Youth Footballers (13-15) and the Coach: Generation Z

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Abstract: Youth football nurseries have historically served to expand grassroots football with a commitment to improving talent. Building on recent research on the Developmental Model of Sport Participation and the Long-Term Athlete Development model, this study explored the experiences for youth footballers in the coaching setting. This study investigated the perceptions and beliefs of youth footballers (13-15 years) on their experiences in youth football club nurseries in Malta. The focus was on (i) the youth footballer-coach relationship; (ii) experiences from the coaching sessions and games; and (iii) environmental factors of significant others. Forty-two youth footballers from six nurseries participated in six in-depth semi-structured focus groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The footballer-coach relationships revealed that participants desire for a coach that does not yell/ shout and remains calm, is caring and encouraging. The coach impacts resilience, motivation, mental wellbeing, and decisions for dropouts. Youth footballers preferred deliberate play rather than deliberate practice pedagogies. Interestingly, a co-operative coaching style was preferred by confident and skilful youths; while the command coaching style was reassuring for those who believed that they had a lot to learn. The findings showed that most participants preferred to play and enjoy themselves, rather than win every game and not play. The Gen Z characteristics of high expectations for success emerged in this study, but the focus on winning, rather than game strategy development, was important to some of the youth footballers. This study recommends that the youth footballer-coaching relationship would benefit from the knowledge and application of advanced social-psychological disciplines from sports coaching sciences, and that youth football nursery programmes should be structured around participants and transitions of continued participation at recreational and high levels of performance.

Keywords: youth football nurseries; football sessions; sports coaching; footballer-coach relationship

Introduction

Research on youth footballers has predominantly focused on elite youth football (Mageau and Vallerand 2003; Reeves et al. 2009; Sieghartsleitner et al. 2019; Toering et al. 2009; Van Yperen 2009), while some work has explored youth development on football nurseries in Malta (Busuttil 2011; Camilleri 2014; Cassar and Gauci 2015). Notwithstanding these contributions, our understanding of youth football and talented player development is far from complete and important questions about the experiences and relationships of youth footballers with their coaches during the sessions as they progress over the years remain unanswered. Mills et al. (2012) identified six factors perceived to either positively or negatively influence youth football player development. These were:

> *awareness (e.g. self-awareness, awareness of others); resilience (e.g. coping with setbacks, optimistic attitude); goal-directed attributes (e.g. passion, professional attitude); intelligence (e.g. sport intelligence, emotional competence); sport-specific attributes (e.g. coachability, competitiveness); and environmental factors (e.g. significant others, culture of game)* (Mills et al. 2012: 1593).

How these factors are embedded in the activities and sessions in youth football and the impact on the footballer coach relationship will be interesting to investigate, nevertheless, the scope of this study was to find out about the perceptions and experiences of youth footballers in the coaching setting. Martens (2012) identifies three styles of coaching: command style, submissive style, and cooperative style. The command style of coaching revolves around the demands and expectations of the coach for the session: players work to improve themselves, while following instructions and practicing what the coach demonstrates. In addition, the session content and the decision-making is determined by the coach and congruent with Mosston and Ashworth's (2008) reproductive cluster of teaching/coaching styles (i.e. command, practice, reciprocal, self-check and inclusion). The Submissive Style is characterised by coaches making fewer decisions, minimal guidance offered by the coach, and a let them play and have a good time approach. Martens (2012) describes this coach as a "babysitter", a person potentially inexperienced and not good at coaching. A cooperative style of coaching is focused on flexibility and empowerment of players to be a part of the decision-making process. This is comparable to the productive cluster of coaching and teaching styles (guided discovery, convergent and divergent discovery, individual programme, learner initiated and self-teaching) (Mosston and Ashworth 2008). There are no best coaching styles and practice styles, and coaches usually select what they feel is most appropriate depending on the stage of development of the youth footballers, the session, gameplay, and other factors (Martens 2012).

The Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP) is a research and refined model that described the processes, pathways, and outcomes associated with sport development throughout childhood and adolescence (Côté and Vierimaa 2015). The model proposed that young participants go through a series of psychological developmental stages of sports development: sampling (6-12 years), specialisation (13-15 years), and investment (16+ years) (Côté and Hay 2002; Strachan et al. 2009, 2011; Subijana et al. 2021). Each stage of this model leads to three different outcomes for the young athletes: continue to participate in the sport as a leisure activity, drop out from the sport, or advance to the next stage (Bailey et al. 2009). Young athletes aged 13-15 years are in the specialisation phase. Typically, these young athletes focus on one or two types of sports, developing sport-specific skills essential for enhanced sports performance. The DMSP provides a pedagogical rational for 'deliberate play' and 'deliberate practice'. 'Deliberate play' comprises of age-appropriate adapted challenging activities, modified rules, and a focus on enjoyment (Côté and Hay 2002). On the other hand, 'deliberate practice' is purposely intended to improve performance through specific tasks designed to overcome current levels of weakness and requires physical effort (Baker and Young 2014; Ericsson 2003; Ericsson et al. 1993). Côté and Vierimaa (2015) postulated that high amounts of deliberate play during the sampling years build a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in activities that are enjoyable.

The Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Balyi et al. 2013) is the planned, systematic, and progressive development of individual athletes, aimed at those with drive and talent to achieve success, and for every participant to engage in lifelong, health-enhancing physical activity and pathways in sport from infancy through adulthood. The LTAD identified early and late specialisation phases (Stafford 2005). The late specialisation

model (Balyi and Hamilton 2004) is essentially a coach-driven, athlete-centred training programme. Progress is determined by biological age and measured by peak height velocity—when children reach their maximum growth rate (Balyi and Hamilton 2004). The model recommends that maturation levels should differentiate the timing of the strength and aerobic trainability as early, average, or late, and that maturing athletes should have different periods of training (Balyi and Hamilton 2004). The LTAD model has been modified and improved (Balyi et al. 2013) and advocates developmentally appropriate training and competition. The model has been criticised for being theoretical (Strachan et al. 2009). Consequently, Balyi et al. (2013) accepted the generic nature of the LTAD and encouraged sport specific adaptations.

Generation Z athletes (typically thought to be comprised of those born after 1996 and hereafter referred to as Gen Z) are potentially different from other generations of athletes. Gould et al. (2020) found that coaches were cognisant of many perceived Gen Z characteristics, including: being more educated than previous generations of athletes, being goal-directed, having excellent technology capabilities, having high expectations for success and focusing on winning, rather than technical game and strategy development. Their study, based on the views of twelve highly experienced tennis coaches identified characteristics such as short attention spans, poor communication and social emotional skills (e.g. poor emotional expression, lacked basic conversational skills such as eye contact, and a preference for impersonal communication, such as texting), were extrinsically motivated and had a general inability to deal with adversity. Although generational research is deficient (Rudolph, et al. 2021) and problematic (McDougall et al. 2023), this study attempted to offer a glimpse of applied research and practice recommendations for youth footballers. Consequently, the experience of Generation Z and how coaches are perceived is of added value to the understanding of the coaching-youth footballer relationships and the potential revisiting and redevelopment of efficient, generationally nuanced coaching approaches.

Given the gap of research that has specifically focused on gauging the perceptions of the youth footballer and their generational characteristics, an in-depth analysis of their views would be worthy to espouse the implication of applying theory to practice in youth football coaching in Malta.

Main Research Questions

The study focused on giving a voice to youth footballers to share their experiences about their years in football nurseries, with an emphasis on the relationship with the coach and their peers; and a coaching session. The key purpose of this research was to explore the subjective views and perceptions, experiences, and beliefs of youth footballers in nurseries (age 13-15). This study investigated the following key questions:

1. What are the beliefs and aspirations of youth footballers about being part of a youth football club nursery?
2. What are the perceptions of youth footballers about their relationship with the football coaches?
3. What are the views of youth footballers on coaching styles and preferred practices during the coaching sessions?
4. What is the relationship with teammates?

Methodology

It is expedient to consider personal philosophy and identity as being situated at the very heart of consciousness and understanding of belief about the field of youth footballers. Reflecting upon ontology—the study of being, and epistemology—how we come to know, we can start to understand our own theoretical frameworks and therefore develop our own researcher identity (Barbour 2008). Individuals may be part of different groups with different practices, but they have unique capital and habitus that has been socially constructed and thus making lived experiences of youth footballers in football nursery programmes, and of the researchers different. Being aware of inherent beliefs and values about what can be known is important when commencing any research as before it is possible to know more, current personal positionality should be discovered (Bryman 2016) to formulate an appropriate research question and methodology that suits the epistemological values held. This research is underpinned by an ontological belief that the "truth" is generally a social agreement rather than a determinable truth (Gergen 2015) and therefore this research looks for opportunities to reflect on this position with a preference to qualitative data approaches whereby one can interpret and begin to understand individual experiences rather than quantifiable truths as we believe that reality to be constructed by social experiences (Kvale and Brinkman 2009).

Qualitative studies provide insight and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering "humanistic 'why?' and 'how?' questions" (Atkinson 2012; Marshall 1996: 522). Focus groups offer 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena through dynamic group in-depth discussion (Harell and Bradley 2009), conversations and deliberation of thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives (Ennis and Chen 2012) on a specific issue, in this case the experiences and perceptions of youth footballers. Through the focus group, participants interacted with each other rather than with the interviewer, and the interaction of the group encouraged youth footballers to express their individual views or co–construct consensual positions (Denscombe 2014, cited in Cohen et al. 2018: 532). The discussions were supervised and documented by the moderator (Krueger and Casey 2015).

Ethical Challenges and Considerations

The ethical considerations and challenges (Sim and Waterfield 2019) for the study included providing a clear account of what will take place in the focus group to the participants and their parents, ensuring that participants spoke freely, respectfully, and constructively about their views and experiences of football coaching sessions, and especially when elaborating on their teammates and the coach. The researchers did not know the participants. A balance was struck between avoiding or closing potentially distressing discussion and silencing the voices of certain participants to whom such discussion could be important or beneficial. Furthermore, it was ensured that the young participants understood what is meant by consent and that the appropriate expectations of participating in a focus group was clear. In addition to the paperwork of three key issues—consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and risk of harm—the researchers addressed these issues through communications in the consent process and the preliminary briefing session of the focus group. Confidentiality and anonymity were potentially problematic because of the researchers' limited control over what participants may subsequently communicate outside the group. The focus group offered:

> *A carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment… discussions are relaxed, and often, participants enjoy sharing their ideas and perceptions* (Krueger and Casey 2015: 26).

