

Agreeing the optimal methods for coaching psychosocial attributes in youth soccer: An e-Delphi study

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how to deliver sport psychology in soccer is an important consideration for coaches and sport psychology practitioners. Different models can be adopted but may not determine which methods are perceived as most important in applied settings. This study investigated approaches for the development of psychosocial characteristics in youth soccer players. A two-round e-Delphi approach was conducted with 12 coaches and eight practitioners in round one with 11 coaches and five practitioners completing round two. Consensus was established on convergence and homogeneity, where a minimum of 70% of scores fell within ± 1 standard deviation of the mean. Round one sought to understand which methods might best promote psychosocial development, generating 29 summary statements across 14 themes following Framework Method analysis. Following round two, five of these statements met the pre-determined acceptability threshold for consensus: 1) taking an empathetic approach to development; 2) collaboration and alignment with all stakeholders; 3) coaches consistently leading by example through holding their own conduct to high standards; 4) encouraging player reflection on experience, and; 5) incorporating game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development. This study identified where coaches and sport psychology practitioners shared perspectives on important methods for the development of psychosocial characteristics in youth footballers. The offered consensus around best practices can be adopted by coaches or sport psychologists working in youth soccer, informing stakeholders constructing sport psychology provisions for young soccer players.

1. Introduction

Establishing a programme of sport psychology within soccer is a complex task, with a range of potentially important topics and attributes proposed in previous research (Forsman et al., 2016; Gledhill & Harwood, 2014; Harwood et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2022). In sport, “psychosocial” is defined as the interrelation of individual and social factors (Gledhill et al., 2017). Such skills are considered to be an internal and interpersonal range of attributes that are interwoven with the talent development environment (Larsen et al., 2012). When designing programmes and tailoring interventions, decisions regarding which concepts to target must be made based on the needs that are specific to that context (Forsman et al., 2016). Yet, understanding which methods and

approaches are best for developing psychosocial characteristics remains ambiguous, with a need for clearer scaffolding to construct such provision (Dean et al., 2022). Development of psychosocial attributes can be beneficial for a young person in developing life skills across different domains (Kramers et al., 2023). The personal assets, characteristics, and skills that constitute life skills can be transferred by the learner to other contexts they may encounter in the future (Pierce et al., 2017). This is pertinent in youth sport where long-term athletic development can promote physical fitness, health, and psychosocial wellbeing (Till et al., 2022).

Attention to psychosocial development is, therefore, important for young people in life beyond sport, but can also support performance development. Evidence drawn from professional soccer club academies

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acknowledges that long-term holistic development – including psychosocial attributes – fosters well-rounded individuals who are capable of progressing to high performance levels (Barracough et al., 2022; Ryom et al., 2020). Where young players are acknowledged as individuals embedded in an environment, psychosocial skills can facilitate positive development holistically and not limited to sport alone (Larsen et al., 2014; Ryom et al., 2020). Psychological and social skills can also contribute to positive youth development through the medium of sport across competitive and recreational levels (Harwood et al., 2015). Developing a better understanding of what are considered the most effective practices for developing attributes will be beneficial to those looking to incorporate approaches within a talent development programme.

The development of soccer players is multi-faceted, dependent on the physical, technical, tactical, and – often with a lesser emphasis – psychosocial components (Barracough et al., 2022). The approaches adopted by sport psychology practitioners and coaches to develop psychosocial attributes are broad, leading to a lack of precision that might hamper effective delivery in applied settings (Dean et al., 2022). Published research has explored the practices and challenges of these roles in establishing long-term athletic development, including psychosocial factors, illustrating a divergence in consensus relating to the practices of embedding sport psychology across sports (Till et al., 2022). In soccer, studies have outlined how different playing positions have different technical, tactical, psychological, perceptual, motor, and decision-making skill requirements (Roberts et al., 2019). There remains little evidence of what constitutes contextually transferable principles for integrating sport psychology with an academy programme (Green et al., 2020). Research examining the experiences of sport psychology practitioners, particularly at elite levels, has suggested a lack of guidance and specificity regarding how a provision of sport psychology should be delivered (Dean et al., 2022). Therefore, clarity should be sought for how to provide sport psychology support for youth soccer players that can promote the development of psychosocial skills.

In applied settings, there are multiple approaches used to promote the development of specifically psychosocial skills. Recently, this aspect of *doing* sport psychology has gained traction as part of the talent development process in soccer resulting in a breadth of interventions targeting the psychosocial development of youth players (Williams et al., 2020). These have included programmes promoting coping strategies (Tamminen et al., 2019), developing psychological skills (Mitchell et al., 2022), and attempting to improve constructs such as resilience (Gervis & Goldman, 2020). Deployed approaches have included sport psychology practitioners working either indirectly through coaches integrating principles during technical training sessions (Diment, 2014), offering a direct provision of regular workshops with players (Gervis & Goldman, 2020), or by additionally engaging with parents (Tamminen et al., 2019). In some cases, players made not have access to a sport psychologist and a coach may adopt this responsibility of promoting their holistic development as a young athlete. This research suggests that engagement with coaches was valuable for promoting psychosocial development but so too was capturing the views of sport psychology practitioners who may often be solely responsible for cultivating sport psychology support.

The responsibility of promoting psychological development may lie with a sport psychologist, coach, or both, dependent on the context of the setting in which it is being deployed. Both coaches and sport psychology practitioners emerge as sharing responsibility for the provision of sport psychology (Harwood et al., 2015). The underpins the importance of having a shared understanding and agreed methods to ensure a coherent and consistent approach is afforded to young players. A recent study illustrated the need for such synergy by outlining the importance of consulting coaches to identify relevant strategies for the facilitation of psychosocial development in soccer (Wixey et al., 2024). Many interventions recognise the role of key stakeholders such as coaches and parents in developing psychosocial skills, irrespective of population,

format, and intended outcome (Diment, 2014; Harwood et al., 2015; Rossing et al., 2022; Wixey et al., 2024). Parents may also contribute to the effective delivery of a programme of psychosocial development, accounting for players' time away from the training ground.

In soccer contexts the 5Cs model has commonly been adopted as a framework for development (Harwood, 2008). This model focuses on the promotion of Communication, Commitment, Concentration, Control, and Confidence (i.e., the 5Cs), through engagement with parents or coaches, to facilitate psychosocial development of youth soccer players in academy environments (Harwood, 2008; Harwood et al., 2015; Kramers et al., 2023; Steptoe et al., 2018). The 5Cs endorses an integrative approach to sport psychology, working through others to promote development (Harwood et al., 2015). To better understand how such interventions are perceived by players, Harwood and colleagues (Harwood et al., 2015) included social validation questions within their data collection procedure to capture reflections and perceived benefits from the participants. Published accounts of delivering the 5Cs approach have offered practical insight for creating and integrating this programme within soccer academy environments. For example, embracing coach observations or parent education may contribute to the development of psychosocial skills at home (Mitchell et al., 2022; Steptoe et al., 2018; Tamminen et al., 2019). Despite robust theoretical grounding, there is a lack of informed consensus for universal methods which promote psychosocial development in talent development settings (Mitchell et al., 2022; Saward et al., 2020; Wixey et al., 2024). Coaches may offer an overarching perspective of the player's journey whereas practitioners can contribute methods to support embedding sport psychology. Eliciting insights from experienced coaches and practitioners' perceptions of methods could therefore enhance the delivery and integration of psychosocial development into soccer coaching.

