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Exploring how the experiences of English youth football coaches have shaped their approach to player learning

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A B S T R A C T

Recently the Football Association (FA) has highlighted a need to move away from traditional approaches to player learning through the dissemination of contemporary pedagogical research. Researchers have attempted to evaluate this process by investigating the practice activities engaged in by youth football teams; however, there remains limited understanding of why coaches adopt certain approaches to player learning. By acquiring youth football coaches' insights, this study addressed this gap by giving coaches a platform to share their approaches to player learning and the different experiences that have shaped it. Eight English youth football coaches (minimum FA Level 2 coaching qualification) were interviewed. Using inductive thematic analysis, eight higher order themes were identified and organised into three dimensions: (i) approaches to player learning, (ii) the coaching environment, and (iii) opportunities for learning and development. Despite some contemporary skill acquisition principles being evident in player learning approaches, coaches' understanding of how specific practice activities impact player learning outcomes was somewhat limited. Learning approaches themselves were not static, but dynamic and adaptable depending on social and contextual factors within the coaching environment. Similarly, these approaches were informed by a multitude of formal and informal learning opportunities, not solely formal coach education pathways. Together, the findings present a challenge for coach educators to account for the individual requirements of coaches and highlight the need to disseminate contemporary pedagogical principles in an easily digestible, transferable, and practical manner.

1. Introduction

Youth coaches are integral to helping athletes acquire the necessary skills to perform successfully in competitive sports such as football (Ford, Yates, & Williams, 2010). The approaches taken by youth coaches can shape learning environments, meaning they occupy a position of centrality and influence in the learning, growth, and achievement of aspiring young players (Cushion, 2013; Ford et al., 2010; Partington & Cushion, 2013). Consequently, it is important to develop coaches with the expertise to create learning environments that can best support effective skill acquisition and skill adaptation of players under their tutelage (Wright & Kim, 2019).

In the UK, coach development has been spearheaded by the UK Coaching Framework, which has encouraged the adoption of evidenced-based coaching practises to help improve the quality of the sporting experience for youth athletes (Duffy et al., 2011; Piggott, 2015; Sports Coach UK, 2008). The principles of the UK coaching framework have formed the foundation of the Football Association's (FA) revised coaching strategy, which has aimed to develop existing coaching methods within English football by disseminating high-quality pedagogical research that can be practically applied across the whole game (Allison, 2016). At the core of this, a dynamic and constantly evolving philosophy known as the 'England DNA' was introduced (Ashworth, 2014; FA Education, 2015). The England DNA highlights the need for the

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development of a coherent identity within English football, placing both how players play (i.e., technical and tactical skills), and how they are coached (i.e., coaching methodologies and the delivery of training), at the centre of it (Ashworth, 2014). It is clear that from the top down, the need to provide access to high quality evidenced-based coaching methods is fundamental to the FA's vision for developing players and coaches alike, and ultimately moving away from traditional pedagogical techniques that have been said to characterise typical coaching practice (Alisson, 2016).

Traditionally, player development has been considered a 'coach-centred' process, which has been suggested to have hindered the integration of innovative and progressive coaching methods within English football (Cushion & Jones, 2006; North, 2016). As a result, traditional pedagogies, characterised by high levels of instruction, corrective feedback, and repetitive attempts to reproduce coach prescribed skills, have become a common feature of coaching practice (Cushion, 2013; Davids, Gullich, Shuttleworth, & Araújo, 2017; Ford et al., 2010; Partington & Cushion, 2013). However, such an approach is thought to undermine the technical and tactical development of English players (Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012).

Typically, traditional coaching pedagogies take a 'process-product' approach to player learning, where the mastery of isolated coach-prescribed skills is emphasised (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009; Harvey, Cushion, & Massa-Gonzalez, 2010; Partington & Cushion, 2013). Yet performing successfully in sports such as football presents the learner with considerably more challenge than repeating simple putative actions (Chow, Shuttleworth, Davids, & Araújo, 2019; Ford & Williams, 2013). For example, the execution of a 20-yard pass requires interpretation of dynamic patterns of play, awareness of positional features on the pitch, quick and appropriate decision making, and skill execution with effective technique. As traditional pedagogical methods look to teach skills through practises void of these representative demands, they are often observed to be associated with limited ability to problem solve independently, low levels of transfer to competitive environments, and poor performance in pressurised situations (Chow et al., 2019; Davids, Button, & Bennett, 2008; Masters, Van Duijn, & Uiga, 2019; Williams & Hodges, 2005). Therefore, it has been argued that practice should encourage the learner to explore and develop functional movement strategies in response to the demands of gameplay (Chow, Davids, Button, & Renshaw, 2016; Davids et al., 2014; Moy, Renshaw, Davids, & Brymer, 2016).

