A Self-Study of a Novice Coach Navigating the Coaching Journey

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Abstract

This study investigated the learning experiences of one novice coach navigating the complexities of coaching teenage girls aged 12-14 over the course of one season. This included consideration of how to balance competition, inclusivity and player development while formally introducing competitive structures. This research contributes to the overall understanding of how novice coaches learn to coach and offers a guide to coaches on how to introduce competitive practices while supporting teenage girls to remain in team sport.

Using a self-study approach, the lead researcher explored her own practices to seek improvement and better understand her coaching. The research was conducted in one Limerick Ladies' Gaelic Football club over seven months. Participants included 47 children aged 12-14 and a wider coaching team of 6 adults aged 25-45. Data was obtained using various data collection methods from the researcher, fellow coaches and child participants. The researcher generated data involved engaging in post-training and post-games reflections (n=30) recorded in the researcher's reflective research diary (n=7,500 words). After three months and upon completion of the league phase of the season, the researcher engaged with a critical friend (n=1) who challenged and questioned the researcher's assumptions before starting the season's championship phase (n=4 months). Additionally, the researcher engaged in mentor observation and feedback sessions (n=4), where the mentor observed, challenged, and provided feedback on the researcher's practice, which were recorded in the researcher's reflective diary. Additionally, key learning moments provided by the mentor to the researcher were recorded in the researcher's reflective diary (n=6). The players in this research took part in post-training (n=10) and post-match (n=7) reflections generating 304 player responses. Furthermore, critical incidents and comments (n=15) made by players were recorded in the researcher's reflective research diary. The data gathered from these sources was analysed thoroughly using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings illustrate the coach's learning journey with changes in her coaching philosophy and developments in her communication skills with coaches and players, which all led to an increase in her confidence when making decisions. The findings illustrate the complexity of balancing competition with inclusivity in youth sport, specifically for girls. This research also indicates the value of novice coaches engaging in self-study research and the benefits it holds for developing and improving current practices. By engaging in self-study, the researcher

developed self-awareness and awareness of others through the actions taken to provide meaningful, worthwhile experiences for players.

On a personal level, this research has proved an enlightening and worthwhile experience for me as I continue to progress on my coaching journey. The contribution of this research lies in sharing my experiences as a novice coach navigating the role of competition and inclusion. These findings can extend understanding of coaching methodologies to enable more coaches to better understand the complexity of competition and coaching teenage girls.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work. I have fully acknowledged and referenced all quotations from other sources. The work submitted here has not been submitted for any other awards at any university or third-level institution.

Signed:  Date: 23/07/2024

Caoimhe Costelloe

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Liam, who demonstrated great courage and bravery throughout his illness while I was undertaking this study. You inspire me more than you will ever know.

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List of Abbreviations

CoP	Community of Practice
ICK	ICoachKids
IPPEA	Irish Primary PE Association
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GBA	Games Based Approach
LGFA	Ladies' Gaelic Football Association
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
PE	Physical Education
TGfU	Teaching Games for Understanding
U12	Under 12 Age Group
U14	Under 14 Age Group

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study aimed to investigate the learning experiences of one novice coach navigating the complexities of coaching teenage girls aged 12-14 years over the course of a season playing Ladies Gaelic Football. This is a qualitative self-study of my own practices as a novice coach learning to coach while introducing the competitive structures of sport. This chapter will outline the research rationale, the significance of the study, its limitations, and an overview of this thesis.

1.2 Research Rationale

This research aims to contribute to the limited research on novice coaches' experiences. As Lemyre *et al.* (2007) highlighted, many researchers have investigated how elite or expert coaches learn to coach. However, very few have investigated this process with coaches at the recreational or developmental performance levels. Additionally, despite similarities between coaching and teaching, the extensive range of self-study research carried out in education has not yet been mirrored within coaching (Casey *et al.* 2018). This study addresses the need to expand self-study research into sports coaching environments (Brown 2011; Ovens and Fletcher 2014). Bowles and O'Dwyer (2020) state that self-study offers considerable potential to explore "one's personal and professional identities" (Casey *et al.* 2018, p. 55) through the interweaving of different experiences within the shared complexity of teaching and coaching.

Additionally, this research aims to contribute to the current literature on teenage girls in sport. Research indicates a significant decline in girls' participation during their teenage years, influenced by social pressures, body image concerns, and a lack of female role models in coaching positions (Sport Ireland 2021; Crane and Temple 2015). By specifically focusing on this age group, this study seeks to address these issues by exploring effective coaching strategies that can enhance the sporting experiences of teenage girls and promote sustained participation beyond adolescence. Furthermore, this study aims to explore strategies that coaches can adopt to create an inclusive, supportive, and empowering environment for female players. Understanding how coaches work with teenage girls is essential for nurturing a positive environment that values and supports female players. By shedding light on these dynamics, this research aims to contribute valuable insights to sports coaching and empowering teenage girls to remain in sport into the future.

1.3 Significance of Study

Participating in sport and physical activity provides multiple benefits for physical and mental health (Sport Ireland 2021). It has been long highlighted that there is a significant dropout of girls in sports during their teenage years. Just 12% of girls aged 12 and 13 in Ireland meet the daily guidelines of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (Sport Ireland 2021). Formal competitive structures are typically introduced in children's sports during the early teenage years. During these years, dropout from sport has been identified as a significant issue (Lunn *et al*. 2013). Research by Ní Chróinín *et al.* (2021) suggests that competition can be a divisive issue in some environments and efforts are often made to deemphasise competition in a variety of ways. It is important to examine and highlight the practices inherent within sports which might deter children from participating in team sports (Bailey *et al.* 2004).

This research will examine how formal competition is introduced in one Ladies' Gaelic Football Club and the subsequent consequences of this. Coaches play a significant role in player retention and ensuring a player's sport experience is positive. Coaches must learn to create a balance between fostering competitiveness, nurturing the holistic development of players, and inclusion.

Furthermore, by sharing my journey as a novice coach and my learning experiences over the season, this study seeks to contribute to the broader research of youth sports coaching. Hopefully, this research can inform and encourage other coaches to adopt a more inclusive, child-centred approach to coaching in the teenage years to retain more female players in sport.

1.4 Research Question

This study addressed the following research question: *What are the learning experiences of a novice coach learning to coach teenage girls aged 12-14 years?* This self-study examined the practices of this coach-researcher, who was coaching a team that had just progressed from a non-competitive model at the Under 12 level to a competitive format at the older age band.

1.4.1 Embedded Questions

The following embedded questions were devised to explore the learning experiences of a novice coach learning to coach teenage girls:

- What challenges and barriers does a novice coach encounter, how can they be overcome, and how do these impact their learning and development?
- In what ways does developing a coaching philosophy influence a novice coach's approach and effectiveness in coaching teenage girls?

- What strategies can be adopted by a novice coach to shape their learning experiences?
- How do coaches create a player-centred environment, and how does this environment promote inclusive practices?

1.5 Research Design

Research design is the blueprint for conducting research (Burns and Grove 2003). This research investigated the learning experiences of a novice coach over seven months in a Limerick Ladies' Gaelic Football club. The participants consisted of 47 teenage girls aged 12-14 years, and their experience of Ladies' Gaelic Football varied from no experience to >6 years. Additionally, there were six coaches aged 25-45 with various levels of coaching experience from no experience to >20 years. Data was gathered using various data collection methods, including a researcher reflective diary, mentor and critical friend discussions, player post-training and post-match reflections.

Self-study research was suitable for this research, as I, as the researcher, am committed to my ongoing professional learning and exploring my assumptions, beliefs and actions as they are enacted in practice (Casey *et al.* 2018). This study provided many opportunities for me to reflect on my beliefs as I tried to make training sessions and matches meaningful for the children I was coaching. This research aimed to track the learning experiences of the researcher at the centre of this study while also focusing on how to balance competition, inclusivity and player development.

1.6 My Connection to the Study

Having graduated with a Bachelor of Education from Mary Immaculate College in 2018, I believed the time was right to engage in professional development and explore a topic that has always been of interest and great importance to me. The significance of this study is centred on my personal and professional interest in my role as a teacher, a player and a developing coach. Teaching and sport, particularly the GAA, are two of my greatest passions, and I have discovered many similarities between them over the past few years.

The GAA has always played a significant role in my life. I grew up involved in hurling, camogie, and Ladies' Gaelic football. I have been fortunate to represent my county at the senior level in camogie for the past twelve years. It is of utmost importance to me to be a positive role model to girls growing up in our community. As a primary school teacher in an all-girls school in my local community, I want girls to grow up seeing sports as inclusive, fun, enjoyable and worthwhile. In more recent times, I have begun to reflect on my own experiences

as a child playing sports and engaging in PE. I often wondered why I was the only female of my age group still playing Ladies' Gaelic Football and Camogie for my club despite the resources available in our community. Growing up through my teenage years, we were often required to amalgamate with other clubs to ensure players had a team to play with, as we no longer had sufficient numbers to field a team on our own. As I began to read and explore the reasons why girls drop out of sport, particularly during their teenage years, it concerned me greatly to think that so many of the pupils I teach would not reach the recommended levels of physical activity as they grow older. I wanted to contribute to changing the outcomes for girls in sport and better understand the role I could play in retaining girls for as long as possible.

I recognise that my experiences in sport and teaching may have created certain biases. These biases include expecting players to have the same level of interest in the sport as I had growing up, or believing that we, as a coaching group, can significantly influence the players' interest in LGFA. Additionally, I may assume that the methodologies and skills I apply in my role as a teacher will seamlessly carry over to coaching, which might not always be the case. Another potential bias is overestimating our ability as a coaching team to develop the skill levels of all players at a quicker rate due to our teaching and coaching experience.

Moreover, coaching techniques that I have experienced and worked for me as a player may not necessarily suit the needs of the players I am coaching. I also recognise that I may unconsciously favour and focus my efforts on developing players who remind me of a younger version of myself rather than addressing the needs of the entire group. However, I have made every effort to ensure these biases are addressed and considered throughout this self-study project by actively seeking diverse perspectives from other coaches, a mentor and critical friend and reflecting on my decisions in my reflective research diary.

1.7 Thesis Overview

Chapter One provides insight into the purpose of this study. The research question is indicated, an outline of the research design is explained, and the rationale for this research is provided. The researcher's personal connection to this study is also acknowledged.

Chapter Two provides an in-depth analysis of the literature available on coaching practices. It will examine the role of a coach, how coaches learn, and how coaching philosophies are created. It will also analyse the literature available on coaching young females in sports, the games-based coaching style and the role of competition in youth sports.

Chapter Three provides the context in which this study took place by detailing my coaching and playing experiences, which have significantly informed this research. It describes my journey from early sport involvement and competitive achievements to transitioning into coaching, highlighting how these experiences influenced my coaching philosophy. This chapter also outlines the study participants and the environment in which the research was conducted, thereby establishing a comprehensive background to help better understand the study's findings and implications.

Chapter Four outlines the methodology and research design adapted for this study. It presents the research question and explains the rationale for selecting a self-study to complete it. It also considers the participants and ethical considerations. The chapter details the multiple data collection methods used and how this data was analysed. Finally, it outlines the measures taken to maximise trustworthiness in this study.

Chapter Five presents the first significant finding of this research: Personal Growth and Development. This finding will demonstrate how the researcher’s engagement with mentorship and reflective practice led to changes and improvements in practice. It will discuss this finding in three emergent thematic areas. The findings will be presented using critical incidents recorded in the researcher’s reflective diary, direct quotes from participants' surveys, and mentor discussions. The findings are linked and discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter Six presents the second significant finding of this research: Creating a Player-Centred Environment. It will present how this environment was created and its significance for players and coaches. Mentorship and reflective practice were utilised throughout the process to help create this environment. The chapter will discuss this finding in three emergent thematic areas. The findings will be presented using critical incidents recorded in the researcher’s reflective diary, direct quotes from participants' surveys, and mentor discussions. The findings are linked and discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

Chapter Seven concludes this thesis with a summary of the main findings and explains the study's strengths and limitations. Additionally, recommendations for future research and the significance of this study are provided.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of this thesis, explaining the rationale for this study, the significance of this research, the research design, and my own connection to the study. Finally, an overview of all chapters in this thesis was presented. The next chapter will present a review of the relevant literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the role of a coach and how coaches learn through formal and informal learning experiences, personal experience, mentoring, and reflective practice. It will also discuss the experiences of female coaches in sport and review the literature on coaching philosophies, competition in youth sport and Irish policy, coach-athlete relationships, coaching youth players and girls in sport, and GBA.

2.2 Role of the Coach

The coaching process is multi-faceted, dynamic, and complex (Cushion 2007; Jones *et al.* 2002). Potrac *et al.* (2002) describe coaching as a complex process involving interactions between individuals of different ages, classes, experiences, genders, philosophies, races, and values. Coaches are not a homogenous group and many have different expectations of themselves, motives for coaching and desires (Harman and Doherty 2014). Coaching is not an activity that can be reduced to applying a set of generic rules (Cushion *et al.* 2010). Instead, it requires a coach to balance individual and collective needs while managing the varied dilemmas that inevitably arise from this complex process (Potrac *et al.* 2000).

Effective coaching is defined as "the consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection and character in specific learning contexts" (Côté and Gilbert 2009, p.316). Coach effectiveness depends on the quality of the interactions between the coach, athletes, and the context (Cushion *et al.* 2006). Coaching is a complex social-cultural endeavour as many competing and dynamic demands are placed on coaches, influenced by culture, traditions and history (Stodter 2022). Participation in coaching is influenced by a coach's enjoyment of engaging in practical coaching, their desire to help others improve, and their desire to give back something to their sport (Lyle 2002; Lyle *et al.* 1997). Coaches are one of the primary influences on athletes in sport (Horn 2008) with the coach's main responsibility being to enable their players to attain levels of performance not otherwise achievable (Short and Short 2005). Traditionally, it is a coach's responsibility to develop a plan and improve the skills and techniques of their players and tactics for participation or competition (Nash and Sproule 2011). Furthermore, coaches take on many roles, including teacher, organiser, competitor, learner, and friend and mentor (Short and Short 2005). These roles include:

Teacher: The role of teacher is the most recognisable role as a coach. Coaches display their knowledge and skills through the design of quality training sessions. Coaches impart their knowledge and skills across physical, tactical, technical, and mental aspects of the sport.

Organiser: Effective organisation involves scheduling games, training sessions, and other work that is not typically seen in public but is crucial for ensuring the success of a season.

Competitor: Coaches play an active role in competitions as they make decisions, substitutions and interact with opponents and referees. Competition can lead to coaches experiencing the same emotions as their players.

Learner: A coach should be continually learning about their sport and improving their coaching ability.

Friend & Mentor: Coaches have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with their players. This involves being a positive role model for players, discussing issues, and sharing advice where required.

These multifaceted roles and responsibilities that coaches undertake throughout a season underscore the complexity of effective coaching, highlighting the diverse range of skills required as a coach. Understanding the multifaceted role of a coach highlights the necessity for understanding how coaches learn, which will be explored in the next section on learning to coach.

2.3 Learning to Coach

Learning is an "act or process by which behavioural change, knowledge, skills, and attitudes are acquired" (Jarvis 2004, pp.100-101). Coach learning is fundamental to developing high-quality coaching for players (Stodter and Cushion 2017; Townsend *et al.* 2017). Understanding how coaches learn is essential in helping them develop more effectively (Stodter 2022). There are four stages in developing expertise in coaching, beginning, competent, proficient and expert (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1987) and learning to coach does not follow a predetermined path (Wood *et al.* 2022). A coach's value to a sport is enhanced more generally as they continue learning within their coaching (Wood *et al.* 2022).

Learning to coach occurs more often in an environment where the primary purpose is not coach learning (Cushion *et al.* 2010). The coaching environment has been traditionally viewed as a place where players learn and develop. However, more recently this environment is considered a place where coaches' learning and development can also occur (Cushion *et al.* 2010).

Coaches acquire their knowledge through various forms of learning and experiences (Trudel and Gilbert 2004; Nash and Collins 2006; Partington and Cushion 2011). Several studies have found that coaches develop skills and knowledge through a multi-faceted combination of their experiences (Piggott 2015; Werthner and Trudel 2006). The main sources of learning include their own first-hand playing and coaching experiences, coach education courses, peer interaction, working with more experienced coaches, mentoring and more recently social media (Trudel and Gilbert 2004; Stodter and Cushion 2017; Walker *et al.* 2018; Cushion and Jones 2001; Gilbert and Trudel 2001). Learning to coach needs to be considered and encouraged as an embedded and embodied process of navigating through a performance environment comprised of an abundance of constraints and entangled tasks (Wood *et al.* 2022). Sherwin (2017) found that there does not seem to be any consensus on the best way to learn, how to coach, or the best way to coach. Additionally, they describe the demands of matches, competitions, and training sessions as requiring a great variety of coaching methods, coaching knowledge, and interpersonal and intrapersonal knowledge to coach effectively in different contexts (Sherwin 2017).

Based on the work of Tusting and Barton (2006), Schunk (2009), and Jarvis (2004), it is possible to make the following inferences about coach learning (Cushion *et al.* 2010):

- Learners build on their existing knowledge and experience
- The learner initiates learning
- Learners have the ability to, and should, learn how they learn
- Learning occurs through engaging in practice, which needs to be supported
- Learners need to reflect meaningfully and build on their experiences
- Learning is idiosyncratic and incidental and cannot be planned in advance
- Learning should enable the learner to reorganise experience and see things in new ways, thus resulting in a transformative outcome

Coaches learn to coach in many ways, and it is a complex process informed by previous and current experiences as both a player and coach. In the next section, the foundations of coaching knowledge are explored.

2.3.1 Foundations of Coaching Knowledge

The foundations of coaching research are closely related to education and teaching effectiveness (Kahan 1999). Similar to PE teachers, it is suggested that coaches must have three types of knowledge when coaching: instructional, pedagogical, and curricular (Nelson *et al.* 2006; Nash and Collins 2006; Côte and Gilbert 2009; Nelson *et al.* 2014). Instructional

knowledge involves coaches having the practical skills and techniques to teach players effectively. It includes understanding how to deliver coaching sessions, demonstrate skills, and provide feedback (Côte and Gilbert 2009). Pedagogical knowledge refers to the methods and principles of teaching and learning. It involves coaches understanding how players learn, how to create effective learning environments and how to adapt coaching methods to meet the needs of different players (Côte and Gilbert 2009). Curricular knowledge involves knowing what content and skills should be taught to players. It includes understanding the sport's rules, strategies, and the progression of skills and concepts that players need to learn over time.

Additionally, research on adult-player coaches proposes that coaches require knowledge of three main disciplines: sport-specific knowledge, sport-science disciplines, and pedagogical knowledge of learning approaches (Nash and Collins 2006; Côte and Gilbert 2009). Sport-specific knowledge includes a detailed understanding of the sport, including techniques, tactics, and game strategies. Sport-science disciplines involve knowledge of physiology, biomechanics, psychology, and other sciences that can inform coaching practices. Pedagogical knowledge focuses on effective teaching methods and learning approaches.

This study attempts to address the current gap in our knowledge of youth coaches by determining whether these areas apply to coaches of children and teenagers. Having examined the foundations of coach knowledge, it is pertinent to investigate the specific learning environments that contribute to this knowledge.

2.3.2 Formal Learning and Informal Learning

Coaching is influenced by three main sources of learning situations – formal, non-formal and informal (Nelson *et al.* 2006). Similarly, Cushion *et al.* (2010) found that a complex mix of formal, non-formal, informal-directed and self-directed learning experiences influences coach learning. This study focuses predominantly on informal learning experiences.

Formal learning in a coaching context can be defined as large-scale coach certification programmes developed by the national governing bodies of sport (Nelson *et al.* 2006). These courses in the past have not necessarily provided coaches with the tools necessary to coach (Cassidy *et al.* 2006). Coach education has been criticised for failing to impact coaches' professional learning (Stodter and Cushion 2017). Often, courses that focus on what to coach, rather than how to coach, resulting in a lack of coach development (Sherwin *et al.* 2016). Coaches benefit from courses where learning activities are interactive (Barrett *et al.* 2021). Approaches that promote problem-solving, scaffolding, group discussions and scenario-based learning activities increase interactivity (Allen and Reid 2019). Non-formal learning

experiences for coaches include seminars, conferences, workshops and clinics (Nelson *et al.* 2006). Outside of formal learning, coaches utilise reflection and experiential learning as developmental opportunities (Cronin and Lowes 2016).

This study focused predominantly on informal learning experiences. Informal learning through coaching experience and engaging with other coaches is the most dominant mode of learning undertaken by coaches (Cushion *et al*. 2010; Cushion and Townsend 2018). Coaches most frequently learn and often prefer to learn, from informal sources, as they tend to be contextually relevant and easily accessible (Walker *et al.* 2018). Informal learning arguably provides the most important learning experiences for coaches and occurs over time when the coach actively participates in their own learning (Werthner and Trudel 2006). The extent to which learning occurs is determined by the person's receptiveness and willingness to learn from peers and specialists (Collins *et al.* 2012). Coach research has found that practitioners learn in various informal ways, including previous experiences as a player (Irwin *et al.* 2004), informal mentoring (Cushion and Jones 2001; Bloom *et al.* 1998), practical coaching experiences, and interactions with peer coaches and athletes (Wright *et al.* 2007).

Coaches learn from various informal sources that create a broad picture of coaching (Erickson *et al.* 2008), including exploring the internet and reading coaching manuals, books, and journal articles (Schempp *et al.* 2007). Research to support technology-enhanced learning in coaching is still developing (Stoszkowski *et al.* 2015). Research by Koh *et al*. (2017) affirmed the many benefits of using the Internet as a source for coaches to acquire coaching knowledge, citing ease of accessibility, low cost and time-saving and offering new coaching ideas. However, evidence base that supports the use of TEL in coaching is currently fragmented and weak (Cushion and Townsend 2018).

Personal experience as an athlete or player stimulates an interest in coaching and the influence of playing experience will be examined now.

2.3.3 Personal Experience as an Athlete

Informal learning plays a significant role in the development of coaching skills, with coaches serving an 'apprenticeship of observation' during their times as player or athlete (Sage 1989). This, combined with a coach's biography, including their previous experience, knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices, has a significant influence on what and how they learn (Stodter 2022; Cushion *et al*. 2010). In many sports, it is common for coaching positions to be held by former players. However, there is little understanding of how playing can develop the

necessary skills for coaching (Gründel *et al.* 2013). Research indicates that coach-related learning occurs many years before any conscious decision is made to engage in coaching (Cushion *et al.* 2010). Previous athletic experiences are foundational to directing a novice coach's first few years in coaching (Jacobs *et al.* 2014). Research on voluntary youth sport coaches reveals that much of the understanding of the coaching role is acquired during the coach's time as an athlete (Erickson *et al*. 2008; Lemyre *et al.* 2007; Wright *et al.* 2007).

Many former players are fast-tracked into coaching, yet the effectiveness of such an approach is still unclear (Blackett *et al.* 2018, 2019, 2020; Rynne 2014). Within sports coaching, there remains an outdated 'you played, therefore you coach' mindset without these player-coaches having a well-developed foundation for coaching (Blackett *et al.* 2018). The transition from playing to coaching cannot be understated. A player with a high skill does not necessarily translate simultaneously into something that they can teach others or that as a coach, they have the appropriate communication skills to teach the player such skills effectively (Chroni *et al.* 2020). As players transition to coaches, there is a sense of 'professional obligation' by elite players to participate in youth sports coaching based on their high-profile status prior to the end of their competitive careers (Blackett *et al.* 2019). Chroni *et al.* (2020) challenge the perception that the player-to-coach transition is easy, comfortable and straightforward. Instead, they highlight the unexpected challenges faced by players transitioning to coaches, including finding new motivation, lacking formal coaching education, and feeling sidelined despite being physically fit to compete. They must also accept that not all players they coach will be champions, regulate their emotions when athletes show low effort and develop effective communication skills. Additionally, they need to shift focus from personal achievements to team success, translate their skills into teachable elements, and rebuild their sense of competence and self-worth as novice coaches (Chroni *et al.* 2020).

Novice coaches often subconsciously apply coaching behaviours that they feel are good qualities to possess as coaches based on their experience with their coaches (Jacobs *et al.* 2014). Research by Cooke *et al.* (2023) found that within a Northern Ireland context, coaches' previous playing experience developed confidence and understanding of the coaching environment and insights into coaching practices. During their time as an athlete, learning includes developing a basic understanding of their sport's rules, drills and procedures (Bloom *et al.* 1998; Lemyre *et al.* 2007), and the opportunity to see and learn from different coaches (Lemyre *et al.* (2007); Wright *et al.* 2007). This experience enhances their empathy towards players and provides insights into their performance (Irwin *et al.* 2004; Jones *et al.* 2003). Furthermore, playing

experience can equip coaches with the required problem-solving skills and resilience, which are essential for effective coaching (Chroni *et al.* 2020). Transitioning from a player to a coach involves a shift in mindset from a competitor to a more vocational role as a coach. This change demands the individual to make adjustments to their identity, skills and competencies while at the same time having to act and deliver in their role as a coach (Chroni *et al.* 2020).

Players need support in examining and realising healthy and unhealthy beliefs and behaviours that can be potentially harmful in practice (McMahon *et al.* 2020) to ensure the unconscious repetition of poor coaching practices and behaviours is not observed (Blackett *et al.* 2019). Blackett *et al.* (2020) and Chroni *et al.* (2020) identified four crucial areas that need to be considered when transitioning to coaching. Firstly, preparation and support systems are crucial, involving the development and transfer of resources from earlier life experiences with the aid of sport psychology practitioners, mentors, communities of practice, and the employing organisation (Blackett *et al.* 2020; Chroni *et al.* 2020). Secondly, understanding the phases of transition is essential, as the process is dynamic and personal, often involving plateaus and back-and-forth movement, which necessitates adaptable and creative support from practitioners. Thirdly, transitioning players must develop new coaching-specific skills such as effective communication, emotional regulation, and the ability to teach and mentor others. Lastly, identity and role adjustment is critical, requiring players to shift their focus from personal achievements to team success, rebuild their sense of competence and self-worth, and adapt from being an expert player to a novice coach.

