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2 Developing specialised youth soccer coaching qualifications: An exploratory study of course
3 content and delivery mechanisms

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1 Abstract

2 The purpose of the present study was to empirically examine the potential course content,
3 structure, and delivery mechanisms for a dedicated elite youth coach education programme in
4 football (soccer) in the UK. By achieving this aim it was the intention of the authors to use the
5 findings of this study for the future development of a customised coach education programme.
6 Fifteen elite coaches, working in youth football at the time of the study, participated in one of
7 three focus groups. **Emerging from content analysis procedures**, the findings placed specific
8 importance on the development of an athlete-centred coaching philosophy, a focus on
9 behaviours and activities associated with positive youth development, a movement away from
10 traditional practices, and the development of the skills required to learn through reflective
11 practice. Additionally, a range of pedagogical approaches, including social approaches to
12 learning, mentoring, and blended learning, were highlighted as ways to better deliver education
13 programmes.

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15 Key words: youth sport, coach education, football, pedagogy

1 practice (Galvan, Fyall, & Culpan, 2012; Morgan et al., 2013). Additionally, the curricular
2 content of such courses has tended to favour the bio-scientific disciplines, frequently neglecting
3 the social sciences (Galvan et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2012). Hence, it has been argued that
4 coaches often leave with some understanding of the sport sciences (i.e., physiology,
5 biomechanics) and further knowledge of the technical and tactical components of the sport, but
6 have little appreciation of pedagogical and socio-cultural aspects relating to the coach's role
7 (Cassidy et al., 2009). Moreover, formal courses have often followed a mechanistic process that
8 supports the idea that knowledge can be delivered, acquired and implemented in a standardised
9 manner by all candidates in spite of the context of their own coaching practice. Indeed, awards
10 have frequently attempted to present candidates with the distilled "wisdom of expert
11 practitioners" (Lyle, 2002, p. 279) by offering predetermined strategies to overcome a catalogue
12 of perceived coaching dilemmas (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Such programmes have
13 subsequently been criticised for offering a 'tool box' of professional knowledge that privileges a
14 technocratic rationality, with Partington and Cushion (2013) warning that in sports such as
15 football this has "resulted in an established traditional pedagogy or practice that is characterised
16 by being highly directive or autocratic, and prescriptive in nature" (p. 374). Consequently,
17 formal programmes have been challenged for not facilitating the development of the theoretical
18 and practical knowledge required to help coaches be sensitive to, and better cope with, the
19 peculiarities, intricacies, and ambiguities of coaching and the unique conditions under which
20 coaches act (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Vella et al., 2013).

21 NGBs have begun to address some of the problems by introducing different approaches
22 to coach education pedagogy (e.g., Galvan et al., 2012). One such approach is that of coach
23 mentoring, which has been implemented, in many cases, between formal course delivery days to
24 support coaches in their natural coaching environment and provide an informal support
25 mechanism (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Jones, Harris, & Miles, 2009). Additionally, the
26 development of integrating reflective skills as a vehicle to continually self improve and

1 challenge coaching practice, as well as creating communities of practice (CoP) for coaches to
2 share and solve real problems have also been observed. These notions have gained credibility
3 and been described and recommended by many authors within the literature (e.g., Cassidy &
4 Kidman, 2010; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Mesquita, Ribeiro, Santos, & Morgan, 2014).
5 It must be noted, however, that little empirical evidence exists to support the effectiveness of
6 such approaches when integrated into coach education programmes. Further, the process of
7 programme development is often done in isolation of those actually coaching in the field (e.g.,
8 the *end user*), and those who have contributed to the theoretical understanding of coaching (e.g.,
9 the *academic*) (McCullick, Belcher, & Schempp, 2005). This is potentially why formal coach
10 education programmes have been deemed as being decontextualised and sanitised, and why ‘lip
11 service’ is often paid to the pedagogical and experiential approaches that have the potential to
12 enhance the quality of education.

13 In attempts to improve the quality of sports coaching and, as a consequence, the
14 experience young people have in sport, government led initiatives across a number of countries
15 have been instigated with investment in the provision of large scale coach education
16 programmes (e.g., Australia’s National Coaching Accreditation Scheme; Canada’s National
17 Coaching Certificate Programme; United Kingdom Coaching Certificate [UKCC]). Such
18 developments have aimed to create more bespoke courses focused on children and youth with a
19 greater emphasis on the specialised skills required to work across a broad range of contexts.
20 These proposals have been outlined in SCUUK’s 3-7-11 year coaching framework (2006-2016),
21 which has provided the catalyst for NGBs to take a greater responsibility in the development of
22 youth sport coaches and in turn youth specific qualifications are beginning to be offered across a
23 variety of youth sport associations. Specifically, within football in the United Kingdom this has
24 coincided with the Football Association (FA) recognising a shortfall in the development of
25 youth players represented at national team level, which in turn led to the Elite Player
26 Performance Plan (EPPP). The specific objective of this plan is to create a new pathway for

1 youth coaches working with players aged between 5-21 years. Similarly, the Union of European
2 Football Associations (UEFA) has recommended that all member associations develop youth
3 specific qualifications up to and including ‘A Licence’ (UKCC Level **four** equivalent) by 2014.
4 Such ideas have gained empirical support with authors proposing the need for more specialised
5 coaching qualifications that cater for the varying contexts that exist between age groups and
6 levels of ability (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010; Nash, Martindale, Collins, & Martindale, 2012).

7 In summary, if a meaningful and valued sport experience for participants, whether it be
8 at participation or high-performance levels, is to be achieved then the development of high
9 quality coach education programmes that focus on specific contexts (e.g., youth sport) becomes
10 an imperative (Stephenson & Jowett, 2009). These programmes have to provide trainee coaches
11 with the opportunity to develop the knowledge (e.g., professional, interpersonal, intrapersonal),
12 skills and experience required for effective practice (within the context in which they work) as
13 well as the chance to develop the ‘quality of mind’ required for effective decision making and
14 management of the complexities associated with the coaching process (Morgan et al., 2013;
15 Nash et al., 2012). Further, formal courses must be intentionally designed to include material
16 that exposes coaches to their context-specific (e.g., age related) responsibilities as educators and
17 specific training on how to promote positive developmental outcomes (Vella et al., 2013). It
18 would appear that a range of formal (e.g., workshops, demonstrations) and informal (e.g.,
19 reflective practice, mentoring) approaches to learning should be used to achieve such outcomes,
20 although the combination of such approaches that efficiently and effectively facilitate learning
21 and development is a topic in need of attention. Indeed, Cushion, Harvey, Muir, and Nelson
22 (2012) have outlined that researchers are still aiming to understand and accumulate knowledge
23 of what coaches actually do instead of identifying clearer links between the perceived demands
24 of the coaching role and the design and content of coach education courses.

25 In light of the preceding discussion, the aim of the present study was to empirically
26 examine the potential course content, structure, and delivery mechanisms for a dedicated elite

1 youth coach education programme in football. To achieve this aim, the objectives of the study
2 were to: (a) examine the *make-up* (e.g., knowledge, skills, experience) of an elite youth football
3 coach to offer insights into potential course content; and (b) explore how a course might be
4 structured and delivered through innovative pedagogy to offer an operative learning
5 environment for the development of elite youth coaches. By focusing on these objectives it was
6 thought that context-specific information could be developed that would potentially overcome a
7 number of the criticisms aimed at formal coach education programmes. Importantly, it was the
8 authors' intention to use the information gleaned in this project to develop a customised Level
9 **four** coach education programme for a home nation NGB of football. Hence, the focus on *elite*
10 coaching (defined in this study as those working in the youth academies of professional football
11 clubs) emerged from the needs of this NGB, and the level and purpose of the qualification.

