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## Coach perceptions of “playing-up” in youth football

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### ABSTRACT

Football coaches are often searching for the most appropriate development environment to help every player to achieve their potential. When youth football players show advanced competencies within their own age group (i.e. U9, U10, U11, etc.), they may be permitted to compete in a chronologically older age group – commonly referred to as ‘playing-up’. Despite this approach being regularly used in practice, coach perceptions of playing-up are yet to be empirically evaluated. Therefore, this study used semi-structured interviews with ten academy football coaches from the United Kingdom to examine their perceptions of playing-up on player development. Following thematic analysis, results showed three higher-order themes comprising nine lower-order themes: (a) strengthening communication approaches (i.e. refine terminology used, emphasise communication between coaches and players, and educate key stakeholders), (b) considering support from social agents (i.e. include parents in the process, involve coaches and multidisciplinary staff in decision-making, and promote supportive peer environments), and (c) facilitating individual player development (i.e. challenge technical and tactical skills, reflect on psychosocial impact, and consider physical competencies). These findings highlight how coaches perceive playing-up as a useful holistic player development tool, which could be enhanced through effective key stakeholder communication and support.

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## Introduction

Talent development (i.e., the process of providing the most appropriate learning environment to realise an individual’s potential; Williams & Reilly, 2000; Williams et al., 2020) is a rapidly growing area of research – particularly in the context of football. Despite the recent surge of research and resources, creating the most suitable development environment for every young player within a single age group remains a major contemporary challenge for both researchers and practitioners (Kelly, 2023). These challenges stem from common pitfalls and challenges in current practice, such as early selection procedures, relative age effects, and maturity-related biases (Kelly & Williams, 2020). Further intensifying this, research findings are not always translated effectively into practice, with coaches and other stakeholders often finding recommendations difficult to interpret or apply (Till & Baker, 2020). To maximise impact in youth football settings, it is therefore vital that researchers prioritise research *for* the sport and not *on* the sport (Collins et al., 2019), whilst providing transparent and

digestible guidance for key stakeholders (i.e., coaches, players, parents, peers, policy makers) based on the most up-to-date evidence (Kelly et al., *in press*).

Relative age effects (RAEs) (i.e., an overrepresentation of those born near the start of an age group cut-off date and an underrepresentation of those born towards the end of an age group cut-off date; Barnsley et al., 1985) and relative growth effects (RGEs) (i.e., an overrepresentation of early maturing players in an age group and an underrepresentation of later maturing players in an age group; Malina et al., 2004) are two influential biases in existing talent development programmes (e.g., football academies). Indeed, a large amount of relative age research in football has highlighted those born in the first three months of the selection year are often selected ahead of their relatively younger peers born in the last three months (see Kelly, Finnegan, et al., 2023 for an overview of football). As an example, following analysis over a 12-year period in a male English football academy (U9-U18), Kelly et al. (2020) reported that players born in birth quarter one (BQ1) were almost

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three times more likely to be selected (40.3%, odds ratio: 2.94) compared to their age group equivalents born in BQ4 (13.7%). Moreover, RAEs have been reported to continue into adulthood at U23 level when analysing the English Premier League 2, whereby almost half (46%) of players who competed in the 2022–23 season were born in BQ1 compared to BQ4 (11.1%) (Doncaster et al., 2024).

A growing number of studies on RGEs in youth football have revealed how early maturing players are also consistently ahead of their later maturing age group counterparts within talent development programmes (see Radnor et al., 2023 for an overview of football). For instance, Hill et al. (2020) showed how a selection bias towards early maturing players emerged at U12 in a male English football academy, whilst there was not a single later maturing player present within their U15 and U16 sample. Similarly, Radnor et al. (2021) underscored how early maturing male academy players in the United Kingdom from U12 to U16 outperformed on-time and later maturing players in most physical performance measures (i.e., strength, power, speed). These authors suggested practitioners (e.g., coaches) should monitor maturation in young football players to control the influence of physical performance, helping to mitigate RGEs that are influenced by absolute performance, and instead help identify the most talented players (Hill et al., 2020; Radnor et al., 2021). Collectively, these findings indicate that existing talent development programmes fail to optimise young athletes' potential, thereby limiting the developmental outcomes for many participants. This is likely due, or at least in part, to the fixed chronological age group structures and the accompanying organisational and perceptual norms that can limit player movement across cohorts, thereby favouring relatively older and more mature players (Cumming et al., 2018). Therefore, it is worthwhile considering the current policies in youth football, including looking beyond fixed chronological age groups (Cumming et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Coaches and policy makers are often in pursuit of strategies to create optimal developmental settings for young football players, and, coincidingly, mitigate RAEs and RGEs. Since organised youth football usually requires individuals to compete within chronological age groups (i.e., U9, U10, U11, etc.), it generally restricts holistic development opportunities outside their respective banding whilst also contributing to the RAEs and RGEs. When youth football players show advanced competencies within their own age group, they may be permitted to compete in an older age group and experience more challenging learning environments, commonly referred to as 'playing-up' (Kelly, Goldman, et al.,

2023). The concept of playing-up aligns closely with the more widely studied topic of acceleration in education (i.e., whereby students enter school early or skip a grade; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016), from which valuable lessons could be drawn. Although research in acceleration is highly complex and contextual, it generally indicates that it benefits students' academic achievement and psychosocial development. More specifically, meta-analyses suggest that high-achieving, accelerated students recorded higher academic achievement than their non-accelerated peers (Kulik & Kulik, 1982; Steenbergen-Hu & Moon, 2011). Previous research has shown how high-achieving students who accelerated a grade had greater socio-emotional development, engaged in fewer problem behaviours, and were more likely to aspire to high degrees of education than those who did not (Kulik, 2004; Saylor & Brookshire, 1993). However, the social dynamics that govern students' experiences in school may not operate in the same way as those that pertain to players' experiences of playing-up in football, where younger players face physical dominance, competitive selection pressures, and potential team hierarchy exclusion from older, stronger peers.

Despite being a strategy used in youth football, particularly within academy settings (e.g., Wayne Rooney – Everton Academy, Jack Grealish – Aston Villa Academy, Ethan Ampadu – Exeter City Academy), only recently has research started to explore the mechanisms and outcomes of playing-up. To our knowledge, only two studies currently exist within this field (Goldman, Turnnidge, Kelly, et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2021). First, using the England Football Associations (the FA) Four Corner Model as a guiding framework (i.e., based on technical/tactical, physical, psychological, and social attributes), Kelly et al. (2021) collected 27 measures from 98 young male players ( $n = 28$  playing-up,  $n = 70$  non-playing-up) from an English professional football academy to assess differences between those who played-up and those who did not. The sample represented two age phases, including the Foundation Development Phase (FDP; U9-U11) and the Youth Development Phase (YDP; U12-U16). Results showed technical/tactical and social characteristics better differentiated playing-up status within the FDP. In contrast, YDP measures across all FA Four Corner Model components distinguished those who played-up from those who did not. Broadly, their study highlighted the multi-dimensional nature of the player development process that was implicated through playing-up and dependent on age phase.