With an extensive range of possible features, it has been argued that understanding, designing, embedding, and delivering sport psychology is paramount (Bergkamp et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019). Accordingly, there is a need to seek agreement from experienced stakeholders to develop a consensus of the "best practice" approaches for delivering and developing psychological attributes within soccer talent development environments. This study aims to qualitatively investigate stakeholder perceptions of methods deployed to support the development of psychosocial characteristics in young soccer players. It is intended to adopt the findings to shape sport psychology provisions in youth soccer contexts.

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

Seeking to establish agreement on optimal approaches, a modified Delphi polling approach was adopted in the form of an online e-Delphi design (Meshkat et al., 2014). Given the heterogeneity of practices around psychosocial development in youth soccer, a research method capable of structuring agreement among experts from diverse professional backgrounds was required. Delphi polling was developed as a method for gaining consensus on specific topics from different expert sources to address issues which have little clarity and is therefore considered as appropriate for the present study (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963; Kaynak and Macaulay, 1984). Delphi studies are shown to embrace participative epistemology, through engagement with stakeholders by enabling those participating to see the emergence of the findings (Feddersen et al., 2021; Tod, 2019). This approach has multiple features including offering multiple iterations, the ability to provide feedback, and adopting electronic means (i.e., online platforms) that enable online consultation allowing for a wide geographical reach and flexibility for professional samples (Chalmers and Armour, 2019; Hong and Coffee, 2018; Humphrey-Murto et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). Reflecting changes made from the original Delphi method, adaptations

were intended to ensure engagement with the process by a number of coaches working professionally.

Online delivery may be considered a modification from the original methodology that permits efficient communication which accommodates the participants' occupational demands (Meshkat et al., 2014). An alternative, in-person, design may have exposed social or selection biases rather than objective representing the field (Chalmers and Armour, 2019). The remote nature of collecting responses provides convenience for the sample; allowing participants to contribute at a time that suited them as opposed to committing to a fixed time (Kaynak and Macaulay, 1984). Given the range of clubs and performance environments, conducting such a project in-person would have produced great challenges in identifying a suitably time and location. This approach intended to capture a diversity of insights reflecting the requirement of coordination between stakeholders to meet psychological needs (Hauw et al., 2022). Approaching both experienced coaches and sport psychology practitioners was intended to reflect the multi-disciplinary approach to player development in soccer (Larsen et al., 2012). The Delphi technique also permitted the panel to anonymously express their views qualitatively, before refining, clarifying, or changing these during rounds of development and prior to quantitative analysis (Quartioli et al., 2019).

By seeking consensus, this research design supports the practical application of the study's aims; to equip stakeholders with agreed approaches for promoting psychosocial development in young soccer players. Consensus may constitute a contextually-grounded notion of best – or effective – practice with respect to the participants' demographics within the United Kingdom.

2.1.1. Sampling and participants

Previous research advocates that a sample size within the ranges of 11–25 presents effective execution of the Delphi method (Chalmers and Armour, 2019; Diamond et al., 2014; Larkin and O'Connor, 2017; Quartioli et al., 2022). A purposive sample of soccer coaches ($n = 12$) and sport psychology practitioners ($n = 8$) were recruited for this study. Expert purposive sampling was adopted to ensure participants represented demonstrable expertise in their field. This required an aspect of intensity sampling, to elicit responses from insightful participants, facilitated by an aspect of criterion sampling, as determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Patton, 2002). Inclusion criteria were defined as (a) minimum five years' experience working in a youth soccer environment; (b) qualified to a minimum of UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) B Licence or HCPC (Health and Care Professions Council) registration as a practitioner psychologist; (c) presently or recently working in youth football. Exclusion criteria were (a) not demonstrating appropriate experience; (b) not holding the minimum qualification levels; (c) not presently engaged in youth football environments. Whilst a minimum of five years' experience was applied uniformly across both professional groups, it is acknowledged that career trajectories differ structurally between coaching and sport psychology. Coaches in this sample held substantially greater experience ($M = 28$ years) relative to sport psychology practitioners ($M = 8.75$ years). This disparity reflects the comparatively recent professionalisation of applied sport psychology in the United Kingdom, and should be considered when interpreting the relative weighting of contributions across groups.

Of the participants who agreed to detail their demographics, all identified as male with 75% based in Scotland and 25% based in England. Coaches represented an average age of 41 years with an average of 28 years' experience and held either a UEFA A Licence or UEFA Pro Licence. The results were generated by self-reported demographic data which could have been interpreted differently across participants as to their starting point in coaching. Sport psychology practitioners had an average age of 32 years with 8.75 years' experience of applied practice and six of eight having a Doctor of Philosophy qualification. Where multiple responses could be indicated, all participants registered as

working in a Performance environment, with 38% also working at Grassroots level and 38% also working at international level.

The interpretation of "expert" hinged upon criteria presented in extant literature which accounts for aspects such as formal coach education and attained experience (Wiman et al., 2010). Participants were required to have a minimum tenure of five years' experience working in soccer combined with an appropriate professional qualification (Rubio et al., 2020). Given the complexities surrounding the definition of expertise, criteria were established based on previous research literature combined with the aforementioned sampling technique (Hasson et al., 2000). The present study is nested in the United Kingdom, where European standards of coach qualification align with UEFA certification structures. Holt and Dunn's (2004) grounded theory research ensured that participants from the United Kingdom held a UEFA qualification alongside five years' experience in coaching young players. In European research, expertise amongst soccer coaches has been justified as a suitable qualification level with an experience tenure of several years, taken as a minimum of five (Mills et al., 2012). The UEFA B licence has previously been applied as a benchmark of expertise in a comparable e-Delphi study pursuing consensus amongst soccer coaches (Roberts et al., 2019). Adopting these standards provides a robust benchmark representative of coaches who practice professionally.

Expertise was defined upon appropriate qualification and experience, which was intended to include the views of individuals working at different competitive levels ranging from grassroots to professional academy settings. Institutional ethical approval was obtained (ref: 2894189), guidance on study requirements was provided to participants, and informed consent was secured.

