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Articles

Beyond the Black Belt: Professional Competencies Required for Taekwondo Teaching

Más allá del cinturón negro: competencias profesionales para la enseñanza del taekwondo

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Abstract

The teaching of taekwondo to children is often associated with the technical mastery certified by the black belt; however, current demands in sports training, developmental growth, and the comprehensive protection of children require professional competencies that go beyond traditional technical certification. The aim of this study was to critically analyze the professional competencies required for teaching taekwondo to children and adolescents. A critical narrative review of scientific and normative literature was conducted, focusing on youth sports training, coach education, developmental growth, pedagogy, psychology, and child protection within the context of formative taekwondo. The findings revealed that teaching taekwondo during formative stages requires scientific, pedagogical, psychological, and legal competencies that complement technical expertise. Although sports certifications validate discipline-specific knowledge, they do not guarantee sufficient preparation to plan, teach, protect, and effectively support the holistic development of children and adolescents. It is concluded that teaching taekwondo to young practitioners constitutes a multidimensional professional responsibility that requires the integration of scientific, pedagogical, psychological, and ethical knowledge, moving beyond an approach based solely on technical sports accreditation.

Keywords: Taekwondo, coach, childhood, adolescence, professional training.

Resumen

La enseñanza del taekwondo infantil suele asociarse al dominio técnico acreditado por el cinturón negro; las exigencias actuales del entrenamiento deportivo, el desarrollo evolutivo y la protección integral de la niñez demandan competencias profesionales que trascienden la certificación técnica tradicional. El objetivo de la investigación fue analizar críticamente las competencias profesionales requeridas para la enseñanza del taekwondo en niños, niñas y adolescentes. Se realizó una revisión narrativa crítica de literatura científica y normativa sobre entrenamiento deportivo infantil, formación de entrenadores, desarrollo evolutivo, pedagogía, psicología y protección integral aplicadas al taekwondo formativo. Se evidenció que la enseñanza del taekwondo en edades formativas requiere competencias científicas, pedagógicas, psicológicas y jurídicas complementarias al dominio técnico; las acreditaciones deportivas certifican conocimientos específicos de la disciplina, pero no garantizan preparación suficiente para planificar, enseñar, proteger y acompañar adecuadamente el desarrollo integral de niños, niñas y adolescentes. Se concluye que la enseñanza del taekwondo infantil constituye una responsabilidad profesional multidimensional que exige integrar conocimientos científicos, pedagógicos, psicológicos y éticos, superando una visión centrada exclusivamente en la acreditación técnica deportiva.

Palabras clave: Taekwondo, entrenador, infancia, adolescencia, formación profesional.

Introduction

Sport constitutes one of the most influential educational contexts during childhood and adolescence due to its capacity to simultaneously contribute to individuals' physical, motor, cognitive, emotional, and social development (Brown et al., 2017). Scientific evidence has shown that appropriately planned sports participation promotes the acquisition of healthy habits, strengthens self-esteem, enhances social skills, and facilitates the consolidation of fundamental motor patterns essential for adult life (Malm et al., 2019). These benefits largely depend on the quality of the teaching, coaching, and support processes implemented by those responsible for guiding the development of children and adolescents (Nery et al., 2023).

Sport sciences have demonstrated that training during early developmental stages must be adapted to the evolutionary characteristics of each phase of human development (Peña et al., 2016). Childhood and adolescence involve substantial transformations related to somatic growth, biological maturation, neuromuscular development, and the progressive consolidation of cognitive and socio-emotional functions, all of which influence responses to physical exercise and sports training (Larsen & Luna, 2018). These particularities require training programs to consider differences between chronological and biological age, as well as the so-called “windows of opportunity” for the development of physical and motor capacities, thereby avoiding the application of training models originally designed for adult athletes (Domaradzki et al., 2025).

