

A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE IN FOOTBALL COACH EDUCATION – AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Torsten Buhre, Jesper Fundberg and Lars Lagergren, Malmö University,
Sweden

Background: This action-research project was initiated by a Regional Football Association (RFA) in Sweden. The region encompasses, 380 clubs, 2.500 youth teams and approximately 25.000 players between the age of 6 and 12 years. 150 football-coaching courses are completed yearly and a total 2.710 coaches have completed these courses, since 2010. A board decision was made (10/1/2016): To make a shift down-sizing the importance of winning that exists at the youth-level to focusing on the individual football-development of *all* participants. This decision was made because the drop-out rate has increased in the age-group around the age of 10, and reports of both physical and verbal abuse has increased during the later years.

RFA contacted Malmö University (MU) with an initial request to enforce the board decision: What research is available on positive youth development in sports and children's sport development over time?

Initial actions: The process started with 10 two hour meetings, discussing definitions and perspectives to gain a common ground of understand both the problem at hand and the interpretations of possible mechanisms creating the problem. The collective view on what needed to be done after these initial meetings, was a change in perspective away from a focus on sports to a see the world from a child's perspective. RFA wanted MU to do a literature review on "How to" interact and engage children in sports, to see if the content in the educational material match what research says about "how to coach kids in sports"

Consequences of actions: The greatest leverage for improving the coaching of children is the coach education. Coaches are the "keeper" of values and belief systems on the grass-root level. The initial collective analysis revealed a gap between the research and content of coach education material. The material is distributed by the National Football Federation, based on the UEFA standards. The gap was between "what to do in organized football" and "how to do it, from a child's perspective" was evident. The material contained over 110 pages (out of 165 pages) different exercise and what to do in these exercises. The "how to" these exercises is not discussed in the exercises themselves, but is covered along the lines of children's rights in sports and the physical an psycho-social development. In the material, the sport transpose it's importance by focusing on "what to do" and integration of "how to and why" gets lost in translation. We interpreted this as the focus is on athletes in becoming and not children as human beings ¹. The importance of having interpersonal competence ² as a coach gets lost when "what to coach" and "how to coach" with children is not connected and dissected.

Follow-up actions: Based on the analysis of the initial actions there was a mutual agreement between the partners to 1) participate and reflect on the participation in the coach education

¹ Qvortrup, Jens (2009) "Are Children Human Beings or Human Becomings? A Critical Assessment of Outcome Thinking" *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali*, 117,(3/4): 631-653

² Côté, J. & Gilbert, W. (2009a) An integrative definition of coaching effectiveness and expertise. *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching* 4(3): 307-323

course and 2) to do a content analysis of course evaluations of previous modules of coach education.

Figure 1: Education as a tool for cultural change



The following model was produced to identify the different steps in the process of using education as a tool for cultural change. It was created to have a greater collective understanding for the project-members on how the different elements are connected. Content and delivery of content influences the development of the knowledge and competencies that will be assessed at the end of the course and a license is given. After the license have been given to the coach, it is up to the coach to start applying the content and maintain this application of content over time. When enough coaches have attained the license, and keep applying the knowledge and competencies over time that a cultural change can be expected.

Coach education: The coach education course delivered by the regional associations is a course required by the National Football Federation (NFF) to enter the UEFA licensing system. It's content is controlled and distributed by the NFF. The course is delivered by RFA and is comprised of two one-day modules with an extended break between the two modules, thus creating opportunities for mediated-, unmediated learning and possibly internal learning situations³. Each module is divided up into different sessions that can be either theoretical, practical or an exchange of experience practice or a discussion of understanding of theoretical knowledge. The practical sessions are done with the course participants. Video clips are also used to engage the participants in discussion and to create time for reflection. The participants have assignments to complete and reflect upon between the two modules⁴.

Reflections of first follow-up action: Initial reflection of the participation in coach education identified two areas for change that could enhance the perspective of the child in the modules: 1) The inclusion of youth soccer players and 2) complimentary films from actual training sessions with children. The video clips focused on ball-movement. The collective perception of the video clips emphasized more what football should look like for children, rather than what it actually looks like when children are playing and deliberately practicing football.