Alternative pedagogical approaches to skill acquisition (e.g., the Constraints-Led Approach, see Renshaw, Headrick, Maloney, Moy, & Pinder, 2019; Non-Linear Pedagogy, see Chow, 2013) conceptualise performers as complex adaptive systems. Guided by the framework of ecological dynamics, these approaches propose that the learner's capacity to adapt to the interacting individual, task, and environmental constraints on performance will determine the behaviours that emerge (Araújo & Davids, 2011; Davids, Araújo, Seifert, & Orth, 2015; Pinder, Davids, Renshaw, & Araújo, 2011). Accordingly, the successful acquisition of skills involves the development of a functional performer-environment relationship, whereby the learner can develop functional movement strategies in response to the acting constraints on performance (Araújo, Davids, Chow, Passos, & Raab, 2009; Davids, Araújo, Correia, & Vilar, 2012).

From an ecological dynamics perspective, there are several important principles that serve to enhance the acquisition of skills. Fundamentally, information that is accessible when learning a skill should be relevant to what is available in the performance environment (Chow et al., 2016). As information informs action in a dynamic, cyclical manner, the accessibility of 'specifying' or high-quality information when learning a skill is considered essential to the development of facilitative information-movement couplings, which players can use to achieve performance goals (Chow et al., 2019). In football, small-sided and conditioned games (SSGs) can encourage learners to execute skills in the presence of specifying information (e.g., the movement of teammates or presence of defenders), presenting the learner with a multitude of affordances (opportunities for action) that are representative of those in the performance environment (Davids, Araújo, Hristovski, Passos, & Chow, 2012; Davids et al., 2013; Pinder et al., 2011). Consequently, the information-movement couplings that are developed are more likely to lead to efficient transfer of skills from training to matches (Davids et al., 2013; Travassos, Duarte, Vilar, Davids, & Araújo, 2012; Woods, McKeown, O'Sullivan, Robertson, & Davids, 2020).

Using the framework of ecological dynamics, creating environments that encourage players to practice skills under representative conditions should be at the forefront of the coaches' theoretical approach (Davids et al., 2013; Pocock, Bezodis, Wadey, & North, 2020; Travassos et al., 2012). However, despite these approaches to skill acquisition becoming more prominent in academic research, their uptake by sports coaches appears to remain limited (Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012; Renshaw, Davids, Newcombe, & Roberts, 2019). As such, it is important to consider how successfully this information is being applied within English football specifically (Griffiths, Armour, & De Lyon, 2016).

Researchers have investigated this through systematic observation of the practice activities and coaching behaviours employed in youth football (Ford & Whelan, 2016; Partington & Cushion, 2013). It has been reported that youth footballers spend long periods of time in drill-based (or 'training form') activities, where skills are practised in isolation and decision making is prescribed by the coach (Ford et al., 2010; Partington & Cushion, 2013). As drill-based activities do not accurately sample the key specifying information available in the performance environment, the acquisition and transfer of skills is limited as relevant information-movement couplings between key sources of information and action are unavailable (Chow et al., 2019; Pinder et al., 2011). More recently, Ford and Whelan (2016) found a higher proportion of games-based activities were used during youth coaching sessions compared to those reported previously (Ford et al., 2010; Partington & Cushion, 2013). Although this demonstrates increased use of game-based activities, the actual time players spent in these was only 60% of the total session time. Similar observations have been made in the most recent investigation of practice activity in English youth football, which showed the time players spent engaged in representative activity to be 56% of the total session (Roca & Ford, 2020). This suggests that any increases in time spent in representative practice activities have somewhat plateaued.

Striving for sessions consisting solely of games-based activity may be unrealistic for coaches; yet youth coaches in Spain and Portugal have been shown to utilise 10% to 12% more of the session for such activities (Roca & Ford, 2020). Despite a clear

shift in intent (e.g., towards sessions containing a greater proportion of representative games-based activity), English youth football coaches appear to be encountering difficulties in utilising these methods to the extent observed in other countries. Indeed, researchers working with coaches across multiple sports have highlighted that contemporary pedagogical approaches can be challenging to implement (Butler, 2020; Moy et al., 2016; Rothwell, Stone, & David, 2019; Stone, Rothwell, & Shuttleworth, 2020). This is something that can be compounded by a lack of readily available resources to guide practice design (Stone et al., 2020) and the establishment of traditional pedagogical coaching cultures (Ross, Gupta, & Sanders, 2018).

