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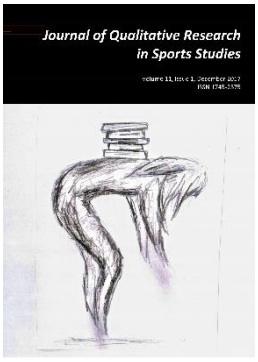

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What, when, how and why: Coaches' perceptions of coaching in junior rugby league

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Keywords: *Sports coaching, coach learning, coach education, rugby league*

Abstract

An increasing body of research has explored how sports coaches learn and develop. However, insight into the fundamental dimensions that underpin coach learning in grassroots and/or junior sport could be more comprehensive. Accordingly, the current study aimed to explore junior rugby league coaches' perceptions of the acquisition of new coaching knowledge, how this perceived learning is integrated with their coaching practice, and why they perceive different learning sources as an appropriate knowledge base from which to draw. Responses to an online survey, completed by practicing junior rugby league coaches (N = 111), were analysed descriptively and inductively. Findings suggest that informal learning sources were the most prevalent source of learning for coaches, although a rationale for such an emphasis was relatively unfounded. Coaches also appeared to find formal coach education useful; however, the content and suitability of current coaching qualifications when applied to junior modified versions of rugby league appears questionable.

Introduction

Rugby league

Rugby League is a full-body contact invasion game that is played across a multitude of formats including amateur, semi-professional and professional (Gabbett, 2000). In England, the sport's professional domestic competition commences from the Championship leagues and progresses to the Super League competition which is the pinnacle. Playing opportunities start at junior level with players eligible to participate within the community game from 6 years of age upwards. The community game caters for non-competitive and competitive formats including junior, youth, student, women, wheelchair, masters, touch and adult open age versions of the sport. The standard playing format of the game is a 13-a-side version, which is implemented from U12s through to elite international competition, with the U11s age groups and below playing several different modified versions. These modified versions range from a maximum 5-a-side format at U7s through to an 11-a-side format at U11s, all of which may be the first experience of the sport for a young player. Under the banner

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of Primary Rugby League, the modified formats are designed to cater to children's motivations with an inclusive, enjoyable, small-sided games format (Primary Rugby League, 2013). Once players progress out of the Primary Rugby League age groups, they play the standard 13-a-side format which is supported by the England Talent Pathway initiative (RFL, 2017). This pathway aims to aid the development of players and coaches within the 13-a-side format by providing access to a varied range of educational courses, workshops and developmental opportunities, whilst also delivering a structured pathway that can take a player from the age group of U12s community game through to the elite professional level. Opportunities include initiatives supported and delivered by professional clubs who are accredited as England Talent Development partners (RFL, 2015). These partners offer a range of programmes for youth and junior players that are designed to increase their development potential and identify young players for their 'elite' academy systems. Players are eligible for selection into the U16s Super League academy system once they participate within the U15s age group, and if successful can progress to the U19s Super League academy system prior to becoming a part-time or full-time professional or elite international player.

Like many sports in the UK, Rugby League requires coaches of junior, youth and open age teams to obtain an initial coaching qualification via a 'train and certify' approach (Trudel and Gilbert, 2006). These qualifications are usually sport specific, relevant to the level at which the coach will operate, and must be endorsed by the respective sport's national governing body before a coach can work in the field (Sports Coach UK, 2012). Accordingly, all rugby league coaches from U7s through to senior open age level are required to attain a minimum level of accreditation prior to registering as a coach. In the community game, this is the UK Coaching Certificate Level 2 qualification in rugby league (Sports Coach UK, 2012). Notably, coaches must achieve this qualification before they are permitted to lead any training or match day activities, irrespective of the age group they coach. Achieving this certification is said to demonstrate a coach has reached a minimum level of coaching competency and is armed with a suitable knowledge base from which they can underpin their practice.

