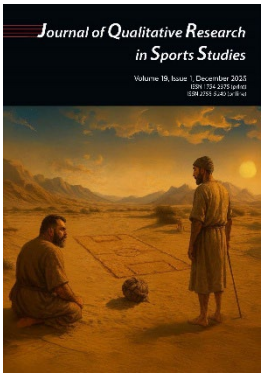
Published by:
Social Inquiry Press: University of Lancashire, Preston, UK.
Date Accepted for Publication: 1st November 2025



Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies

Volume 19, Issue 1, December 2025

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ISSNs: 1754-2375 [print] 2755-5240 [online]
ISBN: 978-1-0683365-1-5 (320 pages)
JQRSS Article No: 4/10-19-1-2025-PG[135]-197

To cite this article:
Olsson, C. (2025) Examining the impact of coach mentoring in football. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies,* 19, 1, 151-172.

URL link to this article:
https://www.academia.edu/145529099/Cliff_Olsson_2025_Examining_the_impact_of_coach_mentoring_in_football_Journal_of_Qualitative_Research_in_Sports_Studies_19_1_151_172

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Examining the impact of coach mentoring in football

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Keywords: *football, mentoring, expertise, epistemology, informal, coach education*

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of the Football Association's (hereafter FA) mentoring programme on coaching expertise. Data was collected through an online survey targeted purposefully at mentors and mentees engaged in the FA mentoring programme. Data was analysed using t-tests to establish a level of coherence between mentors and mentees re: their perceptions on the aims and processes of developing coaching expertise through mentoring. Results showed that there were inconsistencies and confusion with regards to the aims and processes of mentoring. Notably, these findings appeared to emanate from an epistemological gap between the programme's aims, beliefs, knowledge, and actions of the mentors and mentees, findings which may undermine the goals of mentoring.

Introduction

The training and development of coaches through formal coach education programmes has been seen as essential to develop and sustain an educated and skilled coaching workforce (Lyle and Cushion, 2017; Piggott, 2012). Such courses have taken a 'train and certify' approach to learning where the programme is directed by the coach educator who directs what is learnt and it is assumed that coaches learn and apply the concepts and skills in the context they work (Stoszkowski and Collins, 2014). However, formal coach education programmes have often drawn criticism from coaches who do not recognise or value the process. Their perceptions are reported as seeing this route as inadequate preparation for the realities and complexities of coaching practice (Cushion, 2014). Consequently, coaches have resisted such formal educational opportunities, preferring to engage with informal and non-formal learning experiences that include drawing upon previous coaching experiences, observations and engagement with other coaches and possibly using social media to inform their practice (Griffiths and Armour, 2013; Leeder and Cushion, 2019). As a result, however, coach development can become haphazard and lacking a coherent approach, often resulting in coaches not having the critical insights to guide effective practice (Bailey, Jones and Allison, 2019). In response, and to bridge the gap between formal, non-formal and informal learning, a number

of National Governing Bodies have implemented mentoring programmes as a pedagogical tool to support in-situ contextual coach development (Griffiths and Armour, 2012; Leeder and Cushion, 2019).

Typically, mentoring has been conceptualised as a one-dimensional relationship where the more experienced practitioner shares knowledge with a less experienced mentee (Jones, Harris and Miles, 2009; Nash and McQuade, 2014). This approach is not without its problems; although it may be attractive to present mentoring in such simple terms of sharing or providing knowledge to a less experienced mentee, research suggests that mentoring may take a more dynamic and reciprocal relationship (McQuade, Davis and Nash, 2015). Mentoring relationships are either formal or informal in nature with informal mentoring developing in an ad hoc fashion and growing over a period of time. In contrast, formal mentoring relationships occur within formal structured environments with a specific purpose to increase consistency and effectiveness (Leeder and Cushion, 2019, Nash and McQuade, 2014; Wright and Smith, 2000).

A number of governing bodies have been drawn toward employing formal mentoring programmes to develop the innovative and creative coaches needed. Indeed, those engaged in such programmes may report positive outcomes. More critically, however, recent research has identified and discussed a number of issues that may undermine the impact of such mentoring programmes (Bailey *et al.,* 2019; Bloom, 2013; Cushion, 2014; Leeder and Cushions, 2019). For example, research by Sawiuk, Taylor and Groom (2018) found that formal mentor programmes were often driven by wider agendas such as meeting demographic targets, demonstrating the success of current formal coach education programmes, or securing longer term funding objectives. Consequently, there is a danger that such programmes may serve the interests or longer-term institutional agendas of the governing body instead of addressing the needs of individual coach mentees. Beyond the wider institutional agendas that may limit the impact of mentoring programmes, Cushion (2014) has also pointed out that mentoring programmes remain uneven in terms of quality of outcomes, are uncritical in style and can tend to simply reproduce and reinforce existing cultures and practices. Supporting this final point, evidence suggests that formal mentor programmes espouse a philosophy that promotes a standard approach to coaching practice. That is, one that appears arbitrary in approach and reinforces the governing body belief of what good coaching is by discouraging other approaches (Leeder and Cushion, 2019). To reinforce these pejorative approaches, mentors are appointed and trained on the basis of being able to reinforce and lead mentee coaches toward uncritically accepting what is presented as the ways of improving their practice (Bailey *et al*., 2019; Leeder and Cushion, 2019).