Building on this work, Goldman, Turnnidge, Kelly, et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 17

players ( $n = 5$  females,  $n = 12$  males; aged 13–17 years) who played-up from four football clubs in Canada. Their results showed the players perceived playing-up involved a combination of challenge (i.e., coping with intensity, fitting in) and progress (being recognised, experiencing success, developing expertise). Importantly, though, the authors noted that participants' perceptions of playing-up varied greatly from player to player. Further anecdotal evidence has also highlighted how playing-up has been a key part of development for current professional and international male players (e.g., Harry Maguire; Goldman, Turnnidge, Côté, et al., 2021; Kelly, Goldman, et al., 2023). Such experiences can expose players to greater demands in key areas (e.g., physical, technical, tactical, and psychosocial), which some athletes perceive as promoting faster progress in development and preparing them more effectively for the transition to senior football (Kelly et al., 2021). However, playing-up should not be considered as a heterogeneous experience or guaranteed recipe for success (McGuigan et al., 2024), thus it would be inappropriate to use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Existing research has primarily examined playing-up from the perspective of players (e.g., Goldman, Turnnidge, Kelly, et al., 2021), while the experiential insights of coaches – who are arguably the key decision makers in this process – have yet to be empirically evaluated. Understanding coaches' perspectives is critical, as their judgments directly influence talent development pathways and the practical implementation of playing-up within academy environments. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the experiences and decision-making processes of male football academy coaches working in the FDP from the United Kingdom. More specifically, the study sought to understand: (a) how coaches perceive and rationalise the use of playing-up within their coaching contexts, and (b) how coaches believe the playing-up process can be better supported and implemented within academy structures. Based on the limited extant literature in this area, it was hypothesised that coaches would reflect upon multi-dimensional factors (i.e., technical/tactical, physical, psychological, social) when considering which players to play-up, whilst they would use it as a strategy to challenge and progress players beyond their own chronological age group to facilitate their long-term development in football.

## Methods

### Research paradigm

The current research study was guided through a constructivist research paradigm, which assumes that reality and knowledge are created through people's

experiences and interactions. From a relativist ontological perspective, there is no single, fixed reality – but rather there are multiple realities that reflect how different individuals make sense of the world through their lived experiences (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). A subjectivist and transactional epistemological position assumes that knowledge and understanding are co-created through interactions between the researcher and the participant, with researchers' own backgrounds and interpretations shaping the research process and outcomes (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Adopting this constructivist position enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding and interpretation of knowledge through participants' subjective realities of playing-up (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020).

To adhere to the purpose of this study, the third author conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with FDP football coaches who have had experiences with playing-up, to understand how coaches perceived playing-up in youth football. Coaches were considered to have experience with playing-up if they had directly worked with a player who played-up, or if they were involved in the process of moving a player-up for any amount of time during the season including games and practices. The dynamic nature of semi-structured interviews allowed participants a degree of freedom to discuss experiences most relevant to them in playing-up as a coach (Yeo et al., 2014). At appropriate times during the interview, the third author utilised probes to further unpack insightful details from participants' responses to questions.

### Positionality

Bourke (2014) describes how researchers often co-develop knowledge with research participants based on their positionality in association with the given questions within a project. Therefore, it is important to note that the third author's perceptions of playing-up in youth football will have been influenced by past experiences within the sport, due to their coaching and playing career. Importantly, at the time of data collection, the third author had been coaching within the FDP of a football academy in the United Kingdom. These experiences equipped the third author with an understanding of the current landscape of the sport from a coaching context (Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Overall, the background of the third author helped create a unique positionality to access a large range of coaches working in youth football (i.e., participants) for the present study, facilitating deep conversations and insights about their playing-up experiences.

## Participants

After obtaining institutional ethical approval at Birmingham City University via the Faculty of Health, Education, and Life Sciences ethics committee, the third author used purposeful sampling to recruit FDP coaches from United Kingdom-based football clubs as participants for this study. Initially, the third author invited 31 coaches who had experience within the playing-up process to participate in the study via email. Out of the 31 coaches who were invited, ten coaches aged 18–42 years ( $M_{\text{age}} 25.3 \pm 6.6$  years) accepted the invitation and provided written consent to participate in interviews.

The ten coaches who participated in this study identified as males. The average length of experience as an FDP academy coach between participants was approximately 5.8 years. The coaches worked primarily with players aged between 8–11 years on their football development in United Kingdom-based academies, representing nine different clubs: English Premier League Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) Category 1 Academies ( $n = 2$ ), Category 2 Academies ( $n = 1$ ), and Category 3 Academies ( $n = 5$ ), and Wales National Category A Academies ( $n = 2$ ). At the time the study was conducted, two of the coaches held the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) “A” coaching license (tier 4/5), while eight participants held the UEFA ‘B’ coaching license (tier 3/5). All coaches had experience either being directly involved in or working within a football club that has used the playing-up strategy. The ethnic diversity of participants included white British ( $n = 6$ ), black British ( $n = 3$ ), and British Asian ( $n = 1$ ) coaches.

## Data collection

The first and third author developed an interview guide to ensure that data collected aligned with the study’s purpose. The guide was informed by the work of Goldman et al. (2022), who examined athletes’ perceptions of playing-up in youth football. Questions were adapted for football coaches to explore their experiences and views of playing-up in the FDP. A pilot interview was conducted with one English Premier League EPPP Category 3 academy coach familiar with playing-up in the FDP, in which no changes were required following feedback. The pilot interview was excluded from the final dataset.

Interviews were semi-structured and focused on participants’ experiences, knowledge, and reflections on playing-up. After confirming consent, each participant completed a single online interview via Microsoft Teams

(Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA, United States), during the 2022–2023 season. The third author conducted and audio-recorded all ten interviews, lasting an average of 26 minutes. All data were anonymised by assigning coded identifiers (e.g., C1) to ensure confidentiality. Participants were thanked and debriefed following each interview. Alongside the transcripts, the third author kept a reflexive journal in which they detailed and explored their personal assumptions, observations, and reflections concerning the data. Notes concerning tone, body language, and initial analytical impressions were synthesised into this journal to support reflexivity and enhance analytical rigour.