Participation in sports as an athlete is undoubtedly a source of learning for coaches (Cushion *et al.* 2010). A study by Gilbert *et al.* (2006) revealed that all participating coaches competed as athletes at some level, and 75% of development sport coaches had experience as competitive athletes in the sport they now coach. However, elite-level athletic experience is not a prerequisite for becoming a coach (Salmela 1995; Erickson *et al.* 2007). Research has suggested that informal learning in everyday contexts has a lasting and significant impact on coaching practice and is valued more highly than formal forms of education (Werthner and Trudel 2006).

Simply acquiring experience does not guarantee coaching development and expertise; as Gilbert and Trudel (2006, p.114) suggest, “ten years of coaching without reflection is simply one year of coaching repeated ten times”. Chroni *et al.* (2020) found that past playing experiences kick-start in terms of the contextual knowledge of coaching, but this alone will be

insufficient for meeting the challenges of coaching and the transition from player to coach. Therefore, practices such as mentorship and reflection can be utilised alongside this to create positive coaching outcomes. Reflective practice is widely acknowledged as crucial for developing effective coaching practices, and it will be examined in greater detail.

2.3.4 Reflective Practice

Reflection is a well-established practice in many areas, including healthcare, education, and sport. Dewey (1933) was the first philosopher to emphasise the importance of reflective practice in learning. He described it as central to all learning experiences, enabling individuals to act deliberately and intentionally to convert their actions that are merely blind and impulsive into intelligent actions. As it is understood today, reflective practice was more explicitly articulated and formalised by Schön (1987). Reflective practice is universally recognised as being vital for effective practice within sports coaching (Gilbert 2016), but it is not a simple process to enact (Gilbert and Trudel 2006). Reflection is regularly identified as a method of experiential learning. However, developing the coach's reflective skills requires time and space to ensure their learning experiences are not superficial and uncritical (Cushion *et al.* 2010). It should not be applied without consideration for the consequences (Cushion 2018; Downham and Cushion 2021). Effective reflective practice is a skill that requires careful practice to develop (Kearney 2024).

Schön (1987) identified two distinct types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action requires coaches to think on their feet in the moment, making decisions and adjustments in the moment. Meanwhile, reflection-on-action involves a coach looking back after an event to make sense of their practice and improve future practice (Knowles *et al.* 2014). Complementing Schön's work, Gibbs (1988) developed a reflective cycle that provides a structured framework for reflection. Gibbs' Reflective Cycle includes six stages: Description, Feelings, Evaluation, Analysis, Conclusion, and Action Plan. This cycle helps practitioners systematically analyse and learn from their experiences, promoting a deeper understanding and improvement in practice. Cushion *et al.* (2010) maintain that the best theoretically framed explanation for coaches' informal learning has come from Gilbert and Trudel's (2001) experiential learning model. Gilbert and Trudel (2001) demonstrated how six youth sports coaches learned by engaging in three forms of reflective practice: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and retrospective reflection-on-action. Retrospective reflection-on-action involves a coach looking back on experiences in the past to gain a deeper understanding of an event and help identify long-term patterns in their practice. Gilbert and

Trudel's (2001) research presented evidence that supported Schön's (1987) theory of reflective practice as an effective framework for analysing and explaining how coaches frame their knowledge and learn from practical coaching experiences (Cushion et al. 2010).

Reflective practice is closely linked to experiential learning and should be promoted to enhance coach development (Kolb 1984; Schön 1987). Kolb (1984) designed his four-stage experiential learning cycle, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the learning process. It is a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation (Mcleod 2024). In the first stage, the learner encounters a new or reinterpretation of an experience. In the next stage, the learner reflects on this experience, building on their previous experience and identifying any inconsistencies between their existing knowledge and what they encounter. This reflection gives rise to stage three of Kolb's cycle, where the learner's reflection allows for a new idea or modification of an existing concept. Finally, the learner engages in active experimentation, testing the concept in the real world (Mcleod 2024).

Dewey (1933) outlined three critical attitudes that form the basis of reflective practice: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness involves a willingness to consider new practices, admit the possibility of error, and appreciate others' opinions. Coaches engaging in reflective practice must demonstrate a willingness to listen, seek advice, and accept feedback (Nash *et al.* 2017) from both players (Gallimore *et al.* 2014) and other coaches (Gilbert and Trudel 2001). Responsibility requires coaches to carefully consider the consequences of their actions, especially when they affect others. Wholeheartedness is characterised by a commitment to continuous learning and the belief that one can always gain new insights into their practice. Coaches engage in three types of reflection: technical, practical, and critical (Mallett 2004). Technical reflection focuses on achieving specific training or performance goals. Practical reflection aims to connect theory with practice. Critical reflection challenges the social, cultural, and ideological aspects of coaching practices, such as when a coach faces a situation that challenges their moral values (Roy *et al.* 2021). Reflective practice does not apply a single method but draws on various skills embedded into a coach's process and journey (Gallimore *et al.* 2014; O'Dwyer and Bowles 2020). It is through issues that coaches encounter that the impetus for reflection occurs (Gilbert and Trudel 2001).

Coaches who deliberately ask themselves about their practice and use the support of others are likely to get the most from their learning experiences (Stodter 2022). Coaches are, therefore,

active agents in their own reflective analysis of their practice (Roy et al. 2021). Without a form of reflective practice, coaches accrue experiences without it meaningfully impacting their practice (Gilbert and Trudel 2001). Reflective learning is also influenced by the coach's stage of learning, their peers, the environment, and the issues encountered (Gilbert and Trudel 2005). Reflective practice can be incorporated at different steps of the coaching process, including planning, intervention, or assessment, and during or following a coaching event (Roy et al. 2021). Coaches can use various strategies to support their reflective practice, including using a reflective journal, reflective cards, shared reflections, video, or an oral approach such as 'thinking aloud'.

Despite its benefits, reflective practice is not without its challenges, and the success of reflective practice relies on finding a suitable and contextualised medium through which to achieve a meaningful combination of experience and knowledge (Vallance 2019). Time restraints on coaches often result in a struggle to find time for structured reflection in their busy schedules (Vallance 2019). Furthermore, motivation is another critical factor, and coaches must be willing and committed to engaging in the process of reflective practice (Cropley and Hatton 2011). Many coaches view reflective activities as low on their priorities as a coach (Cropley *et al.* 2012). Additionally, the emotional aspects of reflection, such as focusing on predominantly negative experiences, can hinder a balanced approach to reflective practice (Knowles *et al.* 2006). Mentors can be powerful motivators for engaging in deep and meaningful reflective practice, and having access to knowledgeable coaching peers is crucial to achieving a well-rounded reflective process (Vallance 2019; Cropley *et al.* 2012). Reflection is often bound by the coach's personal coaching philosophy, which can lead to scenarios deemed suitable or unsuitable for reflection (Gilbert and Trudel 2001). To overcome such challenges, Roy *et al.* (2021) recommend that coaches allocate specific time for reflection within their preparation, use simple unstructured formats, find mentors, and use technology to enhance their reflective process. Developing support networks and engaging in collaborative reflection with peers is also an effective way to promote more profound and more meaningful reflection (Vallance 2019).

Mentoring is seen as an effective and beneficial tool in supporting reflective practice (Gilbert and Trudel 2001; Vallance 2019) and its use in coach development should be considered.

2.3.5 Mentoring

Mentoring is a practice utilised across various domains; however, there is a lack of conceptual clarity and no universal definition at present (Dawson 2014; Lefebvre *et al.* 2020). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2011) defines mentoring as "a relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles, with a more experienced individual with adult learning knowledge and skills, the mentor, providing guidance and example to the less experienced protégé or mentee". Furthermore, Newby and Heide (2013) describe mentoring as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between a mentor with advanced knowledge and experience and a mentee seeking new knowledge and experience to enhance their career development. Despite mentorship being regularly utilised within sports coaching, the practice is under-theorised and conceptually vague (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Additionally, research in this area tends to focus on 'take-home messages' from other domains, such as healthcare, education, and business, for those in a sporting context to contemplate within their practice (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021).

Within a sports coach setting, mentoring traditionally involves an experienced coach supporting the learning and practice of an inexperienced coach (Nash and McQuade 2015). Mentoring is widely advocated as a method that provides structured and unstructured support for coach learning (Cushion *et al*. 2010). It is also seen as a solution for the professional development of coaches as it offers contextualised learning opportunities for mentees, which overcomes the critiques of coach education workshops (Cushion 2015; Griffiths 2015). Mentoring is a pedagogical approach that supports experiential learning, with learning from experience playing a significant role in coach development (Nash and McQuade 2015; Groom and Sawiuk 2018; Lyle and Cushion 2017). Cushion (2015) describes effective mentorship as providing guidance, opportunities for observation, and encouraging reflective practice, which collectively help coaches become better equipped to handle the unpredictable nature of coaching.

Mentoring within a sports context can be conceptualised as formal or informal (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Informal mentoring is frequent and ongoing through observations and interactions with other coaches without input from other organisations, such as governing bodies. Formal mentoring is often controlled by governing bodies, where dyadic mentorships are structured and monitored by obtaining objectives (Cushion 2015; Sawiuk *et al*. 2018). Additionally, natural mentoring is described as the mentor being sought out by the mentee from within their own community (Philip 1997); this is similar to the processes found in research by

Bloom *et al*. (1998), Cushion *et al.* (2003) and Jones et al. (2009). This process is entirely unplanned but intentional, with the mentee controlling the agenda and interactions (Cushion *et al.* 2010). This approach has proven effective in several domains, including coaching (Bloom *et al*. 1998). Within a sporting context, mentors rarely receive any form of professional development in the area of mentorship, and it is often a secondary role to their primary role as a coach (Chambers 2018). Therefore, practical experience and being a highly qualified coach are desirable prerequisites to becoming an effective mentor (Leeder 2019). Mentors should possess a suitable level of social, cultural, and symbolic capital through their qualifications and experience to gain the respect of their mentees (Cushion 2015; Jones *et al*. 2009). Research by Bloom *et al.* (1998) and Fairhurst *et al.* (2017) suggested that once a coach reaches a certain level of expertise, mentoring a novice coach becomes a seamless and natural transition.

Research has shown that in their first years of coaching, many coaches have access to some kind of mentoring (Lemyre *et al*. 2007). Long-term mentoring is also seen as beneficial (Avery *et al.* 2008). Coaches develop knowledge through practice, and this knowledge and experience can be passed on to other coaches (Erickson *et al.* 2008). Similarly, coaches learn by observing and discussing with other practitioners (Wright *et al.* 2007; Abraham *et al.* 2006). Studies carried out by Erickson *et al.* (2008), Irwin *et al.* (2004), Schempp *et al.* (1998) and Gould *et al*. (1990) found that participants in their studies considered practical coaching experiences and learning from other coaches to be of primary importance. Coaches often identify social learning situations as the most valuable and influential to their learning (Bertram *et al*. 2017). Mentor support varies depending on the mentee's needs (Leeder and Sawiuk, 2021). For instance, novice coaches may seek mentorship in acquiring sport-specific knowledge or guidance in managing athlete behaviour, whereas youth coaches may require support in holistic education or pedagogical methods (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021).

How mentee coaches process and decide whether to adopt, adapt, or reject new knowledge from their mentors remains largely unknown (Stodter and Cushion 2017). However, literature on mentorship demonstrates that it often leads to positive outcomes in sporting communities, particularly in enhancing the mentees' academic achievement, accountability, behavioural control, and self-esteem (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Similarly, mentees mentored by a more experienced individual become more open to various psychosocial and career development benefits, including enhanced self-confidence, increased professional competence and accelerated career progression (Newby and Heide 2013). Mentees often emulate their mentor's attitudes, behaviours and values, but mentees must identify multiple coaching role models

rather than seeking one 'perfect' role model (Ramaswami and Dreher 2007). Despite the merits associated with mentoring for coach development, little research evidence connects engagement with mentoring to a change in coaching practices (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021).

There is a dearth of empirical evidence that has explored the concepts of gender and role models within a female mentoring context (Leeder and Sawiuk 2021). Mentoring is considered an important vehicle for female coach development (Banwell *et al*. 2020), especially when many female coaches feel they are 'surviving' rather than thriving within their coaching role (Norman and Rankin-Wright 2018). Banwell *et al*. (2019) cautioned that more research is required to explore gender-based differences, including dynamics between male mentor and female mentee, as well as female mentor and female mentee relationships. Within an Irish setting, Sport Ireland (2020) examined the experiences of female coaches and found value in having a male or female mentor. Marshall and Sharp (2010) highlight that female coaches encounter challenges such as lacking mentoring prospects and restricted access to role models, potentially hindering their capacity for meaningful dialogue. They propose that CoPs could offer female coaches avenues to establish mentorship connections, enabling exposure to diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Furthermore, support from and developing a sense of relatedness with coaching colleagues is seen to be beneficial and critical to the quality of the coaching experiences for women, especially coupled with opportunities to receive feedback from other coaches (Allen and Shaw 2009).

Mentoring offers coaches the opportunity to learn from others and build on their current coaching ability; reflective practice is a complementary approach that encourages coaches to critically evaluate their experiences to improve their coaching ability.

This section described the significant role mentoring has on a coach's approach and development. Building on the understanding of informal learning, the next section will examine how coaches develop their skills and knowledge through participation in a CoP.

2.3.6 Community of Practice

Community of Practice (CoP) has been defined as a group of people who share a passion or concern and who interact on an ongoing basis in an attempt to deepen their knowledge and gain expertise in their area of interest (Wenger *et al*. 2002). CoP approach focuses on learning as social participation, in which people learn while negotiating meaning through their interactions with others and their practice (Bertram *et al.* 2017). There are three modes in which members belong to a CoP: engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger 1998). Engagement

involves actively participating in the CoP, while imagination involves the process of expanding one's self and creating new perspectives. The process of alignment occurs when members coordinate their efforts and practices, leading to a sense of connection (Wenger 1998). The interaction of those who engage in CoP are influenced by three components: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). Mutual engagement refers to how coaches engage in actions that are negotiated together. Joint enterprise suggests that coaches are in pursuit of a common purpose such as gaining knowledge and expertise in a specific area. Shared repertoire refers to the community's way of doing things that have become part of its practice (Wenger 1998).

The focus on CoP for improving coach development is a relatively new phenomenon (Harmon 2022). The success of CoP depends on the dedication of all participants to regular meetings, common goals, and building on the community's strengths (Bertram *et al.* 2017). Participants join communities as apprentices, but by immersing themselves within the community, they gain more experience and become more competent, therefore transitioning from low-risk to more complex activities as the community progresses (Lave and Wenger 1991). Within an Irish Gaelic games context, participants in Harmon's (2022) study revealed how interacting with their peers increased their self-confidence and ability to connect with other coaches within the club that they did not know prior to CoP. Participants gain immediate benefits from engaging in social learning interactions. These interactions include enjoying the company of like-minded individuals, participating in exciting activities, helping peers with challenging situations, having useful conversations, or receiving valuable tips from colleagues (Bertram *et al.* 2017). This concept highlights the direct and immediate positive outcomes of engaging in social and collaborative learning experiences.

With an understanding of how communities of practice foster collaborative learning, next the experiences of female coaches will be explored.

2.4 Experiences of Female Coaches

Female coaches are a statistical minority in nearly all sports, at all levels around the world (Acosta and Carpenter 2012; Robertson 2010). Volunteer female coaches in non-elite sport are underrepresented in coaching literature (Hogan *et al.* 2022), with less than 5% of studies explicitly focusing on female coaches (Gilbert and Trudel 2005). Internationally, LaVoi (2016) found that there is a lack of representation of female sports coaches at community level, with the exception of some sports where participation rates are higher for girls than boys including

netball and gymnastics. Despite the increase of girls participation numbers in recent times, the same increase is not yet reflected in female coaching (Baxter 2021).

Sport Ireland (2020) reported that 11,559 people were certified to coach in Ireland throughout 2020, and 36% of these coaches were female. Limited information is available on the coaching experience of females and the impact this has on their involvement in coaching (Sport Ireland 2020). Based on this knowledge gap, Sport Ireland undertook a study of female coaches in Ireland to develop a more in-depth understanding of the status of female coaches, investigate the challenges and opportunities to increase female coaches in Ireland and use their findings to develop good practice programmes. 67% of the participants in the study had 13–17 years of coaching experience. Nine themes were created from the analysis of this study (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Challenges Faced by Female Coaches (Sport Ireland 2020)

The main challenges female coaches identified in this research included:

- Time constraints (personal time balancing including work, family, or sporting commitments)
- Sexism and gender-related issues
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of NGB and Club support
- Parental Factors

Furthermore, most of the participants in the study enjoyed coaching and had moderate to high levels of confidence in their ability to coach, but their confidence levels fluctuated in other

situations. Low confidence levels were noted when female coaches were dealing with male coaches, interacting with executives, pursuing higher-level roles, standing up to parents and addressing male management. Skills and sports knowledge acquired as a player through educational means or through coaching experiences were found to support female coaches and helped them to feel confident and persevere (Demers 2009; Messner 2009). Five key themes emerged from Sport Ireland's (2020) study that influenced female coaches' confidence levels, including:

- The level of knowledge and skills they had
- The level of feedback they received from athletes, parents, and other coaches
- Their achievements, triumphs, and successes
- Areas for development in their coaching abilities
- The level of experience they had (seasoned or new coach)

Figure 2.2 Five Themes that Influence the Confidence of Female Coaches (Sport Ireland 2020)

The importance of having females in coaching roles is well documented (LaVoi 2016). Female coaches who effectively foster positive coach-athlete relationships can guide positive development and model lifelong involvement in sport (Fraser-Thomas *et al*. 2017). Additionally, quality female coaching role models have been positively associated with coaching efficacy beliefs and coaching interests among female athletes (Moran-Miller and Flores 2011). A lack of female role models in visible positions can lead to unfavourable outcomes for girls and women, including devaluation of abilities, failure to realise sport career aspirations and potential and an inability to challenge negative stereotypes regarding gender (Lockwood 2006; Hums *et al.* 2007). Same-sex role models inspire others to pursue and

emulate their similar achievements (Lockwood 2006). Research by Baxter (2021) reveal a marked lack of empirical knowledge about female sport coaches. Female coaches are motivated by inherent values and a desire to foster positive youth development, instil positive values and make a difference in players' lives. Barriers to female participation in coaching include role conflicts, gender sorting categories, patriarchal belief systems, lack of empowerment and a perceived lack of female coach development (Baxter 2021). Female coaches are often seen as 'tokens' on all boys' teams and high-level competitive girls' teams. They are marginalised and underrepresented in positions of power at almost all age groups and competitive levels (LaVoi 2009).

Ideologies generate the perception that coaching is a masculine role and female coaches' abilities are questioned due to gendered assumptions of physical and mental strength (Baxter 2021). To overcome such ideologies, female coaches use their own personal athletic ability, coaching qualifications and the competitive success of their athletes to maintain credibility in their role (Baxter 2021). Additionally, when the values and structures of an organisation are not evident, female coaches feel isolated, unsupported, disconnected and only feel valued in a functional role (Allen and Shaw 2013). There are a number of factors that result in female coaches dropping out of coaching, including a perceived lack of ability and success and a belief that they are less knowledgeable about sport than others (Busser and Carruthers 2010). Self-perceptions of female coaches often act as a barrier as some women have low efficacy and low perceived confidence and competence and therefore, believe they are not qualified for the position of coach (LaVoi and Becker 2007; Kilty 2006). Previous research indicated that the coaching environment is not a positive or welcoming environment for many female coaches (Baxter 2021).

Societal views on females in coaching need to change for women to be seen as equal to their male counterparts (Walker and Sartore-Baldwin 2013). Societal expectations often dictate that women should prioritise family and caregiving responsibilities over professional ambitions, including coaching. Balancing family and work commitments is a constant challenge faced by women across all levels of coaching (LaVoi and Dutove 2012). This was found to be more pronounced for female coaches who work full-time in addition to their responsibilities at home (Hogan *et al*. 2022). Hogan *et al.* (2022) found that a woman's entry into coaching often coincided with their child starting in the sport, and they left coaching when their child stopped playing. Gender stereotypes play a significant role in shaping perceptions of female coaches' abilities. Gender adds to the complexity of coaching for women in starting to coach and

developing as a coach (Hogan *et al.* 2022). Coaching is traditionally seen as a masculine domain, with male coaches often perceived as more knowledgeable (LaVoi 2016). Female coaches' capabilities are frequently questioned, and they must continually prove their competence and expertise to gain respect and credibility (Baxter 2021). This persistent scrutiny can undermine their confidence and deter women from pursuing or continuing coaching careers. As per research by Hogan *et al.* (2022), coaching is a male-dominated space, and this has resulted in gender bias being regularly experienced by female coaches who have exhibited unconscious bias themselves. Female coaches in the study by Hogan *et al.* (2022) noted that opposition coaches and referees often assumed that the male on the coaching team was the lead coach or manager rather than the female. Additionally, female coaches also exhibited unconscious gender bias, assuming a female takes the motherly role. Such conscious and unconscious biases should be addressed imminently, and the onus is on everyone involved in sports coaching to change the societal perception of women in sports coaching.

Having explained the specific challenges and experiences of female coaches, the following section will examine coaching philosophy that underpins effective coaching practices.

2.5 Coaching Philosophy

A strong coaching philosophy is paramount in creating positive and engaging sporting experiences for players (Graham and Fleming 2016). This philosophy is shaped by a coach's values and beliefs derived from their personal experience and background (Graham and Fleming 2016). As suggested by Lyle (2002), personal values provide a context for a coach's behaviour, providing a framework through which experiences are evaluated and ranked. Key values such as reliability, kindness, organisation and discipline can play instrumental roles in guiding coaching practices (Graham and Fleming 2016). Moreover, the relationship between coach behaviour and coach philosophy is deeply intertwined (Jenkins 2010). While coaches may profess a certain set of values, their actions and behaviours may not always align with these values (Graham and Fleming 2016). This inconsistency can arise from a lack of effective self-reflection skills, leading coaches to be unaware of the discrepancies between their professed values and their actual behaviour. Additionally, coaches may intentionally misrepresent their values to portray a more socially desirable image or to conform to specific organisational values (Graham and Fleming 2016).

Novice coaches in Graham and Fleming's study (2016) attributed their philosophical approach to three primary sources: personal experience in sport, significant others and self-reflection.

Graham and Fleming's (2016) study found that novice coaches struggled to articulate their coaching philosophy and, particularly, how it would be translated into action. Novice coaches tend to attribute their approach and values to personal experience gained as athletes (Cushion *et al.* 2010). Nash *et al.* (2008) suggest that novice coaches focus on sport-specific skills and content instead of general values. While novice coaches can articulate their philosophy, they are less certain about the process of its implementation (Collins *et al.* 2011; McCallister *et al.* 2000). McCallister *et al.* (2000) found that some behaviours were directly contradictory to the novice coach's supposed beliefs. In contrast, Collins *et al.* (2011) concluded that pre-service coaches appeared to have reasonably clear ideas of their philosophies. Despite being inexperienced in the area of coaching, participants held strong beliefs regarding the purpose and process of coaching. The content of coaching philosophies includes coaching objectives, and the beliefs that underlie the desire to achieve these objectives are a common focus (Collins *et al.* 2009). Players' personal, social, and emotional development has been highlighted as the prime objective for coaches, as opposed to winning games and competitions (Bennie and O'Connor 2010; Camiré *et al.* 2012; Collins *et al*. 2009). However, coaches may misrepresent their values, favouring those deemed more socially acceptable (Lyle 2002).

As coaching philosophy influences coaching decisions and player development, exploring its connection to a winning mentality is crucial, especially in the context of competition in youth sport.

2.6 Competition in Youth Sport

Competition is defined as "a situation in which two or more rivals vie against one other to gain a desired goal or object, generally resulting in a victor and a loser" (Ives *et al.* 2020, p.2). When coaches apply a win-at-all-costs approach, it will most likely mean they are undervaluing the importance of enjoyment, the long-term development of young people, and the holistic development of young people (Rogers 2023a). Successful or effective coaching should not be measured on winning alone and should consider the personal development and enjoyment of all coaches and players (Sherwin 2017).

The most tangible way people measure success in sports is by performance, meaning posing questions such as, *'Did we win?'* or '*What time did I complete the race?*' (Rogers 2023a). However, using performance as the single measurement for determining if a youth coach is successful is fraught with issues and potentially unhelpful, especially for young people (Rogers 2023a). Coaches are teachers and managers striving for victory, and at times, these two roles

appear at odds with each other and challenge the coach's ability to make wise game-time decisions (Naylor 2006). The construction of beliefs and values in coaching regarding competition versus fun is complex (Graham and Fleming 2016). Feigley (2020) highlights the importance of striking a balance when considering the role of competition in youth sport. He suggests that there are two extreme perspectives in youth sport philosophy: one that downplays the importance of winning completely while the other prioritises winning at all costs. Feigley (2020) recommends that the healthy perspective lies somewhere between these two extremes. He describes the "essence of sport is striving to win; without that attempt, the activity is of a different nature" and therefore should be considered but in a more nuanced way whereby winning "must be kept in perspective with the other valuable aspects of youth sports such as social development, fun, fitness, etc." (Feigley 2020, Introduction, para. 1).

Many coaches start out intending to keep competition in check and maintain a healthy playing environment for their players. However, as a game gets more serious and the chances of winning heighten, some youth sport coaches experience a lapse of philosophy where the win-at-all-costs attitude appears (McCallister *et al.* 2000). Literature has challenged previous beliefs that coaches are predominantly concerned with winning (Bennie and O'Connor 2010; Camiré *et al.* 2012; Collins *et al.* 2009; McCallister *et al.* 2000). Research suggests that a coach's focus is more complex and is often dependent on the context. Children and adults define success differently. Children describe success as trying one's best, personal improvement and enjoyment, and mastering and demonstrating skills rather than the product being deemed important (Weiss and Petlichkoff 1989). Attitudes about the importance of winning change with the players' ages. Younger players are more interested in the '*fairness'* of their games, while older athletes become more concerned about winning. Many young players say they would rather play on a losing team than '*sit on the bench'* on a winning team (Clark 2002). The Institution for the Study of Youth Sports examined the importance of winning from a child's perspective and found that it varied with gender and age. However, for the majority of younger children, fairness, participation, and skill development ranked above winning (Merkel 2013).