2.1.2. Procedure

Prior to commencing this study, a pilot survey was conducted with a sample of six soccer coaches who did not meet the inclusion criteria of coaching qualification standards. In line with other studies, feedback was obtained that helped shape the final survey on grounds of clarity, including adjusting the terminology and language of presented questions (Reeves et al., 2009). Reflecting the concise nature of responses elicited from the pilot, questions were re-worded to draw out more depth such as explicit mention of "engagement". Following the pilot stage, three open-ended questions were confirmed to identify perceptions of methods that reflect ideas of "best practice" (Roberts et al., 2019). In the final question bank, three distinct prompts were presented to identify approaches, integration, and examples. These were presented to the panel as:

- a) "what methods or approaches can coaches and/or practitioners use to help develop psychosocial skills effectively in young footballers?";
- b) "how do you think the development of psychosocial skills can be effectively integrated into a football development setting/programme?"; and;
- c) "please give some examples of how you think player engagement can be stimulated and maintained for learning and developing psychosocial skills?";

A definition of psychosocial skills (below) was presented to participants before commencing the open-ended questions: "We consider psychosocial skills to include any personal or social factors that are important in the development of young footballers". This definition aligns with previous studies into the topic within a soccer context (Gledhill et al., 2017). Lay language was adopted throughout to ensure accessibility for all participants. This language would invite an intentionally broad, but relevant, scope of psychosocial attributes. This decision was implemented so not to overlook any potentially valuable factors that could be presented, accounting for the subsequent analysis which would then generate the statements to be presented back to the panel.

The purpose of the first round was to elicit data that reflected the opinions and perspectives of coaches and sport psychology practitioners in an open-ended manner. Participants were encouraged to write freely, without any word limitation, to provide a comprehensive and qualitative response to each of the three questions posed. Questions were

presented to participants online, using the Qualtrics XM platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). This ensured anonymity and reduced any social desirability bias as participants would not receive feedback until after they had contributed (Chalmers and Armour, 2019). Data were collected within a four-week window, with regular reminders for participants to complete the online survey.

A two-week period followed where the anonymous responses were analysed adopting a framework analysis approach led by the primary author before a new online survey created. Indicators of principles were elicited from the open-ended responses through coding before themes organised semantically related points together. Data was arranged into the statements through contributions from the wider authorship of this paper.

The second round presented participants with statements generated from the first stage of the procedure. Participants were asked to rate each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 – “not important at all” – to 5 – “extremely important” – in terms of their perceived importance of it using the stem: “best practice in promoting psychosocial development in young footballers involves...” (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004). The 5-point scale was adopted in line with relevant research literature (Quartiroli et al., 2019, 2021; Rubio et al., 2020). Again, regular reminders to complete the survey were issued over a four-week period.

2.1.3. Data analysis

Qualitative data were collected during round one of the Delphi process and underwent analysis by the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013). The analysis adopted a constructionist epistemology, whereby meaningfulness can arise from recurrence, but can also be based on context and structural conditions. This structured analytical method was adopted to produce descriptive conclusions for commonly occurring themes (Dugdale et al., 2025; Gale et al., 2013). Following transcription

and familiarisation of the data, initial codes were generated through the primary author’s immersion and interaction with the transcript data (Kristensen et al., 2026). Reflecting an inductive approach, themes were generated on a semantic level, clustering codes together based on what participants articulated to establish a working analytical framework for charting the data (Kristensen et al., 2026). Consideration was afforded to latent themes through open coding, indicative of the first author’s underlying knowledge in this field and the potential for deeper interpretation (Gale et al., 2013; Hallett and Lamont, 2015). The initial categories prepared by the primary author were critiqued and indexed with input from the research team prior to being validated as a matrix of themes (Kristensen et al., 2026). To facilitate the final stage of interpretation of the data, supervision from the wider authorship guided the categories and codes into its final matrix constitution of statements (Gale et al., 2013; Kristensen et al., 2026). Proposed themes were eliminated if deemed to not warrant distinction or being too specific. In appreciation of the context binding participants’ contributions – and the integration with the Delphi methodology – the findings generated were presented back to the participant group during round two (Hong and Coffee, 2018). Statement generation was therefore cultivated through using the completed framework matrix to propose exemplar statements which invited comments from the wider authorship. The wording of these statements was challenged constructively by the co-authors with alternative choices presented and incorporated (Gale et al., 2013; Kristensen et al., 2026). This culminated in a final set of 29 statements being carried into the next round. Fig. 1 presents a flow chart to depict an example of the process undertaken of interpreting raw data into codes, themes, and the eventual statement summarising the identified ideas.

2.1.3.1. Acceptability threshold for consensus. During round two, a total of 29 statements were presented to participants who were asked to rate their importance. To ascertain consensus in Delphi methods, attention is