Clearly, this ‘formal’ or traditional approach utilises and reinforces the mentors’ position of power to promote what is viewed as ‘good coaching’ (Leeder and

Cushion, 2019). Although this approach may be justified on the grounds that it encourages the mentee coaches to conform and accept the prevailing practices of the governing body, the reality is that it may constrain and limit the coach's ability to explore and develop their practice. This agrees with Armour's (2015) assertion that traditional approaches consider the mentee to be someone that needs to be guided within relatively prescribed structures that reflect the needs of the governing body rather than addressing the pedagogical needs of the mentee coach. As Bailey *et al*. (2019) points out, the role of the mentor should be to develop and encourage the mentee coach to take greater responsibility and control of their learning and development; an approach described by Collins and colleagues as being more expertise driven (Collins, Burke, Martindale and Cruickshank, 2015). Whilst the mentor can help the mentee coach identify and select relevant sources of knowledge to support their development, ultimately the key is to support the mentee coach develop the ability to identify and evaluate new sources of knowledge and reflect critically upon new experience. In this regard, Bailey *et al*. (2019) is correct to assert that mentors should pay greater attention to developing cognitive rather than technical skills of the mentee coaches.

Importantly, this approach to promote independence and autonomy in coaching would require a culture change in evaluation systems, placing greater emphasis on the expertise of the coach to make decisions rather than relying on the reproduction of competency-based, prescribed behaviour (Collins *et al*., 2015). As Cushion *et al*. (2015) argue, mentors should systematically challenge coaches to reflect upon existing practice and consider alternative approaches, leading mentees to develop their own coaching expertise (Nash, Martindale, Collins and Martindale, 2012).

Such an approach is not without its challenges, as has already been identified in some literature. For example, Griffiths and Armour (2012) highlighted the habitus of the mentee coach as a powerful filter through which mentoring is perceived and how new knowledge may be consumed or discarded. Importantly, they found that learning interactions between mentors and mentees were often unfulfilling and unsustainable, resulting in mentoring dissonance between mentor and mentee. In this regard it can be contended that the basis of mentoring dissonance between mentor and mentee is often the result of an epistemological gap (Light, 2008) which undermines the learning relationship, leaving mentors frustrated and mentees disillusioned. To emphasise this point, Olsson, Cruickshank and Collins (2017) argued that mentors need to target and develop mentees' epistemology, in other words, their beliefs on the acquisition, evolution and scope of knowledge. More specifically, Olsson *et al*. (2017) drew on prior work by Perry (1970) and Schommer-Aiken and Easter (2009), to describe how a coach needs to progress from a naïve towards a sophisticated epistemology to develop appropriately. To explain, a coach who holds a naïve epistemology believes that coaching knowledge is clear, simple,

unchanging, handed down by authorities, and learned quickly or not at all. As such, they tend to coach in a *'*black and white*'* or *'*copy and paste*'* manner. In contrast, a coach with a sophisticated epistemology believes that coaching knowledge is complex, tentative, uncertain, self-constructed, and developed via reasoning over a sustained period of time. Accordingly, they tend to coach in a *'*shades of grey*'*, *'*create and adapt*'* manner. Based upon these descriptions, Olsson *et al*. (2017) stressed that mentors should target mentees' epistemology if they are to help them to optimally develop the declarative knowledge and cognitive skills that underpin effective coaching. In short, mentors need to encourage their mentees to think in an increasingly self-directed, explorative, critical, and adaptive fashion. This message is consistent with a breadth of literature on coaching and the mentoring process (Grecic and Collins, 2013; Griffiths and Armour, 2012; Stoszkowski and Collins, 2014).

Therefore, responding to a call for further research to build on the amalgamation of mentoring literature, this research used an epistemological lens to explore views of mentoring from both mentors and mentees engaged in a formal governing body mentoring programme. More specifically, mentoring programmes that effectively develop expertise in mentees will be characterised by the following three features:

(i) a shared understanding across mentors and mentees on the markers of coaching expertise (i.e., what mentoring is trying to achieve);

(ii) shared perceptions across mentors and mentees on the most important factors for developing expertise: and

(iii) interactions between mentors and mentees that prioritise the development of declarative knowledge and cognitive skills (over procedural knowledge and behavioural skills).

However, the extent to which mentoring programmes are currently reflecting these markers is relatively unexplored. The extent to which epistemology might account for levels of coherence in the goals and process of mentoring is also unknown. As such, the purposes of this study were to: (a) explore one sport's mentoring program against the three markers of effectiveness derived from Olsson *et al*., (2017); and (b) consider potential explanations and areas for enhancement through the lens of epistemology. As well as providing a theory-based evaluation of one specific programme, it was anticipated that the results would also offer insight for the evaluation and enhancement of others.

Methodology

Research strategy and design

Reflecting its focus and purposes, this research was undertaken through a pragmatic research philosophy; one which encouraged adoption of methods that could create practically useful knowledge (Giacobbi, Poczwardowski and Hager,

2005). In this respect, it was decided that a survey would provide an appropriate research strategy. More specifically, as we aimed to explore general trends in a whole mentoring programme rather than features of specific mentor-mentee relationships, a survey allowed us to collect responses from across the target population.

Accordingly, two surveys were designed using online software (Survey Monkey): one to be completed by mentors and the other to be completed by mentee coaches. Although two surveys were developed, both were focused on the same topics with the main difference relating to the wording of each question so that these were phrased appropriately for each group. In line with this, both surveys started with general questions relating to the mentors' and mentees' coaching qualifications, years of coaching experience, and length of time engaged in the FA's formal mentoring programme. More specifically, mentors and mentees were asked to provide responses on a Likert scale to statements on:

(i) the markers of expertise;
(ii) how expertise is developed;
(iii) the nature of interactions with their mentor or mentee; and
(iv) their epistemological beliefs.

For example, participants were presented with statements and asked to indicate the extent to which they either disagreed or agreed with them, perceived them as important or not important, and experienced or did not experience them. To limit the interaction of demand characteristics (McCambridge, 2015) these statements were phrased in ways that were both consistent and inconsistent with literature on expertise and mentoring. Thus, an effective mentoring programme would be evidenced by participants scoring some statements high and other statements low (in terms of agreement, importance, or experience). For example, an effective programme would be shown when participants rated the ability to develop novel and innovative solutions as essential and the ability to reproduce the practices of expert coaches as not important (Nash *et al*., 2012).