Coaches play a major role in making sport a positive competitive experience (Burton and Raedeke 2008). Coaches must strive to develop an environment that focuses on skill development, define success by their players' efforts rather than the outcomes, and respect each player's thoughts and feelings. This will create autonomous, intrinsically motivated players who feel competent (Mallett 2005). Competition can be a divisive issue in some environments,

and efforts are often made to de-emphasise competition in various ways (Ní Chróinín *et al.* 2021). It is important to examine and highlight the practices inherent within sports which might deter children from participating (Bailey *et al.* 2004). Children as young as ten fully understand winning, losing, and self-identity with their competitive outcomes (Balyi and Hamilton 2000). Some children thrive in interpersonal competitions while others do not; therefore, careful consideration should be given to the presentation of competition (Weiss, 1989).

Balancing 'coaching to win' and 'coaching for learning' is a developmental issue (Naylor 2006). Coaches who coach to win focus primarily on ensuring that the team achieves successful outcomes, whereas coaches who coach for learning focus on opportunities for all players regardless of ability and view competition as a source of learning, developing competitiveness and life skills. Coaches who coach for learning strive for equal playing time for all players and reinforce the use of sound techniques and strategies (Naylor 2006). A balanced approach to competition should involve avoiding activities that emphasise winning more than learning. The use of alternative scoring points systems that reward aspects of participation and focus on efficient and consistent skill execution. Basic skills, tactics and fun must be the competitive foci of youth sport coaches (Naylor 2006). Most children participate in sport to have fun, to be with friends, and to learn new skills, and that children will continue to participate in sport if their needs are being met (Petlichkoff, 1993). If coaches overemphasise winning or only play the best players, outcomes may not be as positive for young people, leading to drop-out (Petlichkoff 1993: Sport Ireland 2019).

Coaches should emphasise the importance of effort, persistence and strategic learning in youth sport. Inclusion and acceptance are crucial for engaging girls in sport (Sport Ireland, 2019). Girls must feel like they belong and are making a valuable contribution, even if they are not the best on the team. Taking part should be fun and enjoyable, not fear-inducing. Oftentimes, young people describe themselves as 'not sporty'; however, this does not mean they do not have an aptitude for sport. Instead, they lack the competitiveness or seriousness that most teenage sports activities require (Noctor 2022). Smith, cited in Noctor (2022), advocates removing the pressure to win. "Winning is not the sole motivator for playing a sport, and it may not even be a major one", and winning can often be more important to the coach than the players.

The following section will describe the Gaelic games policy regarding competition, and the developmental experiences players are expected to receive within a Gaelic games context.

2.6.1 Gaelic Games Policy

The GAA, LGFA and Camogie Association created the Gaelic Games Player Pathway designed around a set of principles that align with the core values of the associations, ensuring opportunities for everyone to experience Gaelic games while providing the best and most valid development experiences possible for all players (GAA 2022). Six key principles underpin the pathway:

Figure 2.3: 6 Principles of the Gaelic Games Player Pathway (adapted from GAA 2022)

The pathway consists of three main phases: Foundation, Talent, and Elite, subdivided into eight sub-phases (GAA 2022) (Table 2.1).

The Foundation Phase	The Talent Phase	The Elite Phase
Fundamental Movement Skills (Age: 4-6 years)	Demonstration of Potential (Age: 13-14 years)	Adult Intercounty Player (Age: 23+)
Extension & Refinement of Movement (Age: 7-12 years)	Verification of Potential (Age: 15-16 years)	
Commitment to Gaelic Games & Active Lifestyle (Age: 12+)	Practising & Achieving (Age: 17-19 years)	
	Breakthrough (Age: 20-23 years)	

Table 2.1: Phases of the Gaelic Games Player Pathways (adapted from GAA 2022)

The pathway describes the ages of 12-14 as the time when youths in the associations learn to compete, which applies to this study. Before this phase of development, players across all associations engage in GAA Go Games up to the age of 12. Go Games is the national policy of the GAA, Camogie Association and Ladies' Gaelic Football (GAA 2023). Go Games are defined as "modified small-sided versions of Hurling, Camogie, Gaelic Football and Ladies Gaelic Football which have been devised to cater for the development needs of children aged 7 and up to and including 12 years of age" (GAA 2023). Go Games allow children to have fun, grow, and learn physically, socially, and psychologically, as well as develop the key attributes for life. Go Games are inclusive and structured to cater to all participants' needs, abilities and backgrounds (GAA 2023).

The key underpinning principles of Go Games are:

- All participants play in the Game i.e., everyone 'Has a Go'
- Games are small-sided, with modified playing rules that allow more time and space for players to master the skills, make decisions, and, as a result, experience a sense of achievement.
- Participant needs are catered for at U7, U8, U9, U10, U11, U12. The U6 age grade or below is not permitted.
- The games are progressive and inclusive, structured to optimise the level of fun, friendship, fair play, and enjoyment.

- Participants are coached and aligned to their needs in a safe, supportive, and stimulating environment where they are encouraged to risk error, to learn and to derive maximum enjoyment from their involvement.
- Everybody involved in Go Games, whether as players, parents/ guardians, spectators, mentors, teachers, officials, etc., should adhere to the key underpinning of the relevant Gaelic Games Respect campaigns.

Gavin *et al.* (2024) examined the perceptions of key stakeholders on Go-Games. Coaches and parents alike supported the principles of the Go-Games model as a way of promoting sustained interest levels in the sport by emphasising enjoyment, promoting skill development and de-emphasising scores and winning. However, coaches acknowledged the complexity of catering to players' diverse spectrum of enjoyment and the realities of game outcomes and player understanding (Gavin *et al.* 2024). Coaches perceived maintaining competitiveness during games as critical to enhancing the player experience, often achieved by coaches streaming teams based on individual ability, though this is not explicitly intended in the Go-Games policy. Coaches noted that as the players got older, their understanding of winning and losing games increased, and despite not recording the score, players and coaches knew who had won and lost (Gavin *et al.* 2024). Furthermore, coaches recorded that the principles of Go-Game policy outlined above were not always followed by opposition coaches, where oftentimes, opposition coaches were inflexible around equal player participation, scorekeeping and playing-field dimensions (Gavin *et al.* 2024). This research demonstrates the complex nature of coaching children, where coaches must manage often competing agendas, including varying levels of ability and motivations, while ensuring equal participation and aiming for competitive balance for all (Gavin *et al.* 2024).

GAA Go Games cease after U12, and players progress into more formalised competition structures where the focus changes to learning to compete. This is the transition that the younger players in our team were undertaking during this study. Teams are organised into groups of five and play each other on a league basis. Once all games are played in the group, teams are streamlined into new groups based on the results of the previous games and play in a division suitable to the team's ability.

2.7 Coaching Youth Players

Coaches have a significant role to play in creating an environment where players feel valued, connected, confident, and comfortable (Gosai *et al.* 2021). The environment is crucial in keeping children involved in sports into adulthood (Lara-Bercial *et al.* 2022). The environment

coaches create should be positive, inclusive, and supportive, which is essential for all players. Coaches should foster a culture of celebrating effort and improvement and where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. Creating such environments for players helps build confidence and resilience in young players, encouraging them to take risks and strive for personal bests (Smoll and Smith 2006; Fraser-Thomas *et al.* 2008). Positive pedagogy encourages coaches to avoid being critical or telling their players what they have done wrong, instead focusing on helping the players reflect upon why something did not work and how they could modify it to improve the outcome (Light and Harvey 2015). It is important that coaches create a supportive environment where players feel comfortable engaging in discussions and understand that mistakes provide a learning opportunity (Renshaw *et al.*2012; Light and Harvey 2015).

Smith, cited in Noctor (2022), stresses the need for patience and empathy when coaching teens, as they are experiencing many changes and often trying to find themselves. Coaches focusing on players' physical, psychological, and social development while making sports fun promote higher participation rates (Burton and Raedeke 2008). Strong coach-player relationships are crucial in youth sport (Jowett and Cockerill 2003). Coaches must take the time to get to know their players individually to better understand their strengths, needs and interests; in doing this, players are more receptive to coaching and feedback (Jowett and Cockerill 2003). Children cite 'fun' as the primary reason for participation in organised sports, and its absence is the number one reason for youth sport attrition (Visek *et al.* 2015). Balancing competitive elements with enjoyable experiences is key to sustaining players' interest and motivation to remain in sport long-term (Visek *et al.* 2015). Visek *et al.* (2015) established FUN MAPS (Appendix A), providing an evidence-based blueprint to highlight what constitutes fun in youth sport and how to foster such sporting experiences for players. Coaches should be aware of these principles to maximise the fun and enjoyable experiences for their players.

ICOACHKIDS (ICK) is a global movement organisation promoting sport policy, education and practice that puts the needs of children first (International Council For Coaching Excellence 2023). This organisation established ten principles known as the ICK Pledge (Appendix B) that guide coaches to create a child-centred sport environment and a positive experience for everyone involved in sport, especially children and teens. Within the ten principles of the ICK Pledge, youth sport coaches are encouraged to prioritise the best interests of their players by being child-centred and recognising each child's voice (Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). They should adopt a holistic approach, considering players as individuals with unique personalities and fostering their social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development (Erickson *et al*. 2017; Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Inclusivity is crucial in youth sport, and coaches must

create appropriate goals for all players regardless of ability (Côté and Gilbert 2009; Abraham and Collins 2011). Creating a fun and safe environment is essential, ensuring positive relationships and a caring atmosphere where children can thrive (Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Coaches should prioritise the love of sport over learning, as intrinsic motivation enhances long-term participation and enjoyment (Deci and Ryan 2000; Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Developing foundational skills and basic tactical understanding is vital for lifelong participation and performance (Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Engaging parents positively and collaboratively can also boost youth participation (Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Coaches should plan progressive sessions with long-term holistic goals, focusing on developmentally appropriate activities (Robinson 2015; Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Using varied coaching methods enhances learning and skill acquisition, allowing players to problem-solve and develop a deeper understanding of the sport (Abraham and Collins 2011; Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022). Finally, competition should be used developmentally, where coaches emphasise effort and personal bests over winning (Côté *et al.* 2013; Lara-Bercia *et al*. 2022).

This section explored the broad overview of important principles that coaches must consider when coaching children and youths. In the next section, I will examine the literature on coaching girls in sport and the specific challenges they face. It is crucial that coaches of teenage girls need to understand these needs and challenges to maximise retention in sport.

2.7.1 Coaching Girls in Sport

Teenage girls are not a homogenous group. They have different needs, desires, levels of maturity, and, importantly, different lived experiences of sport and physical activity (Women in Sport 2019). By the age of 14, girls drop out of sports at approximately twice the rate of boys. Evidence in an Irish context suggests that just 12% of girls aged 12-13 years meet the recommended physical activity levels, dropping to 7% for girls aged 14-15 (Sport Ireland 2021). In Ireland, teenage girls participate in sport and physical activity far less than the national average, which includes participation rates across all demographics and age groups (Sport Ireland 2021).

Research carried out by the LGFA in association with LIDL Ireland (2020) found that one in two young women give up team sports completely by the age of 13, citing a lack of enjoyment, being overly competitive, social comparison, and friends dropping as the main reasons for this. Creating positive attitudes towards sports is vital in the teenage years for girls to maintain their participation in sport throughout adolescence, which is more likely to establish a life-long relationship with sport (Sport Ireland 2021). Girls' levels of engagement range from complete

disengagement to complete engagement (Women in Sport 2019) as illustrated in Figure 2.4. Competitiveness can be a divisive issue in teenage girls' sport. When sport is largely competitive, committed players and coaches consider the fun element *childish* or *not serious enough* (Women in Sport 2019). Furthermore, girls who perceive themselves as weaker than their peers often feel they are the weak link or have let the team down in competitions and are more likely to drop out. Therefore, how coaches approach competition and interact with their players is vital.

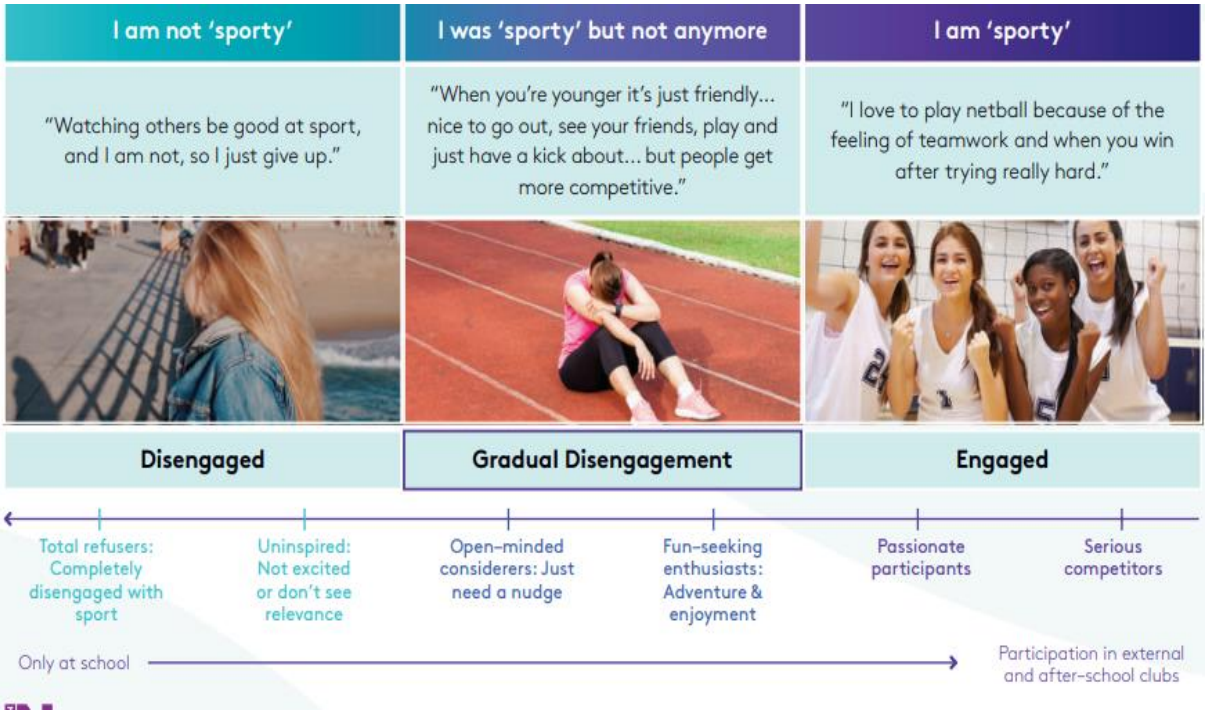

Figure 2.4 Spectrum of Engagement (Women in Sport 2019)

To fully understand why girls do not engage in sports or leave sports, coaches must broaden their knowledge to gain a more holistic understanding of what is truly important in the lives of teenage girls (Sport Ireland 2019). Women in Sport (2019) identified five anchors that are important to teenage girls and may be used to make sport more meaningful and relevant to teenage girls' lives:

- Support Network – friends and strong friendships,
- Independence and Opportunity – making their own choices and discovery,
- Socially connected – social connection, validation and virtual freedom,
- Moments of Pride – progression, achievement and a sense of direction in life,
- Keeping on Top of it All – juggling the demands of teenage life.

Psychological and social barriers are particularly high for teenage girls (Sport Ireland 2021). The sense of feeling 'not good enough' is the greatest barrier to player retention and

participation. This feeling stems from their perceptions and experiences of competitive sports in Ireland (Sport Ireland 2021). When teenage girls feel they are not good enough to participate in sports, they feel ashamed, embarrassed, exposed, and isolated, and feel they are letting the team down (Sport Ireland 2021). Additionally, girls, especially adolescent girls, are oftentimes pressured to conform to social norms and feminine 'ideals' (Dwyer *et al.* 2006), particularly when it comes to competition and being competitive (Yungblut *et al.* 2012). The main reasons girls drop out of sport in their teenage years are (Crane and Temple 2015; Begley 2018):

- Loss of interest
- Lack of fun and opportunities
- Failure to learn new skills
- Too much pressure
- Over-emphasis on winning

Michie *et al*. (2011) propose that girls must have the capability, opportunity, and motivation to become more physically active. The main reasons for player retention and engagement during adolescence are:

- Friendships
- Team spirit
- To compete and improve
- Fun
- Social aspects
- Positive Coaching

It is vital for coaches of teenage girls to understand both the main reasons for dropout and the factors that promote player engagement and retention. To maximise player retention, the principles of player retention must form an integral part of coaching sessions.

Girls, especially adolescents, are often pressured to conform to social norms and feminine 'ideals' (Dwyer *et al.* 2006). Inclusion and acceptance are crucial for engaging girls in sport (Sport Ireland 2019). Girls must feel like they belong and are making a valuable contribution, even if they are not the best on the team (Sport Ireland 2021). It is, therefore, important to for coaches to understand what the principles of success are in keeping teenage girls motivated to play to ensure their experience in the sport is enjoyable and fulfilling for them. Women in Sport (2019) devised eight principles for success based on in-depth research with teenage girls (Figure 2.5).

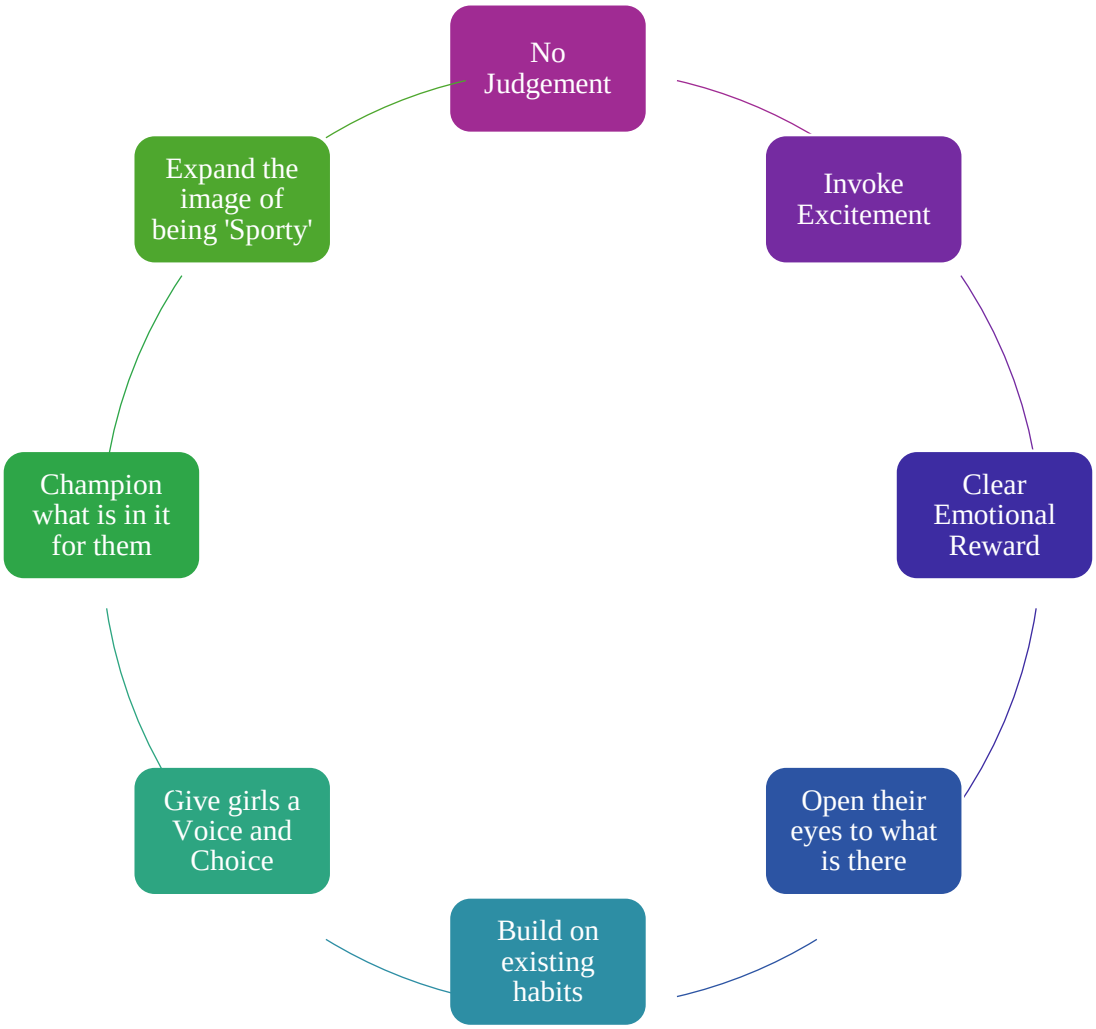

Figure 2.5 8 Principles for Motivating Girls in Sport (adapted from Women in Sport 2019)

Coaches play a significant role in creating a supportive and engaging environment that caters to teenage girls' unique developmental needs. The Camogie Association, in conjunction with Sport Ireland (2023), developed eight tips based on a case study of three camogie clubs. These tips aim to help coaches design coaching sessions that reflect what girls value in their daily lives. One effective strategy is allowing time for girls to chat and connect socially with their peers. This social interaction enhances their enjoyment of the sessions and strengthens team bonds and relationships, which are crucial motivators for girls in sports. Taking time out from training for fun activities, such as team away days, further promotes bonding and a sense of community and belonging. Another key factor is ensuring that sessions are well-planned. Girls should have opportunities to improve and feel good about themselves at every session, which can help them navigate the challenges of team selection and competition. Using positive and appropriate language and tone is crucial. Girls respond better to coaches who offer one-on-one time and encouragement and avoid shouting. Giving girls more voice and choice in their

training through surveys or regular engagement empowers them and makes them feel more involved in their sporting experience.

Coaches should ensure their players are provided with appropriate clothing that fits well and makes girls feel comfortable and confident. During their teenage years, girls develop at different rates and may feel self-conscious about their changing bodies. Ensuring that bibs and jerseys cater to all sizes can make a significant difference. Providing clean toilets with sanitary products is also important, as it shows that their needs are valued and understood. Finally, being a great ally is important for all coaches, regardless of gender. Coaches can positively influence girls' sports participation by demonstrating their commitment to and belief in the girls and their abilities, helping them feel valued and supported in their sporting endeavours.

Next, the critical role of coach-player relationships in retaining teenage girls in sports will be discussed. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating an environment where girls feel motivated and valued.

2.7.2 Coach-Athlete Relationships

Coach-athlete relationships are at the heart of coaching (Jowett 2017). The nature of the interactions between a coach and an athlete impacts the likelihood of whether an individual will continue involvement in the sporting context (Petlichkoff 1993). This is further proved by research carried out by Sport Ireland (2019) that coaches are vital in sustaining youth sport participation. The coach and the player need one another to develop, grow and succeed (Jowett 2017). A positive coach-athlete relationship is reached when coaches and players are mutually and casually interconnected (Jowett 2007).

Jowett and Shanmugam (2016) define coach-athlete relationships as a social situation shaped by the interpersonal thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of the coach and the athlete. A coach and a player are mutually and casually interdependent; therefore, how one feels, thinks, and behaves affects and is affected by how the other feels, thinks, and behaves.

The 3+1 C Model can describe a quality coach-athlete relationship: Closeness, Commitment, Complementary and Co-orientation (Jowett 2007). Closeness represents the interpersonal feelings of coaches and players and describes the affective bond between both through mutual respect, trust, appreciation, and liking. Commitment represents the interpersonal thoughts of coaches and players, whereby they commit to maintaining a close relationship over time despite challenges that may arise. Complementarity represents the interpersonal behaviours of leadership and cooperation. Co-orientation represents the coach's and players' levels' of

interdependence in relation to the similarities and understanding regarding their views on their relationship. Coaches and athletes of the same gender appear to improve the quality of their relationships as they may feel they have something in common that connects them somehow (Jowett 2017).

Positive youth development occurs when a child's values, beliefs, and life skills are proactively strengthened to enable maturation into well-balanced, optimal-functioning individuals in a motivating climate (Gould and Carson 2008). A motivating climate is created by the way in which influential adults define success (Bateman *et al.* 2020). There are two main types of motivational climates: mastery and performance (Duda 1996), often referred to as task-orientated climates or ego-orientated climates (Zurita-Ortega *et al.* 2019). In mastery-orientated or task-orientated environments, success is interpreted as self-improvement rather than goal attainment. This environment focuses on the enjoyment and satisfaction of progress through challenges and overcoming failures, teaching social-emotional skills such as self-determination and work ethic (Dweck 1986). Performance-orientated or ego-orientated environments can be detrimental to personal growth as they emphasise comparisons and superior outcomes over others, with goal attainment in this environment being the definition of success (Dweck 1986). Coaches in mastery-orientated environments emphasise the goal of sport being to learn from mistakes while enjoying working hard for personal improvement (Duda 1996). All players need to feel important and acknowledged (Dweck 1986). In contrast, coaches in performance-orientated environments prioritise winning at all costs, focus on talent identification, and use extrinsic rewards or punishments as motivation (Zurita-Ortega *et al.* 2019).

Understanding the dynamics of coach-athlete relationships and the impact of motivational climates is crucial for fostering a positive environment for players. The next section will explore games-based approaches to examine their role as an effective coaching strategy.

2.8 Games-Based Approaches

Players learn the technical and tactical aspects of the game by playing it in a non-linear, athlete-centred format, for example, within small-sided and/or modified/conditioned versions that are developmentally appropriate to the learner (Harvey and Jarrett 2014). Games-based Approaches (GBAs) have become a prominent pedagogical approach to coaching team-based sports (Kinnerk *et al.* 2023). GBAs contextualise learning within game-related practice activities and emphasise questioning to stimulate reflection and interaction (Light and Mooney

2014). There are many variations of the game-based approach to teaching (SueSee and Pill 2018). The most popular versions of GBA include *Teaching Games for Understanding*, the *Tactical Games Model*, the *Tactical Decision-Making Model*, the *Play with Purpose*, and the *Game Sense Approach* (SueSee and Pill 2018). Light (2013) highlights that all GBAs share four abiding features: (i) the design and manipulation of games, (ii) the use of questioning, (iii) the provision of opportunities for dialogue, and (iv) building a supportive socio-moral environment.