Coach learning

Coaching has been defined as a decision-making process (Abraham, Collins, and Martindale, 2006), with expert coaches said to possess extensive sport-specific knowledge that underpins their ability to solve problems effectively (De Marco and McCullick, 1997). Acknowledged as the 'link between a coach's philosophy, beliefs about knowledge and learning, and demonstrated behaviour' (Grecic and Collins, 2013:153), a coach's epistemological chain should effectively shape what they coach, how they coach, and why they coach in the way that they do. Expert coaches will

search through a plethora of experiences and reflections, whilst utilising numerous skill-sets they have developed over a considerable time period. This effectively provides a 'key' with which they can intuitively unlock and explore their epistemological chain, drawing upon knowledge which allows them to formulate an opinion or action that has considerable worth in a highly complex environment. Importantly, however, novice coaches lack this depth of experience, with Grecic and Collins (2013) suggesting that when coaches hold a 'naive epistemology', it is more likely to be grounded in theoretical concepts and supported by non-experiential learning sources, such as formal learning programmes, text books and coaching manuals. On the other hand, a more sophisticated epistemology, associated with expert coaches, would include a more experiential knowledge base from which a coach can construct 'meaning' from their experiences. This is achieved through reflecting on experiences and contextualising them to support an existing opinion or form an alternative view that may challenge existing knowledge they may have. As such, 'expert' coaches are able to say, 'this is how I know what I know'.

Typically, coach learning can be presented as being formal, non-formal and informal in nature (Nelson, Cushion, and Potrac, 2006). Non-formal learning can be conceptualised as 'any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide select types of learning to particular subgroups in the population' (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974:8). These activities are often 'short-term, voluntary and have few if any prerequisites' (Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007:30), and include things like coaching workshops, seminars and conferences (Brennan, 1997). Formal learning, such as coach education courses, typically involve coaches being 'taught' a structured syllabus that promotes achievement, although the participants have little control over the content that is delivered (Mallett *et al.*, 2009). These programmes can be beneficial for new coaches as they provide a basis for the development of coaching skills, such as reflection (Stoszkowski and Collins, 2015), whilst outlining topics such as sport-specific skills or pedagogy (Araya, Bennie, and O'Connor, 2015). As such, they are said to provide an initial increase in coaching efficacy and confidence (Lemyre *et al.*, 2007; Malete and Feltz, 2000); however, research (e.g., Mallett *et al.*, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2010) suggests that formal coach education has little impact on coach learning and does not meet the needs of many sports coaches. Werthner, Culver and Trudel (2012) allude to the challenges for such programmes, including their ability to sufficiently motivate coaches and offer a content base that meets each coaches' individual learning needs. Furthermore, Collins, Burke, Martindale and Cruikshank (2015) suggests that many formal accreditation courses are overly focused on the modelling and assessing of generic coaching competencies, as opposed to being more focused on the development of the higher-level proficiencies and 'expertise' that is required for effective coaching practice.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, a body of research has also suggested that coaches have a preference for learning informally through a multitude of self-directed sources and experiences, including observing other coaches, previous sporting experiences, The Internet, practical coaching experience and informal mentoring (Abraham *et al.*, 2006; Bloom, Durand-Bush, Schinke and Salmela, 1998; Cushion, Armour, and Jones, 2003; Irwin, Hanton and Kerwin, 2004; Jones, Armour and Potrac, 2004; Stoszkowski and Collins, 2015). Stoszkowski and Collins (2014) also suggest that due to this apparent preference for informal learning, there is a growing interest in 'social constructivist' perspectives of coach learning, whereby an individual 'constructs knowledge through the direct experience of social practice and their interactions with others rather than as a direct result of a formal educational process' (p.775). Consequently, sports coaching is increasingly acknowledged as being highly complex in nature, and taking place in an environment where practitioners are required to transfer knowledge throughout a sociocultural process that is influenced by a multitude of variables (Cassidy, Jones and Potrac, 2004; Gilbert, 2007; Mallet, 2007). For example, the coaching process often involves interaction between individuals who differ in gender, class, values, experience and age (Potrac, Jones, and Armour, 2002). Consequently, Jones (2000) suggests that within the coaching environment, coaches may face a range of ethical, cultural, institutional and ideological constraints that have the potential to impact upon the coaching process. Furthermore, when a coaching environment involves junior players, coaches are required to navigate a diverse group of individuals at different stages of biological, psychological and social development (Weiss and Ferrer-Caja, 2002; Weiss and Stuntz, 2004; Smith, 2007), which immediately creates a multifaceted and challenging conundrum for even the most advanced and/or experienced coach. The coaching process, is therefore said to be disordered, dynamic and multifaceted in nature (Lyle, 2002).