With the FA continuing to focus on reforming England's approach to youth coaching (Griffiths et al., 2016), it is important that researchers evaluate its success to ensure coaching and coach education processes are evidence-based (Ford & Whelan, 2016). By acquiring coaches' experiential knowledge, this study aimed to further current understanding of *what* youth football coaches are doing (e.g., session structure and practice activities), as well as providing a platform for youth football coaches to share *why* they design practice in such a way, and how different experiences have influenced their approach. The insights gained may help to establish how successful the transfer of pedagogical evidence into applied practice has been by: (i) highlighting approaches to player learning across different performance contexts (e.g., grassroots and academy level), (ii) exploring how different coaching environments affect approaches to player learning, and (iii) discussing how influential FA education has been in the development of this approach when compared to other developmental and educational experiences.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Criterion-based purposeful sampling was used to identify individuals with the necessary experience and qualifications to participate. To be included in the study, two key criteria had to be satisfied: current employment as coach of a youth football team or academy, and a minimum of FA level 2 coaching qualification. Eight male youth football coaches that met these criteria were selected and provided written informed consent to participate in the study (M_{age} = 31 years, *SD* = 8.58 years; $M_{experience}$ = 11 years, *SD* = 6.48 years; see Table 1). To maintain anonymity of participants, the specific club or organisation they worked for is not outlined and pseudonyms (e.g., Coach 1, Coach 2 etc.) were provided. Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's University ethics committee.

2.2. Procedure

Individual interviews were carried out with each participant via internet telephony. A novel semi-structured interview guide (see supplementary information) was used to facilitate each interview. Development of the guide was informed by: (i) relevant theoretical understanding of contemporary learning theories and the organisation of practice activity in youth football (e.g., Davids et al., 2017; Roca & Ford, 2020) (ii) research into the FA's current approach to coach education (Allison, 2016; Griffiths et al., 2016), (iii) previous investigations into the experiential knowledge of sports coaches (Pocock et al., 2020, Stone et al., 2020), and (iv) the author's experience of applied coaching practice.

The interview guide was split into three main sections, comprising of: career history, applied practice, and coach development and learning. The aim of each section was to gain an understanding of different aspects of the coach's career and discuss sources or experiences that have informed their practice. To assess how successful the interview guide was in achieving this, pilot interviews were run with a separate sample of two participants that had experience in coaching youth football. Following these interviews, minor modifications were made concerning the specificity of questions into the coach's organisation and practice set-up, as both interviewees highlighted that recounting precise practice techniques was challenging. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

Interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 55 minutes in duration (*M* = 41 minutes, *SD* = 8 minutes). To analyse the data, thematic analysis was selected due to its suitability for extracting rich descriptive accounts and identifying common themes across cases (Braun & Clare, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Accepting

Table 1: Participant characteristics for the eight coaches.

Coach	Age	Years Coaching Experience	Highest Coaching Qualification
1	23	7	FA Level 2
2	43	22	UEFA B
3	23	5	FA Level 2
4	23	3	FA Level 2
5	33	15	FA Level 2
6	42	10	FA Level 2
7	23	8	UEFA B
8	39	18	UEFA A

that the experiences of the coaches could differ significantly from one another, an inductive approach was taken. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for conducting thematic analysis the first stage of this approach involved the lead author becoming familiar with the transcripts, before working systematically through the data set to generate initial codes. These codes were then sorted into potential themes and represented visually in the form of a thematic map, which encouraged the lead author to think vertically and horizontally about the data (Clarke, Hayfield, Moller, & Tischner, 2017). Following this, the themes were reviewed and refined by the lead researcher before being presented to the co-authors, who acted as critical friends by questioning and challenging the suitability of the derived themes. Once a consensus was reached on the accuracy with which the themes represented the data, the themes were defined and named.

2.4. Methodological Rigor

Methodological rigour was conceptualised from a relativist position meaning techniques specific to the project's aims and design were chosen (Smith & McGannon, 2018, Sparkes & Smith, 2009). First, purposeful sampling with specific criteria (e.g., current employment and coaching qualifications) was used to ensure participants had sufficient experience to fully satisfy the research question (Patton, 2002). Accepting that the lead author's experiences of youth football coaching were inextricably linked to the research process and interpretation of the data, the co-authors also acted as critical friends by encouraging reflexivity about the lead author's own biases for conducting the research (i.e., as a practising youth football coach) and alternative explanations of the findings (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). Although the prior experiences of working in youth football are undoubtably tied to the research project, it is hoped that the lead author's knowledge of skill acquisition, representative design, and applied coaching practice has served to enrich the interpretation of findings rather than compromising them (Weed, 2009). The authors have attempted to demonstrate sincerity by acknowledging, accepting and being transparent about *a priori* knowledge of the subject area (Tracey, 2010). Member reflections were carried out with three of the participants, providing a practical opportunity to explore any differences concerning the researcher's interpretation of the results (Schinke, Smith, & McGannon, 2013). These involved participants being sent a copy of their transcript and summary of the results, before being given an opportunity to feedback on any similarities or contradictions they had with the findings. No changes were made following these reflections.