12 **Method**

13 **Epistemological Position of the Research**

14 Given the aims of this investigation and the paucity of research available concerning the
15 explicit understanding of the foundations (e.g., content, structure, delivery) of effective youth
16 coach education programmes in football, an *exploratory* approach was adopted (cf. Stebbins,
17 2001). Specifically, this approach allows for the exploration of new, or under-researched,
18 phenomena in a way that facilitates a better understanding and determines the methods to be
19 used in subsequent research (Maxwell, 2013). This approach emerged from a constructivist
20 epistemological stance, which is underpinned by the goal of understanding the complex world of
21 lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Gergen, 2001). Indeed, given the
22 position of the researchers, who support the contention that the coaching process is inherently
23 complex, it is believed that there is not a single, identifiable truth regarding the *what*, *when* and
24 *how* of coach education. As a result, this study attempted to explore the socially constructed
25 realities of those who have been immersed in the field of coaching and coach education. A
26 precise theoretical framework was, therefore, not adopted. Instead the project was guided by the

1 concept of adult (coach) education and principles associated with effective learning (e.g.,
2 Morgan et al., 2013).

3 **Participants**

4 Participants ($n = 15$) were selected using purposive sampling techniques on the basis that
5 they met predefined criteria and were regarded as ‘information rich’ cases (Patton, 2002).
6 Participants were selected on the premise that they had at least 10 years of coaching experience
7 within youth football (coaching players aged 12-21 years), with either experience of working
8 with international youth teams or with professional club academies, and were coaching at the
9 time of the study. It was thought that participants meeting such criteria would be best placed to
10 discuss the types of knowledge, skills, and experience that should form a part of a context
11 specific coach education programme as well as the way in which such a course should be
12 delivered and thus meet the aims of this research. The participants were male with ages ranging
13 from 30 to 56 ($M = 39.8$, $SD = 8.7$), which produced a diverse range of experiences within the
14 parameters of the study (cf., Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, 2007). Participants’ experience
15 of coaching within youth football varied between 10 and 18 years ($M = 13.3$; $SD = 2.9$), with
16 four having coached age group international teams, eight at professional football academies in
17 the UK, and three in having coached in both settings. Six participants were also qualified coach
18 educators for their NGB. All participants were coaching at the time of the study and held either
19 a Level **four** ($n = 11$) or Level **five** ($n = 4$) UEFA coaching licence.

20 **Focus Group Guide**

21 Focus groups have been defined in a number of different ways, but there is some general
22 agreement that they are a research technique used to collect data through group interaction on a
23 topic determined by the researcher (cf. Stewart, 2014). The use of focus groups for exploratory
24 research is well established in the literature (Maxwell, 2013), and were deemed most
25 appropriate for the present study because, through participant discussion, they would allow a

1 range of opinions to be fostered and thus a more complete and revealing understanding of the
2 issues to be obtained (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010).

3 A semi-structured focus group guide was developed that retained a core of standardised
4 questions but allowed for the exploration of participant experiences and any new issues that
5 arose (Cropley et al., 2010). Patton (2002) suggested that this semi-structured approach allows
6 for continuity in the procedure whilst accounting for the systematic nature of data collection
7 between different focus groups. A pilot focus group was completed with a matched sample of
8 coaches to those participating in the main study. As a result of the pilot, minor refinements were
9 made to the structure and phraseology of certain questions in an attempt to add clarity and
10 enhance discussion between participants.

11 The full focus group guide was separated into six sections. Section one contained an
12 introduction to explain issues of confidentiality, reasons for audiotaping, and a statement of the
13 participants' rights. Participants were provided with a standard set of instructions preparing
14 them for the subject matter and questions. They were also informed of the need for discussion
15 and therefore introduced to their roles and responsibilities during the session. Section two
16 provided the opportunity for the participants to examine and discuss the key coaching
17 characteristics of youth coaches (e.g., what characteristics separate effective from less effective
18 coaches?). Section three expanded the theme of characteristics to focus on the skills coaches
19 need to develop to work effectively with 12-21 year old football players (e.g., what skills would
20 we expect a Level four coach to have over a Level three coach?). Section four explored the
21 knowledge and understanding the coaches had developed within their own career (e.g., what has
22 had the most impact on your effectiveness? What recommendations would you offer to coaches
23 training to achieve Level four?). Section five furthered this discussion by exploring what
24 modules and content should be included with a youth license course in order to reflect all
25 elements discussed (e.g., what should a Level four course contain from a coaching perspective?).
26 The sixth section was aimed at course delivery and assessment (e.g., what approaches should be

1 adopted to deliver a Level four course?). The premise here was to gather information designed
2 to help overcome the issues previously directed at coach education programmes. Finally, section
3 six provided the opportunity for participants to comment on the focus group process (e.g., do
4 you feel as though you could share your honest thoughts?). All participants acknowledged that
5 they were able to provide information accurately and were not coerced in any way.

6 **Procedure**

7 Following the award of institution ethical approval, participants were contacted via
8 telephone, informed of the nature of the study and asked to participate. Those who agreed were
9 asked to complete a written informed consent form prior to being sent a preparation booklet
10 (available upon request), which was designed to allow participants to familiarise themselves
11 with the content of the focus group in an attempt to facilitate the retrospective recall of data (cf.,
12 Cropley et al., 2010).

13 Three focus groups were conducted, each consisting of five participants made up of UK
14 professional club academy coaches ($n = 3$) and coaches working with international age group
15 teams ($n = 2$). Two of the participants in each focus group were also qualified coach educators.
16 Keeping the focus groups small and purposively mixing the participants to sample a range of
17 knowledge and experiences in each group allowed for greater depth of discussion between
18 participants and thus richer data to emerge (cf., Stewart, 2014). The first author facilitated all of
19 the focus groups to ensure consistency in the process. In addition, the second author acted as
20 support during the focus groups by managing the recording equipment and taking notes, which
21 allowed the first author to concentrate on their primary role (cf., Cropley et al., 2010). All focus
22 groups were video and audio recorded (in order to improve the accuracy and efficiency of
23 transcription) and conducted in a neutral setting to aid the flow of conversation and avoid
24 environmental bias. Each focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes.

25 **Data Analysis**

1 behaviours, and (c) knowledge, understanding and application. For *the course*, there is just one
2 main theme: course structure and content.