The development of physical capacities constitutes one of the primary objectives of sports training (Stănciulescu, 2016). Different manifestations of strength, speed, endurance, and flexibility exhibit distinct developmental trajectories throughout growth and therefore require methodological strategies specifically adapted to each developmental stage (Rabin et al., 2025). Likewise, the development of coordinative abilities plays a fundamental role during childhood because of its close relationship with motor learning and the acquisition of more complex sport-specific skills (Biino et al., 2023). Among the most extensively studied coordinative abilities are spatial orientation, balance, kinesthetic differentiation, reaction, rhythm, coupling, and motor adaptation, all considered essential components of technical performance in combat sports (Li et al., 2026).

Youth sports training extends beyond exclusively physical and motor dimensions (Myer et al., 2013). Coaches interact daily with children and adolescents in processes involving motivation, self-esteem, emotional regulation, identity construction, and interpersonal relationships (Battaglia & Kerr, 2024). Sport psychology research has demonstrated that coaching communication styles can significantly influence sport adherence, psychological well-being, and the socio-emotional development of young athletes (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, coaching responsibilities require competencies related to pedagogy, educational communication, and an understanding of the psychological characteristics associated with each developmental stage.

International organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund and the International Olympic Committee have emphasized that sports activities involving minors must be conducted under principles of comprehensive protection, respect for rights, and safeguarding against any form of physical, psychological, or emotional violence (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2023). These guidelines are aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes the right of children and adolescents to develop in safe environments that promote their overall well-being. In Ecuador, these principles are supported by the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador and the Code of Childhood and Adolescence, both of which establish the obligation to guarantee the best interests of the child in all social, educational, and sporting contexts (Constituent Assembly, 2008).

Among combat sports, taekwondo has experienced sustained global growth due to its educational and competitive benefits (Kim et al., 2022). Its practice promotes values such as discipline, respect, perseverance, and self-control, while also contributing to the development of highly specialized physical and coordinative abilities (Yıkılmaz et al., 2025). Teaching taekwondo at formative ages presents particular challenges because of the technical complexity of its movements, the physical demands inherent to the discipline, and the need to continuously adapt instructional processes to the developmental characteristics of practitioners (Zapata Morales, 2023).

The ability to teach taekwondo is often associated primarily with the attainment of advanced technical ranks, particularly the black belt. Although this credential represents legitimate evidence of technical mastery and experience within the discipline, contemporary scientific literature clearly distinguishes between technical competence and professional competence in sports instruction (Lee & Lim, 2025). Mastery of techniques, forms, and competition regulations does not necessarily imply specialized knowledge of growth and maturation, motor learning, training planning, developmental psychology, sports pedagogy, or the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents.

Research on coach professional development suggests that effective sports training depends on the integration of multiple sources of knowledge, including academic education, continuing professional development, practical experience, and the use of up-to-date scientific evidence (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Nash & Sproule, 2009). From this perspective, the complexity of educational processes in youth taekwondo raises important questions regarding the professional competencies that individuals responsible for training minors should possess, as well as the limitations of basing such responsibility exclusively on technical certifications associated with the discipline.

The objective of this study was to critically analyze the professional competencies required for teaching taekwondo to children and adolescents by examining the scope of technical sports certifications in light of the knowledge provided by sport sciences, pedagogy, developmental psychology, and child protection regulatory frameworks.

This review adopted a narrative-critical approach aimed at the conceptual analysis of scientific and normative literature related to youth sports training, developmental processes, physical and coordinative capacities, coach professional development, the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents, and the teaching of taekwondo during formative years. The review considered theoretical and empirical contributions from sport sciences, sport pedagogy, developmental psychology, and legal frameworks for child protection in order to integrate scientific and regulatory criteria that allow for an assessment of the limitations of the black belt as a technical credential in comparison with the professional competencies required to conduct safe, developmentally appropriate, and pedagogically sound sports instruction..

Development

Professional Competencies Required for Teaching Taekwondo in Developmental Stages

Teaching taekwondo to children and adolescents constitutes a complex educational activity that extends far beyond the mere transmission of technical knowledge specific to the discipline. Traditionally, teaching ability has been associated with the technical rank attained within martial arts. However, it is now recognized that a coach's professional performance involves multidimensional competencies related to human development, pedagogy, psychology, sports planning, and the comprehensive protection of participants involved in training processes. This perspective becomes particularly relevant when practitioners are in developmental stages characterized by profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes.