Traditional coaching approaches are characterised by a dominant focus on directive command-style instruction and practice-style tasks that focus on the reproduction of correct technique while coaching emphasises the correctness of conformity to the technical model shaped by players following feedback from the coach (Pill 2018). GBA promote a more player-centred approach, and the transfer of skill from practice to game day matches depends on how much practice resembles the game (Magill 2004). Modified games create constraints that emphasise certain game features to develop understanding as players solve the problems they are presented with within the context of a game (Breed and Spittle 2011). Using GBA in coaching provides opportunities for convergent and divergent discovery learning. Discovery learning requires the learner to produce information that is previously unknown to them (Mosston and Ashworth 2008). Convergent discovery involves the learner discovering the only solution to a particular problem. On the other hand, divergent discovery requires the learner to produce multiple solutions to a given question or situation (SueSee and Pill 2018). Within a sporting context, opportunities will arise in games where players face a problem and do not know the solution; coaches can either give the solution to the players or use it as a learning opportunity for players to discover or create a solution to the problem (SueSee and Pill 2018). Table 2.2 summarises the main differences between a 'Traditional' coaching approach and a 'Games-Based Approach'.

Traditional Approach	Games-Based Approach
Drills are used as the main practice tool.	Games and match simulations are used as the main practice tool.
Techniques are initially thought of by isolating them from play into drills and then combining them into games later when sufficient mastery of the technique is established. Thus, the approach is considered technically oriented.	Skills are taught (at least initially) within the context of play, so the approach is considered games-based.
Practice is designed for control, correctness of movement behaviour and elimination of mistakes.	Practices are designed to promote problem-solving and effective decision-making.
Instruction directs player behaviour and is thus considered commanding and coach-centred, as the coach does most of the talking.	Instruction guides player behaviour through shared inquiry and is thus considered player-centred, as players are empowered to share their thinking and help each other.

Table 2.2 Differences in Traditional and Games-Based Approaches (adapted from Pill 2018)

A challenge for coaches adopting the GBA is that the game-based activities involve players actively problem-solving within match-like situations, meaning skill performance can be variable and lack the consistency exhibited in drill-type practice tasks (Pill 2018). Errors made by players are frequently seen as a negative by coaches; however, messiness can be advantageous as it means players' skills are being challenged and players are being forced to adapt to an improved level of performance (Pill 2018). Coaches must decide what the acceptable level of skill variability is and understand if the player's ability is causing errors or if the level of challenge has been set too high (Farrow 2010). As skill levels improve, the expectations for performance should become more challenging (Pill 2018).

This section provided an overview of GBA and its differences from traditional approaches to coaching games. The next section will explain the features of GBAs essential to the successful implementation of this approach.

2.8.1 Features of Games-Based Approaches

The effectiveness of GBA in coaching derives from several distinctive features that collectively enhance player learning and engagement. These features are integral to creating an environment that fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making within the context of the game. By focusing on game design and manipulation, employing strategic questioning, and nurturing a supportive socio-moral environment, GBAs provide a comprehensive framework for coaches to adapt. The following examines these core features, illustrating how they contribute to a dynamic and player-centred learning experience.

Design and Manipulation of Games: GBA emphasises that most learning is shaped and contextualised within games or game-like activities that involve competition and decision-making (Light 2012). Game design is "inherently connected to designing good learning for players" (Gee 2008, p. 21). A key principle of Game Sense is the representation of the full complexity of games in modified or conditioned forms used for practice (Australian Sports Commission 1998). Coaches are required to design practice tasks that appropriately challenge players based on their understanding of the game concepts (Loader 2012). These carefully designed games offer suitable replication of competitive games and foster active problem-solving among players (Loader 2012). Modified games focus on providing an environment designed for learning, not just doing (Ericsson and Pool 2016). The CHANGE IT acronym from the Australian Sports Commission (2005) elaborates on the pedagogy of purposeful game modification associated with the Game Sense approach.

- C – Coaching Style
- H – How the game is scored
- A – Area of the playing field
- N – Number of Players
- G – Games Rules
- E – Equipment
- I – Inclusion
- T – Time to perform actions

Questioning and Opportunities for Dialogue: Effective questioning is the foundation of GBAs and plays a pivotal role in the coach's session planning (Mitchell *et al.* 2006). Learning in a Game Sense environment is facilitated through dialogue between players and between players and the teacher/coach (Light 2012). As Pill (2013, p.9) asserts, "the central instructional strategy is the use of questioning to stimulate thinking about the game". Harvey and Light

(2015) highlight the importance of coaches cultivating productive and thought-provoking questioning skills, recognising them as essential pedagogical tools for improving learning outcomes. Developing effective questioning techniques and the ability to devise suitable activities to facilitate their application is fundamental to the effectiveness of the Game-Based Approach (Pearson and Webb 2008).

Questioning should focus on players learning how to solve a tactical problem and should direct them to think about movement on and off the ball which will develop decision-making and tactical awareness (Pill 2016; Parry 2022). The coach's questioning further develops players' thinking about how to solve the tactical problems of the representative and exaggerated game form (Cueto *et al.* 2012). Through skilful questioning and further gameplay practice, players realise what they need to do to create scores. GBAs highly value the coach's role as a facilitator and the role of the learner as active and involved in the learning process (Butler *et al.* 2005). Various strategies and frameworks can help coaches generate questions for their sessions. Pearson and Webb (2008) classify questions into four types: recall questions, convergent questions, divergent questions, and value questions. Breed and Spittle (2011) suggest three ways of asking questions during games: strategy-guiding, sport-linking and scenario-based questions. Butler *et al.* (2005) use the 'What? Where? When? Why? With Whom? And How?' framework. Mitchell *et al.* (2006) propose that questions should be based on three categories: Time, Space and Risk. During the modified games, coaches comment positively on good play to help reinforce the targeted skill (Light 2012). GBA promotes player thinking and problem-solving abilities through guided inquiry, often labelled "discovery" (Breed and Spittle 2011).

Building a Supportive Socio-Moral Environment: The socio-cultural environment provides a quality learning environment with positive and productive relations between players and coaches focusing on learning (Light 2014). Coaches adapting a Game Sense approach value a more 'equal' relationship with players that involves more facilitation than directive command style coaching (Pill 2013). The equality in the coach-player relationship motivates players to engage more in training and improve motivation towards training (Pill 2013).

This section explored the main features of GBAs and the importance of coaches implementing them. The Game Sense approach will now be discussed.

2.8.2 Game Sense Approach

As highlighted earlier in section 2.8, there are a number of different variations of GBA; for the purpose of this study, the Game Sense approach was used as the preferred GBA. Game Sense was developed in the late 1990s by Rod Thorpe and the Australian Sports Commission, placing learning within the context of games and offering opportunities for learning how to play the sport or specific aspects of it (Light 2012). Game Sense uses a range of teaching styles rather than focusing on a specific style method or strategy (SueSee and Pill 2018). For the successful implementation of GBA, coaches must embrace the use of more than one teaching style in their coaching (SueSee and Pill 2018), as each teaching style meets a "specific set of unique objectives or goals" (Mosston and Ashworth 2008, p.319). Using the model of cognition provided by Mosston and Ashworth (2008), it is suggested that there are three dominant conscious thought processes (memory, discovery and creativity) when one considers the development of thinking players in a Games Sense approach (SueSee and Pill 2018).

Game Sense follows a pattern of game-reflection and discussion-game, during which players interact with each other and their coaches. This approach to coaching children involves starting with a simple game in which skill demands are reduced to allow immediate intellectual engagement in the game and gradually building on this to make games progressively more complex and demanding as knowledge and skill develop hand in hand (Light 2012). After allowing players to play the game and solve the problem, the coach brings the players in to discuss what tactics could be adapted.

The game sense pedagogical approach comprises of:

- Small-sided and designer games
- modification of games for representation of full rules game form
- modification of games, play practices and designer games to emphasise particular tactical or motor skill learning,
- guided discovery and inquiry learning focused on convergent and divergent questions initiated by the coach
- game first rather than practice first session planning
- Grouping games with similar principles of play and tactical problems
  (Den Duyn 1997; Light 2012; Pill 2013)

The Game Sense approach emphasises the use of questioning to stimulate player thinking. For some players, it will require them to recall or reproduce knowledge, and for others, it will be

discovery learning, depending on each player's own learning history (SueSee *et al.* 2016). Given that players are required to make decisions during matches with no input from their coach (Pill 2014), it is worthwhile for coaches to deliberately construct a game in training to gain confidence in creating solutions to problems (SueSee and Pill 2018). The coach asks questions that generate critical thinking and discussion rather than telling the players what the coach wants (Light 2012). High levels of feedback during training can narrow the breadth of player attention and increase attention and blindness causing a failure of game awareness (Memmert and Furley 2007). The Game Sense approach incorporates times when aspects of performance have to be isolated from the game and practiced before returning to performance within the game. This method is described as whole-part-whole (Pill 2018). Game Sense approaches lead to a games-based but not game-only practice context (Pill 2018).

Player voice and questioning to stimulate player thinking put players at the centre of the Game Sense approach, which will now be discussed in greater detail.

2.8.3 Player Voice

Over the past decade, calls have been made for increasing player independence in coaching and sporting contexts (Forrest 2017). A player-centred approach to coaching allows players to gain control over their own sporting lives and take ownership and personal responsibility for their decisions (Kidman and Lombardo 2010). Player empowerment gives players the autonomy to make decisions. Players are actively stimulated to participate in directing and shaping their experiences, including tactical strategising and the content and delivery of training sessions (Cassidy *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, Romar *et al*. (2018) found that player empowerment is one of the most important attributes for motivation toward sport, and coaches should foster an environment where players are provided with desired choices and joint decision-making in the coaching process.

Student voice is frequently advocated for in PE settings (Howley 2022), but there is limited research on its implementation in youth sports, despite it aligning closely with the principles of Game Sense. For the purposes of this study, "player voice" will represent the concept of student voice. According to Iannucci and Parker (2022), player voice involves creating intentional opportunities for students to authentically contribute to their experiences and preferences, thereby shaping their own and others' learning experiences. This approach places children at the centre of pedagogical decision-making, empowering them to become collaborators and decision-makers. Game Sense and other GBAs promote equal opportunities

and redress the unequal power relations between the coach and the player (Light 2012). Player voice entails coaches listening to, understanding, and enacting players' input in practice (IPPEA 2022). It serves as a catalyst for active learning, enabling players to take ownership of their learning journey and making it more relevant and effective (Ni Chróinín *et al.* 2022). Both coaches and players must practice and learn how to effectively use player voice (IPPEA 2022). Successful implementation requires coaches to be "courageous, compassionate, and confident enough to ease their grip on control" (Iannucci and Parker 2022, p.46). This approach is inherently social and demands coaches and players to demonstrate social and emotional competencies such as self-management, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making, aligning with the socio-moral environment fostered by Game Sense (Howley 2022; Light 2014; Pill, 2013).

Lundy (2007) developed a model for children's participation in decision-making, outlining four essential elements: space to express their views, enabling their voice, communicating their voices to an appropriate audience, and ensuring their voices have influence (Cardiff *et al.* 2023). Player voice pedagogies, which offer democratic and reflective principles, can be effectively implemented within primary PE practice (Iannucci and Parker 2022). Players may need time to find their voice, starting with small decisions before progressing to more complex ones (IPPEA 2022). The success of player voice depends significantly on how coaches respond to the information players provide, fostering trust in the process (Iannucci and Parker 2022). Gradually, player voice can amplify through making choices, sharing perspectives, and taking responsibility for learning (IPPEA 2022), supporting inclusive and meaningful learning experiences for all (IPPEA 2022). Game Sense promotes critical thinking and decision-making by placing players in situations that require self-directed decision-making, thus fostering a sense of independence (Evans and Light 2010). By encouraging player voice, coaches can further develop players' critical thinking skills, which are essential for making effective on-field decisions (Iannucci and Parker 2022). Players in Evans and Light's (2008) study reported having more input in team decision-making because the coach helped them understand the purpose of activities and encouraged their suggestions on how these activities should be performed. This approach aligns with Lundy's model by providing the space and opportunity for players to express their views and influence the game, thereby enhancing their engagement and learning.

Howley (2022) suggests six simple strategies that coaches and teachers can utilise to enact player voice in their context: full-value contracts, personal biographies and timelines, digital

or written reflections, taster sessions, cooperative learning, and conferences. A full-value contract with players invites them to provide rules, routines, and expectations for themselves to enact (Howley 2022). It demonstrates to them that, as a coach, you believe they are important and viable sources of information for learning (Tannehill and Dillon 2008). Personal biographies and timelines help players critically reflect on, share, and learn about their own experiences and relationships with physical activity. Giving players the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences helps both the coach and players make sense of their learning and inform future decision-making (Howley 2022). Utilising and selecting various movement activities through taster sessions, along with eliciting, illustrating, and reflecting on these experiences, offers a novel and democratic way to consider PE and physical activity beyond immediate contexts and traditional curricular content (Enright and O'Sullivan 2010). Cooperative learning structures foster collaborative and responsible decision-making while developing interpersonal skills. Group processing through open dialogue helps students understand and empathise with their peers' emotions and perspectives (Dyson and Casey 2012). Providing dedicated time for reflection and discussion in PE fosters authentic consultation and equitable decision-making (Enright and O'Sullivan 2010; Howley and O'Sullivan 2021).

Player voice has many significant benefits. MacPhail (2011) states that if sport is to be valuable and valued in a young person's life, it is essential that their voice informs and helps to create a more meaningful and worthwhile sporting experience for all. Players who perceive that their voices and opinions are appreciated and heard demonstrate greater intrinsic motivation, vital for sustained engagement and commitment (Amorose and Anderson-Butcher 2007). Furthermore, positive coach-player relationships that promote and value open communication and mutual respect have been associated with improved performance in players (Jowett and Ntoumanis 2004).

The significant role and benefits of utilising player voice in a GBA in coaching were described in this section. The following section will describe the overall benefits of using a GBA.

2.8.4 Benefits of Games-Based Approaches

Research on GBAs suggests that benefits include improved playing ability and understanding, development of personal identity, self-esteem, a sense of belonging and inclusion, and building personal relationships (Light 2012). Game Sense and TGfU approaches empower players to make informed decisions under pressure in competitive matches by giving them opportunities to make such decisions under similar conditions during training (Light 2012). Through

participation in GBA-focused sessions, players experience greater enjoyment, increased game involvement through small-sided games, and increased motivation through tactical goal setting (Evans and Light 2007; Hainey *et al*. 2013). Involving players in games and in the decision-making process can encourage game appreciation and physical skill development. As the players become more experienced, they become better decision makers and more competent game players, and therefore, more motivated to play more games and reap the rewards of participation (Butler *et al.* 2005). Small-sided games increase decision-making and tactical awareness, improve skill development as players have more time on the ball, improve fitness, increase involvement and are more fun and enjoyable (Light 2012). Furthermore, players' ability to communicate on the field and team cohesion improves, as a result of a wider number of players contributing to discussions during training sessions (Atkinson and Harvey 2017)

2.9 Conclusion

In this section, how coaches learn to coach was explored. Coaches learn in various ways from formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences. Research has shown the importance of mixing these three modes of coach learning. Literature highlights that informal learning is the dominant mode of coach learning. Interactions with other coaches, observation, coaching experience through doing, and mentoring are the most common ways in which coaches learn to coach. Reflection is particularly important in framing coaches' learning. However, reflection is a skill that needs to be developed and supported. A comprehensive review of the literature on coaching philosophies, competition in youth sport and Irish policy, coach-athlete relationships, coaching youth players and girls in sport, and GBA was presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3: Context

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide the context and approach in which this study was conducted. It will outline the structure of the club in which this research took place and explain my role in the research.

3.2 The Club Context

This study took place in a rural Ladies' Gaelic Football Club in county Limerick. The club caters to girls aged 6 to adult, with 254 members of all ages. This study occurred at the U14 age group level with 39 players born between 2008 and 2009 (2008 = 14 players, 2009 = 25 players). Players transition from non-competitive playing structures to formalised competition at this age group. The players had varying levels of exposure to Ladies' Gaelic Football, with some players playing the sport since they were six while others were participating in the sport for the first time and did not understand the rules of the sport.

Given the large number of players in this age group, the team management and club officials agreed to enter two teams in the league to maximise opportunities for players to play more regularly; one team was entered into the championship competition due to a lack of numbers during the summer months. There is no official advice from the national governing body on how to cater for teams with such high numbers. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the management to divide the players into separate teams. The management considered a range of options on how best to do this: ability, age, or mixed. It was decided that the players would be divided into three groups based on age and ability. The first group were players born in 2008 and would play in the higher division only, the second group were players born in 2009 of a high standard who could play on both teams as needed, and the third group was made up of players born in 2009 who were beginners or players of perceived average ability and would play in the lower division. The coaches acknowledged this was a complex process and not an ideal solution as other clubs may use different selection criteria for this. Some players born in 2008 may have benefited from playing in the lower division, but we were cognisant of maintaining friendships. How teams were devised was shared with parents prior to the start of the season, but parents were not consulted prior to this decision.

The management team consisted of seven coaches, three males and four females. The coaches had varying levels of coaching experience. All three male coaches had more than 20 years of

coaching experience each, but this was the first time they had coached a girls' team. They were all primary school teachers with a keen interest in PE. One of these coaches became my mentor during the research process. The female coaches all had one year of coaching experience (Caoimhe included), having coached the U12 team in the club the previous year. Three of the four female coaches are primary school teachers who are all very interested in PE.

I, the researcher in this study, am a primary school teacher who graduated from Mary Immaculate College in 2018. Up to the year prior to commencing this research, I had very little experience coaching teams aside from six-week blocks (n=6 blocks) of coaching camogie, Ladies' Gaelic football and soccer with my school's team alongside a colleague. I was interested in commencing my coaching journey as I felt it linked my two passions of teaching and sport well and I could make a positive impact on my community. My interest in girls' sport evolved over time as I engaged in national campaigns to raise awareness of females in sport. By researching why girls drop out of sports, I believed I could contribute positively to creating an inclusive and fun environment that could retain players and also develop better players for our club in the future.

It is important to acknowledge the unique context of this study, as I am both a female and a novice coach, a demographic often underrepresented in coaching literature. This research focuses on exploring my journey and learning experiences as a novice coach rather than my experiences as a female coach. My involvement with the team resulted from the manager inviting me to join as a coach, primarily because she saw me as a suitable role model for the girls, given my playing experience. In addition, my experience as a teacher was seen as a valuable asset. She perceived me as a suitable role model for the girls, demonstrating both a pathway in sports and the potential for lifelong participation. In contrast, the team manager assumed her role due to her child's participation, a typical scenario identified by Hogan *et al*. (2022). Drawing on my experiences as both a player and a teacher provided me with initial confidence in my coaching abilities, unlike many female coaches who may have experience in only one of these domains.

3.3 My Coaching Philosophy

At the outset of this research, I developed an initial coaching philosophy that reflected where I was on my coaching journey. It was idealistic, basic and heavily informed by my values as a teacher around inclusion and enjoyment, as well as my experiences of coaches as a player. It was also informed by my younger brother's negative experiences of playing sport and my desire

to ensure such negative experiences would not occur for the players I was coaching. The following extract from my reflective research diary highlights a significant learning moment as I commenced this research. It describes my reaction to a conversation with my brother at the start of this research study, who was thirteen at the time, and therefore very relevant to this study as the players I coached during this study were the same age. It provided me with a real-life experience of how an over-competitive environment can affect a player's enjoyment of sport and subsequent retention in sport.

> *In this conversation, he asked me if I thought he was bad at soccer because he never got played in matches despite being at every training session. I struggled to explain or justify why a coach would promise a player they would play in a match and subsequently not fulfil the promise. The only reassurance I could offer was to continue training; hopefully, he would play for the team sometime soon. A few weeks later, he decided that soccer was no longer enjoyable and dropped out. It was a critical learning moment for me on this learning journey as I observed the negative outcome an over-competitive approach to youth sport can have on a player's experience. What was most striking about the conversation was how clearly he could articulate himself and how unfair the situation was for him and some of his peers.* (Caoimhe, Research Diary)

The philosophy was centred on the holistic development of the players and ensuring a positive experience for the players. I established four pillars to guide my practice throughout the season:

- *Balancing Skill Development and Enjoyment:*

  This pillar acknowledged my desire to ensure all players received suitable support to develop and improve their skills regardless of their perceived level of ability while at the same time creating sessions that players found enjoyable.
- *Reframing Success:*

  This pillar sought to address my biases around competition and winning, separating my experiences as an elite player and a youth coach. I aimed to instil a sense of achievement derived from personal growth and mastery of key skills rather than winning. I desired to create simple, measurable targets before games and emphasise skill development and improvement as indicators of success rather than winning.
- *Empowering Players:*

  This pillar prioritised inclusivity, positive reinforcement and constructive feedback. It aimed to create a positive environment where mistakes were embraced and seen as an opportunity for learning and growth. As a result of being part of this team, I wanted players to feel valued by their peers and coaches and to become self-confident and

resilient. I wanted the players to see ladies' football as a way of maintaining and establishing life-long friendships.

- *Nurturing Retention:*

  This pillar was the most crucial pillar in my initial coaching philosophy, as I believed it would combine the other three pillars. I viewed retention as the key metric of our success as a coaching team. If we could successfully foster a culture of enjoyment, skill development and camaraderie, we could mitigate the factors that might lead to player dropout.

However, as per the research by Collins *et al.* (2011), I was unsure how I could implement these values in practice. The findings and discussions chapter will explain how my coaching philosophy evolved over the season as critical incidents helped to better inform my understanding of coaching and redefine my coaching philosophy.

3.3.3 Management Philosophy

As a management team, we collectively agreed that our main focus would be creating an enjoyable experience for the players that helped develop their skills and understanding of the game. There was a significant emphasis placed on inclusion and fairness, where all players were treated with respect and received equal opportunities. The management team's philosophy was similar to the pillars I established to guide my practice throughout the season. We did not formally agree on these principles in a meeting, but they would be discussed informally at various times throughout the year. Instead, it was more an accepted, shared core belief around coaching children, given our interests and relationships with one another prior to commencing coaching this team together. The findings and discussion chapter will explain times when this ethos was challenged and how we overcame these challenges.

3.4 My Perspective on Competition

This section provides a context for this study, where I outline my perspective on competition and its place in sport and coaching. As an elite player participating at the highest level of sport for over ten years in the GAA, I appreciate the role competition plays in elite sport. Ultimately, the objective of the elite level in the GAA is to win the championship. However, the Gaelic Games Player Pathway clearly defines three different phases of participation: Foundation Phase, Talent Phase and Elite Phase. I would describe myself as a competitive player, always striving to improve and ultimately win. I can recall from a young age my desire to always win matches. Winning matches and competitions were important to me, and I knew this was not the same for others on my team. I was always striving to be the best version of myself, and I

enjoyed the thrill and excitement of winning. My earliest memory of losing and the hurt I felt was losing a U10 camogie final when I was eight. I can recall the motivation of wanting to be part of the first team in our club to win that competition, and it highlights my enduring understanding of winning and losing. However, I understand that competition or an overemphasis on winning can be divisive and harmful, as I have observed this first-hand throughout my time as a player.

Prior to this research, I had very little experience of coaching to compete. As a coach of our school teams, we focused on participation and ensuring that all players got to experience representing our school team rather than winning the competition. This was the shared ethos of our school and was representative of our values of inclusion. My experience as an elite player has highlighted to me that underage success does not ensure success at adult levels, and therefore, has helped me understand that competition and winning are not significant factors in underage sport and focus ought to be placed on skill development and retention.

At the start of this research project, I wrote a piece on how I would approach competition with the team for the season ahead. In this piece, I stated that winning was not my primary objective; instead, I would like the teams to be competitive in all games and experience winning some games. From personal experience, I believed that winning games would be an effective way of building confidence and demonstrating an improvement in skill acquisition. I acknowledged that I would like the teams to experience winning a competition but not at the consequence of creating positive player experiences for all. Additionally, as a coaching team, we opted not to focus our attention on winning, opting instead to focus on creating a player-centred environment.

3.5 My Understanding of Coach-Athlete Relationships

At the start of the season, I was very cognisant of the effects negative coaching experiences can have on player retention. This awareness made me hyper-sensitive to strive to build strong coach-athlete relationships with all players and be liked by the players. As I contemplated the season ahead, I recalled the coaches in my life who had been most influential throughout my playing career. I identified three key reasons why they positively impacted me, and I used these to inform my practice as a novice coach. These coaches:

- Built a rapport with me,
- Motivated and inspired me to improve,
- Showed kindness, understanding, mutual respect, and fairness to me and others.

The challenges and learning experiences I encountered over the season are explained in chapter five.

3.5.1 Context of Coaching Youth Players

Prior to starting this research, my coaching and teaching experience focused on girls aged 6-12. This experience offered me the opportunity to learn and develop coaching skills for a different age group. Initially, I was confident that my teaching experience would help create this inclusive, child-centred environment.

The use of GBA helped us, as coaches, create a supportive environment where players felt comfortable engaging in discussion. This required introducing the concept of discussion over time, as it was a new concept for the players to understand, as they had been coached using alternative methods up to this point. It will be explained in more detail in section 3.7 of this chapter.

3.6 Context of Game Sense in this Study

Prior to commencing this study, I had no understanding of GBAs. I grew up being coached using traditional straight-line drills and repetition of a specific skill until it was mastered. I had heard of GBA in the media as it was the preferred coaching method of Paul Kinnerk, one of the most successful coaches in GAA. The three male coaches on our management team have used Game Sense as the primary method of teaching skills and tactical awareness in Gaelic football since Paul Kinnerk introduced them to the concept over seven years ago. They have used this concept successfully with various teams across all ages and have published a wide variety of game ideas online to support other coaches in creating developmentally appropriate games for their players.

I was sceptical of the Game Sense approach at first, as I did not understand how a skill could be taught within the context of a game without explicitly demonstrating it to the players. However, seeing the success of the teams using these approaches, I was eager to learn how to coach using such methods. Additionally, the Gaelic Games Player Pathway (GAA 2022) set out six principles that should be present in all coaching sessions to ensure learning is taking place and players are challenged to reach their full potential. Therefore, this experience provided me with a unique opportunity to work with very experienced coaches in the area.