3 **The Coach**

4 **Coach characteristics (philosophy and personality).** [INSERT FIGURE 1 CLOSE TO
5 HERE] Throughout all focus groups there was an agreement that emphasis needs to be placed
6 on helping coaches to develop and understand their coaching philosophy. It was suggested that
7 this is best done by affording coaches the opportunity to explore their values and beliefs about
8 coaching, as well as their own personal characteristics and different approaches to coaching in
9 youth settings. For example, it was acknowledged, “Coaches have to understand their
10 philosophy for coaching, which is different from their philosophy about football”, and, “Without
11 understanding why you want to work in youth football it’s difficult to be effective. You have to
12 be clear about what drives you and this comes from your philosophy.” Whilst the importance of
13 having a clearly conceived coaching philosophy is not a new idea it has been argued that many
14 coach education courses fail to provide the opportunity for coaches to explore their own
15 philosophies in a meaningful way (Gilbert, 2009). **Consequently, the findings of this study**
16 **suggest that any coach education programme has to provide the opportunity for the exploration**
17 **and development of candidates’ own coaching philosophy in a way that emancipating.**

18 Participants were explicitly keen to distinguish between the notions of coaching
19 philosophy and philosophy for football, where they described the former as, “...a set of beliefs
20 and principles about the way in which we practice as coaches”, and the latter as, “...your
21 technical model for the way in which the game should be played.” Such distinctions have been
22 made previously and it is thought that not understanding one’s own values about coaching
23 makes it difficult to understand why we do what we do (Carless & Douglas, 2011; McGladrey,
24 Murray, & Hannon, 2010). This in turn results in coaches regularly experiencing inconsistencies
25 between their beliefs and actions (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Such ideas were best
26 supported in this study by the comments of one participant who outlined, “Many coaches can

1 explain their playing philosophy, but fail to recognise their values and beliefs and this often
2 results in them saying that they coach in one way but actually behave in another.”

3 One theme that appeared to provide the foundation for a number of other factors related
4 to the ‘elite youth coach’ concerned the development of an athlete-centred philosophy. One
5 participant stated, “Youth coaches need a philosophy that focuses on the player, many coaches
6 worry about results and forget what individual needs each player has and this stunts their
7 development.” Others agreed, suggesting, “The player has to be at the centre of everything we
8 do.” Athlete-centred approaches require coaches to embrace goals associated to the individuals’
9 holistic development and have gained significant support in recent literature (Camiré et al.,
10 2014; Kidman, 2005; McGladrey et al., 2010). **In order to establish effective coaching practice,**
11 **it was therefore outlined in this study that coaches must develop a philosophy that prioritises the**
12 **personal and social, as much as the physical and psychological, development of young people**
13 (cf. Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011; Camiré et al., 2014).

14 The practicalities of adopting such beliefs in practice were discussed by participants who
15 considered the difficulty in aligning such a philosophy with the philosophy of their employers
16 (football clubs) that may be incongruent with such ideals. It was suggested that, “Being player
17 centred is important but at times you have to be flexible to fit into a club’s vision and ideas on
18 player development.” This clearly presents a challenge for coaches on two fronts. First, coaches
19 have to be confident in their own ability in order to effectively adopt an athlete-centred
20 approach as they will be required to adopt different approaches to meet individual needs and
21 thus cannot adopt traditional, prescriptive approaches to coaching (Ford, Yates, & Williams,
22 2010). Second, coaches have to be willing to question the taken-for-granted routines that maybe
23 adopted by their employers and accept new, more efficacious, approaches to practice (Cushion,
24 Ford, & Williams, 2012).

25 Other coaching beliefs and approaches to coaching that were linked to the idea of an
26 athlete-centred approach included a ‘long-term perspective’, which was suggested to be, “A

1 perspective that stops us judging children too early and instead giving them the chance to learn
2 about themselves and develop at their own pace to a certain extent.” Youth football in the UK
3 has been criticised for making too many judgments about a player’s ability to progress to the
4 next level of the sport too early on in their development (cf., Cushion & Jones, 2006). As a
5 result, many young players end up exiting the sport, or having a poor experience of the sport,
6 due to inappropriate assessments being made about very specific aspects of their performance
7 (Cushion, Ford, et al., 2012).

8 Participants were keen to establish that elite youth coaches need to develop a perspective
9 that focuses on the long-term development of players in attempts to protect against these issues.
10 Such ideas support the importance of approaches to practice that consider long-term athlete
11 development and the constructs presented in the Developmental Model of Sport Participation
12 (DMSP, Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). For example, in line with the DMSP’s contention that
13 deliberate practice can aid the development of elite performance, participants in the present
14 study also advocated that youth coaches must use ‘ecological approaches to learning’, which
15 were highlighted as, “...practices that allow players to learn in the actual situations that they will
16 face in games”, and, “...competitive situations to allow players to learn how to cope with what
17 they will experience in games.” These comments suggest a movement away from the traditional
18 practices that tend to focus on ‘training form’ (e.g., technique and skill practices) to a greater
19 focus on the adoption of ‘playing form’ (e.g., small-sided, conditioned games) (Partington &
20 Cushion, 2013). Research has indicated that due to the higher contextual interference that is
21 inherent within ‘playing form’ activities they are more realistic and relevant to performance and
22 thus have a greater impact on learning and retention (Ford et al., 2010). It would appear,
23 therefore, that if the goals of positive youth development associated with producing independent
24 thinkers, decision makers, and problem solvers the use of game realistic practices should
25 become paramount.

1 The second order theme of personal characteristics concentrated on those characteristics
2 required to work effectively in youth sport and emphasised the need for coaches to be motivated
3 to work in such contexts. One participant indicated, “Many see youth coaching as a stepping
4 stone to coaching adults, there is a real need for individuals to be motivated to go out with the
5 fundamental aim of working with young players and improving them as individuals”, whilst
6 another added, “Working in youth football requires specialist knowledge, skills and attitudes
7 and so coaches in this area have to be motivated solely to developing themselves as youth
8 coaches.” These findings offer support for the work of Vella, Oades, and Crowe (2011) who
9 acknowledged the importance that both coach practitioners and coach scholars place on positive
10 youth development and the underpinning motivation that supports effective outcomes.

11 Similarly, participants also recognised the importance of the type of individuals who are
12 suited to coaching young players to include being trustworthy, enthusiastic, and humble. For
13 example, “The players have to trust you, they are young and see you in a position of power and
14 therefore need to have comfort in that trust for you”, and, “Behaviours are infectious especially
15 with young people, if you’re not enthusiastic about what you’re doing every day then that will
16 have a negative impact on others.” Whilst these characteristics are widely associated with
17 effective coaches they are seldom considered as attributes that can and should be developed
18 through coach education pathways. Indeed, it is proposed that coaches should spend time
19 considering the potential impact of demonstrating these characteristics on player development as
20 well as exploring how they might be further developed (Lockwood & Perlman, 2008).

21 **Skills and behaviours.** [INSERT FIGURE 2 CLOSE TO HERE] This third order theme
22 emerged as the types of skills and behaviours youth coaches need to learn, develop and apply in
23 the specific context of youth coaching, thus making them different to those required by coaches
24 who work with adults. One participant suggested, for example, “All coaches need to develop
25 relationships but these look very different with young players than adults and as a result require
26 different skills to build them”, with another acknowledging, “Communicating with children is a

1 whole different ball game than communicating with adults.” Many of the skills and behaviours
2 presented as first order themes in figure 2 represent those outlined in the work of Lacy and Darst
3 (1984) and more recently Cushion, Harvey et al. (2012). **However, the participants discussed the**
4 **importance of these in the context of elite Level four football coaches and therefore the way in**
5 **which such behaviours are interpreted and the significance of the approaches that can be used to**
6 **develop and facilitate such skills became contextually relevant.** Participants in the present study
7 highlighted the relevance of coaches being able to manage the environment, be patient, be
8 flexible in style and assessment, communicate and listen effectively, and use positive modelling
9 (e.g., demonstrations) to assist learning. The significance of these was best summarised by one
10 participant who stated, “There are a number of behaviours that coaches should exhibit and skills
11 that they should have in their armoury that should be a fundamental part of coach education,
12 unfortunately we take a lot of them for granted.” This suggestion resonates with research that
13 proposes that coaches have limited training in, or knowledge of, the ‘soft skills’ required to
14 construct and facilitate suitable environments required for youth development (Camiré et al.,
15 2011). It would appear most appropriate for coach education programmes, therefore, to make
16 the development of these skills as well as the opportunity to reflect upon their application a
17 formal part of the course.