Clearly, coaches have a significant role to fulfil within the development of the participants they engage with. However, we must remember that most coaches involved in the community game in rugby league are volunteers, who face numerous challenges within their coaching role that may consist of a host of potentially complex and conflicting variables. Importantly, all the identified learning sources have the potential to heavily influence how a coach constructs their epistemological beliefs, develops their coaching knowledge and delivers their coaching practice. Accordingly, there is a clear need to gain a deeper understanding of how junior rugby league coaches process and apply the knowledge gained through their learning experiences, especially that which is acquired away from formal learning environments. As such, identifying the what, when, how and why of that learning may provide opportunities for the sport of rugby league to support coaches in a manner that will allow them to acquire knowledge in a way that might provide more optimal learning opportunities for their participants (Slade, Webb, and Martin, 2015).

Method

Participants

Figure 1 provides the demographic information of the participants (N = 111) in the current study. The sample was derived from active junior rugby league coaches in the NWC Regional association at the age groups from U7s through to U12s. Participants displayed a range of qualifications, ages, previous participation levels and years of coaching experience across the 6 junior age group categories.

Figure 1. Demographic details of participants

Gender	**Number of Coaches**		**Number of Coaches**	**Number of coaches who did not answer**
Male	66	Female	1	44
Age Range				
18 or less	0	19-29	3	44
30-44	51	45-60	13	
60 or more	0			
Level as a participant of the sport coached				
Never played	15	U16 or below	16	8
U16 Academy	2	U18 Youth	3	
U19 Academy	5	Open Age	56	
Professional	5	Elite International	1	
Number of years coaching experience				
0-2 Years	34	3-5 Years	37	1
6-9 Years	18	10 or more years	21	
Age group coached				
U7	24	U8	21	11
U9	21	U10	17	
U11	23	U12	30	
Current level of qualification				
Not qualified	11	UKCC L1	18	4
UKCC L2	73	UKCC L3	5	
UKCC L4	0			
Has a child playing in the team they coach				
No	22	Yes - Son	76	11
Yes - Daughter	2			

Note: Data in age group coached: Results show multiple age groups being coached by survey participants

They were predominantly male (N = 66), with only 1 female coach completing the survey, although 44 participants did not identify their age or gender. The lack of demographic data for these participants appears a result of the it being requested in the latter stages of the survey. The majority of participants were aged between 30-44 years (N = 51), had participated at Open Age level as a player (N = 56), were qualified to UKCC Level 2 standard (N = 73) and had a child playing (N = 78) in the team that they coached.

Instrument

Following a review of eminent coaching literature (cf. Cushion *et al.,* 2010) and consideration of the first author's coaching experiences within rugby league, which span some 23 years, an internet based survey was designed to provide insight into coaches' motives for coaching, how they perceive they acquire coaching knowledge, the sources of knowledge they prefer and how they perceive that knowledge influences their coaching practice. A pilot survey was reviewed for face and content validity (Dillman, 2000) by the second author, an experienced university lecturer and researcher with a PhD in sports coaching. This process resulted in six modifications, with three items removed and three new items included. The pilot survey was then circulated via e-mail to a small sample of rugby league coaches (N = 6) to ascertain if it was comprehensible throughout and to identify any areas of ambiguity. The pilot survey took between 12 and 25 minutes to complete. This process resulted in the revision of 2 questions. The final survey was comprised of 30 items, 13 of which were closed-answer questions, 12 of which were open-ended questions, 3 requiring a multiple-choice response questions, and 2 requiring a list of items to be ranked.

Procedure

Prior to data collection, the study received ethical approval. Using convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996), a direct link to the online survey which was created using www.surveymonkey.com was promoted and shared on the North-West Counties U7-U12s regional league website and associated Facebook and Twitter social media pages. Each portal displayed a clear explanation of the study aims and objectives and participant confidentiality and anonymity. The survey home page also displayed the aforementioned information as well as stating that there were no right or wrong answers and that all answers would be anonymous and confidential. Participants were told they had the option to withdraw at any point and/or decline the opportunity to complete the survey. Prior to starting, the survey participants were notified that by 'clicking' continue they would provide their consent for the information they supplied to be used for the purposes of the study as previously advised. The data collection process ran for 5 weeks during November and December in 2016, after which time the web link to the survey was deactivated.