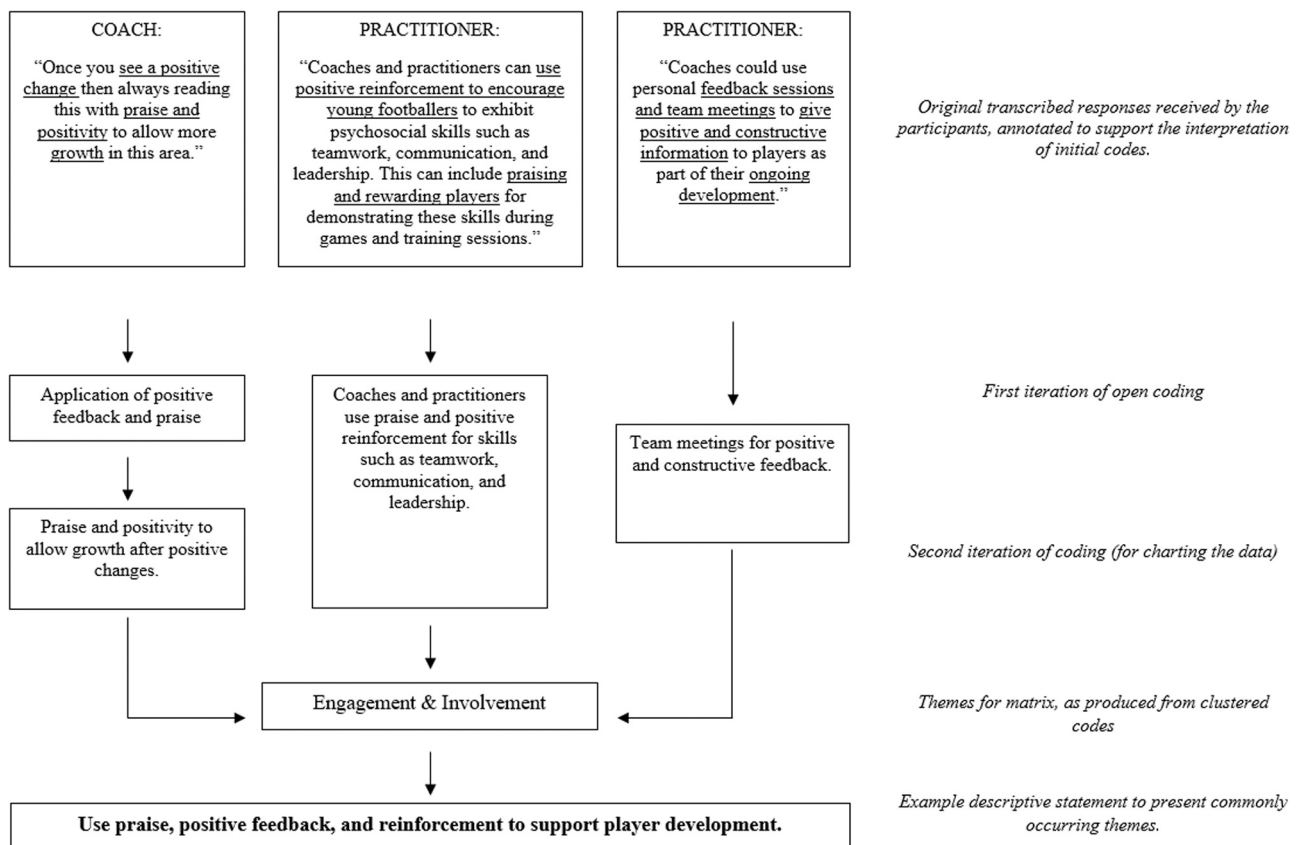


Fig. 1. Flow chart depicting example of statement generation from raw data.

placed upon levels of convergence and dispersion (Chalmers and Armour, 2019). Consensus is justified by two indicative measures reflecting the reported mode and mean. Scores were reviewed for any individual ratings outside of ± 1 standard deviation of the overall average score for a statement (Rubio et al., 2020). This accounts for the measures of central tendency and the variability of responses offered by the participants. The acceptability threshold for achieving consensus was therefore defined upon a demonstration of both convergence (of perceived importance) and homogeneity (reduced dispersion of scores).

2.1.3.2. Convergence of importance. Throughout the Delphi process, there should be a convergence of responses, indicative of consensus in perceived importance (Chalmers and Armour, 2019). Items falling ± 1 standard deviation short of the mode represent a lack of convergence of agreement (Rubio et al., 2020).

2.1.3.3. Homogeneity of perceptions. Homogeneity can be understood through deviation from the mean. A threshold of 70% agreement within ± 1 standard deviation of the mean was adopted (Humphrey-Murto et al., 2020; Quartiroli et al., 2019). Individual scores ± 1 standard deviation from the mean represented a lack of homogeneity (Rubio et al., 2020). Statements where 70% of scores fell within a range of ± 1 standard deviation of the mean can be considered to meet the threshold of consensus (Quartiroli et al., 2019).

2.1.3.4. Group comparisons. Recognising differences in the rating of perceived importance at group level was also investigated. A comparison of mean scores across both sample populations (coaches and sport psychology practitioners) was conducted by the Mann-Whitney *U* test, considering the assumptions of independent groups and ordinal data relating to the data. Statistically significant differences between coach and sport psychology practitioner perceptions were considered where $p < 0.05$. Whilst the test in question relies upon multiple comparisons, no adjustments for these were considered and this could result in an inflated type II error (Rothman, 1990). The calculated effect size was then be categorised as large, medium, or small (Cohen, 1992).

3. Results

3.1. Round 1

Round one yielded a total of 33 responses to the survey; 13 were removed due to being incomplete (i.e., participants began completing the online survey but did not answer all questions), resulting in 20 responses being included for analysis. Following RTA, 222 codes generated 14 themes. From these 14 themes, 29 statements were developed. These final set of statements, associated themes, codes, and illustrative quotations are presented in Table 1.

3.2. Round 2

The second round yielded 18 responses, representing 12 coaches and six sport psychology practitioners. A total of two responses were removed for being incomplete resulting in a final sample of 11 coaches and five sport psychology practitioners. This demonstrates an attrition rate where 80% of participants maintaining their involvement across rounds. All statements with a mode rating of three or greater were retained, reflecting a perception of “somewhat important” or above. Four statements were identified as lacking homogeneity due to scores with a standard deviation equal or greater to 1, thereby reflecting an absence of consensus within the sample. Descriptive statistics for all statements along with attainment of acceptability and homogeneity are presented in Table 2. These items also reflect the highest mean scores, thereby further representing the consensus of best practice and are presented in Table 3.

Table 1

Set of proposed statements with examples following Framework Method analysis of round 1.

Proposed Statement	Theme	Example Code	Example Quote
1) Educating coaches in awareness and development of psychosocial skills.	Coach Education	<i>Coach education to promote engagement.</i>	“Coaches need to be made aware of what psychosocial skills are and how they can promote them.”
2) Collaboration and alignment with all stakeholders (e.g. coaches, parents, practitioners) to maximise player development.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Build positive relationships and establish rapport with coaches and players.</i>	“I think it comes from rapport building initially, a positive relationship with coaches/players to allow for informal conversations and understanding of psych to occur before integrating more formalised practice.”
3) Communicating clearly to establish trust and rapport with players	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Build trust through communication and understanding the person.</i>	“I believe it’s important to build trust with young footballers through communication and actions.”
4) Communicating clearly to ensure content is relatable to players.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Pitched to players in a relatable way.</i>	“Psych should be in layman’s and not jargon/theory based”
5) Making the learning process fun, engaging, and interactive.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Make learning process fun and interactive.</i>	“Making the learning process fun and interactive – usually the greatest success comes from players not realising they are actually developing the skill and it’s only when you debrief and feedback”
6) Incorporating game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Gamification to make learning and skill development more engaging and motivating.</i>	“By incorporating elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and other game mechanics, gamification can make learning and skill development more engaging and motivating for players.”
7) Using praise, positive feedback, and reinforcement to support player development	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Praise and positivity to allow growth after positive changes.</i>	“Once you see a positive change then always reading this with praise and positivity to allow more growth in this area.”
8) Cultivating a welcoming environment that fosters respect, connection, and individual expression.	Environment	<i>Creating an environment where all are even and respected.</i>	“Coaches or practitioners have to create an environment where all are even in terms of voice, thoughts and respect.”
9) Any external practitioners should spend time understanding the context before	External Practitioners	<i>External practitioners need to spend time understanding staff</i>	“If a practitioner is being brought in to the training/match environment, they need to spend a