18 Participants were particularly keen to discuss the importance of questioning and
19 challenging through the use of appropriate goals as skills required by the elite youth coach.
20 Participants suggested that, “Questioning and challenging players helps to develop their thinking
21 and problem solving skills and this is what I aim to achieve as a coach”, and, “...agreed, I want
22 my players to have the answers to the problems they are faced with so I need to challenge them
23 in the first instance to create a problem and then question them about their actions and solutions.”
24 Chambers and Vickers (2006) acknowledged that questioning is a valuable coaching behaviour
25 that encourages athletes’ active learning through problem solving, discovery, and performance
26 awareness. Such views are supported by a host of literature in sports coaching (e.g., Cushion,

1 Ford et al., 2012; Cushion, Harvey et al., 2012; Vella et al., 2011). However, research by
2 Partington and Cushion (2013) found that coaches may employ a questioning approach but are
3 likely to revert to a more instructional style if the questioning (and player learning) process
4 takes too long. This would indicate the need to commit to a questioning approach to practice
5 that places the athlete at the centre as well as the need for coaches to develop their ability to ask
6 ‘good’ questions. This is supported by the thoughts of one participant who stated, “Avoiding
7 closed questions is key. I see so many coaches give loaded questioning like ‘yes’ or ‘no’ which
8 allow for no problem solving, which defeats the purpose of asking in the first place.” In a
9 similar vein, participants discussed the value of being able to set appropriate goals in helping
10 players to develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. Again, it was proposed that many
11 coaches take the skill of goal-setting for granted and as such set inappropriate targets or
12 challenges for players, which is likely to have a negative impact on motivation, persistence and
13 confidence (Kingston & Wilson, 2006). For example, it was stated, “I see so many coaches
14 trying to motivate players but without challenging them correctly”, another participant
15 commented, “The best coaches I have seen constantly use goals in different forms, individual
16 challenge and team goals, in all exercises to ensure tempo, realism, and competitiveness.”

17 Previous research has examined the preferred coach leadership behaviours in youth sport
18 and is in general agreement that more democratic behaviours are associated with higher rates of
19 sporting success (e.g., Høigaard, Jones, & Peters, 2008). In the present study, participants also
20 recognised the value of empowering players through appropriate practice structure and use of
21 conditions (e.g., rules used in game realistic practices that direct play). Participants suggested
22 that coaches needed to develop the skills to be able to apply these factors effectively, for
23 example, “Youth coaches rarely have the skills to apply correct conditions. Instead they try and
24 impose their own ideas rather than letting players discover solutions. We talk about developing
25 decision makers but the practices aren’t developed to allow this to happen.” Whilst education
26 programmes often mention them as valuable practices they “do little to help coaches examine

1 the context specific factors that impact on the quality of their implementation.” Participants in
2 Partington and Cushion’s (2013) study supported this failing in coach education by suggesting
3 that, “Coach education tends to give examples of coaching not the understanding of how to
4 carry it out” (p. 379). Closing the gap between theory and practice in education programmes
5 would help coaches to improve congruence between what they say they do and what they
6 actually do and thus bring their behaviours in line with their philosophies.

7 Finally, participants discussed the skills and behaviours associated with developing
8 positive relationships not only with their players but also with their parents. One participant
9 suggested, “The coach needs to understand the balance between having a good working
10 relationship with the player and also being able to maintain a professional environment where
11 that relationship does not influence their decisions”, with another adding, “I agree, the
12 relationship is key but not only with the player but also their parents because they have such an
13 influence on the player’s development too.” The importance of the coach-athlete relationship is
14 widely discussed in the sports coaching literature (e.g., Jackson, Knapp, & Beauchamp, 2009;
15 Rhind & Jowett, 2010) and adding to this discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper.
16 However, due to complex and dynamic nature of interpersonal relationships it would be naïve of
17 any coach education programme to attempt to ‘teach’ coaches how to develop a relationship.
18 Instead, participants suggested that emphasis should be placed on “understanding the
19 components of positive relationships” and “developing skills required to begin a relationship.”
20 Consequently, prominence was placed on coaches’ communication skills, which included
21 delivery, listening, and interpretation. Considering the implications for coach education, Jackson
22 et al. (2009) found that coaches often overlook look the impact of discourse and use of language
23 on the effectiveness of their communication. They proposed that greater emphasis on helping
24 coaches to develop different forms of communication would likely result in improved practice.
25 We would add that making the development of communication skills a formal part of course

1 content would again close the theory to practice gap and get coaches to focus more specifically
2 on the skills that will have a fundamental impact on their effectiveness.

3 **Knowledge, understanding and application.** [INSERT FIGURE 3 CLOSE TO HERE]

4 This third order theme related to what candidates should be taught as part of an elite youth
5 coach education course and consisted of three second order themes. The first, demands of the
6 game, and second, observation, analysis, and feedback, merely reflected what is traditionally
7 covered on football coach education programmes at **Level** four (e.g., the physical, technical,
8 tactical, and psycho-social demands of the game; understanding of the key elements of
9 observation; different forms of feedback). Participants were adamant that this ‘knowledge of the
10 sport’ was fundamental and would only change as the game evolved. However, the participants
11 did discuss that the way in which this knowledge should be used and applied should be more
12 representative of philosophy of youth development discussed previously. For example,
13 participants suggested, “Knowledge about football doesn’t really change that much but how it’s
14 applied in a youth setting has to be a key focus”, and, “Delivery of content knowledge is what
15 needs to be improved, the candidates will already have lots of this knowledge but how they
16 apply it effectively is what they need to develop”, and, “Coaches think that because they can
17 feed back that their use of feedback is effective, the elite youth coach needs to know how and
18 when to use different types of feedback.”

19 Chesterfield et al. (2010) proposed that those responsible for delivering coach education
20 courses would benefit from considering the relevance and applicability of the various
21 knowledge, methods and perspectives they promote on formal education provision. Similarly,
22 others have acknowledged that coaching courses need to address not only the types of
23 knowledge delivered but also the way in which coaches learn to apply that knowledge (e.g.,
24 Cushion et al., 2012; Høigaard et al., 2008). Linking these ideas to those of the participants in
25 this study, it would seem that the delivery of content knowledge has to take into account the
26 needs of the individual coach and the situations in which they are working, thus making these

1 different forms of knowledge more contextually relevant. Additionally, coaches need to be
2 given the opportunity to apply, reflect and learn from their experiences of working with this
3 knowledge in order to make more informed decisions about what the knowledge means to, and
4 for, them (cf., Cushion, Ford, et al., 2012).