## Data analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted by the second author to identify and categorise emerging themes from participants’ interviews, with coding cross-checked by the first and third authors (Braun et al., 2016). Informed by Braun et al.’s (2016) six-step process, the thematic analysis was conducted on Microsoft Word (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA, United States), including: (a) data was familiarised by reading over the transcripts; (b) using the comment function on Microsoft Word, pieces of the text that were relevant to the research purpose were “tagged” with one or more code; (c) to begin constructing lower-order themes, codes and associated data were examined to cluster them into bigger codes or provisional themes to capture meaningful patterns in the transcripts; (d) the provisional lower-order themes were reviewed, including ensuring all codes were representative of the lower-order themes, that the lower-order themes were relevant to the research question, and that disconfirming evidence (e.g., contradictory cases) was actively sought across the full dataset to refine or discard non-coherent themes. Higher-order themes were then developed to capture overarching patterns among the lower-order themes; (e) themes were then defined and named; and (f) all analytic writing was compiled and revised to integrate it into a final version.

## Methodological rigor

To ensure effective qualitative research practices, the authors employed a study design in accordance with criteria for excellent qualitative research (see Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) proposed a model, entailing eight key indicators of quality in qualitative research. Derived from the work of Tracy (2010), the following criteria contributed to rigor in this study: (a) worthy topic, (b) significant contribution, (c) sincerity, (d) meaningful

coherence, and (e) credibility, (f) rich rigor, (g) resonance, and (h) ethical.

Given the scarcity of literature surrounding playing-up, the present study covered a *worthy topic*. To the authors' current knowledge, the coaches' perception of playing-up has yet to be examined. Indeed, the coach is arguably the most important key stakeholder within the playing-up process thereby warranting its investigation. Relatedly, the current study makes a *significant contribution* both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study advances knowledge on playing-up whilst providing a unique perspective (i.e., the coach), which has yet to be explored in current literature. Practically, this study will inform policy makers and key stakeholders involved in playing-up within football clubs. This knowledge may provoke the advancement of the playing-up process and facilitate changes to sport policy in order to optimise developmental settings for young football players.

Through the positionality statement and utilising a reflexive journal to recognise any biases relative to the data, the authors have demonstrated *sincerity*. Throughout the data collection and analysis process the second and third author utilised the reflexive journal to record and diminish any personal assumptions concerning the data, thereby minimising the bias when reporting on coaches' experiences of playing-up. To accomplish *meaningful coherence*, the authors collaborated to ensure the construction of an effective interview guide that aligned with the purpose of the study. Informed from a previous qualitative investigation of players' perceptions of playing-up in youth football (see Goldman et al., 2022), the interview guide was structured. Further, the author utilised probes during the interview with participants to unpack further detail behind participant responses.

To accomplish *credibility*, interviews took place with qualified and experienced coaches who were directly involved with the playing-up process within the FDP, leading to *rich rigor* data informed by coaches with lived experiences in academy football settings with a minimum of a UEFA "B" coaching license (tier 3/5). The data gathered playing-up experiences of coaches from multiple different football clubs ranging from Category 1 to Category 3 academies across England as well as National Category A academies from Wales, thereby achieving multivocality and demonstrating a strong sample relevant to the research question. In addition, triangulation was also achieved as the first and second author converged on the naming of the themes from the data analysis based upon the contents from the interview transcripts.

When developing lower- and high-order themes, the authors sought to ensure that the findings were

transferable and generalisable across varying contexts, thereby achieving *resonance*. Although all participants in this study were male and from football academies within the United Kingdom, both lower- and high-order themes were conceptualised in a way that allows for their interpretation and application across diverse football academy contexts globally. This approach supports the potential for the study's findings to be meaningfully adapted and transferred to other sporting environments employing playing-up processes.

*Ethical* considerations were addressed by adhering to institutional guidelines and obtaining the necessary approvals prior to data collection. Following institutional approval, all interviews were conducted online on a one-to-one bases to ensure participant confidentiality. This private setting, arranged at a time and day convenient for each participant, minimised the likelihood of external influence or perceived pressure to align their viewpoints with those of their academy regarding the playing-up process, thereby considering relational ethics. To further mitigate this risk, the interviewer emphasised anonymity and assured participants that no identifiable information would be shared publicly or with their academy managers, directors, or other colleagues.

## Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed three key higher-order themes related to coaches' perceptions and recommendations for optimising the playing-up process: (a) strengthening communication approaches, (b) considering support from social agents, and (c) facilitating individual player development (see Table 1). Relating to the first higher-order theme, when reflecting on their experiences, participants shared various communication approaches that they believed could positively influence the playing-up process (i.e., strengthening communication approaches). Following this, participants highlighted the importance of utilising support from key social agents (e.g., coaches, parents, peers) within the playing-up process to ensure its effectiveness (i.e., considering support from social agents). Finally, participants also discussed the developmental impact of the playing-up process on the individual, recognising both its benefits and potential drawbacks across multiple dimensions, including technical, tactical, psychosocial, and physical development (i.e., facilitating individual player development).

### Strengthening communication approaches

Participants emphasised that effective communication approaches form the foundation of a successful