The “how to” coach children perspective was lost in the delivery of the coach education. To explore the “how to” coach children in football importance of creating an authentic learning environment⁵ was suggested, by MU. First, including children footballers in the practical sessions will enable the course participants to actually see the coach developer do the “how to” when interacting with children. This action is possible since the club is the organizer of the modules and RFA delivers the course. RFA can mandate that children footballers are present during delivery of the practical sessions. Secondly, to add video clips from unrehearsed situations that focus on three different things; 1) coach and footballer interaction, 2) footballers “doing” based on actual instructions and 3) overviews on the

³ Trudel, P, Gilbert, W & Rodrigue, F (2016) The journey from competent to innovator: Using appreciative inquiry to enhance high performance coaching. *AI Practitioner*, 18(2): 40-46.

⁴ Swedish Football Federations Coach Education [website]2016
<https://utbildning.sisuidrottsbocker.se/fotboll/tranare/tranarutbildning/tranarutbildning-c/utbildningen/svffs-tranarutbildning/> (accessed 1 august 2017)

⁵ Nash, C. S., Sproule, J. & Horton, P. (2011) Excellence in coaching: the art and skill of elite practitioners. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 82(2):229-238.

activity-level during deliberate football practices. These different types of video clips will enable the participants to recognize themselves in the videos, and also to identify and discuss the elements of good practice and pitfalls in practice.

Analysis and reflections of second follow-up action: The content analysis was done in three themes, “Expectations” prior to the modules, “What was good” post module delivery, “What do you want more of” post the delivery of the module. Similar to the experience of the delivery of coach education, the “what to” was present, but the “How to” was not. The focus on what, perpetuates the notion of treating children footballers as athletes in becoming, not as human beings with different preferences of learning styles than the adult learner and different level of cognitive thinking in relation to the adult. More specifically three areas of “How to” was identified that the participants wanted to experience and reflect more upon during the delivery of the modules. These were “How to” communicate and interact with children based on their developmental stage, “How to” increase activity level based on their learning style, and “How to” create joy and happiness for every child participating in football practices. The content analysis, thus strengthen the need for creating authentic learning environments, allowing the coach developer to create authentic situations for the participants to both experience “How to” and reflect upon the experience. This could also stimulate the coach to utilize internal learning situations⁶ once the course is completed for understanding and acquiring new knowledge and skills⁷.

Future Actions: In order to expose the child’s perspective in football coach education the inclusion of youth footballers and the production of new complimentary videos clips are under way. Both these actions are under the jurisdiction of the RFA. The current material includes content on child development and children’s rights in sport participation, thus the underpinning theoretical knowledge to deliver the “how to” with children in sport is more or less in place. The inclusion of youth footballers in the practical sessions in the modules contextualizes the “what to” and “how to” in a specific situation, thus creating a more authentic learning environment⁸.

Additional unrehearsed video clips used for reflection and discussion will, in a more authentic way, expose how coaches manage practical situations and thus enabling the course participant recognize themselves, allowing for discussions and reflections of their own experience of good practice and pitfalls of the “how to” with children in football.

To stimulate internal learning situations, standardized questions related to the “how to” with children in football have been tested in a pilot study. Eight coaches have responded and have given feedback on the structure and wordings of these questions in order to stimulate the intrapersonal competence of reflecting upon his/her actions of practicing football with children. How to implement these questions and collect the data that these questions elicit are under discussion.

⁶ Trudel, P, Gilbert, W & Rodrigue, F, *AI Practioner*, pp 40-46.

⁷ ⁷ Côté, J. & Gilbert, W. *International Journal of Sport Science and Coaching*, pp 307-323

⁸ Nash, C. S., Sproule, J. & Horton, P. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, pp 229-238

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About the presenters:

Lars Lagergren is professor and Senior Lecture in Sport Sciences at Malmo University. Lagergren's has published research articles and numerous report in the area of children sports with a focus on children's perspective in relation to decision makers, stakeholders and practitioners in sport and open youth work.

Torsten Buhre is an associated professor in Sport Sciences at Malmo University. Buhre's is an ICCE qualified Coach Developer. He has presented twice (2009 and 2013) at previous ICCE conferences.