5 The final second order theme, practice structure, raised the most in-depth discussion. In
6 line with the suggested philosophical stance of youth coach education programmes outlined
7 previously, coaches highlighted the need for coaches to adopt game-realistic practices that
8 mirrored the competitive environment and placed athlete learning and development at the centre
9 (Lauder, 2001). In order to be able to apply these practices effectively the participants
10 acknowledged the importance of being able to understanding and apply a Teaching Games for
11 Understanding (TGfU, Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) approach, and different coaching styles to
12 match the learning needs of individual players. Further, the participants suggested that, in spite
13 of advocating these approaches, trainee coaches should not be dictated to with regards to their
14 approach to coaching. This discussion supports those who have criticised coach education
15 courses for being overly prescriptive and didactic in nature, where a particular approach to
16 coaching is valued over others (e.g., Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Morgan et al., 2012). Indeed,
17 previous research has highlighted the dissatisfaction coaches have felt with ‘one-size-fits-all’
18 approaches to coaching that have traditionally been championed on coach education courses (cf.,
19 Chesterfield et al., 2010). In addition, Peel, Cropley, Hanton, and Fleming (2013) warned
20 against accepting the dogma of one approach to coaching as it is unlikely that the needs of all
21 players will be appropriately served. Support for these arguments is best summarised by the
22 comments of one participant who suggested that:

23 I think a youth education programme has to have an agreed philosophy but there needs
24 to be the flexibility on the course to allow coaches to explore what approaches suit them
25 and the situation in which they are coaching. The course should add new knowledge but

1 also adopt a critical stance where coaches are encouraged to question this in line with
2 what they already know and do.

3 Consequently, participants suggested that, “Coaches need to know and understand the different
4 approaches and styles of coaching available to them, but they also need to make a choice about
5 what is most appropriate in a specific scenario”, and, “You need a toolbox of coaching styles
6 and the mindfulness to be able to adopt the right style at the right time.”

7 Finally, participants expressed a belief that coaches needed to develop the knowledge,
8 understanding and application of how to structure practice in a way that reduced the amount of
9 time they spent intervening in training sessions. It was suggested that, “The best coaches are
10 able to create the correct practices and games that allows the players to solve problems without
11 the coach needing to constantly step into the session and intervene.” In light of this, TGfU was
12 considered as an appropriate vehicle to enhance the number of problem solving activities
13 players engage in and reduce the time spent in coach intervention, which would inevitably give
14 the players more time in actual play. These ideas are reminiscent of the ‘roots and wings’
15 analogy proposed by Ian McGeechan in Jones, Armour, and Potrac (2004), where coaches
16 should provide the structure (roots) through rules to allow athletes to be clear about the
17 parameters of performance as well as the freedom (wings) for athletes to explore their
18 performance and find solutions to problems associated with competition. This means that
19 coaches have to understand how to develop self-reliance and self-direction in athletes and be
20 comfortable in relinquishing some control over athlete behaviours and performance.

21 **The Course**

22 **Course structure and content.** [INSERT FIGURE 4 CLOSE TO HERE] In addition to
23 the outcomes of coach education courses that are pre-defined by the awarding NGB, the
24 participants recognised the need to focus on developing more than practice competence by
25 highlighting a number of extended outcomes. These focused on the development of the coach
26 more generally and recognised the importance of helping coaches to improve their critical

1 thinking skills in order for "...coaches to be more innovative in their practices and actions", and
2 decision making skills to "ensure coaches understand what information they need to make the
3 right decision and execute the decision effectively." Whilst many would identify the difficulty
4 of assessing such skills, incorporating individual mentors, embedding reality based problems in
5 group and individual scenarios and constantly facilitating reflection on and in practice are
6 strategies outlined by participants in the present study and in the literature that are integral to
7 coaches operating in high performance coaching environments (e.g., Gilbert, 2009; Lyle, 2002;
8 Mallett et al., 2009). Certainly, including such factors as outcomes on a youth coach education
9 programme would signify a movement away from the norm where the candidates are often
10 removed from the learning process (cf. Chesterfield et al., 2010).

11 The two remaining second order themes (formal and informal learning) have been
12 widely debated within the literature in question of their efficacy for improving learning (for a
13 review see Cushion, Nelson, Armour, Lyle, Jones, Sandford, & O'Callaghan, 2010). Formal
14 approaches to learning have received considerable criticism in this literature, with authors
15 suggesting that formal education is less valued than experiential learning and other less formal
16 opportunities (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). For example, research has highlighted that courses often
17 give little more than a basic understanding; some of the theoretical material covered is
18 considered too abstract from everyday practice to be considered worthwhile; and courses can be
19 guilty of trying to cram too much information into a relatively short period of time (Cushion et
20 al., 2010). However, participants in the present study commented, "Some formal learning is
21 good but it has to be integrated with opportunities to make sense of the content and consider
22 what it means to the individual", and, "Those formal elements have to develop into more reality
23 based learning scenarios." In essence, these thoughts resonate with those of Mallett et al. (2009)
24 who recommended that, "Formal education needs extensive and variable experiences to convert
25 situated learning to understanding" (p. 332). The challenge for coach education programmes,

1 therefore, is to be designed in a way that moves from research and theory (formal learning) to
2 practical application (informal learning) (Gilbert, 2009).

3 Participants suggested that a youth coach education programme would benefit from
4 clearly identified, justified, and measurable “aims and objectives” that are achieved through “a
5 staff-candidate ratio of 1:4.” These suggestions are linked to further participant comments that
6 suggested, “The candidates need to be involved, they’ve got lots of knowledge and experience
7 and we have to consider how that’s used and explored on the course”, and “Normally on courses
8 the candidates get ‘delivered to’ but actually they should be at the centre of the learning process
9 and should have a more active part to play.” By increasing participant involvement in the formal
10 elements of course delivery through more interactive activities including question and answer,
11 critical discussion, and shared reflection on the formal content being delivered it is likely that
12 participants will feel more empowered and thus more involved in their own learning (Camiré et
13 al., 2014). It is recommended that if courses do adopt such strategies then those responsible for
14 delivery need to assume the roles of facilitator of learning (e.g., to guide the process of learning
15 rather than stifling learning through the imposition of information) and scaffold builder (e.g., to
16 extend that knowledge to a broader and deeper understanding) (Houser & Frymier, 2009). These
17 roles allow candidates to initially be supported through tasks to guide their learning and
18 understanding before the support is gradually removed giving the candidate the opportunity to
19 explore practice based dilemmas on their own (Cushion et al., 2010).

20 The use of pre and post course tasks was another recommendation from the participants.
21 They suggested, “You come on to the course, go home and forget about everything until you
22 come to the next part of the course. Learning needs to be more ongoing”, and, “Yeah, some sort
23 of task before and after the formal contact days would help candidates to consider how the
24 things that they’ve learnt impact on their own practice.” The idea of ongoing learning over the
25 duration of the course might help to overcome some of the issues presented by Chesterfield et al.
26 (2010) who reported that coaches often reverted to their tried and trusted approaches to coaching

1 following completion of a formal qualification. This seems to suggest that on-course learning
2 experiences are often not meaningful to coaches and thus they are discarded once they return to
3 their working lives. Carefully constructed tasks that support the delivery of the indicative course
4 content would help coaches to actually engage with knowledge in the context of their own
5 practice, which is likely to have a greater impact on how they manage the coaching process
6 (Stephenson & Jowett, 2009).

7 Linked to the ideas of more ecological approaches to learning the participants also
8 suggested that youth coach education would not only benefit from formal assessments that take
9 place in the candidates' own working environment but also from "more informal, ongoing
10 assessment during the course." One participant commented, "The assessments have to represent
11 the philosophy of the course and candidates have to be prepared by being given feedback on
12 their practice on a more consistent basis." The notion of assessment for learning (AfL) is one
13 that is advocated as a valuable pedagogical practice designed to seek and interpret evidence for
14 use by learners and their educators to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they
15 need to be and how they might get there (Black, Lee, & William, 2005). In essence, AfL is used
16 as an approach to improve learners and support modifications in their knowledge, understanding
17 and practice and could be integrated into education programmes through the use of formative
18 assessments linked to a mentoring process.