3. Results and Discussion

Inductive analysis of the data identified 8 higher order themes (Figure 1), which were categorised into 3 dimensions: approaches to player learning, the coaching environment, and opportunities for learning and development. These dimensions reflected the aims of the study by first presenting coaches' approaches to player learning within the context of contemporary pedagogical evidence, before considering the range of experiences that shape this approach. The three dimensions are discussed as separate subsections, with key quotes from the coaches used to illustrate each of the higher order themes.

3.1. Approaches to Player Learning

Within this dimension, coaches' views on their approaches to player learning are presented. Two higher order themes of traditional and contemporary methods, specifically related to skill acquisition principles, were identified.

3.1.1. Traditional Methods

In line with previous research (e.g., Williams, Alder, & Bush, 2015), traditional pedagogical approaches were still common within coaching practice. This was evidenced through coaches' desire to teach fundamental movements and skills through isolated, technical drills. The coaches interviewed in this study reported that technical drills often form an introductory activity to progress from when looking to practice specific skills or themes during a session:

> "My session will always be a basic warm-up with lots of movement and unopposed ball work, then 15-20 minutes of technical work, before taking that into a tactical practice and ending with a small-sided game" (Coach 5).

This highlights how coaches look to build their session from simplistic fundamental movements and skills, before integrating tactical information or games-based methods. Adopting a less dichotomous approach that facilitates the development of technique under conditions representative of actual gameplay would be more effective in promoting efficient transfer of these technical skills, whilst also encouraging the development of fundamental game skills (e.g., decision making and anticipation) (Miller, Harvey, & Morley, 2017; Roca, Ford, & McRobert, 2011, Smith, 2016). However, coaches believed that technical drills provided an opportunity to repeat and refine skills that could be transferred into game situations:

> "I'll do a passing rotation… and what you're looking at is the details, movement in and out to receive, checking your shoulder. I know every time I'm passing to the same place, but I'm repeating and repeating it because when we go into possession or games you are then in the habit of making those movements" (Coach 7).

Despite this belief, drill-based activities can fail to accurately sample key specifying information available in the performance environment and constrain the decision-making processes of the learner (Chow et al., 2016; Ford & Williams, 2013). Consequently, the transfer of skills is likely to be limited (Chow et al., 2019; Roca, Ford, & McRobert, 2013). Whilst the acquisition of technical skills may be important (Smith, 2016), and research is emerging to highlight potential motivational benefits of practising under less challenging conditions (Hodges & Lohse, 2022), it is important that skills are not taught using only non-representative tasks to ensure coaches do not risk limiting the development of their players, and transfer of skills to competitive environments (Cushion et al., 2012; Pinder et al., 2011). As is