Data analysis

Survey responses were downloaded from the online portal to individual Microsoft Excel 2010 spreadsheets for further analysis. Closed, multiple response and ranked response questions were calculated in order to provide percentages and/or or frequencies. Open-ended questions generated a varied degree of responses, ranging from short statements (e.g., 'too harsh on my son', 'getting kids to listen properly' and 'not enough time') to longer, more elaborate responses (e.g., 'Adapting the drills to suit the young age of the players, as well as being able to communicate the knowledge in the best way for the kids to understand'). These open-ended responses were subjected to an inductive content analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) by the first author. During this process, the answers to questions were treated as stand-alone meaning units, unless they contained more than one self-definable point (e.g., 'Discussion with another coach at the club and looking at YouTube'), in which case they were separated accordingly. Meaning units were labelled and colour coded to clearly identify the number of meaning units associated with each response, before being compared for similarities and organised into raw data themes. In line with recommendations of Cote, Salmela, Baria and Russell (1993), the analysis then proceeded to the creation of larger and more general lower and higher order themes in a higher order concept. This process allowed for the constant refinement of the results until theoretical saturation occurred (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), as well as enabling the quantification of response frequency (Vergeer and Lyle, 2007).

In an attempt to increase trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the first author was supported throughout the process by the second author, who was familiar with the aims of the study. During this process, both parties reviewed and discussed the raw data and higher order themes, refining and adjusting labels and categories where necessary to until a mutual consensus that reflected both parties' agreement with the final analysis was reached.

Results and discussion

All percentages displayed in the following sections refer to the percentage of the meaning units collated for each theme unless otherwise stated. Of the participants who engaged in this study (N = 111), 78 indicated that they had a child or children playing in the team that they were coaching, with 88 indicating they had also participated in rugby league as a player. Notably, the most significant level of participation as a player (N = 56) was acknowledged as being at open age level, with 51 participants recognised as being between the ages of 30-44 years of age. In line with the findings of Graham, Dixon and Hazel-Swann (2016), who highlighted the number of adults who coach their own, and/or closely related, children within community sport, the most predominant factor for coaches' involvement in coaching rugby league was having a child playing the sport (see Figure 2, 43.47%).

Figure 2. Why/how did you get into coaching junior rugby league?

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Child involved Peer influence	60 7	(43.47) (5.07)	Family/Peers	67	(48.54)
Development of community sport Volunteering Junior Development	18 17 2	(13.04) (12.31) (1.44)	Altruism	37	(26.79)
Ex-Player	26	(18.84)	Ex-Player	26	(18.84)
Love of sport/coaching	8	(5.79)	Love of sport/coaching	8	(5.79)

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

Notably, the second most commonly cited factor was a coach's prior association in the sport as a player (18.84%). Interestingly, the theme of junior development, whilst represented, had the lowest number of meaning units (1.44%). The most common factors associated with the junior rugby league coaches in the current study were that they are male, aged between 30-44 years of age, likely to be currently playing or have recently finished playing rugby league at open age level, and have an association to a child who they are currently coaching as a junior rugby league player.

A significant percentage of respondents indicated they had been coaching for 5 years or less (64.50%) (see Figure 3), with the highest percentage (39.30%) only having completed their most recent coaching qualification in the previous 12 months (see Figure 4). As such, a considerable number of the participating coaches appear to have had limited coaching experience and minimal exposure to any additional formal or non-formal learning opportunities. Consequently, we might assume that applying knowledge to their coaching practice might be constructed as much from social experiences, personal values or beliefs (Tusting and Barton, 2006) as it is from a sport related context, with the most likely primary source of sport specific knowledge being their recent coaching course and its associated resources. Interestingly, the coaches predominantly relayed a positive view of their recent experiences on formal coach education courses, with 41.6% of respondents rating their most recent course as useful, and 23.4% as very useful. 3.9% of respondents perceived their recent course to be useless, and 7.8% of little use (see Figure 5). Where the responses resulted in a rating of 'useless', or 'of little use', it became apparent that a theme of 'not meeting the coaches' needs' (9.09%, see Figure 6) held some association. Specific examples highlighted that the course would 'be useful the older the age groups get, not so much for u7' and 'I feel the qualification is highly based on the older age groups'. Other pertinent feedback reflected concerns around the requirement for all coaches to be UKCC Level 2 qualified, regardless of the level at which they participate e.g., 'I come from a sporting background and I felt the Level 1 course is not as relevant or useful

enough as it should be because the RFL want everyone to be level 2 affiliated regardless of what age group they coach'.