19 The final second order theme, informal approaches to learning, presented a number of
20 pedagogical strategies that have gained support in recent literature (e.g., Cropley, Miles, & Peel,
21 2012; Cushion et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2012). The participants recognised the importance of
22 youth coach education programmes embracing reflective practice, mentoring, and networking
23 opportunities. In regards to reflective practice participants commented, "Reflection is something
24 that gets talked about a lot but I've never been taught how to engage in it effectively...if we
25 want coaches to reflect we have to teach them how", and, "Coach education cannot pay lip
26 service to reflective practice, it has to be embedded throughout the programme." Cropley et al.

1 (2012) proposed that NGBs have a responsibility to systematically educate coaches about
2 reflective practice, facilitate the development of reflective skills, and support ongoing reflection
3 in attempts to maximise the way in which coaches engage in experiential learning. This work
4 supports the ideas of the participants in this study that reflective practice cannot simply be added
5 into a coach education programme but the principles of reflection need to be firmly embedded in
6 the philosophy of the course. Indeed, a range of research has warned against promoting
7 reflection without applying appropriate support mechanisms to help the development of the
8 practice (e.g., Cropley et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2009). In response to their experiences, the
9 participants acknowledged that providing opportunities to work with other candidates, to share
10 reflections and to engage in critical discussion would help to better entrench reflection into a
11 programme, “Reflective learning groups are used in our club and they work really well as a way
12 of sharing our experiences and learning from each other.” Such ideas are consistent with recent
13 work by Gilbert et al. (2009).

14 The participants recognised mentoring as an integral part of a youth coach education
15 programme. They suggested, “Mentoring has been one of the most influential factors on my
16 development as a coach and it should be a part of any education programme. It should happen in
17 the candidates’ club environment too”, and, “It links to reflection, having a mentor helps to feed
18 the reflective process, which helps you to learn more than you would on your own.” Cassidy et
19 al. (2009) raised an issue regarding the way in which mentoring is defined as a process and
20 suggested that within coach education mentoring should be based on the value of guidance. This
21 supports the participants’ previous ideas that the roles of mentors and coach educators is one of
22 scaffolding the learning experience rather than directing the learning experience. Nevertheless,
23 it appears important that if youth coach education programmes are to make the best use of
24 mentoring clear definitions of the role and purpose of the mentor need to be developed so that
25 both mentor and candidate can be clear about the nature of the process (cf., Mesquita et al.,
26 2014; Morgan et al., 2013). Related to the mentoring process, the participants suggested that

1 peer-support and networking through visits to other football clubs could help to coaches to gain
2 a better understanding of how knowledge and skills can be applied in practice and in doing so
3 gain first-hand experience of real-life examples of coaching practice. These activities were
4 suggested to further help close the theory to practice gap that currently limits the efficacy of
5 coach education (Morgan et al., 2013; Partington & Cushion, 2013).

6 **Conclusion**

7 Coach education has been criticised for being divorced from the reality of the coaching
8 process, focused on principles of techno-rationality, and its rather superficial engagement with
9 the complexity inherent within coaching practice (Jones et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2013).
10 NGB's have proposed that the development of education pathways that are dedicated to specific
11 contexts (e.g., youth coaching) may be one way to overcome some of these issues by helping
12 coaches to develop the context specific knowledge and 'quality of mind' required to cope and
13 deal with the problematic nature of sports coaching. However, incongruence between coaching
14 practice and scientific evidence has been acknowledged in the design and implementation of
15 such courses (Cushion, Ford et al., 2012). With these points in mind, the purpose of the present
16 study was to empirically examine potential course content, structure and delivery mechanisms
17 for a dedicated elite youth coach education programme in football.

18 By interviewing practicing coaches who had been educated to a high level, it was
19 thought that the findings of the present study offer ecologically valid insights into the process of
20 coach education. Specifically, the findings suggest that youth coach education programmes
21 should be underpinned by the principles of positive youth development and an athlete-centred
22 philosophy that concerns the holistic development of the individual as a person and as an athlete.
23 Within this structure, trainee coaches should be afforded the opportunity to explore their own
24 values, beliefs and behaviours in accord with the specific contexts in which they work so that
25 they are able to develop a more critical understanding of why they do what they do and how
26 they might make this more effective.

1 Whilst the skills, behaviours and knowledge recognised as important ‘content’ in this
2 study are not too distinct from those considered in traditional programmes it was highlighted
3 that focus should be placed on more context-specific application of this content. Similarly, Vella
4 et al. (2013) have suggested that in order to change coaching behaviour in the messy reality of
5 coaching practice coaches need to be given opportunities that allow the development of practice
6 related skills as well as the support required to transfer of knowledge into practice and into the
7 context in which the coach works. Indeed, coaches should be given the opportunity to explore
8 the utility of different knowledge and approaches to coaching whilst being mindful of the
9 situations in which they work (Mesquita et al., 2014). Emphasis should be placed, therefore, on
10 enhancing coach self-awareness in order to create a deeper understanding of their behaviours. It
11 is thought that such an approach to youth coach education would help to address the
12 ‘epistemological gap’ that is thought to exist between theory, practice and application
13 (Partington & Cushion, 2013). It is clear that coach education has to embrace new indicative
14 content and pedagogical approaches if we are to improve the standard of coaching in youth sport.
15 Youth coach education programmes should not prescribe what coaching should be like, for
16 instance (Galvan et al., 2012). Instead it should facilitate the development of the coach and their
17 practice through a combination of formal (e.g., seminar content delivery) and informal (e.g.,
18 reflective practice, mentoring, CoPs) approaches to learning that are embedded within the
19 complex reality of the coaching process.

20 Future research should focus on critical examinations of the potential impact on the
21 development of coach effectiveness that different approaches to coach education have. Indeed,
22 despite the support for these approaches acknowledged in this research there is little evidence to
23 detail the influence they have on coaching practice. If NGB’s are to thoroughly buy-in to and
24 invest in coach education reform they have to be sure that such change will result in positive
25 outcomes. It is the intention of the authors to use our findings to now develop and implement a
26 customised elite youth coach education programme. Future research attention should therefore

1 be afforded to the evaluation of programmes that adopt the content, structure, and delivery
2 mechanisms reported in the present study. Again, such attention will help to provide the
3 evidence that might be required for more sweeping reform to take place in the wider context of
4 coach education.