**Table 1.** High- and low-order themes describing coach perceptions of playing-up.

Higher-order themes	Lower-order themes	Example quotations
Strengthening communication approaches	Refine terminology used	"I would just say it's important to consider the language of use when talking about playing up. So we use as a club, we don't use the phrase play up or we avoid it in terms of communication with parents. We talk about playing across, and playing across age groups. So it's always just a point to consider in terms of trying to understand how that's being taken, playing across age groups rather than playing up just to try and reduce that stigma of playing up is good cause up is better than down". (Participant 9)
	Emphasise communication between coaches and players	"So as I said, we can't just chuck a kid into a team. . . . We need to make sure we if you go in to do it, you need to continuously make sure that it is the right thing. And you need to let the kid know that going up and then coming back down isn't a bad thing, and it's just kind of part of the journey into developing as a footballer". (Participant 3)
	Educate key stakeholders	"I think the important thing is just making sure that even though they are playing up or playing across whatever term you want to use, their parents knowing that just because they are playing [up] doesn't mean they're on track to be, you know, they're going to be a professional footballer or anything like that. I think it's just it's a very long journey and it's a way of stretching them in that moment. Because you never know, might be a time that they have to go back with their own age group". (Participant 5)
Considering support from social agents	Include parents in the process	"By having their parent by their side throughout, that was really crucial . . . because their parent was quite supportive and quite understanding and actually spoke to the child to get their opinion first. It may make the child feel a bit more comfortable in terms of playing up". (Participant 1)
	Involve coaches and multidisciplinary staff in decision-making	"I think generally speaking, in playing up it's all about the player and then understanding between you, your club, and your coaches understanding on why and what. Why is that best serving that individual development at that moment in time?" (Participant 4)
	Promote supportive peer environments	"That could be that kind of social panic, like being removed from one group that you're familiar with, you've built a fantastic bond with and then all of a sudden you're almost like the big fish in a big pond and you're being moved into a different area that can be quite frightening, especially for a child . . . it's really important that they kind of get their peers approval and they build close relationships, which is great". (Participant 1)
Facilitating individual player development	Challenge technical and tactical skills	"Technically I think they become a lot better [when a player is playing up]. Because they're having to, they're having to basically use the ball in smaller spaces, you're up against taller players, you're up against bigger players. You're going to have less time on the ball, so that technical ability really gets enhanced". (Participant 1)
	Reflect on psychosocial impact	"If they do get physically dominated or technically dominated then . . . [they] think maybe I'm not good enough to play a year up and maybe they should just stick to their own age group and that could affect the kids massively, because they'll go into the next game thinking the same thing. So yeah, just a confidence thing that might hinder them". (Participant 10)
	Consider physical competencies	"It is a big risk to go a year above a lot of the time because again they're stronger, they're quicker the boys could get, overall they could get physically hurt potentially. And they could get, you know, disheartened. . . ." (Participant 7)

playing-up experience. These communication approaches entailed the importance of the terminology used, the communication between coaches and players as paramount, and educating all key stakeholders (e.g., coaches, players, parents) involved in the playing-up process.

### *Refine terminology used*

From a language perspective, participants believed the term playing-up may lead to unintended interpretations from players and parents surrounding player development. Although playing-up can be an indicator of positive progression in player development, the process is utilised to challenge individuals at that point in time. According to Participant 5 (male, aged 27) "Some coaches, quite consciously may have used the words play across . . . And can get quite particular about the up and down sort of terminology, but I think it's just all about stretching and challenging the individual, and it's all about just knowing what,

what, what they sort of need", as such, utilising an alternative term such as "playing-across" was consistently noted by participants, as Participant 9 (male, aged 22) highlighted:

I would just say it's important to consider the language of use when talking about playing up. So we use as a club, we don't use the phrase play up or we avoid it in terms of communication with parents. We talk about playing across, and playing across age groups. So it's always just a point to consider in terms of trying to understand how that's being taken, playing across age groups rather than playing up just to try and reduce that stigma of playing up is good cause up is better than down.

Participant 9 (male, aged 22) felt that the way the terminology is presented to stakeholders, in this case parents, is important given its interpretation. They believed that the term 'playing-up' may be misinterpreted due to the inherent nature that 'up' is often better than 'down'. In general, other coaches felt the same way and discussed the importance of considering terminology when speaking with relevant players and/or parents.

Relating to playing-up, players can also be “playing-down”, which is a process whereby players will be playing in an age-group younger to facilitate their development. Given the possible stigma associated with this process (i.e., playing-down), the use of an alternative and more fluid term (e.g., “playing across”) to categorise both playing-up and playing-down may serve a better purpose, especially when communicating with players and parents, as highlighted by Participant 4 (male, aged 25):

So we take an individual development sort of perspective at our club that ultimately we want to best serve each individual around their development. ... we call it playing across instead of playing up because there certainly is a stigmatisation against playing up and down. And we want to make that a little bit more transparent and a little bit more fluid. Fluid because a lot of players have played across in the downward trajectory.

Therefore, refining the terminology of playing-up to remove stigma associated with players who may not be playing-up, or may even be playing-down, was highlighted as important, especially when communicating the process with players and parents.

### *Emphasise communication between coaches and players*

Participants believed that communication between coaches and players is essential for the playing-up process to be successful. A first important step is understanding whether this process is something the player would enjoy and if it is right for them, as highlighted by Participant 6 (male, aged 24):

First, I think the player should get asked or the parent should be consulted whether the player, do they want to go up or are the parents comfortable with it? Obviously if they're not, then I thought, I don't think it should be done. And obviously if they're not, if they're not going to go in and enjoy it, then what's the point?

Participant 6's comment was echoed by Participant 1 (male, aged 23), Participant 3 (male, aged 31), Participant 4 (male, aged 25), and Participant 8 (male, aged 31) as they discussed the importance of speaking with the player and understanding their willingness and readiness to take part in this process. Participant 1 (male, aged 23) mentioned, ‘... he [the player] might just want to play football with his friends. He doesn't care about being the best player. He might just think, well, I'm only enjoying my football because I'm playing with my teammates on the weekend from school'. Therefore, in such circumstances playing-up may not be beneficial for player development.

When reflecting on experiences as a coach in the playing-up process, Participant 8 (male, aged 31) mentioned how some parents' overpowering desire to push their child to play up often overshadowed the child's own voice and opinions causing, raising concern for the player's well-being. Participant 8 added, “this is their [the child's] career, not yours”. Accordingly, communication between coaches and players prior to playing-up becomes essential to understand the player's perspective which may be overlooked or overshadowed by other stakeholders, particularly parents. Importantly, if a player is already actively playing-up, communication between coaches and the player should also still be emphasised. Continued engagement with the player who is playing-up is important to ensure the player feels supported, as mentioned by Participant 1 (male, aged 23):

... have a chat with the child and just say right, you're going go and play with them now, but also catching up with them every time you've got the opportunity to just show them that you know, you're not just washing your hands with them, but having a genuine interest in their progression.

The playing-up process may vary across the season, as players may at times come back down to their own age-group after a short-term playing-up period. Given the potential negative psychological impact this could have on a youth player, communication between the coaches and player to clarify the playing-up process is essential to mitigating these potential negative effects. As mentioned by Participant 3 (male, aged 25), “We can't just chuck a kid into a team. ... We need to make sure we if you go in to do it [playing-up], you need to continuously make sure that it is the right thing. And you need to let the kid know that going up and then coming back down isn't a bad thing, and it's just kind of part of the journey into developing as a footballer”. This highlights the need for consistent communication with players during all stages of the playing-up process.