While the desire to capture the authentic voice of youth footballers is at the heart of the research, it is essential that the rights and privacy of the children are protected. It was hoped that the focus group would offset the power imbalance between adult and youth. The ethical clearance of the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the of the University of Malta.

Sampling

In Malta, top division senior football league clubs (Premier League) tend to have well-organised and resourced football nurseries (Youth Football Association 2015). Therefore, the top division league Youth Football Club Nurseries (YFCN) were selected for this study, as it is not practical to study the entire population of YFCN of a country (Dhivyadeepa 2015). At the time of the study, there were fourteen football clubs at Premier league level, with two football clubs not having any registered nursery provision and two having provision for girls. For this study, and to safeguard anonymity, it was decided to focus on boys. Consequently, a stratified random sample of six out of the fourteen top division clubs was selected as a fair representation of the population (Jones et al. 2012). The six YFCNs were contacted through an e-mail to head coaches, providing them with ethically approved information about the study. They were invited to express an interest for the under thirteen (U13) and under fifteen (U15) YFCN players to participate in the study. All six clubs accepted, and the identity of these clubs was kept anonymous. The head coaches were then given an invitation pack to distribute to youth footballers. The invitation pack included an ethically approved study information letter, as well as a consent and assent form. Additional information about the random selection process was communicated to the head coaches and the participants. Anyone who was interested in participating in the study had to fill in, sign, and return the forms back to the head coach in a sealed envelope. Coaches and youth footballers were informed that six to eight participants from their club would be selected randomly by the researchers after the sealed envelopes were returned by a date to the head coach and passed on to the researchers. Youth footballers were notified that if they were not contacted, it meant that they were not randomly selected. The size of the focus group was kept to six to eight participants so that there would be time for them to elaborate on their perspectives (Ennis and Chen 2012). The researchers randomly selected six to eight envelopes from each YFCN. Everyone had an equal chance of being selected for the focus group. Each of the six focus groups included a random selection of U13s and U15s footballers to discuss common issues and voice their perspectives (Ennis and Chen 2012).

The focus group schedule followed Krueger and Casey's (2015) stages: the welcome, where a brief background of the study and the researchers were given; secondly, a brief overview of the issue under discussion; this was then followed by an explanation of the purpose of recording the session, anonymity, confidentiality, and that there are no right or wrong answers. Participants were also notified about how focus groups worked, namely that they were expected to respect different opinions and not to ever state what any participant said during the session to anyone.

The focus group started with icebreaker questions about engagement in sports and football and inspirations/aspirations. The key issues considered for the discussion of the focus groups were the relationship with the coach, the type of activities, positive experiences, the least favourite parts of the coaching sessions, and the environment with the teammates.

The semi-structured focus group interview was selected for collecting information in an informal setting (Ennis and Chen 2012). The questions for the semi-structured focus group were piloted for clarity and duration with eight YFCN participants in preparation for the main study (Krueger and Casey 2015). The finalised questions included probing question delving into "what, why, and give an example" and a visual tool to facilitate the discussion on coaching styles. Each focus group was expected to last between 40–60 minutes. The scheduling of the focus groups was negotiated and organised with the nurseries' respective head coach after the training session in a safe indoor space on the premises of the YFCN. Only the participants and the moderators were present for the focus group sessions.

There were forty-two participants, and all were boys. Each participant was given the option to speak either in Maltese, English, or in both languages, according to how they felt most confident expressing their thoughts and perspectives. Questions were asked in both languages. From six focus groups, the participants of two decided to speak only in Maltese, three groups used both Maltese and English, and one group spoke mostly in English. The audio recordings were translated and transcribed verbatim in English, and the faithfulness of transcripts were rigorously checked. All participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of safeguarding anonymity.

The data was analysed using a systematic thematic analysis (Wilkinson 2016). This method facilitated the initial coding and identification of patterns and connections of the themes that emerged from the transcribed data, which was coded and analysed (Braun et al. 2019; Maguire and Delahunt 2017). The procedure of the data analysis adopted for this study involved several stages, as proposed by the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step was familiarising with the data. Each transcript was read three times to understand and grasp the emerging concepts and keywords from the discussions. The second step was generating the initial codes within the transcript (highlighting text and annotations in the margin) where we used a colour-coding system to highlight useful data gathered. Data about coaches were coded in one colour, data gathered about the training sessions were coded in another colour, and data about the environment in another colour. Once this was completed, similar data from different transcripts were tabularised, collated and compared. A table with all the similar codes from different transcripts was generated to collate all the critical relevant data to use as evidence, to critically evaluate and review the emerging codes, and to group, review, examine and coin the key themes. The subsequent step was defining, refined, and selecting the key themes.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis (Wilkinson 2016) of the discussions of the focus group resulted in the three key emerging themes—the coach, the session, and the environment—which can be seen in Figure 1. The key themes pertaining to the coach are based on how youth footballers perceived the dynamics of their relationship with the coach. These were substantiated by the coaches' decisions, actions, behaviours, thinking, believes and communication that shaped the experience of the youth players. The players' perspective about the training sessions was influenced by the fun aspect, the type of practices and the content, and the challenges that resulted in mental training experienced during the sessions and gameplay. The focus group discussions on the environment centred on the relationships between peers and the perceived influences of the parents.