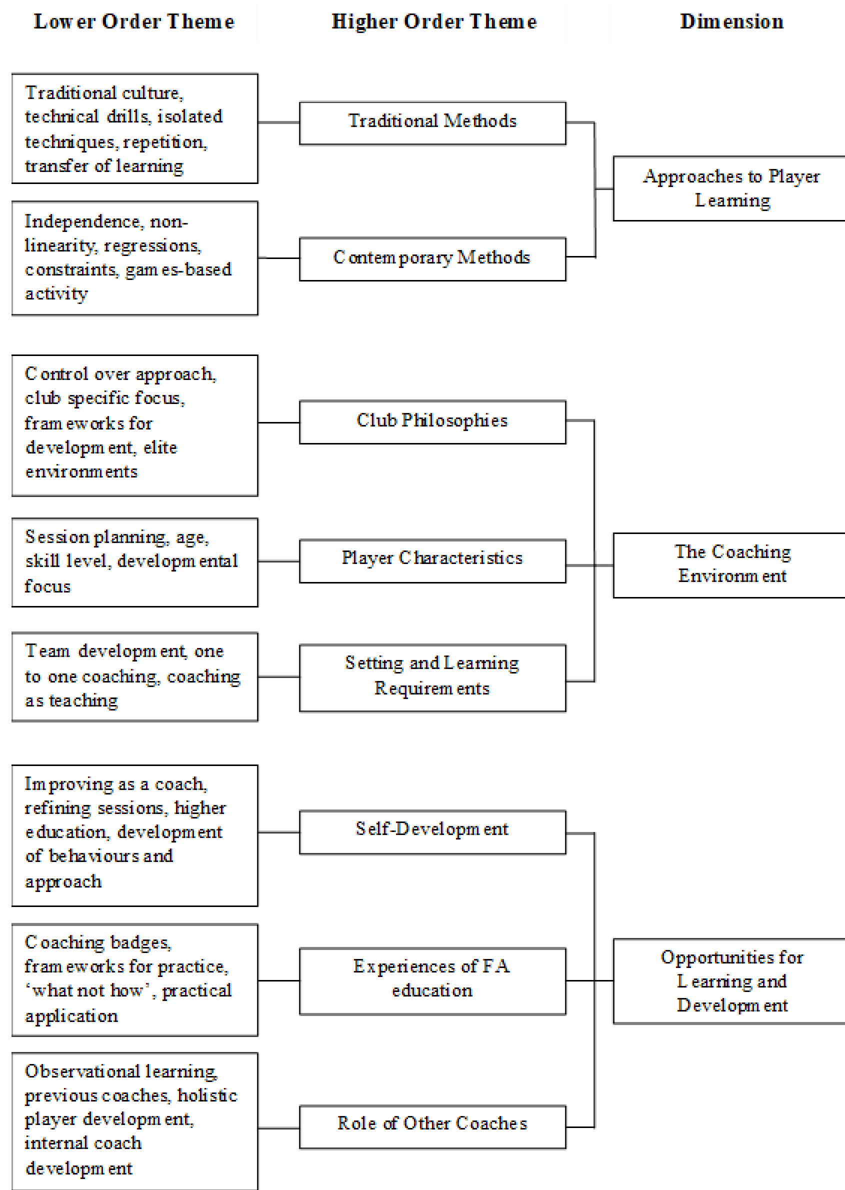

Figure 1: Thematic map displaying the lower order themes, higher order themes, and dimensions of the data set.

presented and discussed in the following theme, coaches do not tend to operate solely within either a 'traditional' or 'contemporary' framework, however the types of activity employed remain fairly distinct within their sessions. Perhaps most important therefore is looking to address the epistemological gap in coaches' understanding of the relationship between practice activities and player learning outcomes. Coach educators must continue to prioritise education of youth football coaches about what representative practice looks like and why it is important, providing practical resources for how to implement these methods into progressive, technically focused sessions (Ford & Whelan, 2016; Moy et al., 2016; Partington & Cushion, 2013; Stone et al., 2020). This process must be supported by ongoing research that not only provides recommendations for practice, but also meaningful and digestible frameworks to implement key learning principles (Woods, McKeown, & O' Sullivan, 2020).

3.1.2. Contemporary Methods

The coaches highlighted how they used a range of contemporary learning principles within their practice. For the most part these were not explicitly referenced in regard to theory, however training methods that align to principles of player centred, nonlinear, and representative learning design, and to ecological dynamics were expressed (Chow et al., 2016; Pinder et al., 2011). One coach detailed the importance of allowing players to learn independently:

> "They don't have to be taught like robots, if you give them a challenging task and a couple of things to focus on, they can learn themselves by playing. They'll pick things up if you give them one thing and don't just spoon-feed them" (Coach 3).

Adopting a player-centred approach to learning led coaches to accept that learning can be an inherently nonlinear and messy process as players explore solutions to challenges during a session (Chow, 2013):

> "It's like learning to ride a bike, you might fall off but then eventually you get it…You've got to go through that learning process where they don't do it, and it doesn't quite come off" (Coach 6).

Adjusting activities to account for differences in learning did not involve over simplifying or completely changing the task, but subtly adjusting environmental or task constraints (Davids et al., 2013). This meant that once they were using a games-based approach coaches could adapt the nature of the task without over compromising its structure, or likeness to a match. Whilst this did not mean that isolated technical practices were absent from sessions (see previous sub-theme), several coaches were able to identify the potential benefits of games-based activity:

> "For me, I like games because they are relevant to a match. That means I can get across the coaching points I want to make for a game on the weekend, and the kids can picture how everything relates" (Coach 2).

This aligns with an ecological dynamics perspective of skill acquisition, and highlights that coaches have some awareness that developing a functional performer-environment relationship is a nonlinear process, influenced by interacting constraints (Davids et al., 2017; Ford & Williams, 2013). Furthermore, coaches advocated the use of games due to their relevance in match situations. By embracing match-relevant games during sessions, coaches provide players with opportunities to acquire and transfer both technical and decision-making skills into matches more effectively (Araújo et al., 2009; Chow et al., 2019; Pinder et al., 2011). Although more explicit conceptual understanding could be beneficial in helping coaches to consistently implement these approaches (Butler, 2014) these findings are somewhat encouraging.

3.2. The Coaching Environment

Within this dimension, coaches' experiences of factors that shape their approach to player learning from within their own coaching environment are presented. Three higher order themes of club philosophies, player characteristics, and setting and learning requirements were identified.