The mentoring programme

Based on the researcher's role as a mentor for the programme led by the English Football Association, the English FA was invited and subsequently agreed to have their grassroots mentoring programme evaluated. Discussions were held with the National Mentor Lead outlining the research aims, to agree the most efficient and effective process to collect the data and how the research and analysis would be shared and disseminated to support the development of the national mentoring programme. This programme was launched as a pilot in 2013 with 60-part time mentors and by January 2019, had grown to over 300 part time mentors and eight full time regional mentor officers deployed across England. Currently, mentors are recruited on a regional basis by the FA through an open application process, with a pre-requisite of having secured a Level 2 FA coaching qualification. Once appointed,

all new mentors attend a one-day regional training course followed by completing the FA Adults' Mentoring qualification within 12 months of their appointment.

In terms of delivery, the FA allocates two grassroots football clubs to each mentor for one season. The criteria for identifying those clubs to receive mentoring support is based upon the FA's Charter Standard Club System. More specifically, County FA Development Officers identify clubs who have the highest charter standard award (i.e., a Community Charter Standard Club) and offer them the opportunity to receive support from a FA mentor. There were no restrictions on what level of coach can receive support, but it was expected that those who do will be a member of the FA's Licensed Club Association and, if they engage in the mentoring process, will consequently be allocated hours towards their Continuous Professional Development (3 hours per year). Overall, the FA expects each mentor to offer 50 hours of support per club over the season, equating to approximately 5 hours of support per month (which includes support during training sessions and/or match days). This support can then be structured in various ways to suit the needs of the club and their coaches (e.g., the mentor can provide 5 hours of support per month to one mentee or split this time across two or three mentees (The FA Boot Room, 2020).

Procedure

Prior to sending the survey out to participants, seven mentors and six mentees were identified by an FA Regional Mentor Manager to pilot both versions of the survey, and provide feedback on their perceptions of the content, clarity and coherence. Following this, some minor amendments were made to the wording of some questions and the answer options. For example, to help clarify the markers of expertise, we adapted 'using a large base of declarative knowledge to explain problems' to 'the ability to explain the reasoning behind coaching practices'. At this point, the FA were consulted for their views on the final versions of the surveys, from which no changes were requested. Notably, the FA confirmed that the nature and focus of the survey fitted with their own specific aims (i.e., the development of coaching expertise).

302 mentors currently employed by the FA were contacted through an existing FA database and invited to complete the survey, with a link provided to the Survey Monkey website. The first page of the survey provided information on the purpose and nature of the study, assurances over confidentiality, and details on the withdrawal process. One week after the invitation was sent to the mentors, a further and separate email was sent to ask them to forward another Survey Monkey link to their mentees. To ensure that all mentees undertook the survey of their own volition, the information page emphasised their freedom to choose to take part or not, the nature of their participation if they decided to take part, and assurances on confidentiality. The lead researcher and his mentees did not complete the survey.

The authors' institutional ethics committee approved all procedures, and all participants denoted acceptance of informed consent by completing the full survey.

Participants

Mentors. A total of 148 mentors participated in the study, representing 49% of all FA coach mentors at the time, with 132 of these completing all of the questions. Of the mentors that responded to all questions, 54% were Level 3 UEFA *'B'* qualified, 26% Level 2 UEFA *'C'* qualified, and the remaining 20% were Level 4 UEFA *'A'* qualified. The majority of these mentors (76%) had worked on the FA's mentoring programme for 2 years or less, with 2% involved since its launch in 2013. The number of mentees that mentors worked with ranged from 3 to 23 in a season with a mean of 5.

Mentees. A total of 201 mentees participated in this study with 162 completing all questions. Of those who responded to all questions, 68% were Level 1 coaches, 24% were Level 2 UEFA *'C'* qualified, 5% were UEFA *'B'* qualified or above with the remaining 3% having no formal FA coaching qualification. Forty-two percent of the mentees had also completed a Module 1 FA Youth Coaching Award. In terms of applied experience, the mentees had coached for between 1 and 32 years with the majority having coached for 5 years or less (64%).

Data analysis

For the responses to each question, means and standard deviations were calculated based on the data from participants who had completed the full survey (those who had not completed the full survey were excluded from the entire analysis process). The mean scores would convey typical mentors' and mentees' perceptions with regards to: (a) the markers of coaching expertise; (b) how coaching expertise is developed; (c) the nature of their interactions with one another; and (d) their personal epistemology (as per the study's purposes). Standard deviations were calculated to provide information on the spread of these perceptions.

To illuminate the level of coherence between mentor and mentee groups, a series of t-tests were undertaken to determine whether any statistical differences were present between mentor and mentee groups. Whilst applying a parametric test to ordinal data may draw criticism, Norman (2010) argues that using parametric statistics offer a more powerful and sensitive way to detect a difference between groups and that their use is perfectly acceptable. See figure 1 for Likert scale data.

Results

Whilst there is evidence across a number of domains that individuals who engage with mentoring have generally positive and productive experiences (Myall, Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Lyle and Cushion, 2017) particularly from areas such as nursing, business and teaching, there is limited literature exploring the impact of mentoring within the context of coach development and specifically, the

relationship between mentors and mentees (Bailey *et al*., 2019). Hence, the goals of this study were to understand, in greater detail, the relationship between mentors and mentees in terms of developing their coaching expertise (Nash *et al*., 2012). Consequently, the survey was designed to present the general trends of mentor / mentee relationships within the context of a formal governing body mentor programme. More specifically, the survey explored the mentoring programme against three markers of effectiveness derived from Olsson *et al*., (2017), and considered potential explanations and areas for enhancement through the lens of epistemology. For clarity, the messages in Olsson *et al*. (2017) were that effective mentoring programmes are characterised by:

(i) a shared understanding across mentors and mentees on the markers of coaching expertise (i.e., what mentoring is trying to achieve);

(ii) a shared understanding across mentors and mentees on how expertise is developed; and

(iii) interactions between mentors and mentees that prioritize progress in declarative knowledge and cognitive skills (over progress in procedural knowledge and behavioural skills).