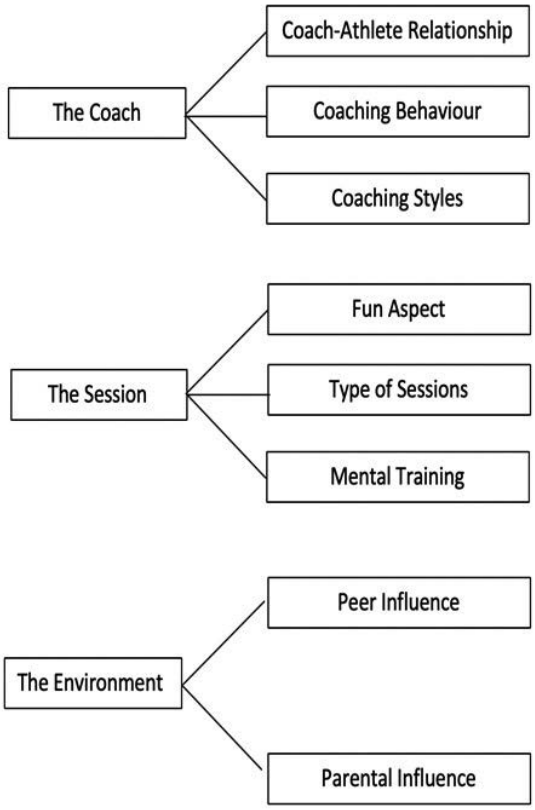

Figure 1: *The emergent themes of the perceptions and experiences of Youth Football Club Nursery participants*

The Coach

Coach - Athlete Relationship

The youth footballers rationalised that their relationship with the coaches was "good" because the coaches listened and communicated with them, which was key to enhance performance and increase their confidence in both football development and gameplay. As Luke explained:

> *My coaches were very cooperative, they were willing to hear and consider my ideas and were always open for discussion. The better the relationship with the coach, the better my performance was*. (Luke)

The relationship with the coach was positive when the youth footballer felt that they were provided with choices that helped develop their inner motivation (support the participant) and when the communication was non-judgemental and non-controlling language (Su and Reeve 2011), as attested and experienced by Mike:

> *If you have a supportive relationship with the coach, you won't feel the pressure during the sessions and even if you make a mistake, you know that*

> *he won't shout at you.* (Mike)

Mills et al. (2012) argued that coaches who offered social support, contribute to the likelihood of successful progression of youth footballers. In contrast, there were youth footballers who stated that they did not experience an encouraging relationship with their coaches because they were not selected to play games or felt that the coach did not support them. Gen Z youth footballers have high expectations of success (Gould 2020), and not being selected resulted in stopping that opportunity for success and a focus on winning. Dan recalled that after a bad match with the U13s:

> *… the coach did not consider me anymore… I felt side-lined, which ended in a bad relationship with the coach … we did not show interest in each other, from both sides.* (Dan)

Another issue that impacted the relationship with the coach was when a coach did not give a chance to a youth player to play, or "play the same players, always … Also, when I make a mistake, he used to shout loud at me" (Jay) and "not playing a lot, and I could see that my performance decreased, and I felt down as well" (Luca). From the comments, it was evident that not playing, or not being given a rationale why this action was taken, what other role could the non-player have on the day, and what the non-player needed to improve on affected the participants negatively. Bill stressed that: "A coach affected me negatively when he did not play me, and I was hurt emotionally. I did not feel worthy".

Despite coaches fielding team A (the best team) and team B (the good team) to offer all the participants playing time, participants in team B seem to be getting less attention and opportunities than team A. Clearly, some inspirational communication from the coaches to explain that footballers have the attention and opportunities as youth players in both teams A and B is an issue that merits further investigation to help the youth footballers remain engaged with practices and games, thus improving their self-worth and game development.

Similarly, other participants assumed that the relationship with the coach was sour due to communication that was judgemental, controlling, and communication that was marred with shouting and the use of profanity, which is disrespectful, although often tolerated in the world of sports (Stephens et al. 2018). Jerome said, "the coach constantly shouted with me during the sessions" while Alex was yelled at whenever he made a mistake, and "apart from that he was always swearing as well." (Alex)

From the focus group discussions with the youth footballers, it was categorically and unanimously felt that coaches should remain calm and collected rather than shout constructive/corrective feedback in a humiliating manner. Shouting that only emphasised negative game performance issues by coaches and lack of interest in the participants was described as disrespectful by different participants. Iven stated that one coach ignored the players and did not show any interest even "if you get injured during the session… He also used to shout a lot."