3.2.1. Club Philosophies

Coaches expressed how the philosophy of the club they worked at contributed to the focus and design of their sessions. Whereas some coaches worked independently, others worked at clubs that encouraged the coaches to design sessions in specific ways, or focus on the development of certain technical skills, as one coach alluded to:

> "At the club where we coach, our main focus is dribbling from the youngest age groups up. That will be ball at their feet, can they beat as many players as possible, can they do skills using different parts of the feet" (Coach 1).

Where clubs had implemented a specific philosophy, the coaches suggested that they adopted it as their own. This was particularly evident when working in more elite environments:

> "At the Cat(egory) 1 and Cat(egory) 2 academies, of course they expect you to plan and develop sessions independently, but you're very much working towards their guidelines in terms of player development" (Coach 8).

By implementing a framework for coaches to adhere to, club philosophies play an important role in determining how learning environments are created for young players. This illustrates the importance of socio-cultural constraints on the development of athlete learning (Rothwell, Davids, & Stone, 2018), and is consistent with Cushion and Partington's (2016) notion that coaching approaches are not underpinned solely by the agency of the coach but influenced by the social structure in which they operate. Although the coaches interviewed had not experienced a situation where they strongly opposed a coaching philosophy implemented by their club, it is important to consider that club philosophies can act as a reinforcer of traditional norms that coaches can find difficult to deviate from (Blackett, Evans, & Piggott, 2019; Cushion et al., 2012; Wadsworth, Charnock, Russell, & Littlewood, 2020). Combined, these findings highlight the need to consider clubs as significant contributors to coaches' approaches to player learning. As such, coach educators must consider how the philosophies of clubs align with their principles for practice (e.g., the England DNA) when looking to integrate contemporary pedagogical principles.

3.2.2. Player Characteristics

Coaches approached their sessions differently depending on the characteristics (e.g., age or skill level) of the group that they were coaching. These characteristics were important considerations when planning sessions, as one coach explained:

> "So, the ability level and age particularly make a difference. You need to adapt the session depending on that and that is the first thing I consider before structuring my session" (Coach 7).

With younger age groups, the sessions became more focused around the development of technical skills over tactical understanding:

> "As they grow older it needs to change from a more technical focus to tactical. So being able to switch from when they are 8 and 9 years old it's all technical, then every year you add a bit more tactical sense in, that is the challenge" (Coach 1).

Similarly, more simplistic technically focused practises were viewed as important when working with players of lesser abilities:

> "With my boys now, I could try and work on transition in defence to attack. Great, set up a phase of play or complex practice. But some of them will struggle because they don't have the basic technical skills like passing range, first touch, movement and stuff. So, we need to work on that first" (Coach 4).

As researchers have suggested (Roca et al., 2013), adopting a less binary approach that accepts the complementary relationship between the development of technique and tactical understanding can be beneficial. Perhaps most notably, this could encourage coaches to create sessions that promote technical development whilst acknowledging the need to train these skills using activities that facilitate decision-making, development of tactical awareness, and the transfer of learning into the competition environment (Chow et al., 2019; Ford & Whelan, 2016; Harvey et al., 2010). This approach to player learning and practice design requires an awareness of task simplification over task fractionation or decomposition, in the sense that practises must preserve the complexity of the activity to maintain the coupling between information and movement, and thus transfer of skills (Seifert & Davids, 2017). Coach educators must be sensitive to this and ensure that coaches are equipped with the necessary understanding to utilise and apply contemporary methods at grass roots and foundational levels (Mallett, Trudel, & Lyle, 2009; Nelson, Cushion, & Potrac, 2006).

3.2.3. Setting and Learning Requirements

The coaches expressed how they may often work in different settings whereby their approaches to learning had to be sensitive to changing learning requirements. Whilst working with their teams, the aims of the session would often revolve around team-based principles relating to either previous performances or tactical development, as one coach explained:

> "This season in training I'd set one team up in a 4-3-3 as a lot of teams play that, then coach a team by letting them play against them in that formation. We'd focus on the positions they need to take up, how we attack, and how we defend against it" (Coach 3).

However, when working with players on a one-to-one basis, learning moved towards the development of technical skills that met the specific needs of that individual:

> "I do a lot of one-to-one bits with pretty talented kids, but it's great because you can really notice, break down and then improve those technical elements of their game that might not be quite up to speed" (Coach 8).

A focus on individual improvement was also commonly reported by coaches who had worked within school systems, where despite coaching in groups, the success of their session was determined by the ability to facilitate positive learning outcomes for each learner:

> "That's (schools) where you need everyone to participate and enjoy it because the levels are so varied. It can be difficult to adapt because what you need to do is challenge the kids who are really good but help the kids who are really struggling so they both get positive outcomes" (Coach 2).