It is important to acknowledge and address the large number of t-tests used in this preliminary investigation; a process which will clearly have inflated the chance of a Type 1 Error across the study. A Bonferonni adjustment could have been used, dividing the desired error rate by the number of comparisons (in this case .05/18) to yield a more conservative criterion value. Importantly, however, this process has been criticised as being overly conservative, with new methods suggested as offering an means for retaining power whilst not rejecting interesting effects. Accordingly, we used the Sequentially Rejective Bonferonni (SRB) procedure (Holland and Copenhaver, 1987), which yielded the unsurprisingly lower but still important number of significant differences between mentors and mentees as shown in figures 1, 2, 3 4 and 5. Briefly, this works by sequentially increasing the critical value of the t score by adjusting the degrees of freedom. So, the most significant difference (largest t score) is tested against the *set alpha* value (in this case, .05), the next against .05/2, then .05/3 and so on until that particular score fails to reach significance. For clarity, both the p value obtained and the SRB result are presented (figures). What is presented below are the findings from the FA's mentoring programme on these key areas, followed by the findings on mentor and mentee epistemology.

Marker One: Shared understanding of coaching expertise

Figure 1 reveals that mentors and mentees shared some beliefs consistent with the criteria of expertise (as per Nash *et al*., 2012). For example, both groups considered the ability to critically evaluate their own and others coaching, having a lifelong learning attitude, being able to adapt and make on the spot decisions and explain the reasoning behind coaching practices as very important to essential.

Notably, however, statistical analysis indicated a lack of coherence between mentors and mentees. More specifically, mentors were found to attach more importance to these markers than mentees (as indicated by the significance values in figure 1).

Marker	Mentor Mean (SD)	Mentee Mean (SD)	t. value
Playing and/or coaching experience at the highest level	1.72 (0.84)	1.94 (1.05)	1.99 *
The highest coaching qualifications	2.28 (0.89)	2.41 (0.96)	1.22 ns
The ability to reproduce the practice of other expert coaches	2.07 (0.90)	2.62 (0.83)	5.58 ***
The ability to apply principles from other disciplines	2.92 (0.86)	2.82 (0.79)	1.06 ns
The ability to adapt and make on the spot decision	3.42 (0.66)	3.22 (0.82)	2.31 *
The ability to explain the reasoning behind coaching practices and decision in detail	3.45 (0.67)	3.28 (0.75)	2.07 *
The ability to cover up shortcomings with presentational and interpersonal skills	1.99 (0.90)	1.97 (0.87)	0.19 ns
The ability to critically evaluate your own and others coaching	3.53 (0.67)	3.14 (0.88)	4.28 ***
A preference to engage in detailed up-front planning	2.95 (0.83)	2.93 (0.81)	0.21 ns
A lifelong learning attitude	3.77 (0.47)	3.26 (0.85)	6.27 ***
The confidence to overlook your own weaknesses / limitations	2.52 (1.04)	2.68 (1.02)	0.11 ns
An ability to develop novel and innovative solutions	3.18 (0.66)	2.94 (0.79)	2.84 ***
An extensive knowledge of techniques, tactics and practices	2.99 (0.73)	2.90 (0.85)	0.98 ns
Group leadership and management skills.	3.26 (0.62)	3.03 (0.84)	2.67 **
Knowing what works and sticking to it carefully	2.04 (0.86)	2.38 (0.92)	3.32 ***
Track record of developing players who go onto to play at higher levels	1.76 (0.77)	1.99 (0.94)	2.3 *
The ability to consider alternatives to the practices you put on	3.17 (0.58)	3.36 (0.62)	2.70 *
Developing rules that can be applied to different scenarios (e.g. In situation x do y)	2.65 (0.72)	2.98 (0.79)	3.73 ***

Figure 1: Perceived importance of different markers of coaching expertise

Notes. SD = Standard Deviation.
Scale: 1 = Not important, 2 = Fairly important, 3 = Very important, 4 = Essential
Significance level: ns = not significant *= p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001,

Of note, some essential criteria of expertise were not rated as essential by either mentors or mentees. For example, mentors and mentees expressed similar opinions that the ability to apply principles from other disciplines and a preference to engage in detailed up-front planning were only considered 'fairly to very important'. In line with the emphasis on procedural (rather than declarative) knowledge, they also agreed that having an extensive knowledge of techniques, tactics and practices was 'fairly to very important'. At direct odds with literature-based markers of expertise, both groups considered the ability to reproduce the practice of expert coaches, the ability to know what works and stick to it carefully and the ability to develop rules that could be applied in different scenarios as 'fairly to very important'. However, mentees attached greater importance to these markers than mentors. Of more concern, was that both mentor and mentee groups seemed similar in their views that the ability to cover up shortcomings with presentational and interpersonal skills and having the confidence to overlook your own weaknesses / limitations were 'fairly to very important'.

In summary, results in figure 1 suggests that, whilst mentors and mentees recognised some of the markers of expertise, data indicates a lack of congruence between mentor and mentee groups with regards to the most important markers of expertise. This may limit a shared understanding of the goals of mentoring which may in turn, lead to coach development being disappointing and unfulfilling for both mentors and mentees. This appears to be consistent with Griffiths and Armour's (2013) notion of mentoring dissonance between mentors and mentees because of a lack of understanding of what was expected of them.