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12
13
14
15

16 **List of Figures**

17
18
19
20

Figure 1. Elite youth coach characteristics (philosophy and personality)

Figure 2. Skills and behaviours associated with an elite youth coach

21 *Figure 3.* Knowledge, understanding and application factors of the elite youth coach

22 *Figure 4.* Elite youth coach education programme structure

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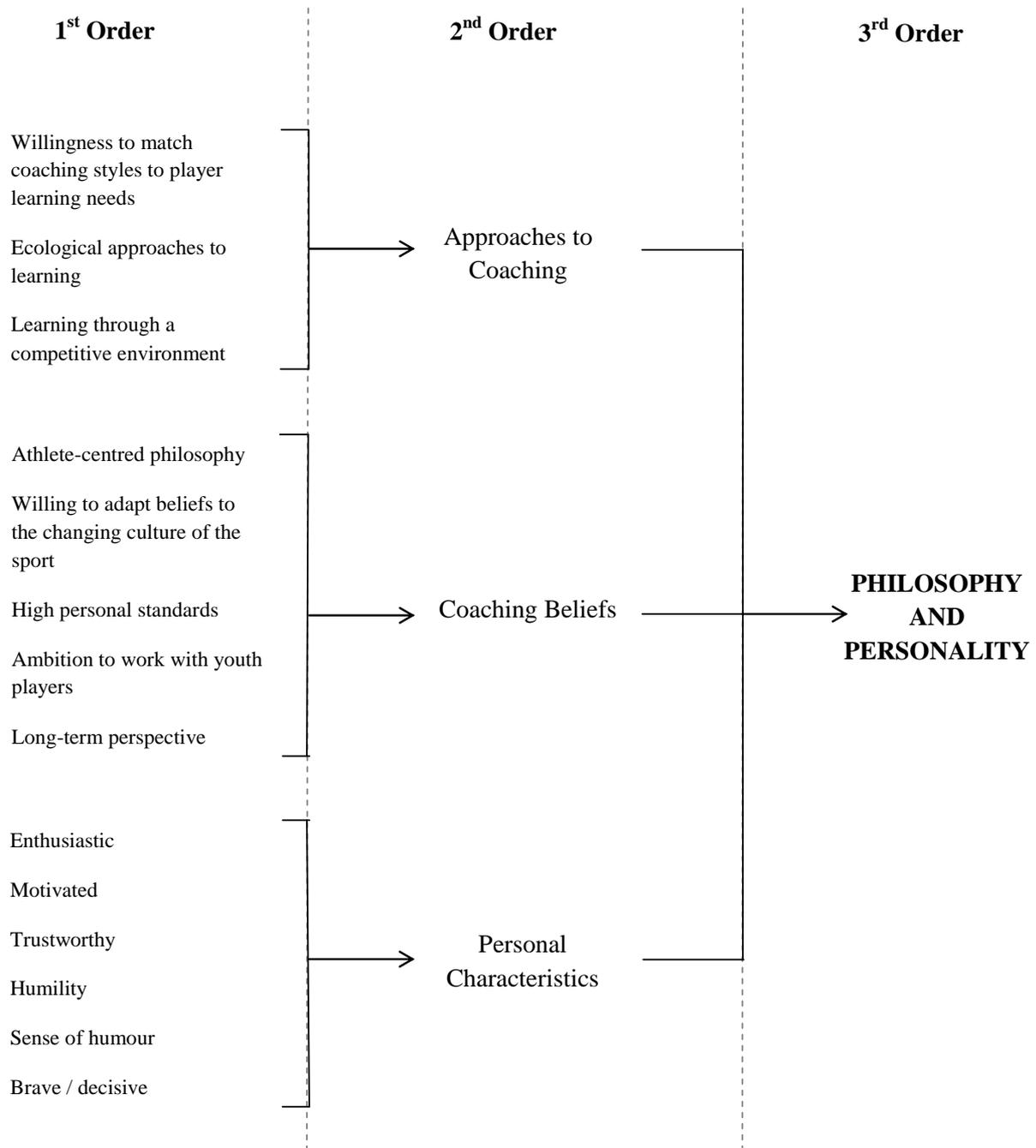


Figure 1. Elite youth coach characteristics (philosophy and personality)

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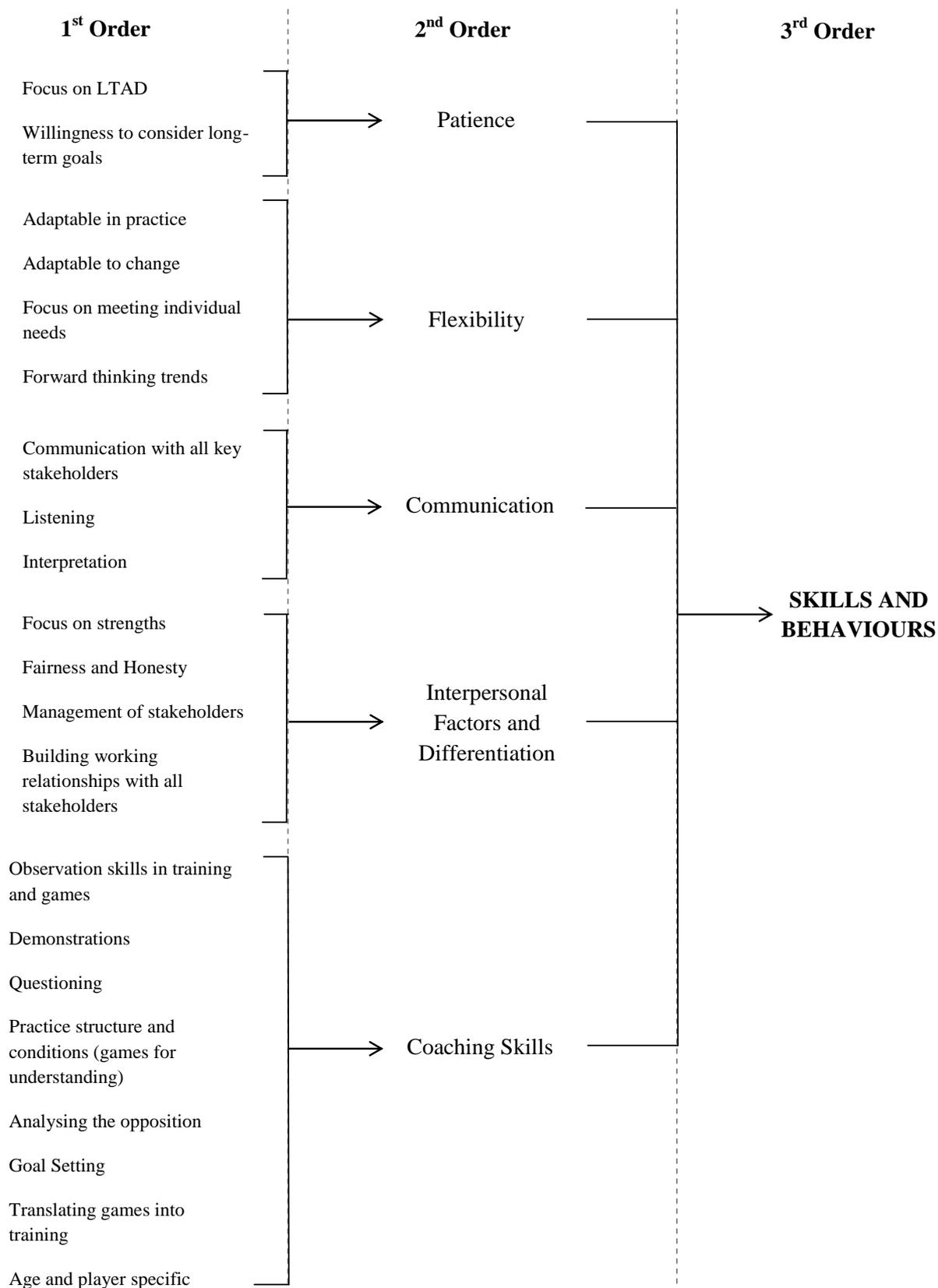