Youth sport represents an educational environment capable of significantly influencing health, well-being, identity formation, self-esteem, and the acquisition of lifelong physical activity habits. Decisions made by coaches affect not only athletic performance but also the holistic development of participants. Newland et al. (2024) argue that coaching effectiveness depends on the integration of professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge aimed at generating positive outcomes for athletes. Under this perspective, a competent coach is not defined solely by technical expertise but by the ability to apply such knowledge appropriately according to the characteristics, needs, and objectives of the population with whom they work.

During childhood and adolescence, growth and maturation processes determine substantial differences in how individuals respond to physical workloads, process information, regulate emotions, and establish social relationships. Consequently, taekwondo instruction requires specialized knowledge that enables the adaptation of content, methods, demands, and expectations to the developmental characteristics of each stage of human growth.

Scope and Limitations of Technical Certification in Taekwondo

Within the organizational structure of taekwondo, the black belt represents one of the highest recognitions of a practitioner's progress. The attainment of Dan or Poom ranks certifies technical knowledge, mastery of forms, understanding of regulations, practical experience, and familiarity with the fundamental principles of the discipline. These certifications are issued by internationally recognized organizations such as Kukkiwon and World Taekwondo, which regulate technical certification processes worldwide.

Although the black belt constitutes legitimate evidence of technical competence, the nature of this certification must be carefully examined. Evaluation processes for advanced ranks focus primarily on technical execution, regulatory knowledge, application of specific skills, and understanding of taekwondo principles. In general, these assessments are not designed to evaluate knowledge related to pediatric exercise physiology, growth and maturation, motor learning, developmental psychology, sports planning, child protection, or applied pedagogy.

This distinction is essential for understanding the limitations of technical certification as the sole criterion for assuming educational responsibilities. An individual may demonstrate a high level of technical mastery while simultaneously lacking specialized knowledge of child development or sports training. Likewise, extensive competitive experience does not necessarily imply expertise in workload planning, injury prevention, educational communication, or child safeguarding. Research on coach development consistently indicates that technical competence is a necessary but insufficient condition for ensuring the quality of sports instruction processes (Yang et al., 2024).

The central issue is not to question the value of the black belt within taekwondo but rather to recognize that the demands associated with teaching children and adolescents exceed the competencies assessed through traditional technical grading systems.

Competencies Derived from Sport Sciences

Sport sciences provide one of the most important foundations for understanding the complexity of teaching taekwondo during developmental stages. Youth training planning requires knowledge related to growth, biological maturation, motor development, exercise physiology, biomechanics, and workload management, areas that have experienced substantial scientific advances over recent decades.

Available evidence demonstrates that children and adolescents do not respond to training in the same manner as adults. Myers et al. (2017) argue that youth physical development should be interpreted from a dynamic perspective in which chronological age, biological age, maturation, motor experience, and practice context interact. This implies that two athletes of the same chronological age may exhibit significantly different physical capacities, coordination levels, and training needs.

In taekwondo, this issue acquires particular relevance because of the discipline's physical demands. The effective execution of combat techniques and poomsae requires the progressive development of different manifestations of strength, speed, endurance, and flexibility. Each of these capacities presents specific developmental periods, adaptation rates, and methodological requirements. Therefore, coaches must understand not only how to perform a technique but also which physical capacities support it, when they should be developed, and which methods are most appropriate according to the athlete's developmental stage.

Coordinative abilities such as spatial orientation, balance, reaction, rhythm, kinesthetic differentiation, coupling, and motor adaptation constitute fundamental bases for technical sport learning (Iorga et al., 2023). In taekwondo, these capacities allow practitioners to control their bodies during movements, kicks, turns, directional changes, and opposition situations (Fong et al., 2012). A limited understanding of these processes may lead to methodological errors that hinder learning or increase the risk of injury.