Marker Two: Shared understanding of developing expertise

Moving on from the markers of expertise, figure 2 details the extent to which mentors and mentees agreed on how expertise is developed, as well as mentors' perceptions of what they thought that their mentees believed to be important to developing expertise. Taking the views of each group first (i.e., the *'*mentor*'* and *'*mentee*'* columns in figure 2), a mixed picture emerges in terms of shared understanding of perceived importance of the different processes for developing expertise. For example, both groups reported taking a trial-and-error approach or experimenting with different options, discussing and thinking through the rationale of practice, challenging existing coaching practice and reflecting upon own practice as being very important to essential, (which is consistent with the literature - Nash *et al*., 2012), the statistical analysis showed that mentors attached more importance to these markers than mentees. Interestingly, both groups were in agreement that discussing coaching processes with peers at the same level was 'very important to essential'. In contrast however, and highlighting a potential inconsistency, both groups also reported that watching practices from current top-level experts and accruing a large base of practices were deemed 'fairly to very important'. Of note,

mentees attached more importance to this than mentors. While both factors scored lower than the more legitimate markers of expertise development listed in the prior section e.g., experimenting, exposing rationale, ratings suggest there may also be a preference in mentors and mentees to rely on the provision and copying of drills.

Markers	Mentor Mean (SD)	Mentee Mean (SD)	t. value	Mentor perception of mentee beliefs. Mean (SD)	t. value
Formal coach education (Level 1 – Level 5)	3.06 (0.79)	2.96 (0.80)	1.08ns	2.76 (0.80)	2.12*
Watching practices from current top level experts	2.29 (0.85)	2.51 (0.88)	2.19*	2.48 (0.85)	0.29ns
Collecting a large base of practices	2.44 (0.97)	2.90 (0.75)	4.65***	2.93 (0.97	0.33ns
Taking a trial and error approach/experimenting with different options	3.30 (0.66)	3.04 (0.80)	3.03**	2.33 (0.66)	7.5***
Reflecting upon own practice	3.79 (0.47)	3.54 (0.66)	6.37***	2.42 (0.47)	12.48***
Discussing and thinking through rationale of practice	3.69 (0.52)	3.47 (0.70)	3.03**	2.46 (0.90)	10.98***
Finding and using resources from social media	2.41 (0.92)	2.45 (0.87)	0.38ns	2.70 (0.52)	2.58*
Listening to respected pundits on TV and radio	1.64 (0.80	1.65 (0.68)	0.11ns	2.07 (0.80)	4.62***
Discussing coaching process with peers at the same level	3.29 (0.73)	3.24 (0.69)	0.61ns	2.46 (0.73)	9.22***
Completing the required hours of licensed coach CPD hours	3.15 (0.81)	2.98 (0.80)	1.82ns	2.32 (0.81)	6.67***
Joining the FA licensed Coaches Association	3.01 (0.88)	2.80 (0.88)	2.06*	2.27 (0.88)	4.97***
Challenging existing coaching practice	3.49 (0.58)	3.23 (0.58)	3.4***	2.29 (0.58)	9.85***

Figure 2: Perceived importance of different processes for developing expertise

Notes. SD = Standard Deviation.
Scale: 1 = Not important, 2 = Fairly important, 3 = Very important, 4 = Essential
Significance level: ns = not significant *= p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001,

Of note, there was also some disparity between what mentors believed their mentees thought important to develop expertise (i.e., *'*mentee*'* and *'*mentor perception of mentee beliefs*'* columns in figure 2). For example, and consistent with literature on expertise, mentees considered reflecting upon practice, discussing and thinking through the rationale of practice, experimenting with options, and challenging existing coaching practice as being 'very important to essential*'*.

However, mentors believed that their mentees only considered these processes to be *'fairly to very important'*. As such, these differences suggest that the mentees may either: (a) *'talk a better game than they walk'*; (b) have been trying to provide the *'right answers'* to paint a positive picture of their own development (and perhaps their mentor's work with them); or (c) be inaccurately understood or portrayed by their mentors. Regardless of the reason, these differences suggest that mentors and mentees are not as aligned as they could be; a point to be picked up in discussion.

Marker Three: Expertise-supporting interactions

Shifting from beliefs and perceptions to action, figure 3 presents data on the perceived content of discussions between mentors and mentees. Encouragingly, a number of responses were again consistent with current literature on expertise. For example, mentees reported that the conversations they had most were on the challenges faced during a session and what could have been done differently.

Markers	Mentors Mean (SD)	Mentees Mean (SD)	t. value
The practices that are used to reach the mentees objectives	3.65 (0.86)	3.80 (0.88)	0.15ns
The reasoning behind using certain practices	3.86 (0.70)	3.97 (0.85)	011ns
The impact of contextual factors on the planned session	3.42 (0.99)	3.42 1.07)	0ns
Potential scenarios that may come up during the session	3.56 (0.88)	3.72 (0.92)	1.45ns
Challenges that may be faced when delivering a session and what could have been done differently	3.88 (065)	4.13 (0.83)	2.75**
Aspects of a practice you wish to develop	3.80 (0.77)	4.08 (0.85)	2.83**
How the mentees coaching compares with experts	1.76 (1.00)	2.29 (1.19)	3.95***
The type of discussion that mentees could have with peer coaches	2.58 (1.12)	3.19 (1.09)	4.53***
Reviewing strengths and weaknesses	3.56 (0.83)	3.86 (1.01)	2.66**
Management of the players and resources	3.54 (0.86)	3.68 (1.08)	1.17ns
What went right and wrong	2.89 (1.23)	3.78 (1.15)	6.14***
How the session went against the planned goals	3.68 (0.89)	3.99 (0.99)	2.74**

Figure 3: Occurrence of different discussions between mentors and mentees

Notes; SD = Standard Deviation
Scale; 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = About half the time, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time
Significance level: ns = not significant, *= p<05, ** = p<01, *** = p<001

However, comparison of the mentees' coaching to expert coaches, was never to rarely discussed according to mentees and rarely to about half the time as claimed by mentors. Of note, findings in this area also suggest some discrepancies between the goal of mentoring (as per the findings in Marker One) and the current process of mentoring used by mentors. While both mentors and mentees stated that experimentation, reflection, focusing on the rationale of practice, peer discussion, and challenging existing practice were all 'very important to essential' (see figure 2), figure 3 suggests that mentors don't appear to harness expertise-supporting conversations as much as we would expect. More specifically, some topics that would seem essential for enhancing declarative understanding and cognitive skill were discussed *'about half of the time to often'*. These included: the reasoning behind the use of practices, the impact of contextual factors on sessions, and potential scenarios that might come up during the session.