### *Educate key stakeholders*

Key stakeholders (e.g., coaches, players, parents) often influence the experience of the playing-up process for the player. However, most participants noted how many stakeholders are unaware of the rationale and what the playing-up process entails. Specifically, referring to parents, Participant 9 (male, aged 22) noted, ‘I don't think parents understand enough what the rationale is for stretching someone [playing-up], and then I don't think they consider what the best way is to support them’. For this reason, educating key stakeholders through communication efforts has been highlighted as essential by

participants to ensure an effective and positive playing-up experience. As Participant 4 (male, aged 25) highlights:

The other thing that I do sometimes find hard is the expectation from significant others. That can be a challenge to manage at times because your expectancy is once it's happened once [playing up], that will forever happen. That can't be the case because there's so many, there's so many methods to the madness that I think people don't quite understand how much in depth conversation has gone into why these things happen, and why those things happen. So yeah, sometimes managing a little bit of expectation and sometimes managing understanding, maybe that's not the right word, actually educating, educating why we do things and what it does for their player and their child.

Participant 4's comment exemplified the need for educating key stakeholders such as parents on the process. Given that playing-up may indicate that a player is progressing at a higher rate than others, parents may misinterpret this process which is ultimately aimed at developing the player. This statement was shared by multiple coaches, for example when reflecting on their experience Participant 9 (male, aged 22) shares, "I've had experience where parents have asked for them to be stretched to ages up. They've gone. Oh, but we should be playing under 11. He should be playing, you know, we want stretching [playing-up] under 13. That's not your decision". Further, Participant 5 (male, aged 27) notes, 'I think the important thing is just making sure that even though they are playing up or playing across whatever term you want to use, their parents knowing that just because they are playing [up] doesn't mean they're on track to be, you know, they're going to be a professional footballer or anything like that'. These comments were echoed by Participant 3 (male, aged 25) and Participant 8 (male, aged 31), highlighting the importance of educating key stakeholders on the playing-up process to mitigate misconceptions and enhance clarity.

From the perspective of a different key stakeholder, specifically coaches involved in the playing-up process, participants expressed that education initiatives from the club or relevant specialists would be beneficial to enhance the overall process. For instance, Participant 7 (male, aged 42) highlights different methods in which coaches can be better informed on best practices associated with the playing-up process by suggesting, '... just giving us [coaches] direction or some parameters to work around or some, you know, regulations'. Participant 1 (male, aged 23) and Participant 3 (male, aged 25) voiced similar opinions during their interviews, as their comments emphasised ensuring sufficient

guidance for all key stakeholders, especially the coaches, during the playing-up process to maximise its effectiveness in developing youth football players.

### *Considering support from social agents*

Relevant to enhancing the playing-up process, and beyond communication approaches, participants believed various relevant key social agents (e.g., coaches, parents, peers) influence the experience of the playing-up process for the player. As such, leveraging key stakeholders, specifically parents, coaches, and peers, may enhance the overall playing-up experience for youth players as noted by participants.

### *Include parents in the process*

As parents typically spend a lot of time together with their child, in the (e.g., watching, car journey etc.) and beyond the football environment, parents are influential social agents in the playing-up process. Participants emphasised the importance of utilising support from the parents in order to ensure the success of the playing-up process. Specifically, Participant 1 (male, aged 23) noted:

By having their parent by their side throughout, that was really crucial ... because their parent was quite supportive and quite understanding and actually spoke to the child to get their opinion first. It may make the child feel a bit more comfortable in terms of playing up.

Reflecting on their specific experience as a coach with the playing-up process, this comment from Participant 1 reflects the importance of leveraging parents to support children in the playing-up process. Specifically, in this situation, rather than have the coach speak directly to the player regarding the playing-up process, the parent were the first to be introduced the idea and concept. By incorporating them in the process, the participant believed that the player would feel more comfortable and supported, thereby making it an easier process for the youth player to embrace. Participant 7 (male, aged 42) and Participant 5 (male, aged 27) expressed similar thoughts, adding that this approach allows the parent to gauge the child's readiness and enthusiasm, thus ensuring that the transition was approached thoughtfully and in the best interest of the child. However, both participants also noted that this approach requires caution, as there may be negative experiences when attempting to include parents in the process. During his exposure to playing-up in youth football, Participant 7 (male, aged 42) notes, 'I've also had a couple of parents who were very reserved and didn't really want that [playing-up] to happen, because they were worried about the negative

impact it may have on their son in terms of confidence and playing against stronger opposition and you know a bit more competitive as well, so it can go each way". Participant 5 (male, aged 27) expands on parents' role in the process by also suggesting that they should have confidence in this strategy. There may be cases where parents believe their child should be playing up, however, an effective solution is to discuss the process and where the child may currently be in it. Further, Participant 5 adds, "It's just about trusting that process and if a significant other doesn't trust that process then you have the honest conversation, should you really be in the building then? and that's not in any, you know, in any animosity, that's just, you know, if you're not going to trust the process, then there's no point you being there. You know, because we're all there for the boys at the end of the day like coaches, parents and analysis physios, etcetera and everyone is there for the boys". This further highlights the importance of parents' to also trust in the strategic plan for their child's development in football.

### *Involve coaches and multidisciplinary staff in decision-making*

Leveraging input from coaches and multidisciplinary staff (e.g., sport scientists, strength and conditioning coaches, performance analysts) in the playing-up decision-making process was highlighted by participants. Participant 4 (male, aged 25) noted, "I think generally speaking, in playing up it's all about the player and then understanding between you, your club, and your coaches understanding why and what. Why is that best serving that individual development at that moment in time?" Generally, participants believed that having the right support group, coaches and other support staff in the club will enhance the process and ensure that playing-up is the right process for the individual player at that time.

Some participants noted that their respective clubs have review processes with multiple stakeholders involved. Specifically, Participant 5 (male, aged 27) notes that their club environment player reviews would be conducted over certain periods and inform the group of coaches and staff if the player was ready to play-up. At their club, Participant 5 (male, aged 27) highlights that "It's all based around reviews and if that certain player is having a good review period or a very good review periods and then actually that the conversation is currently, can we stretch and challenge them more and put them with an older age group". Importantly, participants highlight the review process is not necessarily just coaches. Participant 4 (male, aged 25) outlines their review committee at their club for such processes: 'We have

a multidisciplinary team that will sit down with, so that will be strength and conditioning. That will be the physios that will be the cell leads from elevens to thirteens and the YP [youth phase] as well, head of coaching, academy manager and then we'll kind of sit down and go well, this is the pros to this and this is the cons'. Therefore, by involving other club staff who may have valuable insights into the process from different perspectives, participants felt better-informed decisions could be made on if a player is ready to play-up.