A negative relationship between the youth players and the coach often resulted in players changing clubs:

> *After one of my worst games and the coach shouted at me a lot that my mother went to speak to him after the match. He told my mother that if she'd like she can remove me from the nursery and he told me that if I'd want, I don't go anymore to his session, I ended up changing clubs.* (Mirco)

Not being selected to play in a tournament resulted in Lui changing clubs too, since the coach:

> *Did not seem to like the fact that I asked him why he did not select me for play, and from there, our relationship was not so good. In fact, I changed clubs because of that coach.* (Lui)

The coach-player relationship that emerged from this study indicated that the youth footballers frequently felt that the relationship was negative because of communication, performance, selection, and transition issues. The absence of a formal performance review phase where coaches and youth footballers can discuss how one can set goals to improve and the potential outcome to transition to recreational play and start a new phase perhaps in other club or setting is startling. It is recommend that ongoing professional development for coaches for a holistic and inclusive "selection" approach for gameplay, communication and assessment/performance review processes to manage the expectations of youth footballers, and the monitoring, reporting, and eradication of the use of profane language in nurseries is timely.

Youth football nurseries should be sporting spaces that are safe and free from verbal and psychological abuse. Taylor et al. (2016) believe that coaches are either pictured as protectors, those who help in the holistic development of young people, or predators, those who leave a negative mark or damage on young people. Mageau and Vallerand (2003) argue that the primary cause in dropping out of sports is possibly due to the lack of an enjoyable, safe, and appropriate environment that is experienced by boys and girls during practical sessions. Therefore, there could be opportunities for coaches to self-refer themselves for training and for peer coaches, parents, and players to raise concerns with the club's child protection/safeguarding officers when youth footballers are verbally abused.

Coaching Behaviour Feedback and Communication

Most of the participants stated that they were positively affected whenever the coach gave them constructive and positive feedback, clearly identifying what they did well, what they needed to do better and to improve. Participants felt that the verbal tone the coach used to "correct and speak" (Ben) to them, as well as their being involved in the sessions, meant that they were able to progress. Ben felt that positive and corrective feedback helped him improve: "now I am able to do things that I was not able to do before". Similarly, Luke felt that "whenever I made a mistake, they used to correct me and increase my confidence" and Bron added that only "then I can improve."

> *A coach affected me positively by correcting me in the right manner by giving me the right feedback. Also, I like a coach that is simple in his explanation and exercises.* (Cody)

The findings in this study are congruent with the findings of Hays et al. (2007), where it was found that a coach could generate opportunities for optimal development and progression through positive coaching behaviours. Coaches can also develop children's confidence and intrinsic motivation through appropriate reinforcement and positive feedback. Similarly, Skinner and Edge (2002) emphasized that clear, constructive feedback and expectations and engagement enhances performance and motivation. Kyle argued that when the coach gave "responsibility it means that he believes in me … I also believe that a coach should give this chance to everybody, not just one player" so that everyone can "increase his confidence" (Gian). Larsen et al. (2015) stated that with autonomy and support, the coach facilitates freedom of choice and the support expansion of the players' inner motivation.

In contrast, other participants shared experiences of situations where the coach left a negative impact on the players through disrespectful and humiliating communications and name-calling. For example, a coach shouted at youth footballers during training following a bad game (Dan) and the coach told Matthias that he is "disabled/ handicapped" (Matthias). Jerry thought about stopping football because the "coach criticises you in a destructive manner, especially in front of others". Youth footballers felt demotivated, and their self-confidence and self-worth were shattered. The lack of confidence and self-worth projected onto nursery players by the coaches is startling and contradicts what is suggested by Smith and Smoll (2007, cited in Partington et al. 2013), who emphasised that it is vital for coaching behaviour to be age appropriate. For this reason, coaches working with youth athletes and children should try to develop a child's self-esteem, build their confidence, and support the child's self-worth.

Mat also emphasised how he could not handle all the "pressure he had from his coaches during the sessions and before the games" and how his self-confidence was diminished. Bussman (1995) and Gould (1996), cited in Cervello et al. (2007), found that dropping out is often a result of too much pressure, training sessions, and a lack of success. However, lack of motivation was the primary reason for quitting. It seems to be essential that participants look forward and remain motivated for training. The findings of this study suggest that participants valued the coach's positive communication approach, including telling them what they need to improve. Nevertheless, some coaches will benefit from ongoing professional development on how they communicate and manage youth footballers to cope with setbacks and mental wellbeing in the context of team selection, performance of gameplay, coping with winning and losing causes stress, anxiety, emotions and high/ low self-confidence. Gould et al. (2020) emphasised that Generation Z athletes have high expectations for success and focus on winning. In sports coaching, social relationships, communication, coach leadership, team dynamics, and motivation are some of the key psychosocial (Jowette and Lavalle 2007) disciplines of evolving knowledge and practice that are recommended for coaches, as found in this study.

These examples demonstrate that some coaches should act more professionally, and apart from delivering age-appropriate skills, tactics and techniques, complement these with appropriate use of language, and exemplar coping and communication skills when inadequate performance and failure strikes. These attributes should be part of the communication skills, competencies, and attitudes that are part of ongoing coaching development courses.