Markers	**Mentees**	
	Mean	**SD**
Provide you with practices that you could use to meet your session objectives	3.25	0.91
Provide coaching demonstrations	3.30	0.87
Help you to jointly deliver coaching sessions to your team.	3.04	0.97
Explain the reasoning behind using certain practices	3.91	0.84
Discuss and consider contextual factors in your planned session. (e.g., Weather, resources, facilities).	3.27	1.08
Discuss potential scenarios that may come up during the session.	3.80	0.88
Highlight and consider the challenges you may face when delivering sessions and what you could have done differently (i.e., practices not working).	4.02	0.83
Discuss aspects of your practice you wish to develop.	4.04	0.83
Review how your coaching compares with experts.	2.67	1.23
Outline the discussions you could have with peer coaches about coaching.	3.28	1.04
Review and consider your own strengths and weaknesses.	3.98	0.91
Discuss and review the management of the group / resources.	3.65	1.01
What you did right and wrong	3.81	1.14
How your session went against planned goals	3.25	0.87

Figure 4: Mentees' expectations of interactions with their mentors

Notes; SD = Standard Deviation
Scale; 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = About half the time, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time

Interestingly, mentees reported that *'what went right and wrong'* was discussed *'around half of the time to often'* (albeit mentors reported that this occurred more rarely). In addition, figure 3 suggests that mentors might be failing to fully harness

the social side of learning, with advice given to mentees on the type of conversations they could have with their peers only *'rarely to half of the time'* (albeit mentees reported that this occurred more often). Of note, statistical analysis indicates that mentors and mentees highlight (or recall) some conversations being more or less significant than others. This may again suggest a lack of congruence between mentors' and mentees' understanding of what type of conversations support the development of declarative knowledge. Supplementing these findings, figure 4 outlines what mentees expect from interactions with their mentors. Of note, mentees only expect to discuss the impact of contextual factors and potential scenarios that might come up during a session *'about half of the time to often'* rather than *'all of the time'*, as we might expect, given that adaptability is a cornerstone objective (Collins *et al*., 2014). More significantly, and in line with some findings highlighted earlier, it also appeared that mentees expected their mentors to play a particularly directive role. Namely, mentees felt that, for *'about half of the time to often'*, they wanted their mentor to provide them with practices, provide coaching demonstrations, jointly deliver coaching sessions, and discuss what went right and wrong in a session. This finding is somewhat at odds with the more positively coherent picture presented by other responses in this research.

Markers	Mentor Mean (SD)	Mentee Mean (SD)	t. value
Coaching is fundamentally a simple process based on clear facts.	2.96 (1.23)	3.28 (1.22)	2.27*
Expert coaches are made to a greater extent than born.	3.76 (1.15)	3.63 (1.17)	0.97ns
Expert coaching is learnt quickly or not at all.	1.67 (0.84)	1.82 (0.89)	1.5ns
The knowledge that underpins expert coaching is different from 20 years ago.	3.71 (1.11)	3.92 (1.08)	1.67ns
Expert coaching must be learnt by copying current experts.	2.20 (1.00)	2.51 (1.02)	2.93ns

Figure 5: Comparing and contrasting mentors and mentees epistemology.

Notes, Significance level: ns = not significant, * = p<05, ** = p<01, *** = p<001

Mentors and mentees' epistemological beliefs

Turning to the second purpose of our study, figure 5 details mentor and mentee responses to statements on what coaching knowledge is and how it is acquired. Encouragingly, both groups tended to agree that expert coaching was not achieved by copying current experts or learned quickly. Beyond these responses, however, it seems that mentors, as a collective, do not have as sophisticated an epistemology as would be expected from those responsible for developing the epistemology of others. More specifically, and instead of the expected strong agreement, mentors neither

agreed nor disagreed that coaching was a simple process based on clear facts. The standard deviation ratings would also suggest that there was a notable level of variation across mentors in terms of their beliefs in this area. We would also have expected to see higher levels of agreement with the statements that expert coaches are made to a greater extent than born and that coaching knowledge is different from 20 years ago. Finally, it was also notable that mentors only somewhat disagreed (rather than strongly disagreed, as should be expected) that expert coaching must be learned by copying current experts.

Discussion

Despite limited evidence, a number of governing bodies have advocated mentoring as a means to harness and develop knowledge, professional growth and self-confidence. Whilst mentoring relationships may be presented as unproblematic, a number of studies have indicated that the nature and purpose of mentoring are often not clear and, as Griffiths and Armour (2013) point out, can be unsatisfying and unfulfilling.

In terms of the FA's mentoring programme, our results highlight a largely shared view on what coaching expertise is, how it is developed, and how mentors and mentees currently interact. Positively, much of this was consistent with current literature on coaching expertise (Nash *et al*., 2012) as well as the stated goals of the FA's programme itself (The FA, 2016). It was clear that there was agreement that expertise involves a range of thinking and decision-making skills e.g., adapting practices, as well as a broad base of declarative knowledge (as per the findings on Marker One). It was also clear that mentors and mentees agreed that developing these skills required processes (as per the findings on Marker Two) and interactions (as per the findings on Marker Three) that chiefly exposed and explored the mentee's decision-making e.g., focusing on practice rationale, taking an experimental approach, use of reflection, peer discussion, and challenging existing practice.