1. Enjoyment
2. Challenge
3. Looks Like a Game

4. All Players Involved
5. Player Centred
6. Constant Decision Making

The use of the Game Sense approach in this study ensures that all six principles are being achieved and that the National Governing Body's recommended advice is followed.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided the context and position of the coach/researcher in which this study took place. It also provided a context and explained my understanding of coaching philosophy, competition, coach-player relationships, coaching youth players and girls and GBA. The next chapter will present the methodology used to conduct this study.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the self-study research approach to address this study's research question and embedded questions. This chapter also provides a detailed account of the data collection methods and data analysis procedures. Additionally, it explores ethical considerations and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the approaches and findings.

4.2 Aim of Research

The aim of this research is to answer the following research question:

- What are the learning experiences of a novice coach learning to coach teenage girls aged 12-14?

Understanding how novice coaches learn is essential for supporting their development and ultimately improving coaching quality and athlete experiences.

4.3 Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen as the research method for this study because it focused on exploring the participants' experiences, perspectives, feelings and behaviours and gaining insight into their understanding of a topic (Burns and Grove 2003). Constructivism is a particular way of discovering how people understand their worlds (Denicolo e*t al.* 2016). This approach is used by researchers seeking to understand individuals' internal processes: attitudes, interests, beliefs, values, different perspectives and identities as they interact and influence behaviour in personal, work or social settings (Denicolo e*t al.* 2016). Constructivist approaches and methods help to answer why and how questions about people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviour (Denicolo e*t al.* 2016). Figure 4.1 below outlines the research design:

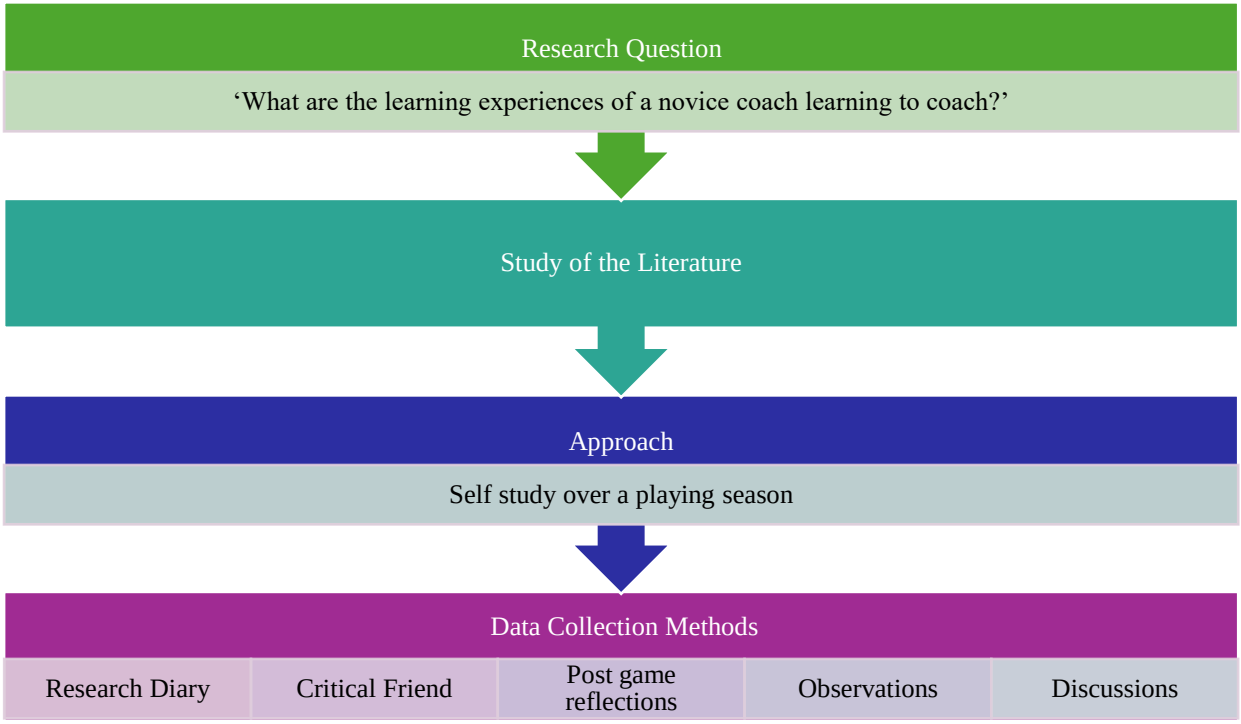

Figure 4.1: Research Design

4.4 Self Study

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) define self-study research as seeking to "provoke, challenge, and illuminate" rather than simply "confirm and settle" (p. 20), involving the researcher studying oneself and their own practices, driven by a moral commitment to improving practice (Pinnegar and Hamilton 2009).

Self-study encourages researchers to describe and analyse their practices, make judgments on their teaching/coaching and learning experiences, interpret their developing pedagogies and identify enabling and limiting aspects of pedagogical practices (Ovens and Fletcher 2014). A key characteristic of self-study is that it is initiated and carried out by the practitioners whose practice is being studied (Nilsson and Loughran 2012) and 'seeks to explore the gap between who I am and who I would like to be in my practice' (Pinnegar and Hamilton 2009, p.12). Self-study allows the researcher to explore their own assumptions, beliefs and actions as they are enacted in practice (Casey *et al.* 2018).

4.4.1 Characteristics of a Self-Study:

LaBoskey (2004) identifies five characteristics of quality in a self-study, which were used in this research, and how each characteristic was used in this research is explained here.

- Self-Initiated and Focused

LaBoskey (2004) states that a critical identifying feature of self-study methodology involves the question of '*who'* in terms of *who* is doing the research and *who* is being studied. Knowledge develops through a better understanding of personal experience through cycles of critical reflection on that experience (LaBoskey 2004). While self-study researchers are both the researcher and the subject of the research, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) highlight that self-study does not mean the *self* is the sole focus of the study. Instead, suggesting that a balance between the study of one's own practice and students' learning is required while attending to the researcher's personal role within that process.

I initiated this study as I was particularly interested in understanding my role as a coach and developing my practices to enhance the experiences of the players I was coaching. Throughout this research, I reflected on critical incidents that occurred and how and what I learned as a result of these incidents. Additionally, player responses played a crucial role in this study as their responses provided me with learning opportunities and gave valuable insights into how my practices are perceived and understood.

- Improvement Aimed

Self-study methodology is designed to understand and improve our professional practice settings (LaBoskey 2004). Self-study researchers are concerned with enhancing their practices in general and the immediate improvement of practice (LaBoskey 2004). Self-study was identified as the most appropriate research methodology for this study, as I was committed to exploring my current practices as a novice coach, enhancing my understanding of coaching, and gaining insight into the selected topic (Burns and Grove 2003). Researchers' improvement intentions are generated from critical issues they discover in studying their own contexts. It is through critical issues that it is possible for action research/self-study "aiming at the improvement of educational practices, and research aiming at the understanding of those practices, to go hand in hand" (Korthagen (2005, p.104). Researchers strive to improve their practice based on a careful and thorough understanding of one's own context, which enhances the understanding of that practice (LaBoskey 2004).

In this study, I was committed to improving my practices as a coach, given my very limited experience of coaching to this point. I acknowledged that while I had a good understanding of Ladies' Gaelic football and experience in teaching, I could not rely on my previous experiences alone and needed to learn and improve to ensure players received the necessary coaching. I also wanted to better understand how one coaches girls aged 12-14 to provide them with the

best opportunities to give them the best chance at staying in sport into their late teens and adulthood.

- Interactive

As self-study is open to individual interpretation and influenced by personal experiences, self-study must be interactive at one or more stages of the process (LaBoskey 2004). Efforts to improve individual practice are made possible by various interactions throughout the research study (LaBoskey 2004). Loughran and Northfield (1998) emphasises the collaborative nature of self-study methodology because if genuine reframing is to occur as a result of the study, alternative perspectives and interpretations must also be included in the research process. Interaction within self-study with the purpose of studying one's professional practice takes many forms (LaBoskey 2004). Self-study researchers collaborate directly with colleagues in an effort to better understand and improve their own practice, in addition they collaborate with colleagues who are working on different professional practice agendas, they interact with their own students in a variety of ways and interact with 'text' of various kinds in varying manners that will inform their personal experience (LaBoskey 2004). Learning is enhanced in this way by challenging previously held assumptions through practical experience and collaboration with colleagues (LaBoskey 2004).

Throughout this research, my interactions with my supervisors, critical friend, mentor, fellow coaches, and players provided me with significant learning opportunities that enhanced my understanding of coaching and improved my practice as a coach.

- Multiple, Primarily Qualitative Methods

"Self-study research is a research methodology in which researcher and practitioners use whatever methods will provide the needed evidence and context for understanding their practice" (Hamilton and Pinnegar 1998, p.240). Using a mix of qualitative methods can enhance our understanding and practices and help us reframe our thinking and teaching in appropriate and defensible ways (LaBoskey 2004).

This study used a variety of data collection methods to support my learning, including observations, a reflective research diary, critical friend reflections, individual and group discussions, reflections, and questioning.

- Exemplar-Based Validation

Loughran and Northfield (1998) states that the report created on the self-study must include sufficient detail of the situation's complexity and context, demonstrate some triangulation of

data, and present a range of different perspectives on the issue. Validation is accomplished when "the results of a study come to be viewed as sufficiently trustworthy for other investigators to rely upon in their own work" (Mishler 1990, p.427).

Chapter three provided the context in which this study took place. Data was obtained using a range of different methods from the researcher, other coaches, and players to support the triangulation of the data, and a range of different perspectives on my coaching were provided, which challenged my viewpoint. The findings of this study are similar to results found by other researchers in this area.

4.5 Participants and Ethical Considerations

The researcher was the primary participant in this study, as this was a self-study of my learning experiences over a playing season as a novice coach.

Secondary participants in this study included my fellow coaches (n=3), as they often provided me with feedback, insights, and validations of my reflections throughout the season. In addition, my mentor (n=1), who was vastly experienced in coaching, offered me regular guidance, support and critical feedback on this research journey. These participants were identified using convenience and purposive sampling as they had the ability to provide me with meaningful insights, support and perspectives that contributed greatly to this self-study research project. These participants were made fully aware of the purpose of this self-study and its procedures, risks, and benefits. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and their confidentiality was assured throughout the research (Appendices C and D).

This research aimed to explore the introduction of formal competition structures in teenage Ladies' Football, which occurs in the under-14 age group. Time and accessibility were considered when choosing the participating group (Cohen *et al.* 2011). The child participants in this study were identified using convenience and purposive sampling. 46 girls aged 12-14 were invited to participate in this research. Ethical approval for this study was sought and obtained from MIREC in May 2022 (Approval Number: A22-005) (Appendix E). The researcher was Garda vetted through Mary Immaculate College for the purpose of research engagement. Firstly, permission was sought and granted from the Ladies' Gaelic Football Club chairperson to conduct the research with the under-14 team (Appendices F and G). Then, the children and their parents were fully aware of this research's aims and goals. A general letter and information sheet were sent to all parents/guardians and children informing them of the research being conducted, that their participation in the research was voluntary and that they

could withdraw at any stage without reason or consequence (Appendices H and I). Parents and their children were required to give written informed consent (Appendices J and K). To ensure the anonymity of all participants in this study, each participant was given a pseudonym, any identifying information from the data was removed, data was stored securely in an encrypted file on a passcode-protected laptop, and only necessary data was used and reported.

4.6 Data Collection Methods

The data collection phase lasted seven months, from February to September. This section will explain the multiple data collection tools used to capture the researcher's and the children's experiences. This self-study involved three main data collection sources: the researcher, the mentor and coaches, and the children. The data was gathered using a reflective research diary, critical friend reflections, mentor observation and feedback, individual and group discussions, (Figure 4.2).

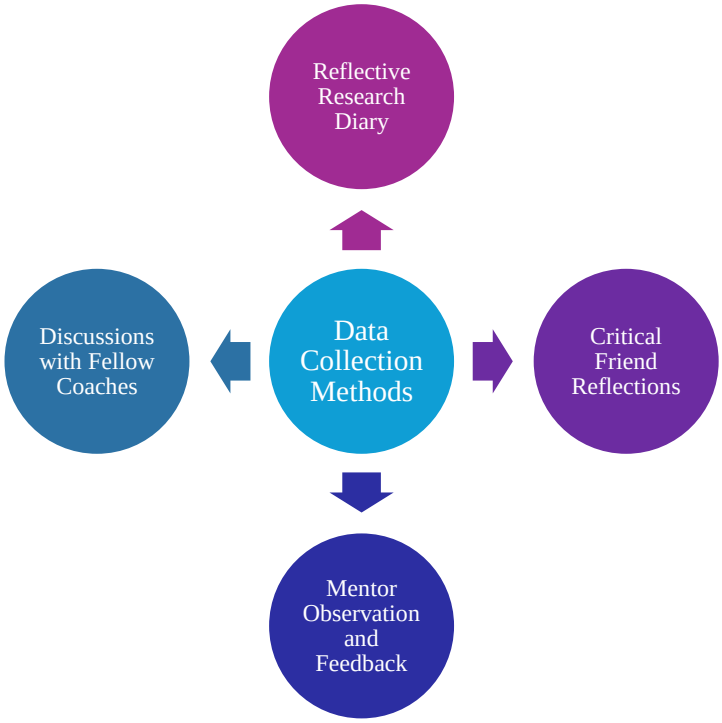

Figure 4.2: Data Collection Methods

Reflective Research Diary: This study's principal source of researcher data collection was reflective research diary entries. Personal reflections help teachers (coaches) unpack their own experiences, beliefs, knowledge and philosophies and help them understand how reflections shape their identities and actions as teachers (coaches) (Ovens and Tinning 2009). The researcher used a diary throughout the research process to record critical incidents during matches and training, informal discussions with players and other members of the management,

and general thoughts and reflections on coaching throughout the research process (n=55 entries, total approx. 13,000 words) (Appendix L).

This rich data source provided me with immediate first-hand accounts of my coaching and learning over time, which allowed me to gain insight into my development as a coach over the season. I explored and challenged my biases about participation, competition and coaching styles in my diary entries, sometimes using prompt questions (Appendix M) and other times using free-writing. The diary also provided a reference point for synthesising my experiences by grounding my claims in events and experiences I had recorded. This helped me to step back from the close relationship I had with the participants and avoid researcher bias (Connelly and Clandinin 2006). The research diary helped inform the data analysis process by capturing ideas that arose repeatedly during data collection, assisting me in understanding the nuances of the data gathered. Reflective research diary entries were a vital source of data that added rigour to this study (Creswell 2014). This data collection method facilitated reflexivity, enhanced trustworthiness and acted as one source of triangulation during data analysis.

Critical Friend: A critical friend was used to support my understanding of how to use self-study research to support my learning as an emerging novice coach. A critical friend can help to "challenge [our] assumptions and biases, reveal [our] inconsistencies [and] expand [our] potential interpretations" (LaBoskey 2004, p.849). My supervisor recruited my critical friend due to their expertise in self-study research and extensive experience in the sport as both a player and a coach. They were not affiliated with the club where this research took place and were not known to me prior to commencing this research. This ensured an unbiased and external perspective on my coaching practice. There was no overlap between my critical friend and the other coaches, as my critical friend remained external to the club environment. Their feedback on my written reflections (n=1) provided the impetus for my decisions and actions. Their feedback was provided in a caring but challenging way through an online critical friend discussion (n=1, average 57 minutes), which helped me to see situations that arose from different perspectives (Casey *et al.* 2018). This online discussion took place at the halfway point in my research between the league and championship competitions.

Mentor Observations and Feedback: Mentor observation and feedback occurred on (n=4) occasions throughout the season and involved my mentor observing and recording my coaching during a training session. On one occasion, this entailed my mentor video-recording my session and using a microphone to record my interactions and questioning of the players. On

all other occasions, it involved them recording notes or observations on a notepad to relay their observations to me after the session. The observation and feedback sessions provided important learning opportunities for me to improve, reflect on my coaching practices, and recognise the development and improvements in my coaching up to that point. These feedback discussions were informal and were tracked in my reflective research diary. Additionally, when I required clarification on aspects of coaching, my mentor would probe and help co-construct a solution or understanding for me.

Discussions with Fellow Coaches: Throughout the season, informal discussions with my fellow coaches provided a rich data source for my research. These conversations were invaluable, allowing me to seek clarity on various events and deepen my understanding of my experiences. Sharing my perspectives and insights with peers fostered a reciprocal exchange of ideas, which was particularly beneficial. Much like the role of my critical friend, my fellow coaches often challenged my assumptions and offered alternative viewpoints, broadening my understanding and fostering critical reflection. These discussions significantly enhanced my reflective practice, and valuable discussions with my fellow coaches were recorded in my research diary.

4.6.1 Data Collection Methods with the Children

The children's data was collected using individual and small group discussions, post-training and post-match written reflections, observations and questioning (Figure 4.3). The children's data was a critical source that supported this self-study, as their contribution greatly enhanced the researcher's understanding of youth sports and coaching techniques.

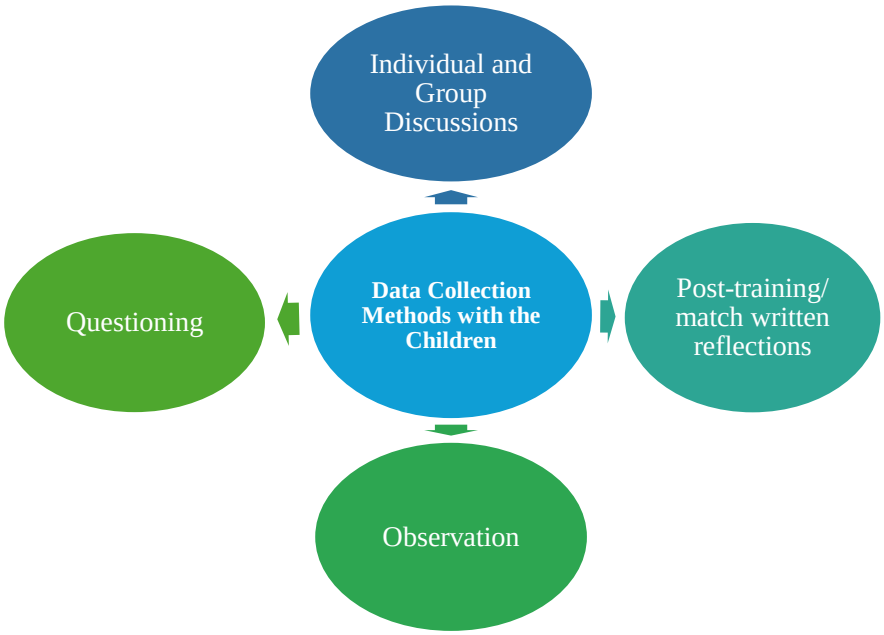

Figure 4.3 Data Collection Methods with the Children

Individual/ Group Discussions: Discussions with players in small groups and individually were used throughout the data collection phase to get feedback on the sessions and assess their understanding and development throughout the year. Group discussions with players often gave me clarity on certain aspects of coaching. These discussions with players provided me with many key learning moments on interacting effectively with players and understanding the unique needs of girls aged 12-14. The discussions with players also gave the players the opportunity to share what they learned from an activity and seek clarity from the coaches if required. Additionally, discussions were a very useful tool as the information received in these discussions provided the coaches with valuable information regarding the players' understanding of the activity, and that was useful to help inform future session planning. Conversations between the researcher and individual players allowed me to ask specific questions about something or more general questions, depending on the situation, and helped me develop a rapport with players. The information gathered during these discussions with players was recorded and reflected in my research diary. The researcher's diary recorded critical incidents or comments made by players. There were (n=15) critical incidents or comments made by players in my research diary that generated 3150 words.

Post-training and post-match written reflections: These gave players the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences of training sessions and matches. In these reflections, the players were given a template (Appendix) with prompts that directed them to write about what they liked and did not like about the session/match and elements they would like to improve or change about a session/match. They rated their enjoyment levels and provided a reason for giving that rating. They were also given the opportunity to provide the coaches with feedback on something they would change and how we could best support them. Post-match (n=7) and post-training (n=10) written reflections generated 304 player responses of approximately 200 words each. These post-training and post-match reflections were very valuable sources of data, as they gave me an alternative view of a situation through the child's perspective on an incident. It allowed me to reflect on my coaching and make changes as required to ensure the players' needs were met.

Observations: During training and matches, I observed the behaviours and interactions of players with each other and the coaches. These observations were described in my research diary. The positive and negative body language of players was also very informative. These behaviours would initiate conversations between a player and me, where I would check in with

the player to identify the issue they were having. This allowed me to give the player one-on-one coaching and highlight certain aspects of the skill to help them improve.

I listened closely to players' reactions after games and training, such as "I loved that game" and "We were really good at… tonight". This was useful in assessing the success or failure of an activity. It was important to listen for the players' negative reactions, including players saying they "would love to play more *real* matches at training". Comments such as this were very informative, demonstrating what was meaningful to the players. As a result, sessions were designed to incorporate *real* matches at different times throughout the season.

Questioning: I adopted questioning as a key coaching strategy to track player understanding of the skill or concept being taught. Players were questioned individually and in groups using open-ended and closed questions. Questions included:

- What would you change to make this game easier or more challenging for you?
- Can you show me how best to protect the ball when you are trying to run past someone?
- How does using the *'give and go'* make it easier for you?
- Why is it better to have the space in front of you?

These questions helped the players make sense of their experiences with the aim of getting them to use these skills and concepts more regularly in games. My synthesised thoughts on these interactions provided a reference point for the players' development, which I captured in my research diary.

4.7 Data Analysis

"Qualitative data analysis encompasses the processes of organising, interpreting, and elucidating the collected data" (Cohen *et al.* 2011, p.537). Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflective thematic data analysis framework was adopted to analyse the data gathered in this research. Thematic analysis is a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data' (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.6). Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Table 4.4) were followed to analyse the data gathered in this research as it provided a clear and structured framework for completing thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that their phased approach is not intended to be followed rigidly. Instead, the six phases should blend somewhat together, and the analytic process becomes more recursive.

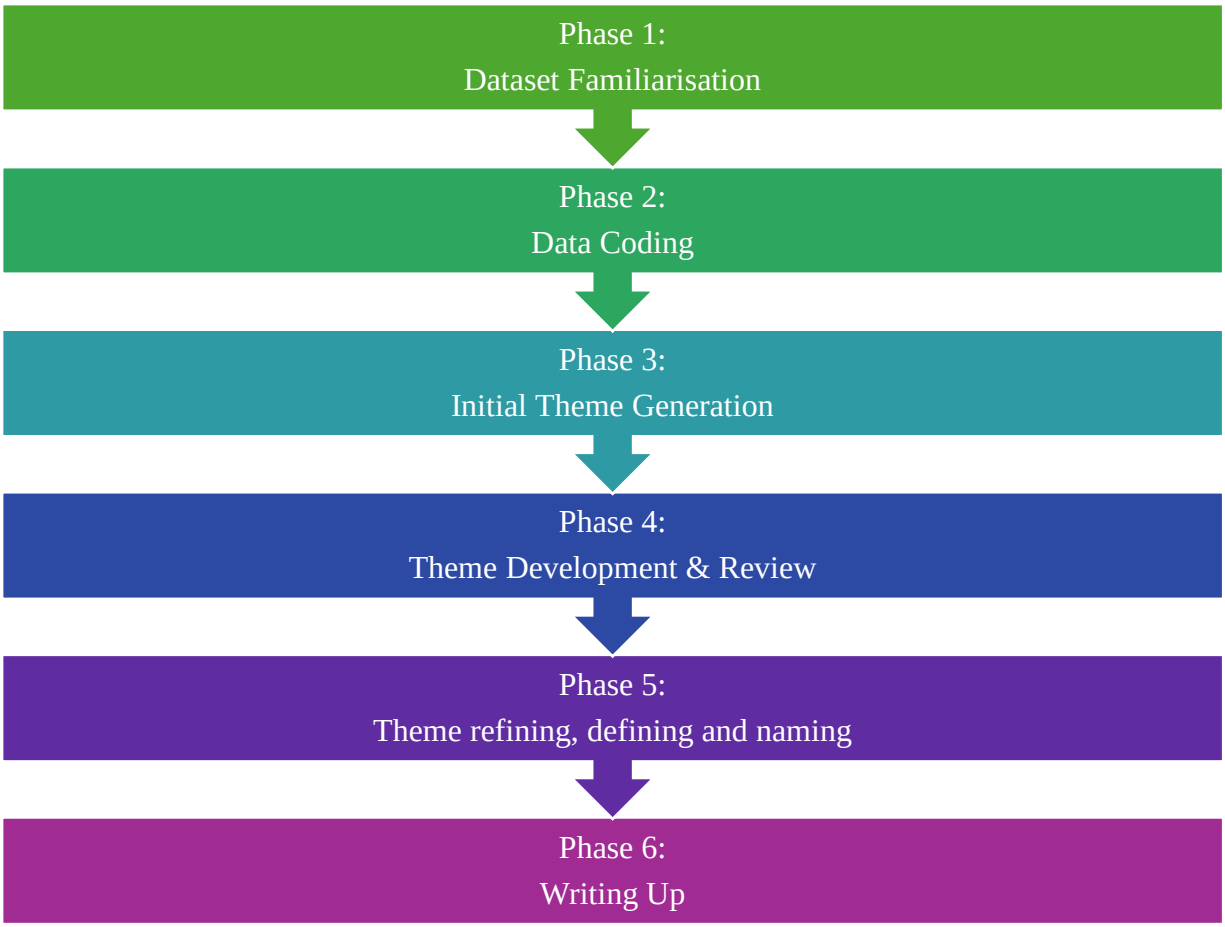

Figure 4.4: Braun and Clarke Reflective Thematic Analysis Process (2021)

4.7.1 Dataset Familiarisation

Dataset familiarisation involves three practices: immersion, critical engagement with the data and note-taking of thoughts relevant to the data (Braun and Clarke 2021). The familiarisation phase of analysing qualitative data requires the researcher to read and re-read transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2021). As immersing oneself in the data occurs, the researcher must also critically engage with the data. The reader must be active, critical, and analytical to identify and develop potential patterns of meaning from the data (Braun and Clarke 2021). The researcher makes brief notes about any analytic ideas or insights they have, both related to each data set and the dataset as a whole (Braun and Clarke 2021). Before proceeding further with the analysis, it is essential to be very familiar with the data.