Another emergent discussion during the focus groups was the importance of winning. Although participants did not point out that their coaches focused directly on winning, most participants stated that whenever they did not play, or the coaches divided the group into team A and team B, they felt disappointed as it lowered their self-worth. The focus group discussion revealed that it is common practice for coaches to select the same players for gameplay or preferred team (A) over team (B) because of the winning potential of team A. When winning in football was overemphasized, this resulted in a negative impact (Côté and Hay 2002). As Miller et al. (2003) stated, young footballers may decrease their progress due to overemphasising winning at a young age.

During a discussion, a participant stated that it is essential to win, however, not all other participants agreed. This brought mixed views and varied reactions to competition and how important they perceive this is in their football development. Zane, Gian, and Kyle all stated that although they like winning, the most important thing for them is to develop. Berry supported his friends' statements by adding: "It's better to improve and to learn rather than to win and learn nothing." Lewis agreed as he always wants to improve but also stated that his aim as a player is to win. Ben ended by stating that there needs to

be a balance between winning and development. Although some participants stated that they prefer development over winning, they all stated that they enjoy and like the winning feeling. This showed that the participants have the "winning" characteristics of Gen Z (Gould et al. 2020) and that there should be some importance given to winning, but that the primary aim should be the development of the participant. It also showed that a coach working with this age-group would be preferably a coach whose philosophy of coaching is guided through a radical ethic. This philosophy revolves around the concept that although winning is important as it marks an achievement, attention is given more to the process of how to win as well as participant development (Bonney et al. 2004).

When discussing the best qualities of a coach, most participants stated that they do not like coaches who shout during games and/or sessions, although they would like to have a strict coach who keeps discipline, "strict in the sense of keeping discipline, not shouting" (Andrew). Attributes of care, authentic education, and commitment emerged as concepts in the discussion. Interestingly many of the participants referred to another two attributes which they look for in a coach. These are fairness and respect. Various participants stated that they would like a coach who motivates and encourages players. The following quotes substantiate what emerged in the findings:

> *A coach that respects everyone speaks to you in a way that does not embarrass you and has a good relationship with the players both on and off the pitch*. (Gian)

> *A coach that respects you, you learn new things, shouts in a positive way and gives a chance to everyone.* (Alessio)

An interesting concept that emerged from the discussion was the fact that participants prefer a coach who has a lot of football achievements rather than a coach with lots of qualifications. Jerome added that "I would choose a coach with the most achievements rather than with the highest licence". Participants stated that a coach should also be an "ex-player" (Jerome) and their reason for this was "So the coach could understand better what we are going through and our problems since he experienced it himself" (Bron). This is a coaching attribute valued by young players. This perception shows that young footballers would like a coach that would have gone through the grit of achieving footballing success and knows what the journey entails. As Cronin and Armour (2013) found, coaching youths should be a caring act that includes authentic education through a commitment to excellence.

Coaching Styles

Most participants showed a preference for the cooperative coaching style (Martens 2012) because they felt invested in the decisions and understood the rationale for the training exercises. Andy felt that the "coach gets you to understand what is happening", while Ned thought that the cooperative style is closer to a game and competitions simulations, therefore it is "better for you in the game".

These participants did "not feel confident" (Mat) with coaches who adopt a command style of coaching (command, practice and reciprocal styles) (Mosston and Ashworth 2008), as when the coach sets up practices and one just goes through a drill, "when it comes to a game, I will have a lot of pressure, and I will end up making a lot of mistakes" (Luke). Meanwhile, these participants believed that with younger age groups, a coach should use the command style of coaching more. Their reasoning was that the youngsters are not that experienced, and the coach knows better than the players. Despite the coach being in control of the content and decision-making during training sessions, "it would be better for

the coach to tell them what they need to know and to do, so that they can improve" (Zak). Chatoupis (2015) concluded that paring 8-year-olds in football dribbling with a friend rather than a non-acquaintance when one is practicing and the other giving feedback (reciprocal style) (Mosston and Ashworth 2008) resulted in confidence in giving and receiving feedback when pairs of friends worked together. The implications of Chatoupis's (2015) work suggests that the coach needs to build friendships and model how meaningful constructive feedback should be given, received, and acted on. The discussions with youth footballers attest that the command and the cooperative styles of coaching (Martens 2012) are predominant in YFCN in Malta.

The Session

The Fun Aspect

Participants "go to the session to have fun and meet…friends" (Aaron) and "because it involves fun exercises" (Jon). Fred added that "to have fun is the most important thing during a session", while Gonzalo thinks that "it is essential to enjoy what you are doing." Players do not like sessions that get boring or repetitive. The sessions for children aged 13-15 years should be designed such that fun is central in all activities; and the overall football experience should provide young footballers with enjoyment as found in the work of Côté and Abernethy (2012). In addition, Franks et al. (2001) stated that one of the different responsibilities of the coach is as an instructor, and therefore it is the coach's responsibility to teach the participant how to do and what to do in the session in an enjoyable and fun environment to keep the child engaged. This study showed that the coaches included fun and enjoyment in their sessions.