Figure 3. How long have you been coaching?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
0 – 2 Years	30.9%	34
3 – 5 Years	33.6%	37
6 – 9 Years	16.4%	18
10 or more Years	19.1%	21
	Answered Question	**110**
	Skipped Question	**1**

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to participant responses collated during data analysis.

Figure 4. When did you complete your most recent coaching qualification?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Within the last 12 months	39.3%	42
1 – 2 Years	25.2%	27
3 – 5 Years	24.3%	26
6 – 9 Years	6.5%	7
10 Years or more	4.7%	5
	Answered Question	**107**
	Skipped Question	**4**

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to participant responses collated during data analysis.

Figure 5. How useful would you rate the most recent coaching course you attended when attaining your coaching qualification?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Useless	3.9%	3
Of little use	7.8%	6
Moderately useful	23.4%	18
Useful	41.6%	32
Very useful	23.4%	18
	Answered Question	**77**
	Skipped Question	**34**

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to participant responses collated during data analysis.

Figure 6. Please briefly expand on why you have answered question 15 the way you have. (Q15 - How useful would you rate the most recent coaching course you attended when attaining your coaching qualification?)

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Overall course content	27	(30.68)	Positive impact on learning	59	(67.04)
Assisted my development as a coach	10	(11.36)			
Specific course content	8	(9.09)			
Course delivery	6	(6.81)			
Self-reflection	3	(3.40)			
Observational learning	3	(3.40)			
Networking opportunity	2	(2.27)			
Did not meet the coach's needs	8	(9.09)	Of limited value	17	(19.31)
Not completed or recently completed course	4	(4.54)			
Did not enhance knowledge	3	(3.40)			
Repeat course	2	(2.27)			
Coaching resources	5	(5.68)	Associated benefits	7	(7.95)
Obtained qualification	2	(2.27)			
Lack of time	2	(2.27)	Logistical factors	5	(5.68)
Venue	2	(2.27)			
Financial cost	1	(1.13)			

Note: Numbers and % relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

To provide clarity on the previous point, in line with the requirements set out by the governing body for rugby league (RFL, 2013), 78 of the participants were appropriately qualified to UKCC Level 2, thus qualifying them to lead any training or match day activity (RFL, 2013). It is important to consider the structure of rugby league between the U7s and U12s age groups, as it is only the U12s age group and above that participate in the 13-a-side standard version of rugby league, for which UKCC Level 2 is the recognised coaching qualification. However, the current study extended across six age groups and results suggest that the activity of the participating coaches was evenly distributed, with some coaches applying their practice across multiple age ranges (see Figure 1). All participants who held a UKCC Level 2 coaching qualification and apply their practice at the five age groups below U12s face constant year on year change to the rules and playing format under the modified games structure (Primary Rugby League, 2013). Therefore, the needs of both the coach and player may be vastly different to that of those participating at the age of U12s and above. The constant revision of the playing format below U11s is also combined with the continual change in biological, psychological and social developmental needs of young players (Weiss and Ferrer-Caja, 2002; Weiss and Stuntz, 2004; Smith, 2007) that will also be present and provide further challenges during that period.

The most prominent level of playing experience for coaches was at the open age level (N = 56, see Figure 1). Whilst previous experience as a player has been said to be advantageous from a coaching perspective (Irwin *et al.*, 2004), many participants within the current study gained that experience playing the standard 13-a-side version of rugby league within a competitive format. Therefore, it is possible that participating coaches had limited knowledge in relation to the rules, format and non-competitive ethos of the modified games programme. Notably, coaching knowledge was the strongest theme (20.58%, see Figure 7) to emerge when coaches stated what they thought their biggest weakness was. Some responses associated with this theme support our earlier concerns surrounding the disparity between the playing formats and the implications of coaching players who were playing a modified games version.

Figure 7. What do you feel is your biggest weakness as a coach and why?