Figure 2. Skills and behaviours associated with an elite youth coach

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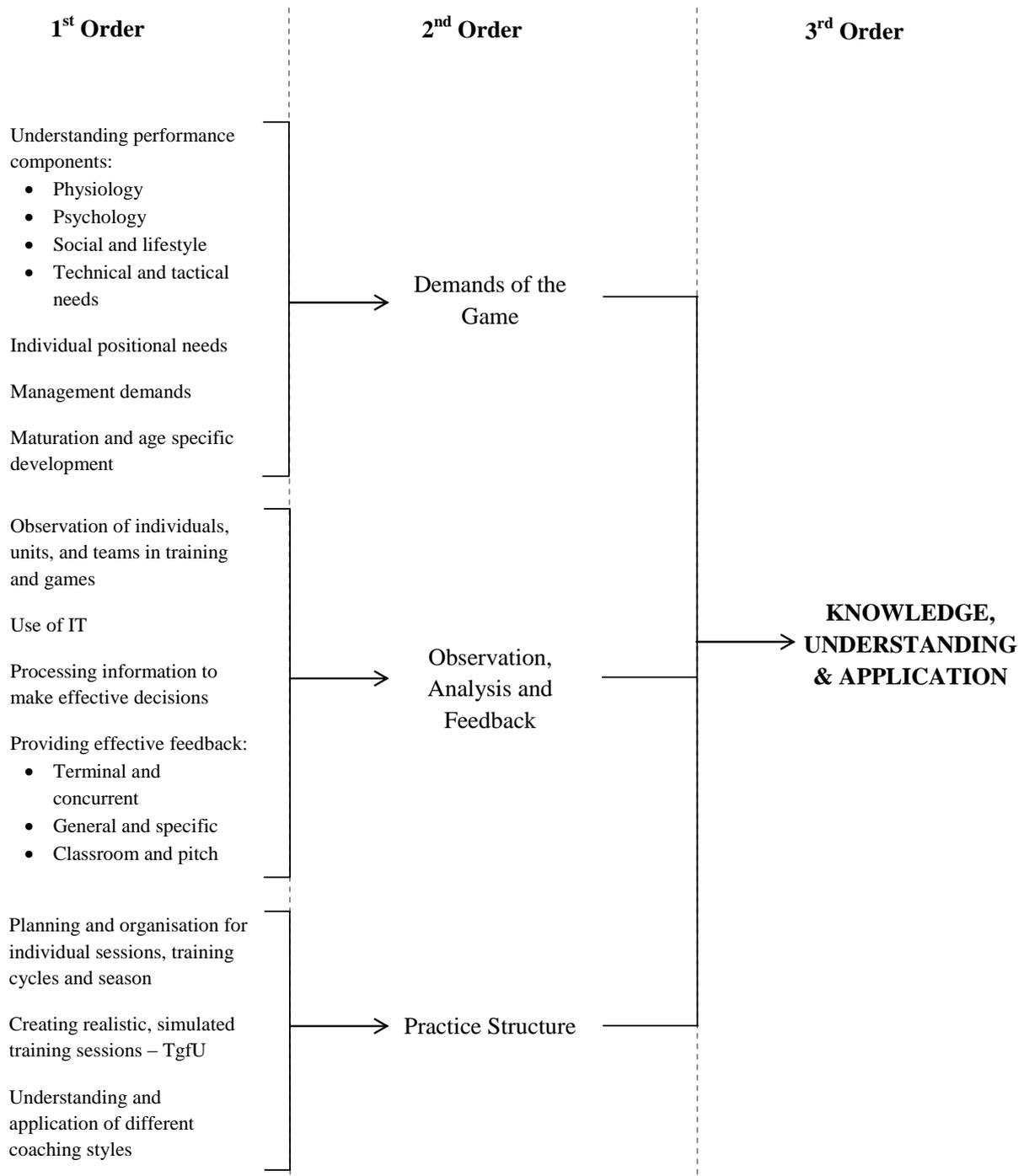


Figure 3. Knowledge, understanding and application factors of the elite youth coach

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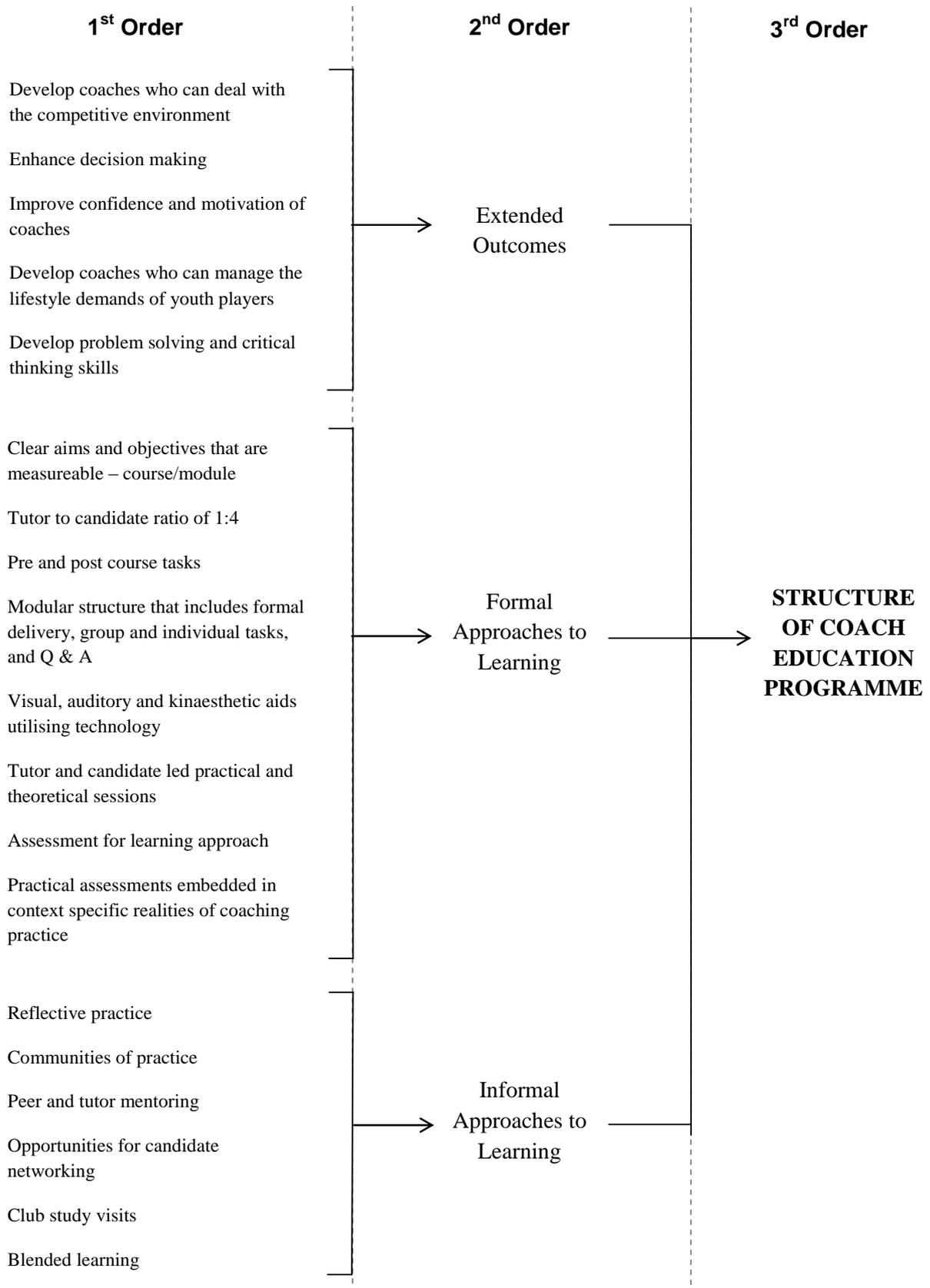


Figure 4. Elite youth coach education programme structure