Meanwhile, a minority of individual participants stated that their main aim is to improve but that they also expect to have fun and enjoy the session. In fact, their favourite exercises during the session were those that had an element of fun while improving and developing their game performance. Most participants experienced fun during the game-related exercises and the end-game phases. Zak substantiated this with his comments; "I prefer the end game, 1v1, and 2v2 because since I am a defender I can improve by practising these exercises." This finding resonated with the work of Gould et al. (2020) who proposed that while coaching Gen Z footballers/athletes, firstly coaches should connect process with performance, for instance, explaining the connection between practice and game performance point to enhance performance and motivation. All participants emphasised that the end game is their favourite part, and that they like the exercises where they have some element of freedom of individual decision-making. Youth footballers feel that it is important that coaches give a sense of purpose to their players.

Types of Sessions

All the participants stated that they were involved in physical training which they perform once or twice a week, tactical training, and technical training. Across every nursery, goalkeepers have their own specific individualised training as well. According to the LTAD model (Balyi et al. 2013), children from 11-15 years (girls) and 12-16 years (boys) are in training to train phase. Findings in this study showed that participants could be provided with individualised training programmes, developmental progressions of tactical, technical, and mental capacities, and the inclusion of physical strength and conditioning. Children could be split into different groups. Specific training for goalkeepers equates with specific training advocated in the Developmental Model of Sports Participation (DMSP) where participants start developing sport-specific skills which are an essential feature of sport engagement.

Participants of all nurseries verified that all youth footballers perform the same physical training together, and they were not split into different groups. This practice contradicts what is recommended in the LTAD model (Balyi et al. 2013). Differentiation within every session, especially in strength and speed exercises, is essential for the development of youth footballers according to their potential (Bolotin and Bakayev 2017).

The model suggests that for physical conditioning, participants should be split into different groups. Balyi and Hamilton (2004) stated that strength and aerobic trainability should be developed according to age groups, while Lloyd and Oliver (2012) proposed a new approach to LTAD to enhance the physical development of youth. These models identify research-based maturation levels: early, average, or late. Thus, during training sessions, risks such as burnout injuries, not reaching full potential, and lack of self-worth need to be minimised through individualised training plans. Further research on the application of LTAD individualised programmes is desirable.

The participants are in the specialisation phase (13-15) (Côté and Hay 2002) and preferred sessions and activities that are deliberately play-orientated rather than deliberately practice-oriented. This demonstrates that most participants desired activities that are enjoyable (Côté and Hay 2002). These participants potentially found the challenge of physical effort out of their comfort zone at this stage in their development. They found find deliberate practice intended to improve performance and work on weaknesses not necessarily fun (Baker and Young 2014).

This study revealed that some nurseries performed physical fitness check-ups and individual sports-specific tests twice a year, another nursery once a year, while in another nursery there is no clear plan. During the discussion, participants stated that if they had regular check-ups, their progress and development would have been quicker, and some felt that they missed out. Karl stated, “If we perform these tests more regularly, we could improve more”. Dan added, “You have to do tests regularly to monitor your improvement.” The LTAD model recommends that children on the path to talent development should be monitored for height, weight, and medical screening. Youth football nurseries could consider developing ethical and professional monitoring to provide the coaches with the data for individualised physical development and training programmes. Unquestionably, the monitoring of the physical development of the participants could be improved given the outcomes of success of the LTAD model (Lloyd and Oliver 2012).

Challenges and Mental Training during the Sessions

Self-determination and confidence emerged as interesting psychological qualities of mental training experienced by Zak:

> *The coach does not affect me, I always play my game. Whenever I play, I always have one aim, that is to win, and therefore, I do not get affected by what is being said on the outside.*

Gould et al. (2020) also suggested placing youth footballers in challenging situations and simulating psychological and emotional stressors in a progressive manner to build resilience and confidence. These experiences lead to the preparation to cope in similar scenarios in the competitive game situations (Gould et al. 2020). Other recommendations included that coaches be direct and set clear expectations and teach basic communication skills, for example: introducing oneself, making eye contact, exhibiting friendly behaviours, and engaging in respectful communication. These are important indicators of how coaches currently and holistically understand youth footballers.

This form of mental strength is also evident in the following comment: "There were participants who tried to do me wrong, but they did not affect me" (Zak). According to Cervello et al. (2007), another contributor to dropping out of a sport is when children undermine self-determined motivation and activities that are not age appropriate (Wall and Côté 2007). Furthermore, mental training helps participants progress in their careers. Being psychologically strong and being mentally prepared to whatever they face throughout their careers and personal life are essential factors that can be taught through sports.