Whilst there may have been general agreement between mentors and mentees with regards to what coaching expertise is and how it is developed, statistical analysis of the data suggests that mentors attached greater significance to many of the key markers of expertise and the processes to develop it which may lead to a lack of congruence between mentors and mentees with regards to the goals and processes of mentoring. It should be of no surprise that mentors attached greater significance to markers such as thinking and decision making as key attributes of expert coaching as we would expect mentors to have a more sophisticated understanding of expert coaching. In support of this, Bailey *et al*. (2019) also argue that mentoring should take a more cerebral approach as opposed to a technical activity. Beyond this alignment with current literature, however, our findings also pointed to features that might be limiting the delivery and impact of the FA's current programme.

Regarding Marker One, a number of essential markers of expertise (Nash *et al*., 2012) were not rated as such by either mentors or mentees. It was notable that some markers such as the ability to reproduce the practice of expert coaches, the ability to know what works and sticking to it carefully, the ability to develop rules that could be applied in different scenarios are inconsistent with current literature on expertise were rated as 'fairly to very important' by both mentors and mentees. As such, it would seem that there may either be confusion within the FA's mentors on the type of coach they should be developing, or insufficient recognition of essential elements in the targeted make-up. Of note, statistical analysis of the data suggests that mentees attached greater importance to these markers than mentors suggesting a lack of alignment with regards to goal of mentoring. Similarly, the findings on figure 2 suggest that there might be an inappropriate emphasis on processes that encourage a *'*drills-focused*'*, *'*copy and paste*'* approach, inappropriate in the sense that this approach is inconsistent with the need to prioritise development on a declarative level, including the mentee's ability to plan, act, and reflect independently. This approach by mentors and mentees is reflected in the response that considered it 'fairly to very important' to collect a large base of practices as a means to develop expertise. However, mentees attached greater importance to collecting a large base of practices to develop expertise than mentors. Again, this reveals a lack of congruence between mentors and mentees, or which Griffiths and Armour (2012) refer to as mentoring dissonance. The findings on Marker Three further suggests that mentors and mentees are either not engaging in the level or kind of interactions that can optimise the development of expertise, or that they lack sufficient understanding on how the process of mentoring might best work.

Clearly an important part of a mentor role would be to select and signpost the mentee toward relevant knowledge sources, although this in itself cannot be sufficient (Bailey *et al*., 2019). Developing mentees' ability to critically evaluate and apply new knowledge through a critically reflective process should take centre stage. This approach may take the forms of guidance initially but subsequently, may also include challenging strongly held beliefs and principles that have underpinned the mentees coaching practice (Heaney, 1995; Leeder and Cushion, 2019). This may result in conflict and discomfort on both sides and requires mentors to have a more sophisticated understanding of the process of mentoring than the results from this study appears to show.

As an explanation for the apparent issues on what expertise is, plus the processes and interactions required for its development, our findings point to the role of epistemology and mentors' epistemologies as crucial considerations. More specifically, as we have already pointed out, mentors considered the 'ability to reproduce the practice of other expert coaches', 'develop rules that can be applied to different scenarios' and 'know what works and sticking to it' as fairly to very

important suggesting that mentor epistemology are not as sophisticated as would be expected from this group (although more sophisticated than mentees). Consequently, this approach could result in mentors reinforcing a naïve or black and white approach to coaching that was evident in some of the mentee responses; or at least limit the potential for mentees to learn to see the grey of coaching practice and develop a more critical approach (Grecic and Collins, 2013). For example, and although causation can clearly not be inferred, it is telling that a *'*drills-focused*'*, *'*copy and paste*'* focus was apparent in our participants' accounts alongside a group of mentors who:

(a) did not disagree that coaching was a simple process;
(b) weren't particularly sure if expert coaches are made more than born;
(c) weren't particularly sure that coaching knowledge is different from 20 years ago; and
(d) only somewhat disagreed that expert coaching must be learned by copying current experts.

As Grecic and Collins (2013) argue, a coach's epistemology will reflect the environment that they create and the coaching they deliver, so if mentors promote a cut and paste approach there is every likelihood that mentee coaches will go on to reflect this in their own coaching. However, it is important to stress that this seems to be a programme level issue rather than an entirely individual one. In keeping with other studies which have used Likert scale data to compare opinions (e.g., Pankhurst, Collins and MacNamara, 2013), this research has focused on average responses. Whilst using mean differences and running statistical tests on these does represent conventional practice, it is acknowledged that the differences in mean scores may lack real world significance. What, for example, is the behavioural consequence of a 0.5 difference in mean Likert scores? Accordingly, it could be argued that a number of mentors match up well in terms of the epistemology (plus understanding and action) required to optimally develop their mentees (i.e., those who provided responses that were consistent with literature and the FA's goals). Of course, and especially where standard deviations suggest a big spread of opinion, the opposite extremes are also apparent and, clearly, suggest that those concerns are warranted.

For the present purpose, and given the programme level focus in this study, it does appear that mentors may require even further development if the FA are to limit the extent to which mentors work from more a naïve epistemological position. Further study using behavioural observation to confirm the implications of expressed opinion would be an important next step but, even with the questions around what the score differences actually mean in behavioural terms, when combined with the large standard deviations, there is good evidence for epistemological differences.

Any factor which potentially leads to mentors giving different messages to their mentees and supporting incoherent outcomes across the programme is surely a

matter for concern and this is strongly suggested by our data. In other words, an epistemological gap between the stated aims of the mentoring programme and the actions and knowledge of developing expert coaches exists (Light, 2008; Partington and Cushion, 2013). Indeed, if the aim of the mentoring programme is to develop more creative independent coaches, it will require them to develop a more sophisticated epistemology to draw upon previous experience and be able to understand the 'why' of practice (Collins *et al*., 2012; Light, 2008). Usefully, Stoszkowski and Collins (2014) suggest that a coach's epistemology can be used as a critical sieve to plan and evaluate all aspects of coaching practice. However, to produce such coaches, mentors need to develop a more sophisticated and coherent epistemology with skills and knowledge to apply a range of strategies to support the development of their mentees (Olsson *et al*., 2017).