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Proposed Statement	Theme	Example Code	Example Quote
providing guidance		<i>and players before making changes.</i>	good deal of time just getting to know the staff and players and the way in which they operate BEFORE making suggestions/ changes.”
10) Coaches consistently leading by example through holding their own conduct to high standards	Illustration	<i>Coaches should hold their own conduct to a high standard.</i>	“Coaches should hold their own conduct to a higher standard”
11) Establishing mentoring between players of different experiences to provide support.	Illustration	<i>Mentoring programme with senior players to share experiences.</i>	“Pair young athletes with senior athletes to share experiences”
12) Role modelling by coaches and from current or former professional players	Illustration	<i>Role-modelling of psychosocial skills through coaches’ practice and examples of successful footballers.</i>	“They can also provide examples of other successful footballers who exhibit these skills to inspire and motivate young players.”
13) Sharing examples and normalising experiences to stimulate player reflection and critical thinking	Illustration	<i>Present stories and examples to stimulate player reflection and interpretation.</i>	“...making them think about pressure, nervous, fear, worry and challenge but its not a school lecture its a story.”
14) Regular 1–2–1 meetings and individual development plans to track players’ progress	Individual Development	<i>1–2–1 sessions to concentrate on development plans.</i>	“... 121 s and concentrating on development plans ie what does each player need to focus on to improve their game.”
15) Introducing a range of mental skills (e.g. goal-setting, imagery, self-talk, routines) to help support players.	Individual Development	<i>Goal-setting to help support players with negative thinking.</i>	“Goal setting can also be useful to help support players through moments of negative thinking.”
16) Taking an empathetic approach to development, recognising the person behind the player.	Individual Development	<i>Empathetic approach to player/ person development.</i>	“Talking to players individually, knowing them as individuals, and caring about them as more than just a team member is vital, especially understanding that cookie cutter approach will not work for different player.”
17) Co-creating on-pitch interventions for players to experience challenge and develop coping strategies	Intervention	<i>Create challenging environment in training to help development of coping strategies.</i>	“At times create challenging/hostile environments in training (aggression/poor decisions/poor outcomes) and help them focus on strategies above to cope in practice for games.”
18) Embedding competition and	Intervention	<i>Creating competition,</i>	“I have also personally found

Table 1 (continued)

Proposed Statement	Theme	Example Code	Example Quote
modifications in training to align with players’ individual development needs.		<i>targets, and goals during training to promote engagement.</i>	that creating competition (e.g., targets, goals) during training helps with engagement.”
19) Ensuring on-pitch training sessions are purposeful to target psychosocial constructs.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Interactive, fun, and pitch-based.</i>	“Interactive, fun, pitch based - not to be lecture based.”
20) Offering leadership opportunities (e.g. roles and responsibilities) for players to promote engagement and ownership.	Leadership	<i>Offer players leadership roles to promote engagement.</i>	“Offering roles of leadership is an important aspect for engagement”
21) Involving parents and guardians to support players away from the training environment.	Parental Support	<i>Involving parents or guardians to facilitate their support for psychosocial skill development.</i>	“In this scenario, involving parents/guardians to make them aware of the planned strategic set-back can support the psychosocial skill development.”
22) Planning a curriculum for development that offers themes which underpin the wider programme	Planning	<i>Defined psychosocial skills development programme that informs and underpins all activity.</i>	“The design of your football (tactical, technical & physical) curriculums should be underpinned by your Psychosocial Skills Development programme where session designs are informed by this programme.”
23) Developing player self-awareness to think about their role in the social (team) setting	Reflection	<i>Self-awareness to think about teammates.</i>	“I’ve not touched on self awareness and that can also be coached at 121 or during drills when players need to think about teammates and not be selfish.”
24) Encouraging player reflection on experiences to evaluate and be active in their own development	Reflection	<i>Players need to be self-aware, reflect, and evaluate performance to be active in their own development.</i>	“I firmly believe that players need to be constantly active in their own development through being self-aware of their performance in training and matches.”
25) Using video content to show examples of psychosocial skills in action (e.g. decision-making, body language, resilience)	Resources	<i>Use video content to show examples of decision-making.</i>	“Having education sessions through the team watching previous games is via Veo and showing examples where good and bad decisions have been made.”
26) Co-creation of resources (e.g. posters, charts, and hand-outs) to encourage player	Resources	<i>Co-create resources available for players.</i>	“We use individual development plans to help players target their development and to

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Table 1 (continued)

Proposed Statement	Theme	Example Code	Example Quote
ownership and responsibility of development.			reflect on their practice... This is a co-constructed document 'it's important they have some skin in the game)'"
27) Utilising technology (e.g. apps) as a resource to support learning and reflection.	Resources	<i>Use of technology apps to support goal-setting and reflection.</i>	"Technology can be used to enhance the psychosocial development of players. For example, video analysis tools can be used to provide feedback on communication skills, and apps can be used to support goal-setting and reflection."
28) Building social skills and togetherness through social learning, group discussion, and team-building activities.	Socialisation	<i>Facilitate social learning by encouraging work on and off the field through team-building exercise.</i>	"Coaches and practitioners can facilitate social learning opportunities for young footballers by encouraging them to work together on and off the field."
29) Regular group workshops to identify psychosocial skills relevant to on-pitch experiences.	Workshops	<i>Workshops and small-group activity to specifically develop psychosocial skills.</i>	"Workshops or small group activity focused specifically on developing psychosocial skills are also methods that can be use."

A significant difference was identified between coaches and sport psychology practitioners for one of the statements lacking homogeneity. This statement related to the delivery of mental skills ($U=11, p = 0.043, ES=0.13$) where coaches presented higher ratings ($Mean = 4.45, SD = 0.69$) than the sport psychology practitioners ($Mean = 3.20, SD = 1.48$). No other significant differences were observed between coach and sport psychology practitioner mean ratings.

4. Discussion

This study sought to attain a consensus of the "best practice" approaches for coaching and developing psychological attributes within soccer talent development environments. By Delphi polling an expert panel of stakeholders, five statements met consensus criteria on grounds of homogeneity and acceptability alongside displaying high mean scores. All 29 established statements reflect mean scores of perceived importance above the mid-point of the Likert scale and demonstrate approaches that coaches and sport psychology practitioners can adopt to promote psychosocial development in young soccer players. In line with ecological approaches to talent development in soccer, these principles may be contextual to the macro- and micro-environment of the participants (Flatgård et al., 2020). Combined, the results delineate a set of consensually endorsed principles for athletes' psychosocial development that may inform practice for stakeholders within comparable youth soccer contexts. This section shall attend to the statements which secured both acceptability and homogeneity but dismissal of any statements due to a relatively lower score should be avoided with due consideration in a specific context. The present findings converge with existing ecological and relational models; however, the Delphi process provides contextualised prioritisation within academy football settings.

Taking an empathetic approach to development, recognising the person behind the player, may account for a young soccer player's life within and outside of the sport, recognising the influence of demands when in the training environment (Wixey et al., 2024). To support long-term athletic development, an individual centred journey through sport requires a safe and caring environment (Till et al., 2022). It should also be acknowledged that in soccer, development is not linear but subject to age and maturity status (Sarmiento et al., 2018). Players in academy settings will develop their ability to cope with multiple stressors if the support system is there, particularly if support is differentiated in line with individual needs (Wixey et al., 2024). Effective coaching should comprise coaches' understanding and empathising with their athletes (Becker, 2012). An effective coach-player relationship was identified as integral to the performance environment of national youth soccer teams (Pain and Harwood, 2007).