Other participants shared differing perspectives to Participant 4 (male, aged 25) and Participant 5 (male, aged 27) and the support received in the playing-up process. Participant 7 (male, aged 42) noted, "Given how much pressure and how much spotlight is on football and teams and players and kids these days with academy, it would be great to have a bit more. Some kind of support from the club itself, just giving us direction or some parameters to work around or some, you know, regulations". Indeed, given the different experiences amongst the coaches, and the differences in their respective club environments, different perspectives on support with the playing-up process from their clubs exist.

In general, participants believed that without the right support system and reasoning for the playing-up process, negative consequences are more likely to arise. In reflecting on the playing-up process, Participant 9 (male, aged 22) encourages stakeholders such as coaches to ask and answer, "Is it the right moment? Is it the right time for them to come up?" Participants encouraged involving and collaborating with all coaches and support staff to gain comprehensive information and make an informed decision on initiating the playing-up process for an individual player.

### *Promote supportive peer environments*

When players are playing-up, they are immersed in a new environment, where social identity and relationships with peers may not currently exist. Participants highlighted the difficulties associated with leaving a familiar environment. Because of this, a common behavior noted amongst participants when working with players playing-up is their quiet nature. Participant 1 (male, aged 23) elaborated by explaining "That could be that kind of social panic, like being removed from one group that you're familiar with, you've built a fantastic bond with and then all of a sudden you're almost like the big fish in a small pond and you're being moved into a different area that can be quite frightening, especially for a child". Given that the player is chronologically younger coupled with their unfamiliarity with his new environment, the reluctance to engage in social

interaction or break out of silence to speak with other players is not surprising. As such, an environment which promotes positive peer support will help enhance the playing-up experience for the player and create new social bonds and connections. In fact, in promotion of supportive peer environments during the playing-up process, Participant 1 (male, aged 23) added to his statement by expressing that “it’s really important that they kind of get their peers approval and there they build close relationships, which is great”.

Although participants did discuss the quiet nature of players, and importance of peer support they noted positive instances where players worked together, demonstrating demonstrated a supportive environment in order to make the player playing-up feel more comfortable. For example, Participant 5 (male, aged 27) recalled an instance from his coaching experience in the playing-up process by noting, “It was almost the boys trying to do everything to try and get this player [playing-up] to score, which was quite nice. You know, just seeing them really rally around the younger player was quite nice”. Such environments may help enhance the overall experience ultimately provoking positive development of the youth player in the playing-up process.

### *Facilitating individual player development*

Coaches emphasised the value of the playing-up process as a key developmental tool. Specifically, coaches noted its capacity to challenge players’ technical and tactical abilities, and support psychosocial growth by exposing them to more demanding environments. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of considering the physical readiness of the player to ensure appropriate levels of challenge. When managed effectively, coaches strongly perceived the playing-up process offers tailored and bespoke developmental opportunities that align with each player’s individual needs.

### *Challenge technical and tactical skills*

Participants emphasised that playing-up provided players with opportunities to develop their technical and tactical skills due to the increased challenges presented in older age categories. These challenges often included operating in more complex game environments (e.g., moving from 7 vs. 7 game formats to 9 vs. 9, or 11 vs. 11), which require players to make quicker decisions in constrained time and space. Participant 1 (male, aged 23), Participant 4 (male, aged 25), Participant 7 (male, aged 42), and Participant 10 (male, aged 22) noted that such environments demanded a higher level of technical precision

and tactical understanding. Participant 1 (male, aged 23) specifically noted, “Technically I think they become a lot better. Because they’re having to basically use the ball in smaller spaces, you’re up against taller players, you’re up against bigger players. You’re going to have less time on the ball, so that technical ability really gets enhanced”. Similarly, Participant 4 (male, aged 25), Participant 7 (male, aged 42), and Participant 10 (male, aged 22) emphasised that the playing-up process offers a chance to challenge players further, particularly within the technical domain. Participants also perceived that the tactical competencies of players were enhanced from exposure to higher-level play. Specifically, Participant 9 (male, aged 22) articulated, the new playing context altered the affordances available to players, forcing them to adapt their decision-making. This shift in affordances, which includes faster game tempo and greater tactical variability (e.g., moving from 7 vs. 7 game formats to 9 vs. 9), provoked improvement in tactical competencies.

Although most participants acknowledged the positive benefits of the playing-up process for enhancing players’ technical and tactical skills, they also emphasised and added the need to pay close attention to the context in which this development occurs, and the processes used. More specifically, participants highlighted that the training environment, game design, and formats must be carefully tailored or to ensure developmental experiences remain appropriate and beneficial for the individual player playing-up. Placing a talented player in an older age group does not guarantee meaningful development if the conditions do not support their learning needs. For example, Participant 4 (male, aged 25) described a scenario involving a player who excelled in one-on-one dribbling situations. If this player moves from a 5 vs. 5 or 6 vs. 6 game formats, where frequent touches on the ball and individual actions are more common compared to a 9 vs. 9 game format, the increase in player numbers may limit their opportunities to engage in the types of actions they excel at. As such, this could reduce the effectiveness of the playing-up process. Participant 4 (male, aged 25) further explained, “. . . your actions as a dribbler will be decreased, so the level of challenge isn’t appropriate because they won’t get to be good at the things that they’re good at as many times as possible”. To address this, coaches must consider creative modifications to the games programme, such as organising smaller-sided games within the older age group to ensure that younger players continue to receive appropriate levels of challenge and engagement. These considerations may help maximise the experience and growth in technical and tactical skills for the player playing-up.

### *Reflect on psychosocial impact*

Coaches also identified significant psychological and social benefits associated with the playing-up process. Participants often interpreted the opportunity to play up as a reward for players that would contribute positively to their motivation, enjoyment, and a confidence boost. Moreover, Participant 3 (male, aged 25) emphasised that the experience could enhance both resilience and risk-taking behaviours in players. From a social standpoint, Participant 3 (male, aged 25), Participant 4 (male, aged 25), and Participant 5 (male, aged 27) highlighted the potential benefits given the interactions with older and potentially more mature teammates, offering further developmental benefits, particularly during informal interactions or individual practice time, noting that these moments offer valuable developmental benefits related to social adaptability.

