consequently, educational games support both physical development and positive attitudes toward lifelong physical activity.

When integrated with freestyle wrestling exercises, game-based activities create a balanced instructional approach that combines structured skill development with enjoyable movement experiences. Wrestling-based games can simplify technical movements, improve partner interaction,

and facilitate the gradual acquisition of motor skills while maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment. This integration enables teachers to develop physical fitness through activities that are educationally meaningful, motivating, and appropriate for students in Grades 5–9.

Overall, game-based activities should be viewed not merely as recreational exercises but as purposeful pedagogical tools that enhance the effectiveness of physical education. Their integration with freestyle wrestling exercises provides a theoretical basis for designing innovative learning experiences that support comprehensive physical fitness development in middle school students.

5. A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Freestyle Wrestling Exercises and Game-Based Activities Based on contemporary theories of physical education, motor learning, and student-centered instruction, this paper proposes a conceptual framework for integrating freestyle wrestling exercises with game-based activities to improve the physical fitness of students in Grades 5–9. The framework emphasizes the balanced development of physical abilities through structured, engaging, and age-appropriate learning experiences.

The framework consists of four interconnected components:

Movement Foundation. This component includes basic freestyle wrestling movements such as stance, footwork, balance, body control, and simplified partner exercises. These activities establish the motor foundation required for developing coordination, agility, strength, and movement efficiency.

Game-Based Learning. Wrestling exercises are incorporated into modified educational games that encourage active participation, cooperation, and problem-solving. Game situations make learning more enjoyable while increasing students' motivation and lesson engagement.

Pedagogical Organization. The instructional process is guided by the principles of safety, progression, inclusiveness, and differentiation. Learning tasks are adapted to students' age, physical abilities, and previous movement experience, ensuring equal opportunities for participation.

Expected Learning Outcomes. The integrated approach is expected to improve physical fitness, motor competence, teamwork, self-confidence, and positive attitudes toward regular physical activity. Together, these outcomes support the broader educational goals of school physical education. This conceptual framework demonstrates that freestyle wrestling exercises and game-based activities should not be implemented as separate instructional methods. Instead, they function as complementary pedagogical tools that create meaningful movement experiences and promote the holistic development of middle school students.

6. Discussion The conceptual framework proposed in this study highlights the educational value of integrating freestyle wrestling exercises with game-based activities in school physical education. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize repetitive practice, the proposed framework encourages active participation, diversified movement experiences, and learner-centered instruction. This combination creates favorable conditions for improving physical fitness while simultaneously supporting students' motivation and motor competence. The framework is consistent with contemporary educational perspectives that advocate competency-based learning, active engagement, and holistic student development. Freestyle wrestling exercises provide functional movement patterns that develop strength, balance, agility, and coordination, whereas game-based activities increase enjoyment, cooperation, and sustained participation. Their integration therefore represents a complementary rather than an alternative instructional strategy. From a practical perspective, the framework offers physical education teachers a flexible approach

that can be adapted to different school contexts. Wrestling-based activities may be modified according to students' developmental characteristics, available facilities, and curriculum requirements without requiring specialized sports training. Consequently, the proposed framework expands the educational application of freestyle wrestling beyond competitive sport and positions it as an effective pedagogical resource for promoting comprehensive physical fitness in middle school students. Future studies may further validate this conceptual framework through classroom implementation and empirical investigation in different educational settings.

7. Conclusion The development of physical fitness during middle school years requires teaching approaches that are educationally meaningful, developmentally appropriate, and motivating for students. This paper has proposed a conceptual framework that integrates freestyle wrestling exercises with game-based activities as a pedagogical strategy for physical education in Grades 5–9. The proposed framework demonstrates that wrestling exercises can serve as valuable educational tools when adapted to school contexts and combined with game-based learning. Such integration supports the development of essential physical qualities, including strength, agility, coordination, balance, flexibility, and endurance, while also encouraging cooperation, self-confidence, and active participation. The conceptual approach presented in this study contributes to the theoretical development of school physical education by offering a structured methodology for integrating sport-specific movement activities with learner-centered pedagogical practices. It also provides practical guidance for physical education teachers seeking to diversify instructional methods and improve students' physical fitness through engaging and inclusive learning experiences.

Overall, integrating freestyle wrestling exercises with game-based activities represents a promising direction for modern physical education and may contribute to the development of healthier, more physically active, and more competent students.

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