Pedagogical Competencies for Teaching Taekwondo to Children and Adolescents

Teaching taekwondo during developmental stages requires pedagogical competencies capable of transforming technical knowledge into meaningful, safe, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Damayanti et al., 2026). Knowing how to correctly execute a technique does not necessarily imply possessing the skills required to teach it. Instruction is a complex process involving planning, content sequencing, methodological adaptation, continuous assessment, effective communication, and the creation of environments conducive to learning.

Sport pedagogy has demonstrated that motor learning occurs through progressive processes of exploration, practice, feedback, and consolidation. Schmidt and Lee (2019) indicate that motor skill acquisition depends on the interaction between learner characteristics, task demands, and environmental conditions (Sigmundsson et al., 2017). Coaches must be capable of selecting exercises appropriate to the athlete's developmental level, identifying execution errors, providing relevant feedback, and designing methodological progressions that facilitate learning.

In taekwondo, this competency is especially important due to the technical complexity of many skills. The execution of a spinning kick, a combat combination, or a poomsae sequence involves coordinative and cognitive processes that must be developed gradually. Attempting to teach advanced skills without first consolidating basic capacities may generate frustration, persistent technical errors, and decreased motivation. Effective instruction requires understanding how children and adolescents learn, what they are realistically capable of performing, and which strategies promote the progressive construction of motor knowledge.

Planning constitutes another fundamental pedagogical competency. Training should be guided by clearly defined objectives, structured content, and coherent evaluation criteria (Bompa

& Buzzichelli, 2019). In many sporting contexts, planning continues to rely exclusively on instructors' personal experience or the repetition of exercises learned during their own athletic development. Although experience represents a valuable source of knowledge, the absence of systematic planning may limit learning progression and hinder adaptation to practitioners' individual needs.

These pedagogical competencies are rarely addressed in depth through traditional taekwondo certification processes. Although some instructor education programs incorporate methodological content, sport pedagogy is a specialized field that requires specific training and continuous professional development. The ability to teach should not be assumed as an automatic consequence of technical mastery.

Psychological and Socio-Emotional Competencies in Youth Sports Training

The psychological dimension represents one of the most relevant yet often overlooked aspects of coach education. During childhood and adolescence, sport participation develops alongside processes of identity formation, emotional regulation, self-esteem development, and the acquisition of social skills (Posso Pacheco & Minda Guaman, 2026). The interactions established between coaches and athletes can significantly influence both the sporting experience and the personal development of young practitioners.

Self-Determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan, suggests that human motivation is strengthened when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and positive social relationships (Siomar Castillo & Colmenero Fonseca, 2026). Applied to the sporting context, this framework implies that coaches should foster environments in which athletes perceive themselves as capable of progressing, feel that their efforts are valued, and experience a sense of belonging within a respectful and supportive community. When these psychological needs are satisfied, intrinsic motivation, sport adherence, and overall well-being tend to increase.

In taekwondo, motivation assumes particular importance because of the discipline's inherent demands. Learning complex techniques, participating in belt examinations, and engaging in competitive experiences frequently expose practitioners to situations involving challenge, error, and frustration. Coaches must possess competencies that enable them to manage these experiences appropriately, transforming them into opportunities for learning and personal growth.

This reality becomes even more significant when working with minors. Children and adolescents often attribute considerable authority to their coaches and, in many cases, spend substantial amounts of time under their supervision. Consequently, coaches' words, attitudes, and decisions exert a profound influence on how young athletes perceive themselves and their capabilities.

Although taekwondo promotes values such as respect, perseverance, and self-control, these principles should not be confused with practices involving psychological maltreatment, public humiliation, or demands incompatible with athletes' well-being. Educational discipline should be directed toward fostering self-regulation and personal responsibility rather than imposing power relationships that compromise the dignity of practitioners.

Psychological competence in coaching includes skills related to effective communication, educational leadership, conflict management, emotional support, and the promotion of motivating environments. These competencies constitute an essential component of youth sports instruction, regardless of the technical rank achieved within the discipline.