Participant 1 (male, aged 23), Participant 3 (male, aged 25), and Participant 4 (male, aged 25) also highlighted the value of playing-up in placing players in environments where they are no longer dominant, thereby fostering psychosocial benefits such as humility, increased self-awareness, and personal growth. As an example, Participant 4 (male, aged 25) noted playing-up as ‘...valuable tools because suddenly they go “oh ok, I’ve got to learn now by not being, I might not be the best player today” and they’ve got to sort of develop their own sort of coping mechanisms to overcome that’. Interestingly, exposure to new coaching voices was also seen as an important psychosocial benefit associated with playing-up by some participants. Participant 4 further explained that interacting with different coaches during this process allows players to receive diverse feedback, ultimately allowing for new experiences which may enhance and inspire their development.

Despite these potential benefits highlighted, coaches cautioned against assuming that all players are mentally ready to handle the demands of playing-up. Participant 1 (male, aged 23) and Participant 7 (male, aged 42) stressed the importance of assessing a player’s psychological readiness before this process, warning that young players may struggle to cope with increased mental demands in the playing up process, which could lead to negative experiences and hinder long-term development. Coaches were encouraged to evaluate whether players had social connections within the new group, as such relationships could ease the transition and support psychosocial adjustment.

Participants also acknowledged the potential ripple effects of the playing-up process on peers within both the original and receiving teams. Players left behind may experience doubt or decreased self-esteem, wondering why they were not selected. Conversely, introducing

younger players into older squads could re-energise competition, motivating older players to maintain their performance levels, as noted by Participant 9 (male, aged 22). These contrasting psychosocial dynamics underline the need for coaches to consider not only the developmental readiness of the individual player but also the wider impact on other older and younger members of the team(s).

### *Consider physical competencies*

Most participants highlighted physical development and competency as essential considerations in the playing-up process. Specifically, coaches highlighted that playing-up could be a strategic way to challenge early maturing players who may be physically dominating within their age group. Without this challenge (i.e., playing-up), early maturing players may overly rely on their physical strengths, potentially attenuating developing technical and tactical skills that are beneficial in the long term. Indeed, multiple coaches shared this view and believed playing-up offered an avenue to continue their physical development, while challenging technical and tactical abilities in a meaningful way.

Nonetheless, participants agreed that physical safety must remain the top priority. Participant 7 (male, aged 42) highlighted, ‘It is a big risk to go a year above a lot of the time because again their stronger, their quicker the boys could get, overall, they could get physically hurt potentially and they could get, you know, disheartened’. Coaches also pointed to scenarios where physically underdeveloped but technically proficient players struggled with the demands of playing against larger and more powerful opponents. Participant 3 (male, aged 25) emphasised ‘At the end of the day, our job as a coach is to keep the kids safe. And if we’re putting them a year up because he’s good at football, but he’s not the right size to play a year up, it can result in a probably a nasty injury or a kid just want not wanting to play football anymore’. Accordingly, participants identified the physical gap between age groups as a potential risk, particularly given the variability in growth and maturation among younger players. Indeed, the risk of injury and emotional discouragement is higher when players are significantly smaller or weaker than their opponents. Therefore, coaches must carefully assess physical readiness and consistently review this aspect throughout its execution.

## **Discussion**

The current study aimed to explore youth football academy coaches’ perceptions of the playing-up process and how it can be used as a tool to support player

development. In line with the growing emphasis on creating more individualised and equitable talent development environments for youth athletes (e.g., Kelly et al., *in press*; Till and Baker, 2020), our findings contribute timely and novel insights to an emerging area of research. Key findings revealed that participants generally described playing-up as a potentially valuable, yet highly nuanced strategy to holistically manipulate challenge dynamics, one that requires thoughtful planning, effective communication, and strong stakeholder collaboration to avoid possible (unintended) negative consequences.

Talent development in football is increasingly criticised for over-relying on fixed chronological age groupings, contributing to issues such as RAEs and RGEs (Kelly & Williams, 2020; Radnor et al., 2023). Playing-up, whereby selected players compete in older age groups, may act as a corrective mechanism by matching challenge to developmental readiness rather than age alone, aligning with calls to move beyond a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to development (Cumming et al., 2018; Kelly et al., *in press*). However, similar to educational acceleration (Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016), playing-up is unlikely to be universally beneficial and instead appears to support development only when carefully individualised and supported by appropriate conditions (Goldman, Turnidge, Kelly, et al., 2021), which has also been reflected in our findings.

Participants highlighted communication as a cornerstone of the playing-up process, beginning with how playing-up is described and interpreted. Echoing critiques of talent development environments that overly valorise performance and winning at youth level (Kelly et al., 2021), many coaches were concerned that the term "playing-up" may unintentionally convey superiority and foster stigma against those not selected. The suggested alternative, "playing-across", reflects a more neutral and development-focused narrative. This may help mitigate fixed mindsets among players, parents, and even coaches. This linguistic shift aligns with broader critiques of selection practices in youth sport, where early selection and hierarchical labelling may have long-term effects on players' effort, self-efficacy, and developmental trajectories (Grainger et al., 2025; McAuley et al., 2022). Indeed, previous research in athlete development has highlighted the power of language, with it being able to shape expectations and stakeholder investment (Johnston et al., 2023; McAuley et al., 2023). Adopting more appropriate terminology and being consistent with communication may help normalise fluid player movement between age groups during development. This may allow coaches to create a more transparent and inclusive environment that

reduces perceived status differentials and enhances the understanding of players and parents.

In line with clear communication, participants repeatedly emphasised the need for improved stakeholder education. One of the key reasons for this was so coaches, parents, and even the players themselves avoid misconceptions that playing-up is a direct indicator of developmental potential. These findings echo concerns raised by previous research with regards to the disconnect that exists between research and practice in talent development systems (Kelly et al., *in press*; Till & Baker, 2020). At present, parents in particular often lack insight into the rationale behind development and/or selection decisions, which may facilitate misplaced expectations or place unnecessary pressure on the player. This is especially important in light of the persistent biases highlighted in research on RAEs and RGEs (Kelly, Finnegan, et al., 2023; Radnor et al., 2023), which may shape perceptions of "talent" that are based on older relative age and advanced biological age advantages, rather than long-term potential when these age and maturation-based differences are more attenuated (Doncaster et al., 2024; McAuley et al., 2024).

Coaches also highlighted the need for stronger institutional support and clearer policies to guide developmental decisions such as playing-up. They described the value of multidisciplinary review processes that consider contextual factors like age phase (e.g., FDP, YDP) and holistic player data (i.e., technical, tactical, physical, psychosocial). While this approach reflects the multidimensional nature of youth football development (Kelly et al., 2021), the present findings suggest that the balance of challenge within these domains remains most critical in considerations. Challenge Point Theory (Guadagnoli & Lee, 2004) provides a useful framework for interpreting this balance (i.e., when the demands of the training or playing environment slightly exceed a player's current capabilities, skill acquisition is optimised). For example, technical/tactical features differentiated those who played-up compared to those who did not within the FDP (Kelly et al., 2021), which resonates with the findings of this current study whereby coaches often use playing-up to further challenge these skills. However, achieving this balance requires careful consideration of the individual and the environment they are entering. As highlighted by participants in this study, placing a player into an older age group with fewer opportunities to engage in their strengths (e.g., one-on-one situations), may hinder rather than support development.