As indicated by the illustrative quote associated with this theme, it is deemed valuable that coaches and support staff understand a young player and respond to their individual needs; "knowing them as individuals and caring about them as more than just a team member is vital". Care towards young soccer players is argued as a fundamental element of coaching (Cronin et al., 2020). This can be achieved by coaches taking time connect with their athletes, developing rapport (Becker, 2012; Taylor and Bruner, 2012). By investing time in these critical interactions, coaches can better understand young soccer players and better accommodate their needs in the performance environment. Finally, effective long-term development supported through a safe environment will foster life skills amongst young soccer players (Mitchell et al., 2022; Till et al., 2022). Life skills development in sport will arise from psychologically safe environments that demonstrate an alignment of key social actors (e.g., parents, peer group; Gould and Carson, 2008). Attaining life skills that will be transferrable outside of the sport environment is valuable in soccer academy settings due to the high level of de-selection, and subsequent drop-out from the sport (Taylor and Bruner, 2012).

The ecological context for a holistic development experience accounts for important contributions not only from coaches but also individuals belonging to family, peers, and school (Flatgård et al., 2020). Some of these groups can be formally partnered – such as between school and club – but ultimately relationships must be cultivated to support player development.

Multidisciplinary approaches represent collaboration and alignment between key internal stakeholders; such as coaches and support staff (Green et al., 2020; Steptoe et al., 2018). Illustrating the multiple factors associated with youth development in soccer (Kelly et al., 2021; Reilly et al., 2000), multidisciplinary teams can encompass roles such as strength and conditioning coaches, performance analysis, and psychologists (Chandler et al., 2020). A challenge for implementing sport psychology can be a lack of incorporation of the wider staff team, creating a siloed approach to development (Chandler et al., 2020). The results of this study demonstrate that both coaches and sport psychology practitioners see the value of adopting a unified approach. Key stakeholders outside of the sport environment include parents and family (Green et al., 2020), suggesting both internal and external stakeholders share interest in a young player's development. It falls upon the coach to cultivate such relationships, as indicated in another generated statement; "Involving parents and guardians to support players away from the training environment". It is important that those inside and outside of the playing environment can complement each other, an approach supported by practising effective communication.

A lack of parent-coach communication is a barrier that can hamper the provision of support for young players in a soccer academy (Harwood and Knight, 2015). Effective communication represents a frequent sharing of information between such parties (Knight and Newport, 2020; Kramers et al., 2023). It is also important that parents align with others in the soccer environment and communication will help form effective relationships not only with coaches, but the wider

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of statement ratings, indicative of acceptability and homogeneity.

		Mode	Mean	SD	“Extremely Important” Responses (%)	Acceptability Threshold	Convergence (on Mode)	Homogeneity (on Mean)
Statement 16	Taking an empathetic approach to development, recognising the person behind the player.	5	4.88	0.34	87.5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statement 2	Collaboration and alignment with all stakeholders (e.g. coaches, parents, practitioners) to maximise player development.	5	4.81	0.40	81.5	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statement 10	Coaches consistently leading by example through holding their own conduct to high standards	5	4.75	0.45	75	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statement 24	Encouraging player reflection on experiences to evaluate and be active in their own development	5	4.75	0.45	75	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statement 6	Incorporating game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development	5	4.69	0.60	75	Yes	Yes	Yes
Statement 1	Educating coaches in awareness and development of psychosocial skills.	5	4.63	0.72	75			Yes
Statement 13	Sharing examples and normalising experiences to stimulate player reflection and critical thinking	5	4.63	0.62	68.75			Yes
Statement 3	Communicating clearly to establish trust and rapport with players	5	4.56	0.73	68.75			Yes
Statement 20	Offering leadership opportunities (e.g. roles and responsibilities) for players to promote engagement and ownership.	5	4.56	0.81	68.75			Yes
Statement 17	Co-creating on-pitch interventions for players to experience challenge and develop coping strategies	5	4.50	0.63	56.25			Yes
Statement 5	Making the learning process fun, engaging, and interactive.	5	4.44	0.63	50			Yes
Statement 9	Any external practitioners should spend time understanding the context before providing guidance	5	4.44	0.89	62.50			Yes
Statement 7	Using praise, positive feedback, and reinforcement to support player development	4	4.38	0.62	43.75			Yes
Statement 8	Cultivating a welcoming environment that fosters respect, connection, and individual expression.	5	4.38	0.81	50			Yes
Statement 18	Embedding competition and modifications in training to align with players' individual development needs.	4	4.38	0.62	43.75			Yes
Statement 21	Involving parents and guardians to support players away from the training environment.	4	4.38	0.62	43.75			Yes
Statement 4	Communicating clearly to ensure content is relatable to players.	5	4.31	0.79	50			Yes
Statement 12	Role modelling by coaches and from current or former professional players	5	4.31	0.95	56.25			Yes
Statement 19	Ensuring on-pitch training sessions are purposeful to target psychosocial constructs.	5	4.31	0.87	50			Yes
Statement 22	Planning a curriculum for development that offers themes which underpin the wider programme	5	4.31	0.87	56.25			Yes
Statement 23	Developing player self-awareness to think about their role in the social (team) setting	5	4.25	0.93	56.25			Yes
Statement 28	Building social skills and togetherness through social learning, group discussion, and team-building activities.	4	4.25	0.86	43.75			Yes
Statement 14	Regular 1–2–1 meetings and individual development plans to track players' progress	4	4.13	0.81	37.50			Yes
Statement 15	Introducing a range of mental skills (e.g. goal-setting, imagery, self-talk, routines) to help support players.	5	4.13	1.15	50			
Statement 25	Using video content to show examples of psychosocial skills in action (e.g. decision-making, body language, resilience)	5	4.13	1.15	56.25			
Statement 27	Utilising technology (e.g. apps) as a resource to support learning and reflection.	4	3.88	0.81	25			Yes
Statement 11	Establishing mentoring between players of different experiences to provide support.	4	3.81	0.98	25			Yes
Statement 26	Co-creation of resources (e.g. posters, charts, and hand-outs) to encourage player ownership and responsibility of development.	4	3.75	1.24	31.25			
Statement 29	Regular group workshops to identify psychosocial skills relevant to on-pitch experiences.	3	3.63	1.15	25			

Note: Darker shading represents statements which meet acceptability threshold, lighter shading represents absence of homogeneity

support team (Knight and Newport, 2020). An effective way of ensuring constructive alignment and communication may be through educating parents (Mitchell et al., 2022; Steptoe et al., 2018). Peers are also important stakeholders who may influence young soccer players' progress positively through teammate support, or negatively through social comparisons (Goldman et al., 2022). A player's social group may be more challenging to incorporate when shaping alignment but remains a key influence. A young player may identify friends from within soccer

and those from outside of the sport; each offering slightly different forms of support (Gledhill and Harwood, 2014). Whilst peers may not formally shape a young player's development in the same way a parent or coach might, they are important stakeholders whose presence should also be accounted for, and support could even be advocated for. Shaping peer influence may be more challenging than parental alignment. Nonetheless, coaches may explore accounting for players' potential in positively influencing their peers or offering structured mentoring to help amplify

Table 3

Consensus statements indicative of best practice for psychosocial development in youth soccer.