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Coaching knowledge	21	(20.58)	Pedagogy	33	(32.34)
Communication	5	(4.90)			
Participant management	5	(4.90)			
Age/Stage appropriate	2	(1.96)			
Organisation skills	9	(8.82)	Personal Factors	26	(25.48)
Lack of experience	5	(4.90)			
Control of emotions	5	(4.90)			
Confidence	3	(2.94)			
Indecision	2	(1.96)			
Age	1	(0.98)			
Mobility	1	(0.98)			
Lack of time	11	(10.78)	Managing external pressures	21	(20.58)
Parental management	5	(4.90)			
Lack of additional support	3	(2.94)			
Associated admin	2	(1.96)			
Level of expectation	11	(10.78)	Pressure of performance	14	(13.72)
Match day related	3	(2.94)			
Not applicable/No weakness	6	(5.88)	Unawareness	8	(7.84)
Don't know	2	(1.96)			

Note: Numbers and % relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

For example, coaches who expressed concerns about their coaching knowledge reflected the issues they had in adapting their existing knowledge and practice to suit the younger age groups, with concerns around the delivery of 'drills' noted as a prominent factor i.e., one coach said they found it difficult when 'adapting the drills to suit the young age of the players, as well as being able to communicate the knowledge in the best way for the kids to understand.' Similarly, another coach stated that they lacked 'experience of drills' and 'balancing the coaching sessions so both the more advanced players and lesser ability players get the same out of the same drill' was a concern.

In terms of the Level 2 qualification itself, coaches indicated that the 'overall course content' represented the most positive impact on their learning (30.68%, see Figure 6), with responses from coaches primarily focused on activity described as training methods or training drills. Interestingly, coaches also indicated that 'warm up and drills' (29.41%, see Figure 8) were used with the highest frequency in their coaching practice following completion of the course.

Figure 8. Do you still use the information, experiences and ideas you acquired from your coaching course to guide your coaching practice? If yes, can you give a recent example of something you took from the course that you have put into practice?

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Warm up and drills	20	(29.41)	Pedagogy	50	(73.52)
Skill Development	10	(14.70)			
Session delivery	8	(11.76)			
Games based practices	6	(8.82)			
Questioning and feedback	4	(5.88)			
Safe areas	1	(1.47)			
Developing PCDE's	1	(1.47)			
Session planning	8	(11.76)	Planning skills	8	(11.76)
Access to other coaching resources	7	(10.29)	Learning resources	7	(10.29)
Child Welfare	1	(1.47)	Safeguarding	1	(1.47)
Coaching Philosophy	1	(1.47)	Coaching Philosophy	1	(1.47)
Reflection on sessions	1	(1.47)	Reflection	1	(1.47)

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

The data also suggest that coaches felt it would be most beneficial to know more about 'drills and techniques' if they are to improve as a coach (22.61%, see Figure 9), with technical and tactical knowledge rated second highest (14.28%, see Figure 9) within the most prevalent higher order theme of 'pedagogy', which suggests coaches have a desire to place emphasis on these elements within their practice. Perhaps worryingly, 13.09% (see Figure 9) were 'not sure' what would be most beneficial for them to know more about.

A consistent reference to 'drills' appeared across four significant elements within the study, namely; what coaches perceive as their biggest weakness, why coaches rate the course as useful or very useful, what coaches take from the course and apply in their coaching practice, and what coaches feel they need to know more about if they are to improve as a coach. Therefore, it seems that coaches associate the use of 'drills' with the provision of effective coaching practice.

Figure 9. State the thing you feel would be most beneficial to know more about if you are to improve as a coach?