The data generated in this research was gathered from various sources: self-generated data by the researcher, player-generated data and coach/mentor-generated data. Therefore, the data was analysed in three stages. Stage one was a review of the data generated from research diary entries, reflections on my practices, and critical friend discussion. The research question focused on my learning and experiences as a novice coach learning to coach. Stage two

involved a close examination of the player-generated data. The player reflections were studied and reflected on in my research diary. Stage three reviewed the data generated from my discussions and interactions with my mentor as recorded in my research diary. I reviewed all the data and made initial notes, questions, and mind maps (Braun and Clarke 2021) to identify any potential patterns of meaning from the data.

4.7.2 Data Coding

In this phase of the analytic process, the researcher works systematically through the data set to identify segments of data that appear potentially interesting, relevant or meaningful to the research question (Braun and Clarke 2021). The focus is specific and detailed, with coding aimed at capturing a single meaning or concept. Coding can be completed at a range of levels from very explicit to implicit meaning (Braun and Clarke 2021). While coding summarises the content of the data gathered, it is also important to capture the researcher's 'analytical take' on the data (Braun and Clarke 2021). The coding process involves reading each data item closely and tagging all segments of the texts where you notice any meaning that is potentially relevant to the research question with an appropriate code label (Braun and Clarke 2021).

In this phase, the data is organised in a meaningful and systematic way (Maguire and Delahunt 2017) by generating initial codes from the data. It is important to analyse the data with the research question and embedded questions in mind (Maguire and Delahunt 2017). Following Braun and Clarke's advice, rather than "selecting out a particular corpus of instances which you then analyse, you code all the data that's relevant to your research question, and it's only later in the analytic process that you become more selective" (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.206).

In this phase, I read through the data and stopped when I thought something might be relevant in addressing the research question. I tagged these potentially relevant ideas with a code label (Braun and Clarke 2021). I chose to label the data in this research by "handwriting code labels on the printed data" (Braun and Clarke 2021, p.65). Highlighters, underlining, and circles were used to indicate what bit of data the code was related to (Braun and Clarke 2021) (Figure 4.5). The data collected from the researcher and players were coded separately. I did not have a set of pre-set codes; instead, the codes developed and were modified as I worked through the coding process.

Braun and Clarke (2021) describe coding in reflective thematic analysis as organic in nature, meaning codes are likely to evolve as the researcher's analytic insight develops. This was true in this research, as I initially found that the codes being developed were too broad or general,

and as per the recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2021), I honed them to identify a range of meanings related to the same general concept.

I proceeded to the next phase of reflective thematic analysis when I was confident that the list of data codes generated from the data was an accurate summary of the diversity of meanings contained in the dataset (Braun and Clarke 2021).

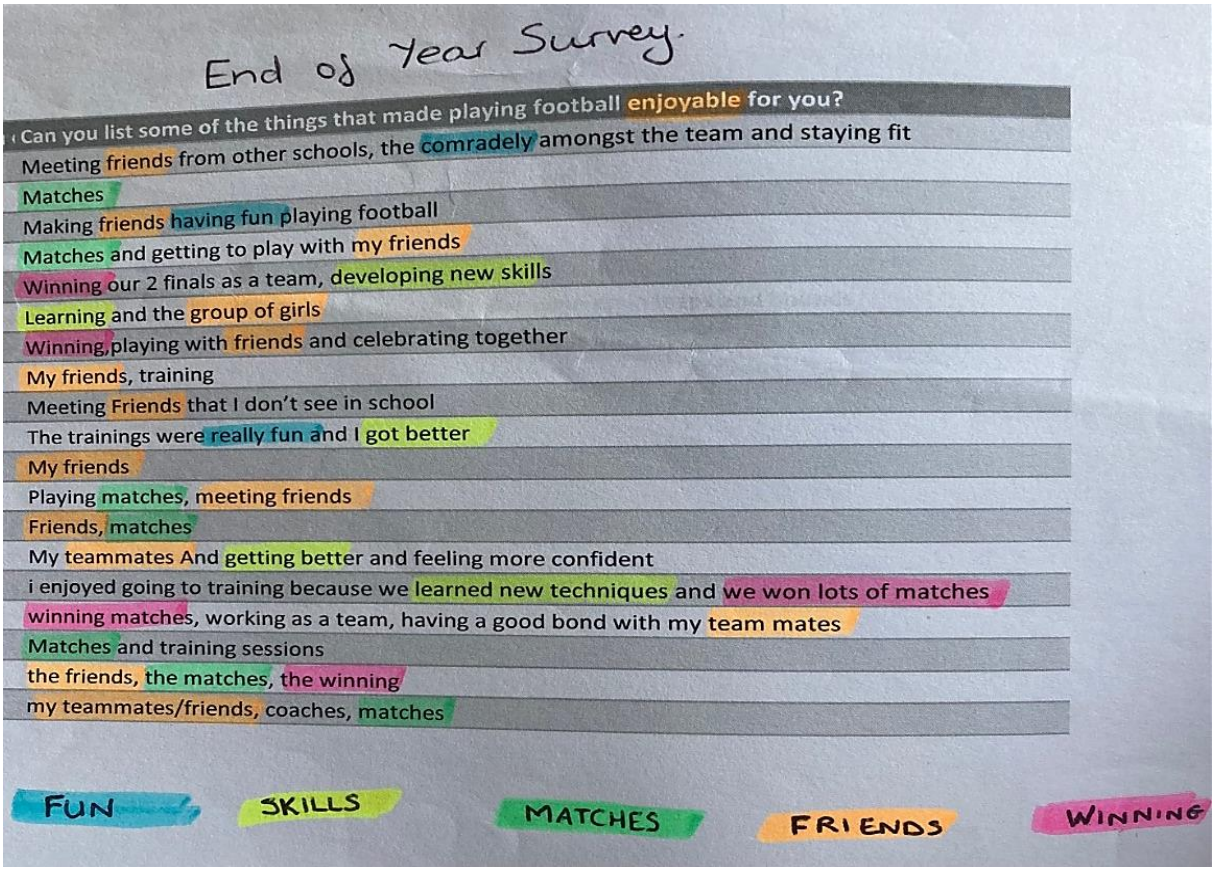

Figure 4.5: Code development from player surveys

4.7.3 Initial Theme Generation

This phase involves a range of processes of engaging with the data codes to explore areas where there is some similarity of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2021). Theme development is an active process whereby the researcher constructs themes based on the data, the research questions, and the researcher's knowledge and insights (Braun and Clarke 2021). Once potential themes that best capture the data and address the research question have been identified, the researcher collates all coded relevant data to each candidate theme.

Phase three involved sorting the initial codes into potential themes (Braun and Clarke 2013). Braun and Clarke (2013) describe this phase as being an active process. A theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.224).

The visual mapping technique of drawing thematic maps was used in this research to help identify patterns between the codes, themes and sub-themes (Figure 4.6). Braun and Clarke (2021) describe thematic maps as very useful as a general analytic practice and in three specific ways: (1) for starting to think about provisional themes in their own right; (2) for exploring how provisional themes might relate to each other; and (3) for starting to consider the overall story of the analysis.

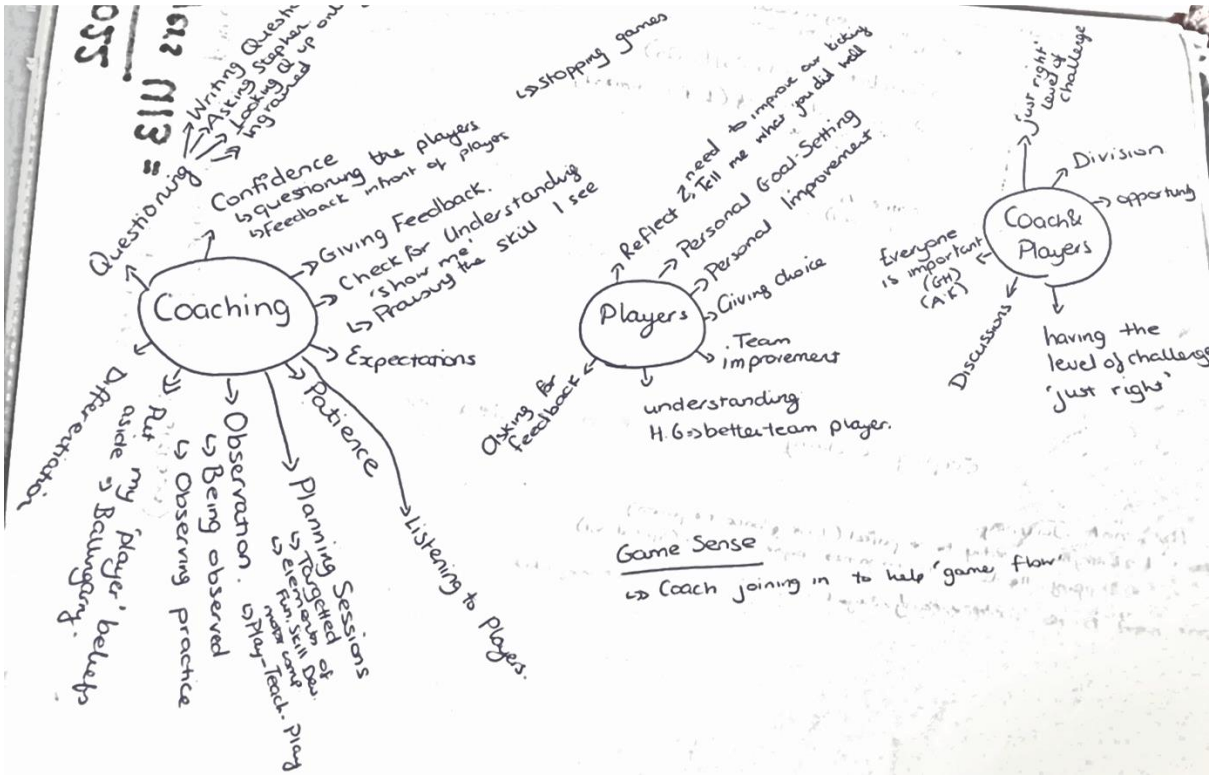

Figure 4.6: Initial Theme Development

4.7.4 Theme Development and Review

Phase four offers a vital check on the initial theme development in phase three through a process of re-engagement with all coded data extracts and the entire data set (Braun and Clarke 2021). This phase requires the researcher to assess the initial fit of the provisional candidate themes in the data and the overall data analysis's viability by returning to the full dataset (Braun and Clarke 2021). This phase involves checking that themes make sense in relation to both the coded extracts and the full dataset (Braun and Clarke 2021). Some candidate themes may be combined together, while others may be split into separate themes or discarded.

Often, initial themes do not work well and need considerable redevelopment (Braun and Clarke 2021), which was true for this research study. I felt that the candidate themes developed in

Phase Three were not coherent or comprehensive enough to represent the data of this research accurately (Figure 4.7).

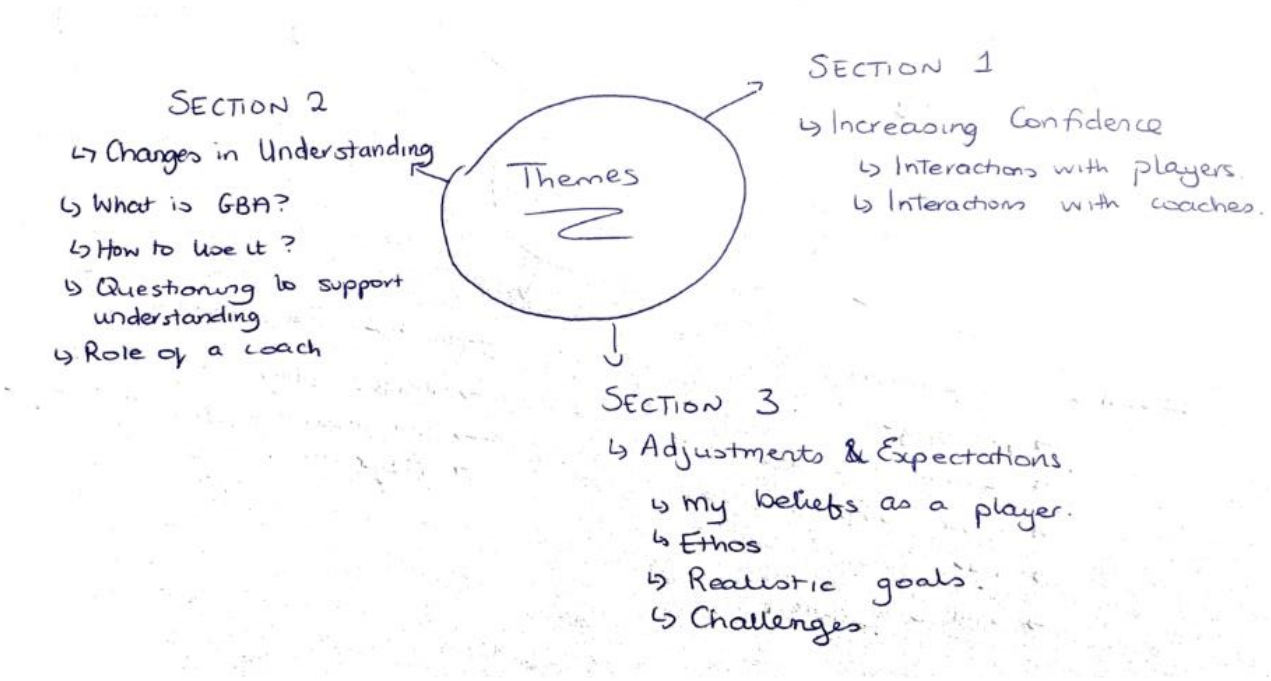

Figure 4.7: Initial Candidate Themes

Once I reviewed the themes and felt the set of themes represented the coded data extracts well and each candidate theme offered something distinctive (Figure 4.8), I went back to the entire dataset to review.

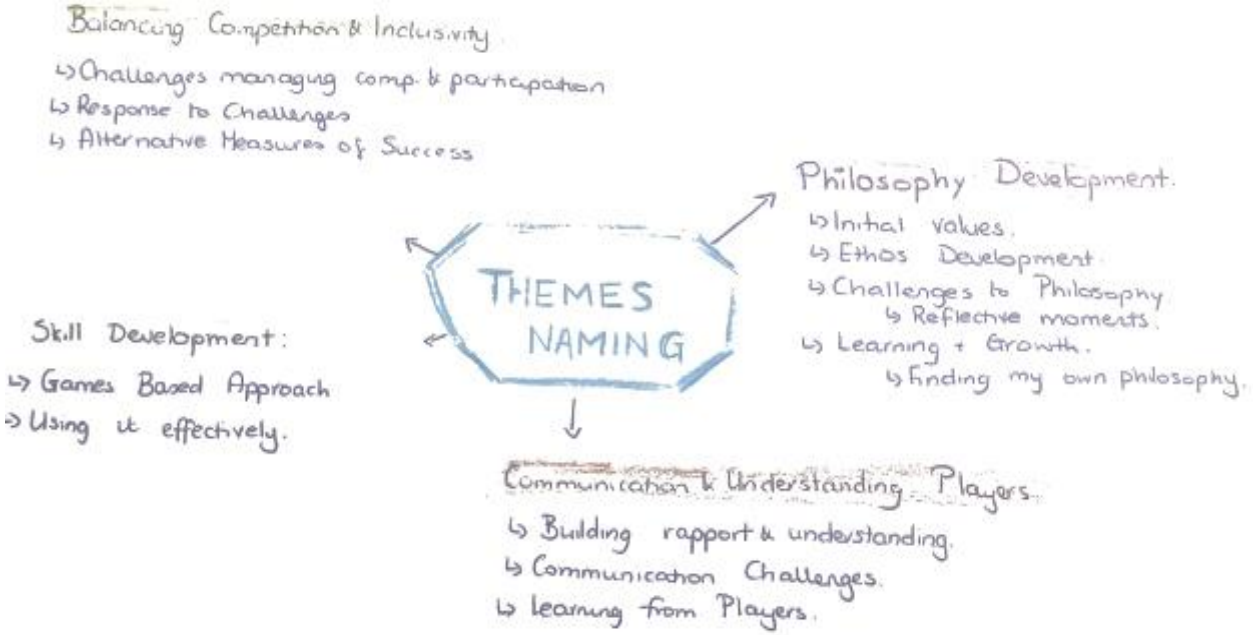

Figure 4.8: Candidate Themes

The data generated by the researcher and the players were reviewed separately to ensure the themes were reflected in all the data gathered in this research. This phase involved reading through the coded data from each theme generated in phase three and assessing whether they created a coherent pattern (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Then, all the data gathered in the research was reread to ensure that the themes already generated accurately reflected the entire data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

4.7.5 Theme Refining, Defining and Naming

During this phase, the researcher ensures that each theme is clearly demarcated and is built around a strong concept (Braun and Clarke 2021). Key activities in this phase include writing a brief synopsis of each theme and deciding on a concise and informative name for each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Theme definition is "effectively an abstract for your theme" (Braun and Clarke 2021) that clarifies and illustrates what each theme is about. Another important aspect of this phase is naming each theme (Figure 4.9). A good theme name will be informative, concise and catchy (Braun and Clarke 2021).

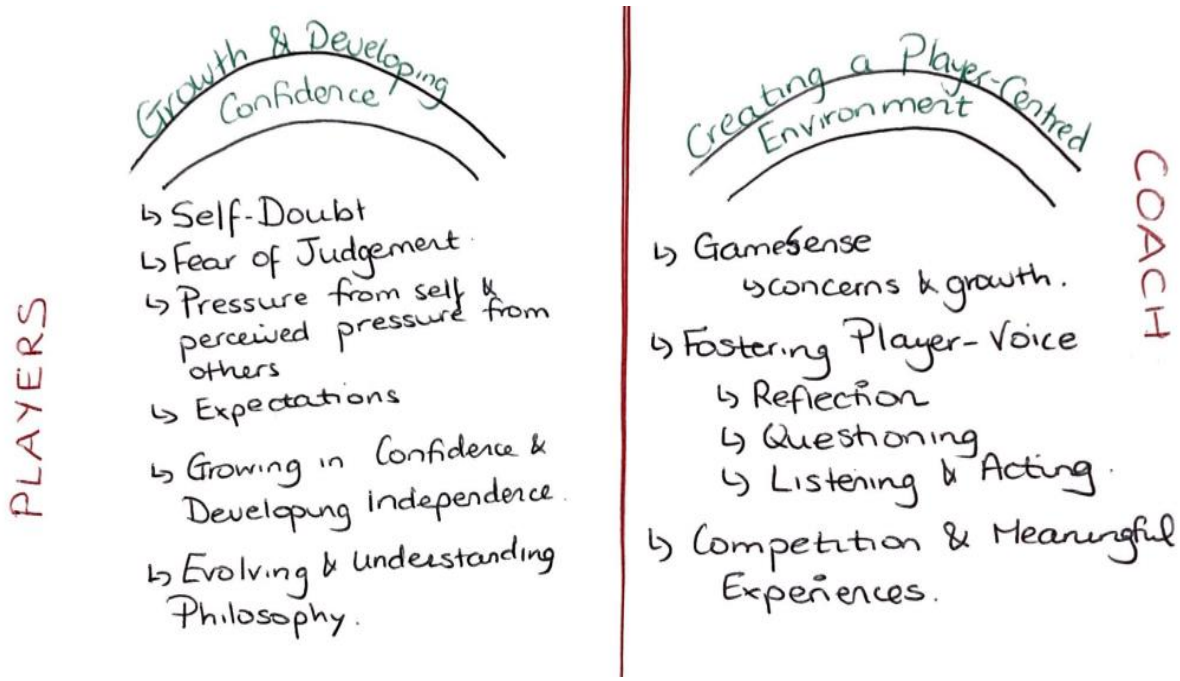

Figure 4.9: Theme Naming

4.7.6 Writing Up

Braun and Clarke (2021) describe writing as an integral phase of the analytic process of thematic analysis. Informal writing completed throughout the phases, such as familiarisation

with notes and reflexive journaling, can feed into more formal writing. The aim of this phase of data analysis is to weave together your analytic narrative to provide the reader with a coherent and persuasive story about the data set that addresses the research question (Braun and Clarke 2021). It is essential to maintain a critically reflective and self-evaluative stance throughout the entire process (Braun and Clarke 2021). The final phase of reflective thematic analysis involves telling the story of the data. The findings of this research are presented in Chapter 4.

4.8 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in research as it ensures the credibility and validity of the research being carried out. Trustworthiness is one way researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research, data analysis must be precise, consistent and exhaustive in nature. This involves recording, systemising, and disclosing analysis methods with enough detail for readers to assess credibility (Nowell *et al.* 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four criteria for trustworthiness in research which have been widely accepted and easily recognisable to demonstrate trustworthiness in this study. The criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

4.8.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Credibility is established through the use of a number of techniques, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, data collection triangulation and researcher triangulation (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Prolonged engagement is the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes, such as learning the culture and building trust (Lincoln and Guba 1985). In this study, the researcher spent over 50 hours with the participants across seven months, in addition to having developed trust and positive relations with many of the participants from their time in primary school.

Persistent observation involves the depth and quantity of the observations, with its purpose being "to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 304). In this study, I tracked my development and experiences as a novice coach across a sustained period of time and gave players the opportunity to share their opinions regularly through the data collection process.

In conducting this study, I employed the method of triangulation, which Creswell and Miller (2000) describe as a validity procedure involving the convergence of multiple and different sources of information to establish themes or categories. This approach, as highlighted by Glesne (1999), strengthens the reliability of assertions and conclusions derived from research findings. This self-study allowed for multiple sources of evidence to be used in this study. Triangulation was able to occur in this research study, as I used multiple sources of data collection, including a reflective research diary, observations, discussions, player reflections and mentor and critical friend feedback.

Peer debriefing was used in this research with the "purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, p. 308) through discussions with my supervisors, critical friend and mentor.

Member checking occurs when "data, analytic categories, interpretations and conclusions are tested with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained" (Cohen and Crabtree 2006). Guba and Lincoln (1989) asserted that member checking is the most important form of credibility as it gives importance to the subject's voice. Member checking can be completed formally and informally, during data collection and after when data is analysed (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Throughout this study, I sought clarity from my mentor when advice was given to ensure I accurately understood their feedback. Additionally, I sought clarity from players during discussions when I was unsure if I understood their opinions.

Figure 4.10: Credibility Techniques adapted in this study

4.8.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalisability of inquiry that allows others to adopt it in their own context (Nowell *et al.* 2017). Thick description is one method that tests for transferability in research. Thick description refers to a detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Holloway 1997). Throughout this research, I provided detailed descriptions of the context in which this study was completed, the participants of the study, the data collection methods employed, and the time period over which this data was collected.

4.8.3 Dependability

To achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin and Begley 2004). I achieved dependability through rigorous data collection and analysis techniques to ensure triangulation.

4.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved (Lincoln and Guba 1989). Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the researcher's interpretations and findings are clearly derived from the data, requiring the researcher to demonstrate how conclusions and interpretations have been reached (Tobin and Begley 2004). Researchers establish confirmability by maintaining reflexivity, acknowledging their own biases, and using techniques such as peer debriefing and external audits. Reflexivity is a validity procedure whereby researchers self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs and biases (Creswell and Miller 2000). Reflexivity is more than just thinking of oneself, it also includes the knowledge we produce from research and how we produce it (Luttrell 2019).

The use of multiple data collection methods such as maintaining a reflective research diary, conducting observations, analysing player reflections, and seeking feedback from mentors and critical friends contributed to ensuring confirmability in this research. Each of these methods provided diverse perspectives and insights, reducing the risk of bias and enhancing the credibility of the findings. A reflective research diary was used throughout this research study to challenge and acknowledge my own biases in the area of study. Furthermore, the use of triangulation helped validate the findings and added an additional layer of confirmability to this research.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the approach adopted in conducting this research. The research design, data collection methods and data analysis techniques were explained in this chapter. The techniques used to ensure the trustworthiness of this research were explained. The following chapter presents the findings and discussions of this research project.

Chapter 5: Personal Growth & Development

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the first of two central findings of this research study: Personal Growth and Development.

5.1.1 Chapter Five and Chapter Six Overview

This research study aimed to answer the following research question:

- What are the learning experiences of a novice coach learning to coach teenage girls aged 12-14?

These chapters will describe my learning journey and how I navigated the transition from my role as a high-performance GAA player to that of a novice coach. They also explore the significant findings of this research regarding my learning journey while managing the players' transition from non-competitive games to structured competition while ensuring an inclusive environment that fosters player development. The findings are presented in two chapters: 'Personal Growth and Development' and 'Creating a Player-Centred Environment'. Chapter five, 'Personal Growth and Development,' is divided into three sections: Overcoming Self-Doubt, Developing Confidence as a Coach and Developing a Philosophy.

Chapter six, 'Creating a Player-Centred Environment,' is also divided into three sections: Embracing the Game Sense Approach, Fostering Player Voice, and Balancing Competition and Player Participation.

Both chapters will highlight the significant impact of mentorship and reflective practices on my learning experiences as a novice coach. Figure 5.1 depicts the main themes of this study and their presentation in chapters five and six. These themes highlight how mentorship and reflective practice facilitated my growth as a coach and my understanding of creating a player-centred environment. The sub-themes under 'Personal Growth and Development' and 'Creating a Player-Centred Environment' are presented accordingly.