Rank	Statement	Theme	Illustrative Code
1	Taking an empathetic approach to development, recognising the person behind the player.	Individual Development	<i>Empathetic approach to player/person development</i>
2	Collaboration and alignment with all stakeholders (e.g. coaches, parents, practitioners) to maximise player development.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Build positive relationships and establish rapport with coaches and players</i>
3	Coaches consistently leading by example through holding their own conduct to high standards	Illustration	<i>Coaches should hold their own conduct to a high standard.</i>
4	Encouraging player reflection on experiences to evaluate and be active in their own development	Reflection	<i>Players need to be self-aware, reflect, and evaluate performance to be active in their own development</i>
5	Incorporating game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development.	Engagement & Involvement	<i>Gamification to make learning and skill development more engaging and motivating.</i>

the efforts of technical staff.

Coach conduct should be held to a high standard, consistently leading by example, as coach behaviours can influence the learning and athletic experience of young soccer players (Anderson and Harwood, 2020; Cushion et al., 2012). Coaches may be expected to serve as role models, either for correctly displaying behaviours associated with a skill or to serve as a source of positive influence (Anderson and Harwood, 2020; Harwood, 2008; Harwood et al., 2015). This provides coaches with an opportunity to blend the instruction of a targeted skill or technique with related psychosocial aspects such as managing emotions or encouraging teammates. Appropriate coaching behaviours can help foster self-regulation skills in young soccer players, suggesting a reciprocity in maintaining high standards of coach conduct whereby both players and coach may develop (Barracough et al., 2022).

Like players, coaches will encounter challenging situations and internal experiences that may influence their emotional expression (Anderson and Harwood, 2020; Wixey et al., 2024). Clear and stable beliefs and coaching philosophies may help coaches maintain standards of their behavioural conduct (Becker, 2012). This link between beliefs and coaching behaviours may require the introduction of self-regulation skills to help coaches achieve consistency in their behaviours (Cushion et al., 2012). Appropriate coach behaviours will influence young players, and contribute to various outcomes through embracing the principles of transformational leadership (Erikstad et al., 2021). The status of coaches carries implications where expressed behaviours can support the development of young players leading coaches to seek opportunities to invest in associated skills such as practicing self-regulation. Ideally, coaches monitor their behaviours, ensuring alignment with their own values or the coaching environment. Actively engaging in reflective practices or supervision can ensure its effectiveness. Coach behaviours are dynamic but should be appropriate to support psychosocial development. Reflecting the cross-disciplinary sample of the present study, coaches could be supported in this regard by engaging sport psychology practitioners to refine their self-awareness and behavioural repertoire (Anderson and Harwood, 2020).

Within the self-regulation of learning, reflection has been identified as having an important role during development phases of young athletes (Toering et al., 2011). Reflection can contribute to talent development by optimising the learning process, across youth athletes in multiple sports (Jonker et al., 2012). This represents the perspectives of participants who champion players using reflection to take

responsibility for their development.

Reflective thinking has been identified as a self-regulatory skill that is positively related to progress in soccer (Gledhill and Harwood, 2014; Jonker, 2019). Reflection is associated with self-awareness and, when combined with effort, can facilitate players reaching higher performance levels (Toering et al., 2011; Wixey et al., 2024). Reflection can be a behavioural example of mental preparation, psychological processes, mental techniques, and self-regulation (Dohme et al., 2017). To fulfil this theme, coaches and sport psychology practitioners should seek opportunities to encourage players to engage in reflective activities. Learning in the sport environment should be structured accordingly, guiding players towards behaviours that constitute reflection. Behaviours associated with reflective practice in young soccer players can include evaluating past performances through video analysis (Jonker, 2019). Engaging with technology to review video footage can enhance self-awareness and, in turn, self-reflection (Wixey et al., 2024). In accordance with reflection being a skill of self-regulation, there is evidence that it can be developed, such as through the application of self-talk (Jonker, 2019).

Appropriate structuring of the sport environment with design of training sessions can promote the development of self-awareness, self-reflection, and autonomy over their development (Wixey et al., 2024). Players who are exposed to autonomy supportive coaching behaviours, such as valuing player input, can also develop self-regulatory attributes (Gledhill et al., 2017). Autonomy can also be fostered through the actions of parents, by promoting decision-making or problem-solving (Kramers et al., 2023). Coaches should be aware and mindful of key autonomy-thwarting coach behaviours, such as not sharing a rationale behind their decisions (Gledhill et al., 2017). As described in the title of this statement, autonomy supportive behaviours can help a young soccer player be active in their own development. Key actors – such as coaches and parents – may be well positioned to foster autonomy in young players, but sport psychology practitioners can also endorse this approach by supporting players to reflect, solve-problems, and make their own decisions in relation to their development.

Coaches may use a transformational leadership approach toward athlete outcomes, adopting autonomy-supportive coaching to provide young players with choices (Erikstad et al., 2021). There are multiple levers that may be applied to guide players in the youth football context, including the adoption of game principles for development.

The incorporation of game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development could be construed in one of two ways. It could comprise shaping training sessions to reflect game situations that could be encountered in a competitive match. Alternatively, it may be the inclusion of conditions that focus on the task at hand, such as an activity in a training session. This interpretation parallels the discussion of “playing form” (or “game form”) and “training form” activities, both of which have benefits for learning but the former may be better for transferability of an acquired skill (Cushion et al., 2012). Game relevant activities in which players are prepared for the competition element of the sport may be beneficial for talent development (Gledhill et al., 2017). Such “game form” practices may help translate training into competition by fostering shared mental models that represent shared understanding and coordination of players as a team (Moran et al., 2024). Attending to “training form” in sessions embraces gamification differently, such as by manipulating activities to foster intra-team competition. Here, the focus lies not on emphasising the relevance of a drill, but rather accentuating the challenge at hand (Diment, 2014). As a common aspect of gamification is adopting leaderboards, including a competitive element around the outcome of practice activities could include publishing individual scores (Kent et al., 2022). In extending this, players can use technology to attain feedback to help them closely monitor their progress. Engagement with technologically informed feedback, such as performance metrics or video analysis, can further help develop self-awareness and reflective practice in athletes (Hjort et al., 2018; Wixey et al., 2024). In both scenarios, there is an

opportunity to develop mental skills and strategies that ultimately aid performance (Diment, 2014). Technology may help enhance game-elements in the “training form” and offer a novel and engaging experience for young soccer players that supports their development.

Beyond the five statements reaching consensus, other principles were widely supported but displayed lower homogeneity. Of the total 29 statements, 25 held a mean score reflecting an average rating of either “important” or “extremely important”. This indicates that findings from the present study represent a consensually prioritised set of approaches for psychosocial development within this expert panel. Those responsible for instilling a psychosocial development provision are recommended to consider which statements would be applicable for the context in which they operate. Four statements held mean scores below this range and can be understood as perceivably less important by the sample: Statements 11, 26, 27, and 29. Further, Statements 27 and 11 fall below a mean of 4 yet maintain homogeneity, suggesting a greater indifference to their value.