Whilst playing-up may support socio-emotional development in a similar manner to accelerated educational environments (Sayler & Brookshire, 1993), the coaches also noted that the importance of parental

support and peer acceptance as players are isolated from familiar teammates and/or may be placed in a more socially unsupportive environment. Such transitions can provoke uncertainty and anxiety, as players lose established social bonds and are required to navigate new group dynamics represented through Participant 1's statement, where they explained "That could be that kind of social panic, like being removed from one group that you're familiar with, you've built a fantastic bond with and then all of a sudden you're almost like the big fish in a big pond and you're being moved into a different area that can be quite frightening". These experiences can resemble the *big-fish-little-pond effect* (BFLPE), whereby individuals shift from being a top performer among same-aged peers to being one of many in a higher-performing group which can negatively affect athletes' confidence and social integration (Becker et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2008).

It is equally important to recognise, however, that some individuals may experience *basking-in-reflected-glory effects* (BIRGEs), whereby their self-concept is bolstered by association with older or more advanced peers (Cialdini et al., 1976; Preckel & Brüll, 2010). These contrasting effects and outcomes, underpinned by integrating into such environments, highlight that playing-up should not be used uniformly or be considered as a heterogeneous experience that is a guaranteed recipe for success. Rather, consistent with recent research (Goldman, Turnidge, Kelly, et al., 2021; Kelly, Goldman, et al., 2023), playing-up should be approached as one of many tools available to create more appropriate, individualised learning environments. Participants' views aligned with this perspective. As Participant 5 explains, 'the important thing is just making sure that even though they are playing up or playing across whatever term you want to use, their parents knowing that just because they are playing [up] doesn't mean they're on track to be, you know, they're going to be a professional footballer or anything like that. I think it's just it's a very long journey and it's a way of stretching them in that moment'. Coaches, therefore, serve a crucial role as a mediator between these social agents and must consider not just the holistic data and stakeholder input, but also how the player themselves feel about the opportunity to ensure their needs and voice are being adequately reflected during the decision-making process. Indeed, participants in this study underscored the need to continually monitor and review players' experiences, echoing the literature's emphasis on implementing processes that facilitate developmental fluidity (Cumming et al., 2018).

## Limitations

The present study provides novel insights into coaches' perceptions of the playing-up process within youth football. However, several limitations should be acknowledged to help better contextualise the findings. First, although purposeful sampling facilitated rich, in-depth exploration of coaches' lived experiences, the relatively small sample size ( $n = 10$ ) inherently limits the contexts to which findings may be transferrable. Whilst generalisation is not the purpose of qualitative research, the sample was comprised exclusively of coaches from United Kingdom-based male football academies, which may not fully represent the breadth of playing-up practices across different footballing cultures, regions, genders, or developmental systems. Future research should seek to include a more diverse range of coaches from various countries to better capture potential differences in perception related to gender as well as cultural and geographical background. The study also focused specifically on coaches operating within the FDP. As such, the findings reflect playing-up practices and perceptions at an early stage of player development and may not fully translate to older age phases, such as the YDP, where different or more characteristics (i.e., technical/tactical, physical, psychological, social) may influence findings (Kelly et al., 2021). This would be an interesting research avenue to explore further in the future. Additionally, the researchers' background in youth football coaching and talent development may have influenced question framing and data interpretation. Social desirability bias may also have influenced coaches' responses, potentially leading them to emphasise the positive aspects of playing-up in alignment with environmental norms (i.e., high-performance youth academies).

As this study examined coaches' perceptions of the playing-up process, rather than measuring developmental outcomes associated with the practice, the participants discussed *perceived* benefits and challenges of playing-up, but the *actual* developmental trajectories of players involved were not empirically assessed. Future research may benefit from employing longitudinal and/or mixed-methods designs to evaluate how playing-up impacts the development of youth athletes over time, their (un)successful transitions towards adulthood, and how this corresponds to coaches' perceptions. Moreover, exploring the perspectives of the players themselves would further enrich understanding of this process.

## Practical applications

The findings from this study provide several actionable insights for practitioners and policy makers seeking to

optimise developmental environments by using playing-up as a tool to more appropriately challenge youth athletes:

- Adopt a holistic assessment approach: Evaluate players' readiness to play-up across technical, tactical, physical, and psychosocial dimensions rather than relying on single performance metrics.
- Implement structured evaluation frameworks: Establish standardised procedures for assessing suitability to play-up, incorporating input from coaches, sport scientists, welfare staff, and other necessary key stakeholders.
- Provide individualised support and monitoring: Offer ongoing psychological and developmental support for players who move into older age groups, with regular progress reviews to manage potential challenges.
- Promote flexible grouping policies: Encourage governing bodies and clubs to adopt bio-banding or development-based grouping to more effectively accommodate individual differences in maturation and reduce stigma around both playing-up and playing-down.
- Integrate evidence-based coach education: Embed content on flexible age-grouping strategies within coach development programmes to improve decision-making, reduce bias, and promote equitable development opportunities.
- Ensure transparent communication: Involve players, parents, and other relevant key stakeholders in playing-up decisions, setting clear expectations and fostering shared understanding and support.

Through these practices, football academies may be able to more effectively employ playing-up to enhance player development whilst minimising the possibility of (unintended) negative consequences.

## Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of *how* and *why* the playing-up process is implemented and how it is experienced by coaches within football academies, a previously unexplored demographic. Our findings extend the limited prior research in this area by providing a better understanding of the complexity involved with 'playing-up' and the importance of effective communication, stakeholder collaboration, and individualised planning. These insights highlight that clubs should reconsider how they communicate player movement across age groups, invest in stakeholder education

to reduce developmental misconceptions, and develop formalised review processes that involve multidisciplinary characteristics. Furthermore, researchers should continue prioritizing research *for* sport rather than *on* it – emphasising context-sensitive guidance and co-production with practitioners. Future research should investigate longitudinal outcomes of playing-up, explore players' own experiences across different developmental phases, and examine how different cultures and policies shape playing-up practices and perceptions across varied football (and other sport) settings.

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