Comprehensive Child Protection and the Professionalization of Taekwondo Coaches

Over recent decades, the protection of children and adolescents within sporting environments has become an increasingly important concern in international sport and human rights policies. Organizations such as UNICEF, the International Olympic Committee, and various specialized agencies have emphasized the need to ensure safe sporting environments that protect the physical, emotional, and social integrity of minors.

This concern arises from the recognition that sporting contexts are not exempt from risks associated with abuse of power, psychological violence, negligence, discrimination, or practices incompatible with child well-being. Gurgis and Kerr (2021) indicate that sport can simultaneously function as a context for positive development and as a setting in which rights violations may occur when adequate protection and oversight mechanisms are absent.

In Ecuador, the comprehensive protection of children and adolescents is supported by an extensive legal framework. The Constitution of the Republic recognizes the principle of the best interests of the child and establishes the obligation to guarantee their holistic development across all areas of social life. Complementarily, the Code of Childhood and Adolescence stipulates that public and private institutions must adopt measures aimed at protecting minors' rights and preventing any form of violence, abuse, or degrading treatment.

These provisions have direct implications for taekwondo instruction. Sports clubs, academies, and training schools constitute environments in which adults exercise authority over minors and therefore assume responsibilities related to their welfare and protection. Coaches cannot be regarded solely as technical instructors but must also be understood as educational agents with specific ethical and legal responsibilities.

The professionalization of coaching requires the incorporation of competencies related to child safeguarding, violence prevention, first aid, risk management, and the promotion of positive treatment. These competencies enable coaches to identify potentially problematic situations,

respond appropriately to incidents, and ensure that sport participation takes place within conditions compatible with the rights of children and adolescents.

Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Taekwondo Coach Professionalization

Based on the analysis presented, teaching taekwondo to children and adolescents requires competencies that extend far beyond the technical mastery certified through traditional grading systems. Although the black belt represents valuable evidence of experience and discipline-specific knowledge, the complexity of educational processes during developmental stages demands broader and more multidimensional professional preparation.

Research on coach development consistently indicates that professional competence is constructed through the interaction of multiple sources of learning. Nash et al. (2023) identify formal education, non-formal learning, practical experience, and professional reflection as fundamental components of coach development. They further emphasize that effective coaches integrate knowledge derived from academic training, continuing education, accumulated experience, and ongoing engagement with contemporary scientific evidence.

The professionalization of taekwondo coaches may therefore be understood as a continuous process of competency development. Technical certification provides discipline-specific knowledge; academic education contributes scientific foundations related to human development, training, and pedagogy; continuing professional development facilitates knowledge updating and adaptation to emerging challenges; practical experience promotes the contextualization of learning; and engagement with scientific evidence supports methodological decision-making based on objective and evidence-informed criteria.

From this perspective, the teaching of taekwondo to children and adolescents should not be conceived as a responsibility derived exclusively from technical rank attainment. Rather, it should be understood as a professional endeavor requiring the integration of technical, scientific, pedagogical, psychological, ethical, and legal competencies to ensure safe, effective, and developmentally appropriate educational experiences..

Conclusion

The teaching of taekwondo to children and adolescents should be understood as a multidimensional educational practice whose complexity extends beyond the technical mastery certified through traditional grading systems. Professional coaching competence is shaped by the integration of scientific, pedagogical, psychological, and ethical knowledge that enables practitioners to respond appropriately to the developmental and safeguarding needs characteristic of formative stages.

Technical certifications represented by the black belt constitute legitimate mechanisms for validating discipline-specific knowledge and practical experience within taekwondo. However, their scope is insufficient, by itself, to ensure the professional preparation required to lead instructional processes involving minors. The educational responsibility associated with youth training demands competencies that go beyond technical execution and encompass evidence-informed decision-making related to human development, learning, well-being, and safety.

The professionalization of taekwondo coaches should be conceived as an ongoing process of competency development supported by the integration of academic education, specialized training, reflective practice, and continuous scientific updating. The quality of instruction depends on the coach's ability to integrate diverse forms of knowledge and apply them contextually to promote the holistic development of practitioners..

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