Despite coaches' views that one to one coaching provides an important source of information regarding specific technique and weaknesses, to facilitate successful learning and improvement from these sessions, coaches must allow learners to explore solutions to challenges under representative conditions as opposed to fragmented or heavily broken-down technical drills (Chow et al., 2019; Seifert & Davids, 2017). Interestingly, working in school systems encouraged coaches to think critically about how to achieve individual improvement through maintaining suitable levels of challenge for each learner within a group session (e.g., Challenge Point Framework, see Guadagnoli & Lee, 2004). Taken in combination with the previous themes within this dimension, it is evident that coaching, and consequently approaches to player learning, are complex and influenced by a multitude of social, contextual and situational factors (Jones, Edwards, & Viotto Filho, 2014; Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

3.3. Opportunities for Learning and Development

Within this dimension, coaches' experiences of how different learning and developmental opportunities have shaped their approach to player learning are discussed. Three higher order themes of self-development, experiences of FA education, and role of other coaches were identified.

3.3.1. Self-Development

The participants voiced how continually looking to improve as a coach was an important part of their practice:

> "A massive thing for me throughout my coaching career or professional life is 'who do I learn from?', 'how do I get better?'" (Coach 6).

Whilst in some cases this could involve independently evaluating and refining practice activities, the coaches expressed how knowledge gained from educational courses was also important. For many, this centred around a form of tertiary level study such as undergraduate coaching courses. The learning experiences on these courses helped develop skills like planning and reflection, but also directly influenced coaching behaviour, as one graduate coach described:

> "Okay, so one thing I learnt on the course is that every player has a different personality. I cannot shout instructions at every player because it will overwhelm a certain player. You have to adapt your behaviour accordingly to get the best out of individuals" (Coach 5).

Although researchers have indicated that coaches can struggle to specify and provide rationale for the behaviours and activities they use (Cushion, 2013; Partington, Cushion, & Harvey, 2014),

experiences in higher education helped this sample of coaches to indicate how they adapt their sessions to suit the development of their players:

> "I've been in sports science as well like you and know that different players learn differently. I think by using games players can see it, hear it, and learn to do it better. My boys can't picture drills in a game, so they don't like it because it's not how they learn" (Coach 3).

These findings support the idea that the educational background of coaches influences coaching practice (Stonebridge & Cushion, 2018). Whilst formal learning environments in the form of coach accreditation schemes are often devalued by coaches (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2018) opportunities for tertiary level study provided an important means of self-development that was reflected across both coach behaviours and practice activity. From an applied perspective, this could present an opportunity for coach educators to learn from professional teaching institutions (e.g., universities) when trying to identify how best to disseminate contemporary pedagogical ideas (Armour, Griffiths, & De Lyon, 2016).

3.3.2. Experiences of FA Education

The coaches had experienced a range of FA led educational opportunities. Attaining FA coaching badges was a fundamental element in the progression of the coaches' career, and although some of these experiences preceded the FA's revision to the coaching courses (Allison, 2016), similar viewpoints were expressed regarding the transition from the simplistic FA Level 1 to the more technically focused FA Level 2, as one coach explained:

> "Yeah, I was on the new Level 1 which I am glad about, but it was still pretty basic. Enjoyable but I wouldn't say it influenced my approach too much. The Level 2 is then when you add the detail about coaching a technique, progressing into a skill, then taking that into a match" (Coach 4).

The development of tactical game understanding came once coaches had progressed further and looked to complete their UEFA qualifications (FA Level 3 & 4):

> "That's where I learnt so much about the game, Level 2 was all technical whereas UEFA B was all tactical" (Coach 7).

The structure by which coaches suggested they had been taught during FA coaching courses was reflected in their own approach to player learning in that the technical component of skill acquisition preceded tactical and games-based practice. This may be important when considering why English youth football coaches choose to begin sessions with technically focused practices, and ultimately are able to utilise less of the session for active decision-making activity than their European counterparts (Roca & Ford, 2020).

Whilst experiences from FA coaching courses offered a useful framework for practice, the coaches articulated that some formal learning experiences had lacked guidance for practical application in that they explain '*what*' to do but less so '*how*' to do it, as one coach alluded to when discussing a recent Continuing Professional Development (CPD) event:

> "I remember having a discussion after… we felt it lacked a 'this is how you do it'. There was a guy talking to us, but he was asking us how we'd develop decision making. I would have liked more direction to actually go and practice what we were trying to learn" (Coach 1).