While epistemology may play a part in explaining some of the apparent shortcomings in the FA's mentoring programme, it is important to recognise other possible factors. For example, while mentors might be over-emphasising drills, procedural knowledge, and an understanding of *'*the way*'* to coach because they believe that this is how mentees learn, this may point to mentor epistemology not being as sophisticated as one would expect. It may reflect an over formalised mentor programme that reduces the mentoring process to a behaviourist approach (Sawiuk, Taylor and Groom, 2016). Alternatively, it is also possible that mentors are influenced by social factors e.g., to foster positive impressions by *'*giving the mentee what they want*'*. Supporting this point, Bailey *et al*., (2019) found that mentors viewed their role as responsive in nature rather than initiatory. This may, inadvertently lead mentors to provide what mentees want, drills, demonstrations etc. and reinforce dependence upon mentors and limit mentees ability to challenge and critically reflect upon their own coaching experiences (Nash *et al*., 2012). While the provision of drills and a *'*do it like this*'* style of mentoring might be appropriate for some mentees early in the process (Olsson *et al*., 2017), mentors should constantly challenge their mentees to evaluate their practice and their role and move the mentee toward the very edges of their knowledge (Cushion, 2015). This requires a shift in thinking by mentees that may challenge and undermine previously held knowledge and beliefs. As Bailey *et al*. (2019) found, mentees were often reluctant to shift their thinking. This may lead to diametrically opposed views of the goals and processes of mentoring that can lead to incompatible expectations between mentors and mentees (Griffiths and Armour 2013).

Although there seems to be a logical match between the shortcomings of the studied mentoring programme (as per Markers One, Two, and Three) and mentor-mentee epistemology, it is also important to recognise the limitations of this research and factors which may have shaped its findings. For example, whilst conclusions have been drawn from the respondents who took part in the study, it is recognised

that this does not reflect all mentors and all mentees engaged in the programme. In addition, both mentors and mentees who took part may have tried to provide the *'right'* answers or paint a positive picture that may have differed from reality. Another limitation was that mentees were recruited to complete the survey by their mentors and, as such, it is possible that those who did not *'fit'* with the expectations of the programme or who may have provided *'wrong'* answers may not have been given the opportunity to complete the survey. In this respect, however, the reader is encouraged to note the number of participant responses that are either inconsistent or not entirely consistent with literature on expertise and, significantly, what the FA have publicly targeted (The FA Boot Room, 2020).

Conclusion

Whilst there was general agreement between and amongst mentors and mentees with regards to some of the markers of expertise, there appeared to be some inconsistencies and / or confusion of other markers of expertise, such as 'being able to reproduce the practice of expert coaches' or 'the confidence to overlook weaknesses and limitations'. Potentially, this results in a lack of clarity on what constitutes expertise which may lead to inconsistent messages and poor outcomes of the FA mentoring programme, thus limiting the impact of the mentoring programme to develop better coaches. In addition, the study reported that whilst mentors' epistemology was not as sophisticated as might be expected there was evidence that it was more sophisticated (not surprisingly) than the mentees and consequently an epistemological gap between mentors and mentees exists that may undermine the process of effective mentoring.

Even where there was general agreement between the two groups, evidence of an epistemological gap was reflected in the statistical analysis which often suggested a lack of coherence between mentors and mentees with regard to the value of some markers of expertise and the processes to develop expertise. This is consistent with more recent literature which has highlighted differences in expectation between mentors and mentees in terms of the aims and processes of mentoring (Griffiths and Armour, 2013). This may lead to mentees resisting new coaching models endorsed by the national governing body and limit the impact of mentors upon coaching practice (Leeder and Cushion, 2019). Notably, mentors did not appear to utilize a range of mentor - mentee interactions that can optimise the development of expertise. This may suggest either mentors a) do not have as sophisticated understanding of the process to develop declarative skills that underpins expert coaching (Olsson *et al*, 2017), or b) mentors provide what mentees expect (i.e. reproducing practices) in order to present a positive image of themselves in order to sustain their position (Leeder and Cushion, 2019).

Finally, based on the findings reported in this study, the mentor / mentee relationship is complex, requiring further investigation. Specifically, extension work should focus on the goals, processes, rationale and epistemological basis of actions and perceptions of mentor / mentee pairs. In addition, whilst the move toward the use of mentoring by governing bodies of sport within formal coach education is well justified, this move requires careful consideration for the training and development of coach educators and the relationship between formal, informal processes of coach development (Sawiuk *et al*., 2018).

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Ethics statement: This research was conducted with ethical approval at the University of Lancashire.

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Reviewer Comments

This paper presents a well-structured and academically rigorous exploration of the Football Association's mentoring programme and its influence on coaching expertise. The abstract is concise yet informative, clearly outlining the study's aim, methodology, and key findings. By highlighting the epistemological gap between programme aims and participant perceptions, the research demonstrates critical insight into the complexities of mentoring in sports coaching. The research is situated within the broader context of coach education. It effectively synthesizes existing literature, drawing on authoritative sources to illustrate the limitations of traditional

‘train and certify’ approaches and the growing preference for informal learning pathways. This establishes a compelling rationale for mentoring as a pedagogical tool, while also acknowledging the nuanced challenges associated with its implementation. The discussion of mentoring’s conceptual evolution, from a one-dimensional knowledge transfer model to a dynamic, reciprocal relationship, is a notable strength. Furthermore, the text critically engages with institutional agendas and philosophical underpinnings that may constrain mentoring effectiveness, demonstrating depth and originality in its analysis. Overall, this work makes a valuable contribution to the discourse on coach development. It combines theoretical grounding with practical implications, offering insights that are highly pertinent for governing bodies, coach educators, and policy makers. The study’s emphasis on epistemological alignment and critical reflection underscores its potential to inform more effective and contextually responsive mentoring strategies in sport.