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Drills and techniques Technical/Tactical Knowledge BioPsychoSocial Development Behavioural management – players Session planning Communication skills Equality Reflection	19 12 8 3 2 2 1 1	(22.61) (14.28) (9.52) (3.57) (2.38) (2.38) (1.19) (1.19)	Pedagogy	47	(55.95)
Coach education Mentoring Regular coaching resource Coaching pathway Refereeing qualification	7 3 3 2 1	(8.33) (3.57) (3.57) (2.38) (1.19)	Further support Pre/Post qualification	16	(19.04)
Not sure	11	(13.09)	Not sure	11	(13.09)
Parental management Performance expectation	3 2	(3.57) (2.38)	Managing external influences	5	(5.95)
Understanding the professional environment	3	(3.57)	Understanding the professional environment	3	(3.57)
Increasing player participation Parental/Volunteer inclusion	1 1	(1.19) (1.19)	Growing participation	2	(2.38)

Note: Numbers and percentages relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

However, we must question the relevance of such practice in an environment where the format is designed around small-sided games, decision making, skill development and enjoyment. Considering this, it is not unreasonable to assume that where coaches place a consistent emphasis on such a specific factor within their coaching practice, they may not meet the needs of the participant or apply practice that reflects the ethos associated with the Primary Rugby League format. Furthermore, it demonstrates the potential for perhaps misguided influences to penetrate the epistemological chain of coaches who may, at that stage, still hold a naive perspective (Grecic and Collins, 2013). It is also concerning to note that the UKCC Level 2 is viewed as the standard requirement for the sport, and is the single entity which enables a coach to lead any activity within both a standard and modified games environment. Additionally, the UKCC Level 2 qualification may foster the potential for such a naïve epistemological perspective to remain and even predominate among newly qualified coaches, given the qualification may not meet the needs of the modified games participants that they go on to coach. Subsequently, inexperienced coaches may view coaching as a process, based on formal experiences and qualifications, that simply allows a coach to deliver organised, replication and repetition of activities at all levels,

irrespective of the level of sport specific and appropriate pedagogical rationale with which it is be underpinned.

In line with previous research (e.g., Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Stoszkowski and Collins, 2015), coaches in the current study exhibited a clear preference for informal learning opportunities (89.53%), with formal (4.65%) and non-formal experiences (5.81%, see Figure 10) valued far less.

Figure 10. Which of the sources in question 21 would you say you find the most useful and why? (Q21 - How useful do you find the following sources for acquiring knowledge to help you develop as a coach?)

Lower Order Themes	**No.**	**(%)**	**Higher Order Themes**	**No.**	**(%)**	**Umbrella Theme**	**No.**	**(%)**
Observing other coaches Mentoring from other coaches Player feedback Other coaches' views Ex-Players Feedback	12 11 6 4 1 1	(13.95) (12.79) (6.97) (4.65) (1.16) (1.16)	Peers	35	(40.69)		77	(89.53)
Video/DVD footage YouTube Online coaching resources Coaching websites/apps Books/Literature Social media Discussion board – Online	9 8 3 3 3 2 1	(10.46) (9.30) (3.48) (3.48) (3.48) (2.32) (1.16)	Perceived coaching resources	29	(33.72)	Informal learning		
Practical experience Experience Playing experience Sport specific knowledge	8 3 1 1	(9.30) (3.48) (1.16) (1.16)	Existing knowledge and experiences	13	(15.11)			
CPD Workshops	5	(5.81)	CPD Workshops	5	(5.81)	Nonformal learning	5	(5.81)
Coaching qualifications	4	(4.65)	NGB Coach Education	4	(4.65)	Formal learning	4	(4.65)

Note: Numbers and % relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

For example, coaches perceived other coaches and peers as the most useful source of learning (37.50%, see Figure 11) and acquiring new knowledge (Observing other coaches, 13.95%; Mentoring from other coaches; 12.79%, see Figure 10). Interestingly, there was a lack of clarity surrounding 'why' coaches perceived interactions with other coaches to be so valuable.

Figure 11. What factor do you feel has been most influential on your development as a coach and why do you hold that view?

Lower Order Themes	No.	(%)	Higher Order Themes	No.	(%)
Coaches and peers	36	(37.50)	Community club members	44	(45.83)
Players/Team	6	(6.25)			
Parental support	2	(2.08)			
Desire to learn and develop	21	(21.87)	Developmental ethos	34	(35.40)
Enjoyment	9	(9.37)			
Club/Coaching ethos	4	(4.16)			
Additional CPD	6	(6.25)	Education and resources	11	(11.45)
Coaching Course	4	(4.16)			
Coaching resources	1	(1.04)			
Playing experience	2	(2.08)	Sport Specific Experience	4	(4.16)
Practical experience	2	(2.08)			
People skills	2	(2.08)	People skills	2	(2.08)
Love of the sport	1	(1.04)	Love of the sport	1	(1.04)

Note: Numbers and % relate to stand-alone meaning units generated during data analysis.