On the contrary, only four of the 29 statements fell short of the threshold of homogeneity, attributed to the themes of *Resources* and *Workshops*, indicative of a divergence in perceptions; Statements 15, 25, 26, and 29. Resources are presented as part of applied practice, such as displaying posters to highlight key principles (Kramers et al., 2023). Yet, it can be difficult to extrapolate the impact that a displayed poster – or other resource – might have on players. Certain formats (e.g., posters) could also be considered outdated in the context of technological advancements (e.g., videos). Delivering psychosocial content in group settings or as workshops alongside training sessions has been commonly reported in the literature as part of an intervention (Diment, 2014; Gervis & Goldman, 2020; Harwood, 2008; Kent et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2022). There were two recorded instances where statements were neither homogeneous nor highly important and can be excluded based on both criteria of Standard Deviation and mean score (Statements 26 and 29). This profile may signal practices perceived as outdated or ill-suited to the context under study.

There were also instances of divergence across the two populations of coaches and practitioners. A significant difference was identified where coaches placed a higher importance in relation to workshops introducing a provision of mental skills, in comparison to sport psychology practitioners. This might be explained by a potential ambiguity in the term “mental skills”, which has been presented as an umbrella term that may blend different psychological components (Dohme et al., 2017). For instance, some coaches may interpret “mental skills” as confidence and goal-setting (Barker & Winter, 2014), whilst sport psychology practitioners may consider skills to be practicing self-awareness and self-reflection (Wixey et al., 2024). It has previously been reported that coaches may hold a different understanding of psychology and a lack of standardisation of practice (e.g. in academies) could lead to this breadth of interpretation (Dean et al., 2022). The alternative paradigms could also be indicative of the alternative professional pathways for coaches and practitioners; presently the majority of psychologist practitioners pursued doctoral education whereas coaches’ education is more practical in nature. The low effect size and risk of a Type II error (Rothman, 1990) guides this finding to be treated with caution, yet such distinctions invite further investigation in contemporary soccer contexts.

Participants might consider that contemporary approaches have evolved towards an integrative approach, emphasising the framing of training activities to integrate sport psychology with activities on the training ground (Diment, 2014; Wixey et al., 2024). Such ideas are reflected in highly rated statements of the present study; “ensuring on-pitch training sessions are purposeful to target psychosocial constructs,” and “on-pitch interventions for players to experience challenge and develop coping strategies.”. The consensus from the present study supports adopting a plurality of approaches, not limiting sport psychology to the classroom environment or by producing resources, but reflecting the contextual preference for psychosocial development.

These principles align with examples of designing challenging drills or conducting a pressure training intervention to stimulate the engagement of psychological skills and in male academy soccer players (Diment, 2014; Kent et al., 2022).

These principles, meeting a threshold of consensus across coaches and practitioners, offer comprehensive guidance that features tried-and-tested techniques for integrating and engaging sport psychology in a youth soccer context. The adoption of certain ideas will require further attenuation for contexts (e.g. grassroots club or professional academy) and deployment may be dependent on available resources in that macro-environment (e.g. financial or geographical factors).

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Recruitment for this study presents a risk of self-selection bias within the final sample (Hasson et al., 2000). By their participation, this study might only reflect a sub-sample of the broader coaching population who are interested or invested in the application of sport psychology. This self-selection bias may have inflated endorsement levels, thereby limiting generalisability to coaching populations less engaged with sport psychology. Therefore, the consensus achieved was limited by reflecting opinions of those with prior curiosity or engagement with sport psychology in youth soccer. It is acknowledged that the present sample comprises two roles with an unequal ratio of 60/40. The online format may buffer against possible implications whereas an in-person focus group could result in the majority group becoming dominant (Hasson et al., 2000). The present sample is also based in one country which could indicate that the results are culturally bound to the UK. This may be shaped by which nation within the UK a coach or practitioner is situated, alongside the performance level. In England, organised club academies align with the Football Association’s Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), which stipulates provisions of sport psychology for academy soccer players (Barracough et al., 2022; Kramers et al., 2023; Mitchell et al., 2022). This may not necessarily be the case in other countries, including other parts of the UK, such as Scotland. Despite this structure and regulation, the EPPP has been criticised by practitioners as sub-optimal for sport psychology, with deficits in guidance impacting coherence across clubs (Dean et al., 2022). The study demonstrated a dropout rate of 20%. Similar studies in sport have reported higher attrition rates, which could be a result of survey fatigue (Chalmers and Armour, 2019; Quartiroli et al., 2019). No analysis was conducted to determine whether attrition introduced systematic differences between rounds. An alternate rating scale (i.e., seven- or nine-point Likert Scales) might have captured richer insights (Diamond et al., 2014) by inviting more detailed perceptions of importance through the provision of fewer or additional anchor points (Larkin and O’Connor, 2017). Finally, the five-point Likert scale was adopted *a priori*, though might not have been sensitive to the skew towards importance found across the results (Rubio et al., 2020). This could cause a ceiling effect where highly rated items are not clearly distinguished by the participants, or abstention whereby participants occupy the mid-point.

This study’s findings can be used to shape future research seeking to adopt innovative and novel approaches to the delivery of sport psychology in youth soccer populations. Longitudinal studies monitoring psychosocial development in youth soccer players through an endorsement of these identified approaches as a framework or curriculum would be valuable. Equally important would be ascertaining the perspectives of the athletes experiencing these principles, by eliciting social validation feedback (Harwood et al., 2015). This may be operationalised through further investigations which could constitute interview methodology or action research designs. Intervention studies, for example, might further attend to specific principles, such as adopting technology to enhance engagement or adherence with learning content in ways that are relevant and stimulating to young people. Finally, the differentiation between coaches and practitioners remains worthy of further investigation with a view to understanding and then bridging any gaps across

interpretation of what sport psychology provisions can be. The authors therefore recommend that coaches and practitioners consider the principles contained across the different categories of statements; adapting for the context in which they would be implemented.

5. Conclusion

A set of 29 thematic summaries were generated through reflecting stakeholder recommendations back to the sample yielding ratings representing perceived importance. When presented back to the panel, five statements met the predefined acceptability and homogeneity thresholds, indicating consensus regarding their perceived importance. There were; 1) taking an empathetic approach to development; 2) collaboration and alignment with all stakeholders; 3) coaches consistently leading by example through holding their own conduct to high standards; 4) encouraging player reflection on experience, and; 5) incorporating game elements to enhance motivation for learning and development. Our results offer an expert consensus on practices for promoting psychosocial development that can be incorporated by coaches and sport psychology practitioners. The delivery methods and principles elicited may be used to facilitate the translation of content from existing applied sport psychology literature in supporting the development of young soccer players. These findings may inform the development of psychosocial curricula within comparable youth football contexts, subject to contextual adaptation and further empirical validation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Dugdale James: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Reeves Matthew:** Writing – review & editing. **Chris Hartley:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Russell Martindale:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Dickson Alban Colin Strang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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