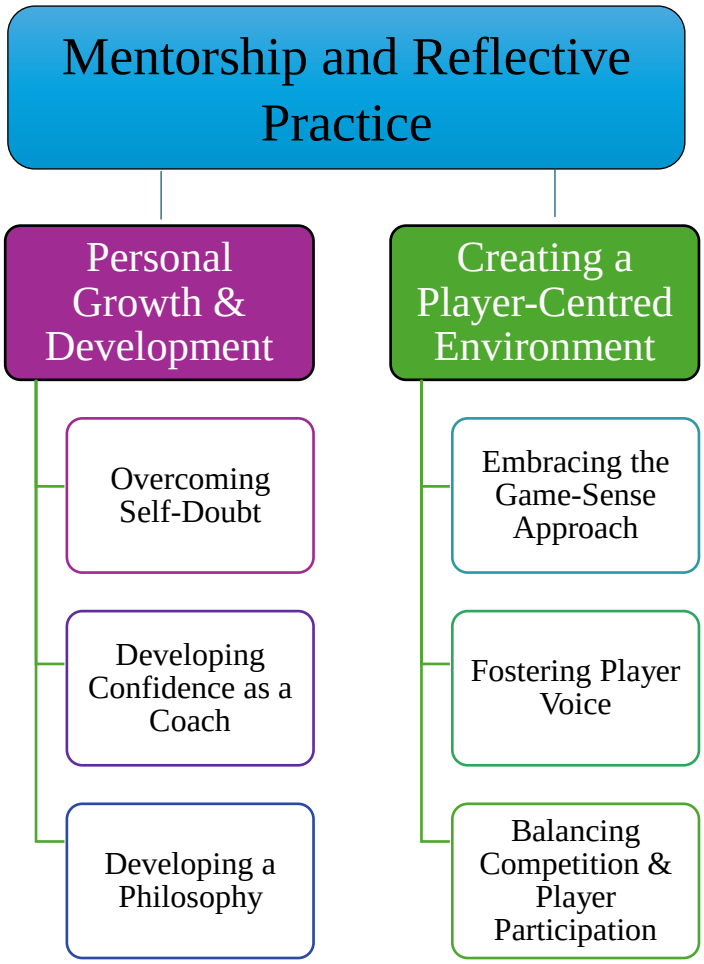

Figure 5.1 Main Themes of this Study

Some data in chapters five and six are labelled as (mentor, research diary) and (player, research diary). These labels refer to critical incidents, conversations, or observations involving me, the researcher, and either my mentor or a player. These interactions prompted reflections that I recorded in my reflective research diary. Specifically, (mentor, research diary) captures important advice from my mentor that I recorded and reflected upon in my research diary. Similarly, (player, research diary) includes quotes from players during one-on-one conversations or within small groups that provided reflective moments and learning opportunities that I recorded in my research diary. Additionally, the label (Caoimhe, research diary) refers to my own reflections and comments within my research diary as the researcher.

5.2 Personal Growth and Developing Confidence

This theme will describe the journey I undertook as a novice coach to overcome self-doubt, the weight of expectations and the fear of judgement before learning to embrace my new role as a coach and understand that with experience, a coach's confidence will develop over time. Recognising challenges and seeking support from more experienced coaches and a mentor

whose invaluable guidance enhanced my growth and development as a coach. Reflective practice and mentorship were significant contributing factors in helping me grow and understand my role as a coach.

5.2.1 Overcoming Self-Doubt

At the outset of this research, I regularly grappled with insecurities, questioning my ability to coach and meet the expectations of players, parents and fellow coaches. I desperately wanted to be an effective and competent coach, which created pressure on me, and I struggled with this for much of the season. I felt being an elite player created an external pressure to be instantly successful as a coach to reflect the success I had experienced as a player. This finding is consistent with Hindmarch's (2008) work, which argues that self-doubt is an emotional experience based on a perception of a lack of ability to perform an activity to a satisfactory level. A reflection from my research diary before commencing coaching highlights the pressure and doubts I experienced from the outset of this research:

> *There will undoubtedly be an expectation from parents, players, and the other coaches that I will be a good coach, given how I am seen as a player. They will expect me to be a coach capable of making a positive difference in their (participants') abilities and skills. I am worried that I will fall well short of their expectations and end up being a disappointment*. (Caoimhe, research diary)

Critical incidents that I reflected upon in my research diary demonstrated the pressure I felt and how self-doubt cast a shadow over the early stages of the season for me. Despite a well-intended comment by a parent to me after the first training session about how the players were fortunate to have me as their coach and how it was a great learning opportunity for them (parent, research diary) to be coached by an elite player, it reinforced the pressure I felt to be capable and competent rather than providing me with confidence as it was intended. My own self-perception and perceived lack of ability as a coach is consistent with the research of La Voi and Becker (2007) and Kilty (2006), which focused on women's experiences as coaches. Despite acknowledging that "coaching is a skill that evolves over time with experience and practice" (Caoimhe, research diary), I believed I did not have time for learning to occur before judgment would be passed on my practice. I was concerned that "I might not be any good" (Caoimhe, research diary) and that more experienced coaches would be dissatisfied with my coaching style and session delivery. Hogan (2022) stated that coaches want to become better coaches, but as Denison *et al.* (2019) point out, there is no such thing as the perfect coach;

instead, coaches should aspire to just being good enough. This is true for my practice and how I wanted to be perceived as the perfect coach.

My insecurities and feelings of inadequacy around being a coach were reinforced at the first training session of the season. The team manager divided the players into three groups based on age and friendship. Being relatively inexperienced at coaching through GBA, I followed the coaching guidelines provided to me by the coach with each group. I enjoyed the session, gaining confidence with each group I coached until it was my time to coach the final group, which was the eldest and most skilful group of players. The confidence I gained with the first two groups was gone in less than ten minutes of coaching the final group. In my research diary, I described the group as:

> *the most challenging of the night. Most of the girls were laughing and joking throughout the game and questioning time without ever getting fully involved, unlike the less able groups who engaged fully with such enthusiasm… As the coach tonight, I was unsure of myself and did not know how to tackle this challenging behaviour. Maybe I am actually bad at this* (coaching) *because the lead coach did not have any of these issues when I observed from afar. Why didn't I challenge that behaviour? It was rude, and they showed a lack of respect for me.* (Caoimhe, research diary)

This study aligns with the findings of Kelchtermans (2009) that when an individual is unable to perform a role in a particular way, they may experience a variety of strong emotional consequences in terms of their self-esteem and job satisfaction as well as continued engagement in the activity. At the time of the incident, I was self-conscious about my ability to coach and demonstrated a lack of understanding of coaching. I was aware from research (Sport Ireland 2021) that coaches can have a significantly negative impact on a player's experiences, often leading to dropout, and I did not want to be responsible. I catastrophised the outcome and therefore opted not to address it despite the actions being contrary to one of my own core values, having respect for everyone. I also used their interactions with lead coaches as a way of reinforcing my own self-doubt.

Reflecting on this incident later in the season, I acknowledged that my lack of experience significantly affected how I interpreted the situation. My experience at that point was mainly with girls aged 6 to 12 years old as I work in the local primary school, and it was my teaching experience that gave me confidence with the initial two groups. In contrast, I had extremely

limited experience interacting with girls aged 13-14. While I continued to lack confidence in myself, it did improve as I gained experience throughout the season and I learned to better understand the needs and interests of the players. I was striving throughout the journey to be a perfect coach for the players, in how I interacted with them, advice I gave and how and what skills I coached, but as the season progressed, I came to realise that Denison *et al.* (2019) points were true. They advocated for a realistic approach where coaches aim to be "good enough" rather than perfect. This involves intervening only when necessary, discerning what is essential to control, and allowing more room for difference, creativity, critical thinking, learning, independence, and imagination within daily training environments (Denison *et al.* 2019). I agreed with their points as it aligns closely with the principles of Game Sense coaching (SueSee and Pill 2018) and is a more realistic and attainable outcome for coaches to achieve. and I tried each day to be good enough for the players. I learned I sometimes needed to fake confidence to instil confidence in players that I was a good enough coach for them.

> *While at times I continue to lack confidence and belief in my own coaching ability, maybe if I had given the impression to the group that I was confident and faked it from the outset, the girls may have had more respect for me and might have been less inclined to talk over me. Also, on reflection, I would have stated my expectations for the group before ever starting the drill to ensure they knew exactly what I expected from them.* (Caoimhe, research diary)

Central to this journey was the realisation after the third session that I needed to seek support from more experienced coaches to prioritise my learning and development over personal insecurities. By embracing feedback and seeking clarification from mentors, I discovered the transformative power of mentorship in fostering growth and development. These findings reflect the work of Miller and Doherty (2018), who claimed that readiness to change is a significant factor in whether or not CoP, community sport organisations and coaches grow and develop. This finding is consistent with research by Hindmarch (2008) that found self-doubt can be overcome with the development of an empathetic and supportive relationship. Interactions and experiences with others influence can impact an individual's sense of self-perception and self-esteem (Purdy and Portrac 2016). Furthermore, Hindmarch (2008) found that women are more likely to raise their self-doubt with others sooner in their learning than men, which is consistent with this research, as I sought support after the third training session.

Overall, this finding is consistent with the research carried out on non-elite women coaches to date. Lack of confidence is a barrier for female coaches, resulting in continued low numbers of women coaches (Clarkson *et al.* 2019; Robertson 2016; Sport Ireland 2020).

5.2.2 Developing Confidence as a Coach

This section describes my learning journey from a coach heavily reliant on mentor guidance to becoming a more independent coach capable of problem-solving and becoming confident in designing sessions.

At the start of the season, I was excited to learn how to coach using the Game Sense approach. Initially, I was heavily reliant on the game guidelines that my mentor provided. I followed the structure of the activity (Figure 5.2) strictly as was recommended and did not know how to resolve issues if they arose. Initially, I demonstrated no signs of being able to adapt to the session to enhance the players' learning.

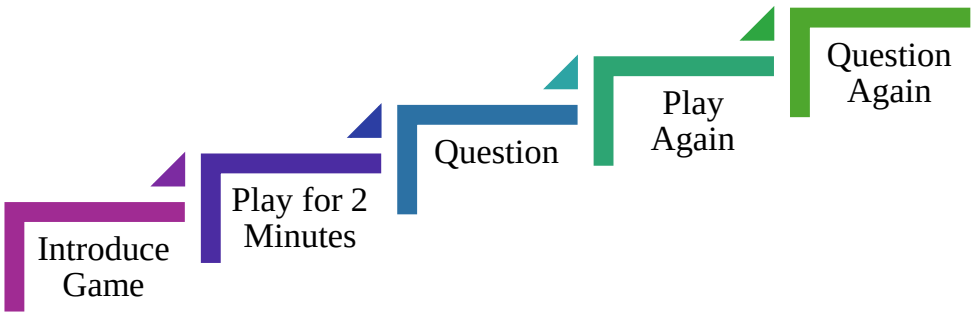

Figure 5.2 Structure of a Game Sense Game

A critical incident occurred during the third week of training, which led to seeking support from my mentor and greatly enhanced my coaching journey. I was running a station within the session, and as the session progressed, I found it more challenging to identify the intended learning outcome of the activity I was coaching. At the time, I did not see clarification from the other coaches, as I was overly concerned with how they would perceive me and did not want to show signs of vulnerability because "I didn't want them to think I couldn't do it" (Caoimhe, coach diary). Upon reflection, I realised that the fear of judgement was hindering my learning opportunities. I needed further support to improve my practice rather than hoping I would naturally improve myself as the season progressed. This realisation that I needed support from others to improve and develop as a coach is reflective of the findings by Trudel *et al.* (2013), who found opportunities to engage and interact with other coaches provide opportunities to seek to address real-life coaching issues and individual coaching needs. I

sought support from my more experienced coaches and asked if I could observe and learn from their practices throughout the year and reflect this learning in my self-study. Asking for support from my mentor was challenging, and it made me feel vulnerable and exposed my lack of ability, but I wanted to learn the skill of coaching. I recognised the fortunate position I had as a novice coach: "Our lead coach has over ten years of coaching experience at a high level and is open to helping me, and I need to take this opportunity" (Caoimhe, research diary). Gilbert *et al.* (2009) found that a peer coach is ideally placed to act as a facilitator/mentor as they gain instant credibility from others and are able to relate well to the real problems of practice, which is reflected throughout this research. I trusted the practices of my mentor, and I recognised them as reliable and credible sources of information. I explained to my mentor that I felt nervous about coaching and felt pressure to be a good coach. This honest conversation helped me build trust with them, and I felt less pressure to be assured of myself when discussing ideas. I also felt safe to ask questions without fear of judgment.

The focus of session seven was *give-and-go* handpassing and running into space. As advised by my mentor, I explained the rules and how to score and started the game. However, during the initial two-minute game, neither team scored or showed signs of understanding the use of space. My mentor was circulating between stations, and again, I worried I would be judged because the game was not running as designed. My instinct was to pause the game and explain what was wrong and how it could be improved. Unlike session three, where I continued running the station incorrectly for fear of judgment, as my mentor approached me, I asked for clarity. I knew the area they found challenging and sought clarity on whether I should stop a game to rectify the mistakes immediately. They advised against stopping it, instead playing out the remaining time and then using questioning to bring the players to the answer. I realised at that moment that they had not passed judgement. Instead, as the final moments of the game played out, they observed the play and questioned me:

> ***Mentor**: What do you see?*
>
> ***Caoimhe**: So, they understand the idea of giving a handpass but very few actually continue their run. Watch; most of them stand rather than move when they get possession. They are all just following the ball then and aren't spreading out.*
>
> ***Mentor**: Exactly, good. So now, when you are questioning, ask them 1. Why is it so difficult to score? and 2. How could they help their teammate who has the ball? Is there anything you could do to help with the flow of the game?*
>
> ***Caoimhe**: I don't know… What could I do?*

> ***Mentor**: Be a floater in the game. Play as an extra player to show them the movement you expect to see and talk them through it and it will help with the flow of the game too*. (Caoimhe and mentor, research diary)

After the session, my mentor asked if I felt playing as a floater enhanced the game and decided to "play that game again next week, and we'll see if they can improve it again and put some of what they did this evening into practice next week" (mentor, research diary). Conversations such as these were crucial in improving my understanding of coaching. I realised at that moment that it takes time for skills to become embedded in a player's practice, and it is not necessarily the coach's fault when players do not apply what they have learned immediately. Until this point, I considered myself an ineffective coach because I could not get the players to perform the skills efficiently each time. Having conversations such as these throughout the season better informed my coaching and practices, demonstrating that having a mentor is beneficial for coach learning (Taylor *et al.* 2014).

Being honest and accepting that I was hindering my own personal development as a novice coach in the early stages of the season significantly improved my coaching experience thereafter. Seeking advice from more experienced coaches and observing their practices enhanced my learning journey considerably. Subsequently, my confidence improved, and I enjoyed the process of learning to coach more. I came to understand that players' difficulties with implementing skills and concepts do not necessarily mean I am an incompetent coach, more so that concepts take time to become embedded in practice. This aligns with the findings of a study by Stodter and Cushion (2017) that social relationships, such as watching and working with other coaches, were an important influence on coaches' beliefs. Furthermore, Silva *et al.* (2020) stated that self-awareness and reflection are core competencies in the process of becoming a successful coach.

My confidence and understanding of games improved as I gained more experience using Game Sense as a coaching methodology. I began to understand the objective of the stations easier and the role I could play as a coach within the context of the games. Identifying the players' challenges and potential ways of fixing them became easier. For example:

> ***Mentor**: How did that game go?*
>
> ***Caoimhe**: "It [pocket-player] didn't work [well] with the smaller numbers. There was too much space available for the players to attack, and there wasn't the need or opportunity to recycle the ball backwards, so I changed it to playmaker [different game]*. (research and mentor, research diary)

Earlier in the season, I would not have had the ability to see what was wrong with the game and would have continued playing it as per the brief and would have been concerned that my mentor would be annoyed with me for changing the game's focus. Instead, my mentor praised me for making the change. Getting this approval from my mentor was reassuring that I was capable of using Game Sense well within sessions. There are three key characteristics of CoP: Domain, Community and Practice (Wenger 2004), all of which are found throughout my interactions with my mentor across the season. The domain identifies the topic or subject of interest that is shared by the group involved in the CoP. It inspires members to participate, guides learning and brings meaning to actions through which elements of the community are enacted through discussions, shared activities and interactions between the members of the community. In this research, as the mentee, I was inspired to learn how to apply the practices of Game Sense coaching, and through the practice of discussion and reflection with my mentor, my confidence and understanding grew.

This section described how I developed and grew in confidence using Game Sense to become a more confident coach as the season progressed. It described the pivotal role seeking support from my mentor played in this development. The findings in this research are consistent with the findings from Leeder and Cushion (2020) that mentoring is an essential tool to coaches at the start of their coaching journey, where the mentor employs a powerful model of direction, observation and active learning to empower the novice coach. Additionally, this research aligns with Corsby and Edwards (2019) who suggest that mentoring can boost a coach's competence and holistic development.

5.2.3 Developing a Philosophy

This section describes the changes and growth to my coaching philosophy informed by critical incidents, moments of reflection and an increase in my understanding of coaching and values a coach should have when coaching players at this age.

Chapter three outlined my coaching philosophy and how it was informed. Centred around inclusion, I was determined to ensure that the environments I was part of would not let winning and overly competitive environments hinder the opportunities for all players to experience meaningful participation in games. There were many moments across the season that tested my philosophy.

The first time my philosophy was challenged was during the league semi-final. With fifteen minutes remaining, we were winning 4-4 to 0-3. Our team manager asked for my opinion on

taking off two of our stronger players to ensure the game remained competitive and also to guarantee that all our players got ample game time. Initially, I disagreed with the changes, fearing it would significantly weaken our team as we were not replacing the players with players of a similar ability. I feared such a significant change would cost the team a place in the final. On reflection, I ceded because I realised leaving those players on the field was unfair to the opposition and our substitutes. Winning this match was secondary to our management team's commitment to keeping matches competitive and giving all our players opportunities to play. The substitutions were made, and we won the match. Reflecting on this incident, I was disappointed in myself that in the moment, "I became more consumed with winning and the result than staying true to our inclusive ethos" (Caoimhe, research diary). I envisaged the potential consequences of my attitude of *winning at all costs* could have on a player's interest and enjoyment of Gaelic football and their self-belief, as well as considering the parent's perspective who would have potentially spent the evening reassuring their child, similar to the experience I had with my brother previously. This critical incident reflects the previous research by Graham and Fleming (2016) who found that a coach's actions and behaviours can be different from the values that a coach professes to have. McCallister *et al.* (2000) found that some behaviours were directly contradictory to the novice coach's supposed beliefs, which is true for this study as reflected in my response to substituting stronger players in this game. The next match was the final, and my philosophy was tested again when a similar situation occurred. Learning from my experience in the last match, I encouraged the manager to "make the necessary changes, if we lose, we lose. But we'll have done the right thing by the players" (Caoimhe, research diary). The *right thing* being that we give every child the opportunity to play a meaningful part in the match, regardless of its perceived importance.

Separating the elite GAA player from the youth coach was more challenging than anticipated. Initially, I believed that the values I have as a teacher would carry seamlessly into my practices as a coach. However, I found it difficult, at times, not to think like a player during matches. The higher the stakes, the more challenging it was to remain true to my ethos, especially during knock-out matches. The findings of this study reflect the research carried out by Graham and Fleming (2016), which found that a coaching philosophy is shaped by a coach's values and beliefs derived from their personal experience and background. Additionally, learning how to enact my philosophy was important on this journey and the environment created by the management team and players supported my learning. Coté and Gilbert (2009) ascertained that it is important that a coach experiences an environment that allows them to gain a better

understanding of their own philosophy, values and approach which was the case for me throughout this research.

For example, our team was playing in the quarter-final championship match, and it was very close and competitive. Our team scored a goal with a few minutes remaining, and instinctively, I jumped and cheered loudly in celebration. Almost instantly, I regretted this behaviour and felt embarrassed because I believed it was the antithesis of what I was trying to practice. Reflecting on this behaviour, I recognised that at the moment, I was consumed once more with winning, and the goal relieved the tension I felt when I was unable to contribute directly to the outcome. I realised that it was important to recognise these unhelpful feelings and that it is important to keep emotions in check and not get overly consumed at the moment because, ultimately, these players are young, and the outcome of the match is less relevant. It was a critical moment in my coaching journey that taught me the importance of maintaining perspective, especially in high-pressure situations. Recognising that my competitive instinct was there helped me to manage my emotions more appropriately during the semi-final and final of the championship. The incident in the quarter-final made me aware of this competitive instinct. I recognised that my competitive instincts sometimes overshadowed my commitment to fostering a positive and development-focused environment for the players.

My actions prompted me to reflect on my behaviours and realign my priorities for future games. For the remaining games, I focused on the players' needs and began to think more like a coach than a player. I focused on providing encouragement to players after a score rather than celebrating like I previously did. Graham and Fleming (2014) found that effective self-reflection skills can help coaches become more aware of the discrepancies between their professed values and their actual behaviour. This study found that reflective practice was crucial for me as a novice coach to consider and review the discrepancies I had in my philosophy and how I could take steps to address these issues. This change in behaviour aligns with the work of Harvey *et al.* (2010) that in order for coaches to change their practice and behaviour they must recognise what they do, and the assumptions that underlie and inform their behaviours.

In my final reflection on coaching philosophy, I revisited the initial philosophy and the critical moments that occurred during the season. Upon reflection, I realised that my initial philosophy did not reflect my current state as a coach at the time. It was written to reflect what I believed a youth coach should believe rather than being representative of where I was on my coaching

journey, as is consistent with other novice coaches who struggle to articulate how to apply their philosophy in practice (Graham and Fleming 2014; Collins *et al.* 2011). It did not address my competitive instincts and how I intended to control them, and as a result, when high-pressure moments occurred during the season, I reverted to what I knew as a player. However, I grew and developed as a coach through critical reflection on these incidents. I could better understand the importance of creating a philosophy that is "truly reflective of me as a person" (Caoimhe, research diary). I came to realise that my philosophy should be centred around fostering positive player experiences and promoting inclusivity. My revised philosophy will be presented in the conclusion chapter.

5.2.4 Conclusion

Through the journey of navigating self-doubt and embracing the opportunities for growth, I learned that self-doubt is a natural aspect of learning to coach and can be improved as experience develops. Recognising that self-doubt was negatively impacting my experience, I sought support from experienced coaches in the form of a mentor. Using reflections to frame my thoughts, I realised self-doubt could be overcome. My experiences of self-doubt acted as a stepping stone towards personal and professional growth as a novice coach.

Chapter 6: Creating a Player-Centred Environment

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how, as a novice coach, I learned how to create a player-centred environment. The findings are organised under three subheadings: Embracing a Game Sense approach, Fostering Player Voice and Balancing Competition with Player Participation. Each theme will explore and describe how various challenges during the season informed my practice. It will be discussed in relation to the significant impact reflective practice and input from players, coaches, and my mentor had on establishing a player-centred environment.

6.2 Embracing the Game Sense Approach

This section describes my journey of embracing the Game Sense approach across the season. Initially, I was sceptical of adopting the Game Sense approach and was unsure of its benefits and effectiveness because I did not fully understand the approach, its benefits and how skills could be taught within the context of games. Over time, as my understanding of Game Sense evolved, driven by observations, mentorship, and reflective practice, the initial doubts gave way to recognition of its benefits.

6.2.1 Skill Development

My original understanding of GBA was that its main function was to "ensure players work harder at training given the small-sided nature of the games" (Caoimhe, research diary), which led to my scepticism regarding its place when teaching new skills to players. Initially, I was excited to learn how to coach using this approach, and I was content with delivering sessions designed by the lead coach.

However, my concerns regarding skill development were confirmed during two league games where our team had been well beaten. I could not see evidence within the style of play that demonstrated the girls were applying what was practiced in training. I contemplated if we had neglected to teach the skills required, such as kicking and soloing, to assist our team in competing and if a more traditional linear coaching style would be better suited to coaching the specific skills of Gaelic football, similar to what I experienced as a player. I was concerned that Game Sense approaches were not suitable for less-able players learning a skill for the first time, given the games-based nature of the games and the lack of ability to perform the skill in isolation, not to mention in a game scenario. I believed that Game Sense would "make the better players even better, and the weaker players will remain the same" because "the better players can already perform many of the skills that are practiced in the small-sided games and

can apply them within the context of a real game" (Caoimhe, research diary). Later, upon reflection, I realised that I did not fully understand the structure of Game Sense approaches in practice in the early part of this journey, leading to inaccuracies in what I believed were the advantages and disadvantages of Game Sense. Light and Harvey (2015) explained that research on GBA, such as Game Sense, identifies difficulties in coaches taking up the approach as it is essentially a radical change for many, which was reflected in this research, where I was initially sceptical of its benefits. As per the work of Collins (2012), the extent to which learning occurs is determined by a person's willingness to learn from peers and specialists. As the season progressed, I demonstrated this willingness to learn from my mentor, who is recognised as a specialist in the area of Game Sense coaching and embraced the new experience rather than relying on transferring the skills I learned from my own playing experiences (Stodter 2022; Cushion *et al.* 2010).

I wanted to believe in the Game Sense approach, as it was a practice that two of my fellow coaches and mentor used for several years. Conversations with my mentor significantly helped change the negative narrative I had created about the effectiveness of using the Game Sense approach. I realised that my doubts about its effectiveness had resulted from my misunderstanding of how games-based approaches are applied in practice. Up to the point where I sought clarity on how coaches are supposed to teach a new skill to players, I had the misconception that 'skills such as soloing and kicking could not be taught in isolation and had to be taught within the context of a game' (Caoimhe, research diary). Learner-centred approaches such as Game Sense are effective for improving game-playing ability, increasing player motivation, and providing positive affective experiences of learning (Cassidy and Kidman 2010; Light and Harvey 2015). My doubts about using GBAs to teach new skills were derived from how I learned skills and the need to practice them in isolation. Millar and Doherty (2018) claim that the readiness to change is a significant factor in the success of community sport organisations building success. I needed to be willing to change my beliefs to embrace this way of coaching, and my mentor was central to this willingness to embrace change as I was willing to learn and develop in my role as a coach (Walsh *et al.* 2011).

My mentor clarified that "of course, there are times when we need to teach a specific skill explicitly, but the idea of GBA is to relate it back to a game as soon as possible" (mentor, research diary). To demonstrate this point and help me understand, I observed my mentor introducing the skill of the solo for the first time. They demonstrated the skill using the head, hand and feet model and used terms the players could relate to, such as, "imagine your foot

being the bucket of a digger" (mentor, research diary). My mentor allowed the players to explore the skill independently for a few minutes as they circulated, checking for understanding and correcting errors in executing the skill. Finally, they brought the skill into the context of a game called *'Solo Bulldog Charge'* where players could work at their ability but were performing the skill within the context of a game. This experience offered me greater clarity on this coaching approach. It confirmed the research by Wright *et al.* (2007) that coaches learn by observing and discussing with other practitioners.