This resonates with coach education literature that has highlighted how formal education (e.g., CPD) can lack clarity over how to practically implement the information provided (Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). From a skill acquisition perspective, this could hinder the integration of contemporary pedagogical approaches as coaches resort back to tried and trusted methods (Armour et al., 2016). Although the FA have looked to combat this through introducing the Football Association Youth Coach Education programme to support coaches practically by working in situ (Griffiths et al., 2016), only one of the coaches (Coach 5) had any experience of this.

3.3.3. Role of Other Coaches

The influence of other coaches on approaches to player learning and coach behaviours has been well documented (Cushion, 2013; Partington et al., 2014). The coaches interviewed also highlighted how observing and learning from other coaches impacted their own coaching methods:

> "Yeah I've learnt so much from the coaches I've been around… Even little things about the session looking professional then all the way through to adjusting the size of areas, adding challenges, adapting and progressing sessions, then communicating with players as well" (Coach 7).

It has been suggested that imitating other coaches can hinder the integration of progressive learning approaches through promoting a 'path dependence' that simply follows traditional coaching cultures (Ross, Gupta, & Sanders, 2018; Stone et al., 2020). However, this sample of coaches did not highlight an explicit awareness of doing so:

> "I wouldn't say I really hold with me any of the coaching methods I experienced from a technical or tactical point of view… The moments that I have taken on board are those that really mattered to my development. More about how coaches instilled self-belief and spoke to me as a person" (Coach 6).

In this way, the coaches looked to apply a holistic view of player development that incorporated the social and mental aspects of their players' learning which they had valued when playing (e.g., the Athletic Skills Model, see Wormhoudt, Savelsbergh, Teunissen, & Davids, 2018). The coaches also explained how learning from their peers can take a more nuanced form of critical reflection that serves to improve their practice:

> "Where we are, we'll have coach meetings every half term that focus on how we can improve what we're doing. That will be

not just identifying areas for each of the coaches to improve on but highlighting our strengths and how to develop them further too" (Coach 8).

Clearly, other coaches are important in shaping and developing practice amongst their peers. Rather than dismiss this as a hindrance to the integration of contemporary pedagogical ideas, this rich experiential knowledge can be of value to coach educators and practitioners. Where formal environments have been criticised for their failure to account for the context in which coaches practice, and the complexities faced by individual coaches (Mallett et al., 2009; Piggott, 2012), by providing a forum for the informal sharing of ideas, the FA and other governing bodies could encourage a free, accessible and 'open' environment for coach learning (Piggott, 2015).

4. Limitations and Future Directions

This study has provided novel insights by integrating youth football coaches' approaches to player learning with experiential knowledge of the sources that have influenced their approach. However, as there can often be limited correspondence between coaches' intent and practice (O'Connor, Larkin, & Williams, 2017), future research may look to observe sessions, and follow this up with interviews regarding coaches' experiential knowledge. Such an approach would provide a more objective understanding of the implementation of different pedagogical approaches within youth football. Furthermore, despite this study investigating a cohort of English youth coaches specifically, the insights gained present an opportunity to build on this and previous research by contrasting the experiences of English coaches with coaches from different countries (Roca & Ford, 2020). Contrasting how the experiences of coaches working in different countries, and under different cultures, have influenced their coaching approach could provide an alternative means of benchmarking the development of coaching practice in England (North, 2016). There is also scope to build on the relatively small sample of English coaches used in this study, providing greater depth of understanding from within this culture, and wider range of experiences.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to further current understanding of player learning within English youth football, following recent qualitative research (e.g., Brackley, Barris, Tor, & Farrow, 2020; Pocock et al., 2020), which has used experiential knowledge of coaches to explore why they coach the way they do. The results indicate that while contemporary pedagogical approaches are deemed an important part of practice (Ford & Whelan, 2016), limited understanding of specific learning principles (e.g., representative learning design; transfer of learning) means that isolated technical drills remain a prominent part of player development. Approaches to player learning were not fixed, but dynamic and adaptable depending on a range of different social and contextual experiences within the coaching environment (Cushion & Partington, 2016). While it may be challenging for coach educators to demonstrate sensitivity to these when looking to implement contemporary learning approaches, coaches' ability to adapt and evolve their sessions depending on the requirements of their learners suggests that they possess the necessary skillset to embrace innovative and novel approaches (Butler, 2014; Stone et al., 2020). However, this is a process that will need to be facilitated by enhancing understanding and providing digestible frameworks for practice (Renshaw et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2020). Although the FA has devoted considerable attention to this (Allison, 2016), these findings align with previous research by highlighting that formal learning environments can be received indifferently by football coaches (Stodter & Cushion, 2017). To enhance their effectiveness, it is important that the coach educators disseminate contemporary pedagogical principles in a practical and easily transferable manner.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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