Responses formed a broad general theme that suggested coaches observed other coaches to see what they did and what methods they used, then would copy what they saw. Importantly, Stoszkowski and Collins (2014) refer to the varying agendas and competing egos of more experienced coaches along with several other potentially contradictory influences that may pressure new or inexperienced coaches to act or behave in certain ways, which may result in coaches conforming to stereotypes in order to secure the approval of their peers. Consequently, we must also consider that new or inexperienced coaches will likely view a broad range of coaching styles, methods and session content when observing other coaches, and are as likely to observe poor coaching practice as much as they are good (Cushion *et al.*, 2003). In view of these findings, it is important to understand the implications for new or inexperienced coaches when placing such high value on informal learning sources, particularly when they are based on the observation of other coaches. Similarly, we must consider the earlier discussion surrounding the emphasis placed on formal qualifications and their potential failure in meeting the needs of all coaches or their participants and consider what impact this may have on coaches who may observe (and then copy) more advanced or experienced coaches. It is quite possible for those coaches perceived as being of higher status to demonstrate inappropriate coaching

behaviours, resulting in the potential for coaches to misconstrue knowledge as being valuable when obtained from a naive epistemological perspective.

Conclusion

The current study raises questions regarding the suitability of the UKCC Level 2 qualification for junior rugby league coaches who operate under the modified games format. Significantly, coaches appear to place a consistent emphasis on 'drills' type practices as an element they feel is associated with their weakness as a coach, a reason they find formal coach education useful, something they utilise most in their coaching environment and something that they perceive they need to know more about. The current study also suggests that, in line with previous research (e.g. Bloom *et al.*, 1998; Cushion *et al.*, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Stoszkowski and Collins, 2015), informal learning sources are the most prevalent source of learning for junior rugby league coaches and the source they place most value on. However, the rationale behind such an emphasis is vague and relatively unfounded and holds the potential to provide inappropriate learning outcomes for coaches and their participants. Consequently, it is possible for a cycle of learning to occur from which we can attribute a host of negative or inappropriate experiences that are a result of a combination of formal and informal learning opportunities. We could assume that such a cycle ensues due to the apparent lack of value coaches perceive formal coaching qualifications to hold outside of the entitlement it provides for them to become a coach (Piggott, 2012). If this is the case, then we must ask the question, why? One view may revolve around the body of research (Mallett *et al.*, 2009; Cushion *et al.*, 2010; Werthner *et al.*, 2012) that suggests coach education programmes do not meet coaches' needs and are often inappropriately structured and therefore dismissed by coaches, hence their desire to find other learning sources. Ironically, those sources include their peers who have followed the same or a similar process, but are now sought out and perceived as one of the most appropriate sources from which to learn!

Accordingly, we need to better understand why coaches are considered to be competent once qualified, given their reluctance to accept formal learning as being a valuable learning opportunity (Cushion, 2011). Future research should also review the appropriateness of the UKCC Level 2 qualification when applied to a modified games format in junior rugby league. Furthermore, it may be advantageous to gain a much better understanding of how existing coaches currently rationalise the knowledge they have acquired from the UKCC level 2 course and apply it within their practice when coaching in a modified games environment. We may then begin to better understand the impact of the UKCC Level 2 qualification on coaches that operate within the modified games environment. In addition, such an approach may assist in developing a formal model that more appropriately qualifies junior coaches and underpins the development of expertise more suited to a modified games programme.

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Reviewer Comments

The authors give an insight into the views of coaches within the sport of rugby league at the junior level, and as such must be commended in their attempts to broaden our knowledge and understanding of an important element of this under-researched sport. The paper provides a sound platform on which to further explore coach preparation and may provide an evidence base with which to enhance this provision in the future - by listening to and responding to recipients of coach education within the sport. The conclusion within the paper is insightful and indicates further work would be of benefit in eliciting the reasons for coach behaviour. It would be interesting to discover the reasons for coaches' limited value of a formal coaching strategy. In this respect we may uncover what it is that coaches feel is missing from existing provision and what they seek to find through informal means: is this behaviour purely knowledge seeking in its' motivation or is there more that these people seek?