The Environment

Peer Relationships and Influences

The findings suggest that most of the participants have good relationships with their peers and that they get over disagreements and end up being friends again in no time. On the other hand, Matthias stated: "There were peers that tried to bully me or make fun of me", while Zen added "I had peers who always try to find the negative things in you… he was always picking on me." Participants also stated that they were aware that, in their respective teams, there were sub-groups of friends coming together because of personal likes and more commonly due to participants attending the same school. This, however, did not seem to affect training negatively, as Lewis stated that "It's most evident prior to the session, but during the session, everyone does well with each other." On the other hand, some participants felt that forming sub-groups is not healthy for a team. Ben stated that: "I was in a squad in which there were groups and it was annoying because the team was split in two. During the game, everyone starts arguing, and it was not healthy for the team"; Lee also stated that: "During the game, there would be two separate groups and there would be rough and unneeded challenges which end up in fights." In contrast to the previous arguments, there were participants who stated that their peers made them lower their confidence, self-worth and, as Ned stated,

> *They did not accept me, and I was not being included, so I was kind of feeling stressed, and that also affected me in the match, which made me scared.*

Cody agreed with Ned as he stated,

> *I had a peer who always shouted and blamed others whenever we conceded a goal. He lowered my self-worth, and I was not able to play with confidence.*

Cervello et al. (2007) stated that a sense of the athlete's competence perceptions and identity are formed through relationships and socialisation with others during adolescence. This corresponds to what has emerged from the discussions. In fact, participants who had a good relationship with their friends and were affected positively felt good to be part of the team. On the other hand, participants who did not do quite well with their peers felt that their confidence and self-worth decreased. Young footballers participate in sports to be successful in sport participation, form part of a group, improve skills, and enjoy playing (Cervello et al. 2007). When individual youth footballers are bullied, picked on, and feel excluded by their peers, coaches have a role to play to prevent and eradicate these adverse experiences in youth football (Flores-Aguilar et al. 2021).

On a more positive note, words of encouragement from peers helped to build confidence, with Mike stating that "My peers always encourage me and support me whenever I make a mistake." This adds to the responsibilities of the coaches and all those working with young participants in sport to foster positive relationships and communication patterns amongst young participants.

Parental Influence

Most participants agreed that parents do not affect them positively since they reduced their self-worth, added extra pressure, and lowered their confidence levels through their shouting and misuse of language. Karl stated, "Parents should shut their mouth. They do not need to shout at the referee even if he (referee) made a mistake". Different participants also stated that the parents are not coaches and they should go and just watch the game. Although most of the participants spoke negatively on the effect of the parents, some stated that their parents affected them positively through feedback, support, and encouragement. Alex stated that "My parents encourage me and support me and when I make a mistake, they give me advice." Andy also stated that "My parents affect me positively because they always give me feedback on how I have done in the game." Ferreira and Armstrong (2002) stated that parents are associated with dropouts. Parents should support and encourage their children as well as the other participants. This situation can be improved from the nurseries' side by putting in more effort to improve parental behaviours. These situations can be tackled by introducing rules/guidance of conduct/signed agreements that should be followed by the parents.

Conclusion

The study focused on young footballers' perspectives on the relationship with their football coach, the football session, and the environment. One strength of this study was that it was underpinned by theoretically established developmental theory applied to practices in youth sports coaching. Côté's and Vierimaa's (2015) DMSP, Balyi et al.'s (2013) LTAD models of youth sports development, Martens's (2012) coaching styles, and practice styles (as derived from Baker and Young 2014; Côté and Hay 2002) helped frame the purpose of the study, inform the content for the focus group, and guide the data analysis. A further strength of the study was the consideration of the characteristics of youth footballers from generation Z (Gould et al. 2020), which facilitated reporting 'in the moment' views and perceptions of footballers in youth nurseries in Malta. A potential limiting factor was that only youth football nurseries from the premier league football clubs and only boys contributed to the focus groups.

The key findings revealed that youth footballer and coach relationships were both positive and negative. The way the coach communicated with the players turned out to be a crucial factor in how the youth footballers perceived their coach. Some young footballers were affected positively as they felt that the coach provided honest and constructive feedback, and because they were actively involved and supported through encouragement in the session. Others were affected negatively, as the coach did not provide enough feedback to improve their performance or sidelined them. All youth footballers felt that shouting, the use of profane language, exerting verbal pressure or not communicating strategically post sessions are objectionable and unprofessional. An unexpected finding was that youth footballers unanimously agreed that they would have more trust in their football coach if they used to be an ex-footballer, as they would have knowledge and experience, hence understand youth footballers better. Another unexpected result was that some youth footballers alleged that their parents influence the self-esteem and performance

negatively through pressure to perform better, and that, moreover, parents should not shout at referees. There is scope for further investigations on how parental behaviours impact youth footballers and parental conduct management policies. Interestingly, none of the youth footballers mentioned a desire for the use of technology to record, analyse, and enhance their performance as per Gen Z predispositions. Peer support and friendships amongst the youth footballers were evident, but the input of the coaches to develop and monitor these relationships requires further exploration. It is recommended that there be ongoing professional development for coaches to improve communication and processes concerning gameplay, assessment/performance review processes to manage the expectations of youth footballers, and the monitoring, reporting, and eradication of the use of profane language in YFCN. As a follow-up of this study, further research is recommended on social-psychological aspects of coaching in relation to some of the characteristics of Gen Z, and on the policies and procedures of communications of coaches and parents in youth nurseries during the training sessions and gameplay.

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