As the season progressed, these concerns were reduced, and my initial concerns resulted from a lack of understanding of coaching young players. As my reflective practice improved throughout the season, I began to think more deeply about why we were coaching specific skills over others. As per research by Gilbert and Trudel (2005), reflective learning is influenced by the stage of the coach's learning, which is true for this research as my reflective skills improved as I developed and could think more deeply about the what, why and how of coaching youth players. I asked my mentor why they had decided to emphasise skills such as handpassing and *give-and-go* rather than trying to blend everything, and their answer was enlightening. To paraphrase, they described it to me as identifying "a skill that will collectively give the team the best chance of succeeding. Gaelic football is mostly hand-passing, so if most players can hand-pass and move well, there is a better chance of success because you will always have someone who can naturally kick a score' (mentor, research diary). They also noted the need for a coach to be patient and trust that there would be an improvement over time. I struggled with this initially and often found myself frustrated with the lack of skill execution in matches, despite the skill being practiced and applied in many contexts and games at training. My mentor's advice was confirmed in the championship final when every player used the skill of hand-passing and *give-and-go* consistently throughout the game. It was another critical reflective moment for me as it demonstrated the need to be patient and trust in the long-term goal if, at times, it is not evident. Smith *et al*. (2022) describe that coaching habits and behaviours tend to originate from an individual's perception and learnings from previous experiences, which in turn can contribute to decisions made in the design of coaching practices. This was evident in my initial scepticism of applying the Game Sense approach but critical incidents such as those described in this section confirm the findings of Stodter (2022) that coaches who deliberately ask themselves about their practices and use the support of others are most likely to get the most from their learning experiences.

This research supports claims that the small-sided nature of games using the Game Sense approach increases tactical awareness and improves players' skill development (International Council For Coaching Excellence 2023). This was particularly evident in this research when players were questioned. Early in the season, players found it difficult to articulate or identify areas for improvement within the context of small-sided games. As a result, I found that as a coach, I needed to probe and scaffold the players by asking direct or leading questions to help them identify areas for improvement. As the season progressed and players became more experienced in the Game Sense approach, their problem-solving ability improved significantly. I found as the season progressed, the discussions during rest periods between the mini-games were more constructive, and players were demonstrating levels of tactical awareness in speaking with one another on how to create scores in the games. Additionally, this research supports Pill's (2021) research that while errors are frequently seen as a negative by coaches, this messiness can be advantageous as it means players' skills are being challenged, and players adapt their level of performance. For example, in an early season session, players played a mini-game that encouraged players to identify and move into space. However, in the first two minutes of play, passes went astray, players were bunching, and no team scored. I decided not to stop the game when it broke down as I felt it was providing an excellent opportunity for me to probe the players in the questioning phase of the station. The players were being challenged in a way that linear drills cannot do. The messiness allowed the players to improve their tactical awareness and create a solution to the issue they were presented with. The coach must know what skill level is acceptable and whether errors are made because of the challenge to the player's ability or if the challenge is beyond their capabilities (Farrow 2010). My own playing experience gave me confidence and helped me identify when the challenge was beyond their capabilities and I could adapt the games accordingly. This finding suggests that coaches link their playing experience to gaining confidence on the technical skills and rules of the game (Hogan *et al.* 2021). The importance of playing experience is consistent with Feltz *et al.* (2009) that playing leads to confidence in rules and strategies of the game.

6.2.2 Inclusiveness of the Game Sense Approach

This section demonstrates the Game Sense approach's significant role in creating an inclusive environment for players and how my understanding of it developed across the season. Initially, I believed Game Sense was a method of "ensuring everyone gets lots of touches of the ball in a training session" (Caoimhe, research diary). I believed on that basis, it was inclusive of everyone.

Immediately, I could identify the inclusive nature of the Game Sense approach, where small-sided games and the conditions applied to them ensured that "everyone gets possession of the ball regularly, unlike traditional games where the better players tend to dominate" (Caoimhe, research diary). Traditional skill-based approaches to teaching exclude and marginalise players who are less skilled and less confident (Light 2012) and GBA provides an alternative approach to maximise inclusivity. Furthermore, a discussion with a dominant player consolidated my belief that Game Sense was an inclusive approach. She wanted to change the structure of sessions to "play real games and not ones where we have to pass to everyone" (player, research diary). Reflecting on this critical incident in my research diary, I could understand her frustrations as she wanted to demonstrate her ability to us. Until this point in her football career, she may not have been encouraged to pass others but instead encouraged maybe to try to score on her own. In this reflection, I described the Game Sense approach as "an ideal way to limit the dominant and support the weak" (Caoimhe, research diary). The stronger players were challenged in various ways, through limiting their plays on the ball, playing against and making players of similar abilities to theirs and challenging them to try alternative hands or feet to complete a skill. Similar to my experiences in school, inclusion does not mean all players are expected to perform the same activity at the same level. Instead, coaches need to meet players where they are regarding their abilities.

As the season progressed, I could see the collective improvements of the players and my view that Game Sense limited the dominant changed. Instead, in addition to the benefits of improved tactical awareness, I found it made "the dominant players more aware of others, and they became mentors to their peers" (Caoimhe, research diary) having observed the previously mentioned player encouraging a weaker player "go again and I'll pass it to you" (player, research diary) which resulted in the player scoring for her team. This incident demonstrated a marked change in the dominant player's attitude and demonstrated the benefits of using Game Sense with young players. This peer coaching was regularly modelled by the coaches throughout the year as a way of supporting the flow of the game and demonstrating to players how to move to create a more favourable outcome. This player was applying what she had seen the coaches do, and additionally, such skills of peer coaching are often used by players to communicate with each other in games. Additionally, the consistent and regular praise of all players and the creation of an environment that promotes player talk and actions was evident in this incident. This research supports Light's (2012) suggestion that GBA promotes inclusion by its design nature and provides players with a sense of belonging. Furthermore, GBA fosters

enjoyment by encouraging the development of resilience, self-confidence and creativity through inclusivity and team learning (Light 2013).

6.3 Fostering Player Voice

In this section, I describe how effective communication and understanding of players enhanced my coaching journey, leading to the embrace of the player voice. It will describe my initial struggles in this area and how interactions with players and coaches and engaging in reflective practice led to my growth in confidence across the season.

6.3.1 Learning to Communicate Effectively

This section explains how I learned to communicate effectively with players throughout the season through reflections on critical incidents and conversations I had with players throughout the season. Reflecting on the season ahead, I recalled influential coaches from my playing career and identified key factors that positively impacted my development as a player. The key factors I identified were building rapport, motivation, kindness, respect, and fairness. This section focuses on how these values were integrated into my coaching practice across the season.

I struggled to build rapport with all the players early in the season. Being liked by players and being a good role model to them was of paramount importance to me. I recognised myself more as a role model than a coach. Additionally, I had no experience building relationships with teenage girls, as my experience at this point had been with girls aged 6-12. Initially, most of my interactions with players were with those whom I knew respected me as a player prior to this research project and reminded me in a small way of my younger self as a player (Caoimhe, research diary). These players made me feel secure in myself as a coach when I struggled with confidence and identity. The quality of these coach-player relationships can be determined and shaped by the interactions between the coach and the player (Jowett and Poczwardowski 2007), as they would often speak to me informally about sport and support me when I am playing.

Managing behaviours was an initial challenge I faced as a coach. During the first training session, many players within the older U14 group spoke to each other as I explained the activity and continued to engage in conversations with each other during the activity without fully participating in it. On reflection of the incident, I felt inferior to them and consolidated my self-doubts in my role as a coach. It was a new experience for me, as I had always felt at ease in the company of children and was self-assured when communicating with them. I was unsure

how to challenge behaviours constructively. I feared reprimanding off-task behaviours would impact the group negatively, and I was eager to start the season positively, so I ignored the behaviours. While coaching alongside another coach at the fifth session, a similar situation occurred, but unlike my decision to ignore the off-task behaviours, they challenged the players in a constructive way through the use of questioning. They posed a question to the players to rate their effort out of ten, then asked why they scored it that way and how it could be rectified. Without directly criticising the off-task behaviour, the coach facilitated the players' taking responsibility for their actions.

At a session later in the season, a similar situation occurred where the group's application was less than what was expected of them. Unlike the earlier experience, I used questions similar to what I had observed from another coach, asking players to rate their application and find a solution for it. I learned that giving ownership to the players could lead to a positive change in their attitude and application without me as a coach needing to criticise them. As the season progressed, I was less influenced by being liked by the players because I was confident that if I communicated positively and constructively with players, they would respect me. This connects to the closeness aspect of Jowett's 3+1 C Model (2007), whereby the relationship created between the players and me was one of mutual respect, trust, appreciation and liking. An important learning lesson for me throughout this experience was the need for a coach to set clear expectations at the outset of a season to ensure all players know the standard expected of them.

Coaching this age group was a new experience for me and throughout the season, I found it easier to communicate with the players as I became more aware of their interests and needs. Initially, I was focused on delivering the session I had been assigned and conversations centred around tactical and technical improvements in game. I did not spend much time discussing something that would be personally relevant in their lives, as I began to reflect on my interactions with players, I came to realise the importance of building relationships with players. Conversations centralised thereafter around school, other hobbies and interests. I found it significantly enhanced my interactions and experiences with the players, it also made it easier to address challenges and expectations with them. In line with previous research, the interactions between coaches and players start with technical and tactical aspects of play and then progress to support, advice and rapport building (Jowett and Cockerill 2003; Hogan *et al.* 2022). Through creating strong relationships with the players, I realised that coach-athlete relationships are at the heart of coaching (Jowett 2016).

6.3.2 Valuing Every Player's Contribution

Throughout my coaching journey, the importance of recognising and valuing every player's contribution to the team became increasingly apparent. During the initial games of the season, my focus gravitated towards the more influential players, whom I viewed as pivotal for the team's success. I believed offering them advice during the game and postgame would encourage them to improve and, in turn, develop the team. In the early parts of the season, these players helped me validate my practice when unsure of my role within the coaching team.

Following a discussion with a player on my way to a game, I realised that my practices were not aligned with my initial coaching philosophy. From the outset of the season, I had observed this girl as quiet and often "very reluctant to engage in conversation, and fully participate in games though very interested in football" (Caoimhe, research dairy). On this evening, as we walked into the GAA grounds together, I initiated the conversation with her, asking about "how her day had been at school and what she liked most about football" (Caoimhe, research diary). Upon reflection on this brief conversation, I recognised the importance of establishing a relationship with as many of the players as possible rather than focusing on pre-existing relationships I had with players. Commitment is an essential aspect of coach-athlete relationships (Jowett 2017), this incident with a shy player highlighted the importance for me as her coach in committing to create and maintain a close relationship with her and others despite challenges. I realised it was important to take an interest in their lives outside of Gaelic football, and questioning provided an effective way of doing this. This experience made me realise the importance for coaches in "seeing all their players, not just the players who are the most talented", as girls must feel they belong and are making a valuable contribution even if they are not the best on the team (Sport Ireland 2021).

As the season progressed, I gained the greatest satisfaction from observing the growth and development of our weaker players, which marked a change in my coaching journey and values. Before this, while I said inclusiveness of all was my philosophy, it was not reflected in my practices as a coach. As a coaching group, I felt we contributed directly to this improvement. Many of these girls had never played a football match before this season, and some had never watched it. In their first game, I was one of three coaches on the sideline, guiding the players on what to do. They were being well beaten in the game, and at half time, I explained to them that the opposition was "not being rough, but in matches, we have to fight a little more to win the ball instead of our markers" (Caoimhe, research diary). Reflecting on this game, I identified the need to "teach them the rules of Gaelic football and develop some

element of game sense" (Caoimhe, research diary). That evening, our girls scored one point late in the match when the opposition had significantly weakened themselves by reducing their numbers and substituting some of their better players. Witnessing the celebration of our players following the score:

> *provided me with the biggest learning of the evening. They jumped up and down like they had just won the championship. But it highlighted to me that for many of the girls, they weren't overly concerned with being beaten. They were more than happy to participate in the game and score a point, and that was success enough for them* (Caoimhe, research diary)

Four months later, this group of players played in a game where the circumstances were very different. Our players had improved significantly from their first game. During the game, we reduced the number of players on our team to help the opposition compete in the game. This game was the most satisfying moment of the season for me as a coach because of the collective improvement and development of this team in particular, "getting to see the players apply the skills we had practiced so much throughout the season so effectively, such as tucking the ball in a tackle, taking four steps before bouncing it when in possession as well as their passing was a very proud moment for me" (Caoimhe, research diary). A study by Rathwell *et al.* (2014) found that coaches experience significant joy and satisfaction from seeing their players improve as the improvement validates their efforts and reinforces their commitment to their coaching role.

'Valuing the Contribution of Every Player,' underscores my journey of learning, during which my focus shifted from nurturing the talented to recognising and nurturing the growth of every player. It highlights the importance of investing time in every player, ultimately contributing to the team's overall improvement and success.

6.3.3 Empowering Player Voice

'Empowering Player Voice,' captures the journey of development where I came to recognise the importance of giving players a voice and the ability they have to make informed decisions. Through post-game reflections and group discussions, players were empowered to share their opinions and insights to enhance their experiences across the season.

Before commencing this study, I believed that players in this age group would rely heavily on coaches for advice on how to play games effectively. However, as the players began to understand how and what to reflect upon using the Game Sense approach, it became an

empowering experience for all. Initially, players were reluctant to respond to questions for fear of being incorrect or not knowing how to improve their play. This finding is consistent with the findings of research by Light and Harvey (2015) that as players begin to learn how to learn, they become more willing to engage in purposeful social interaction. They rely less on the coach and take more responsibility for their own learning. Furthermore, I learned that as a coach, it is vital to create a supportive environment where players feel secure enough to speak up, take risks and be creative (Light and Harvey 2015). For example, during the question and answer phase of training, rather than disagreeing with a player's point, I would ask them to provide clarity, praise their contribution and then pose an additional question to enhance their understanding. Additionally, praise was a skill I often used to encourage players to take risks, especially players who were more shy or less able than others, as a way of acknowledging their effort and ensuring they knew I recognised their improvement. Less experienced players made many valuable contributions when encouraged by the coach (Light and Harvey 2015), and I discovered the importance of encouraging and questioning everyone, as it is not uncommon for more confident and experienced players to dominate discussions early on (Light and Harvey 2015).

Player voice plays an important role in the GBAs as players construct and make sense of the game they are playing. As a coach, I learned the importance of checking for understanding throughout the sessions. This became apparent to me after five sessions when the players were using target vocabulary, such as *give-and-go* and *using space* during the questioning, but it was not reflected in practice during the games. Upon reflection, in my research diary, I identified the importance of checking for understanding by using probing questions and clarifying what specific actions would look like in a game. This was necessary because the players had recognised the vocabulary being used by the coaches throughout the sessions and were able to provide the expected answers rather than enacting the principles in practice. This incident highlighted the importance of coaches checking for understanding beyond hearing the desired answer. Light *et al.* (2014) found that dialogue, reflection and purposeful social interaction play a central role in facilitating learning and promotes deep understanding when using the Game Sense approach.

Player feedback provided many valuable lessons that informed our collective practice as coaches throughout the season. Their contributions enhanced my learning experience enormously. After a game, one player advised us as a management team to "only have one voice on the sideline because it gets a bit confusing" (player, post-match reflection). Following

this feedback from the player, I shared it with the other coaches as I believed it was a valuable contribution. Collectively, we agreed that we were not sharing consistent messages of encouragement and agreed to reduce the feedback being delivered during games. This incident demonstrates the valuable contribution player feedback can provide to coaches regarding the importance of unified coaching and highlights the need for clarity and consistency in guidance during games. By valuing player opinions and implementing their suggestions, the coaching team fostered a collaborative environment where player input was valued and acted upon. This example of player voice is an empowering example of how coaches can acknowledge the child's voice and, as a result, support the development of the learner's autonomy and provide opportunities to talk about personally relevant learning (Coulter *et al.* 2021) where they feel respected.

An important aspect of player voice that emerged from player reflection was the importance of feeling heard by the coaches. The feedback from players often included recommendations for training, which I shared with the other coaches, for us to enact some of the advice received. Players asked if they could play *"real games"* from time to time in training to meet everyone on the team, rather than only training with the assigned group. Listening to their request, we incorporated "real games" into practice every so often, and we explained to them how we appreciated their input and would incorporate it more into sessions, as well as explaining why small-sided games help develop skills and better decision-making in games. Similarly, as the season progressed, the players felt more comfortable making requests directly to us, one time requesting to play music during sessions, and this became part of the practice as the season went by. Furrer and Skinner (2014) found that "when teachers treat students with respect, seek out and listen to and value their opinions, students are more willing to commit themselves to the hard work entailed in learning" (p.106), which is what was further proved through the promotion of player voice throughout this study. This viewpoint is supported by the research of Reeve and Jang (2006) and Stefanou *et al.* (2004).

This player feedback encouraged me to reflect further on the advice and feedback I gave players at games and in training. I questioned how constructive the feedback I gave players was and what the intended outcome of the advice should encourage. During the next training session, I was conscious of what I was saying, and often, my praise was "excellent or well done, over and over throughout the station" (Caoimhe, research diary). As I reflected on the praise, I decided that the praise I give should "reinforce good habits or praise the skill/behaviour I want

to see more of" (Caoimhe, research diary) with the intention of bringing it to the players' attention.

During half-time breaks of games, I often refrained from addressing or commenting on aspects of play with the entire group. Instead, I engaged with players individually, offering individualised praise and encouragement. This decision stemmed from a belief that other members of the coaching team had already conveyed the important messages required for the team, and adding more input for the sake of speaking could potentially dilute the impact of advice being shared with players. Drawing from my experience as a player, I recognised the effectiveness of focused discussions led by one or two individuals in identifying areas for improvement and discussing actionable strategies. Post-match reflections from players emphasised the importance of unified coaching advice during games, with players expressing a preference for concise and consistent guidance. As one described, the least enjoyable aspect of one game was "the coaches saying different things to you during the match" (player, post-match reflection), while another identified "give us one thing to improve on" (player, post-match reflection) as the advice she wanted to share with the coaches. This feedback underscored the need for cohesion among the coaching team to ensure an effective and impactful communication approach during matches. This aligns with the findings of Abraham and Collins (2011) that too much feedback can lead to an overload of information and cause a decrease in confidence levels in players to solve problems individually.

The coaches' and players' practices developed through the use of player reflections and open dialogue during training and games. Players are capable of constructing meaningful feedback. By giving players the opportunity to share their opinions and as coaches acting on their advice and opinions, we can make players' experiences in sports more meaningful. As one player recommended in the end-of-year reflection, to "keep listening to the players" (player, end-of-year reflection). This section emphasises the transformative impact of embracing player voice, enhancing the coaching experience and promoting player autonomy, constructive feedback, and collective growth within the team.

6.4 Balancing Competition and Player Participation

This section describes my journey of learning to balance competition while promoting player participation and enjoyment within the context of Ladies' Gaelic football. As a management team, we recognised the significance of ensuring all players felt included and valued, prioritising their long-term engagement with ladies' football over immediate competitive

success. Despite shared values, implementing this approach presented many obstacles, particularly in maintaining the right level of challenge for players during games.

6.4.1 Alternative Measure of Success

This section describes the learning journey to demonstrate how I learned to use alternative methods to determine the success of the season. At the outset of the season, the management agreed to prioritise inclusion over winning competitions. Within this, we decided to ensure that any games played would be as competitive as possible for both teams, where we would weaken ourselves if required by reducing our numbers on the field or substituting our better players. Additionally, we decided to reduce the importance of winning games and competitions in order to optimise player development. Therefore, we were required to find an alternative motivator for the players.

At the start of the season, I believed that "winning some games would be important for the girls. From personal experience, winning games is often an effective way of building confidence in players and the team" (Caoimhe, research diary). However, I acknowledged that "winning should not come in the way of the development of players and winning a competition should be a by-product of implementing good practices rather than being the measure of success" (Caoimhe, research diary). I believed there should have been some place for competition and winning within our context. However, I trusted the other coaches' opinions, as they had significant coaching experience, unlike me, who was basing my opinions on my experience as a player. I acknowledged that this could have created a bias and decided instead to commit to the decision made.

After one game, I spoke with my mentor about elements of the game that disappointed me, as the players were not applying the skills we had been working on. My mentor explained how a clicker could be used to promote the execution of a desired skill. A clicker was introduced in the next game to track the number of *give-and-go* passes executed correctly, and it was instantly successful. It gave the players "an alternative focus, and the girls were motivated to hit their target. At halftime, they were not interested in the scoreline but had they reached their target of *give-and-goes"* (Caoimhe, research diary). This method was used for the remainder of the season, and as skills were introduced, players asked if they could add another target to track during games. They selected the target number to achieve, highlighting their motivation and desire to implement the skills they had been taught. Locke and Latham (2002) found that goal-setting is more effective for players when they have a say in the goals they wish to achieve,

which is evident in this research as players were motivated to create, implement and achieve the targets in each match. Additionally, it fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility within the team. I learned that players can be challenged in many different ways, and if it is presented in an exciting manner and relevant to the group's needs, it can be as motivating to players as winning and losing.

Winning was important for some players on the team, as highlighted by them regularly throughout the season in their reflections. This was an area that I felt conflicted by because I feared our lack of emphasis on winning throughout the season might hinder those players' experiences because winning was what they valued. For me, I could identify best with these players, as I sometimes saw my younger self in them, especially when one described winning a match as the most enjoyable part of a game because they are "a competitive person and I love winning" (player, post-match reflection). As a management team, we never put pressure on the team to win; we always spoke in pre-game discussions about creating measurable and attainable targets for the team to determine success, and it worked very well.

However, I sometimes worried if we were "fulfilling the needs of every child when we decide that winning is not important because it is for some of them" (Caoimhe, research diary). I was committed to our collective ethos and never discussed winning with the team. Instead, I spoke on a one-to-one basis with some of these players before games, and I acknowledged that I understood why winning was important to them and encouraged them to "go out and try to be the best player you can be for your team" (Caoimhe, research diary). Our older players understood competition, winning and losing. Winning became very important to most of the team when they played in the semi-final and final of the championship despite the lack of emphasis on winning throughout the year, highlighting their understanding of competition's role in sport. Across these two games, 23 players participated in post-match reflections, and all except three described winning as important to them.

As the season concluded, a comment from a player in the end-of-year survey gave me greater clarity on the role of competition in this age group. She was asked to recommend one thing the management did well throughout the season and should continue to implement in the future: her response was, "I liked the way the coaches didn't put pressure on us to win" (player, end-of-year survey). Upon reflecting on this response, I learned that winning and losing have their place in Ladies' football by the nature of it being a sport. However, it is the emphasis coaches place on winning at all costs that makes competition in sport a divisive issue (Ní Chróinín *et*

al. 2021), and we opted not to put unnecessary pressure on our players to win and focused more on areas where the players could control the outcomes more. Additionally, for many of the players playing on this team, this was their first experience of formalised competitive structures in the LGFA, and the GAA emphasises that as players transition from non-competitive Go Games structures at U12 to competition structures at U14, players should first *"learn to compete"* at youth level before progressing to *"competing to win"* at adult level.

Research by Sport Ireland (2019) suggests that an overly competitive environment focusing on winning can lead to player dropout, and coaches should consider alternative measures to create an environment where players feel comfortable. This research demonstrates when competition is considered with other methods, motivation and retention are improved, thus keeping girls in sport for longer.

6.4.2 Meaningful Participation

This section explains elements of Ketchmar's (2006) meaningful participation that were present throughout the season. Elements of Ketchmar's (2006) meaningful participation created an alternative to competition and supported our commitment as coaches to develop an environment that prioritised player development over success in competitions.

Challenge: Providing the players with the *just-right* level of challenge was the most challenging area for us as a coaching team to achieve consistently. While we could directly alter activities in training sessions to challenge the various groups according to their ability, we did not have the same control over this during matches. Coaches play a significant role in determining if an activity is beyond their players' current ability levels (Farrow 2010) and must know how to alter an activity to ensure players can access it at their own level. Throughout the season, a range of strategies were implemented to achieve the just-right level of challenge at training, including groupings, the role of a coach as a floater or anchor within games to support players and various scoring systems and conditions of the games. This research aligns with Fletcher *et al.* (2021), who describe the use of alternative scoring systems that reward other aspects of participation beyond winning and encourage a focus on achieving personal bests as a way of having a balanced approach to the competition. Similar to what was implemented in this study, Vasily (2021) recommends that coaches offer different forms of interaction to adjust the level of challenge and give players autonomy, for example, giving players opportunities to perform skills individually, with a partner or within a group. Additionally, players were regularly asked if they felt the game was too easy, too difficult or

just-right, and were given the opportunity to create solutions if it was too easy or too difficult. By ensuring training sessions were appropriately challenging to the players, players developed a range of skills in an environment where they felt safe to make mistakes. Research by Vasily (2021), who prioritised the feature of *'challenge'* while teaching his students cycling, a student with no experience before the unit developed much more confidence in themselves, as evidenced by their improved ability and willingness to push themselves to get better. Similarly, in this research, a significant number of players had no experience playing football prior to this season, and through careful consideration when designing sessions, all these players developed a range of skills that enabled them to participate fully initially in small-sided games at training before progressing into competitive games against other teams.

While we occasionally weakened ourselves if we were overly dominant during a game, this principle is not always reciprocated by other teams. It presented a challenge for us as coaches to overcome, as an overly challenging environment leads to decreased motivation for players (Ketchmar 2006). In the season's second match, our team faced a significant deficit at halftime, struggling to maintain possession against the dominant opposition. During halftime, our team manager asked the opposing team manager if they would weaken themselves in some way to allow our players to practice their skills and not be well beaten. However, the opposing manager declined, citing past experiences and the belief that such defeats were part of the sports experience and necessary for our players to learn from. This refusal was deeply frustrating and disappointing for us as coaches, highlighting a narrow-minded perspective on youth competition some coaches can have and its potential long-term impact on player development. Reflecting on the incident, I described the actions of the coach being "the antithesis of what I believe underage competition is about. It was wrong" (Caoimhe, research diary). This incident taught me that as a coach, I will not always have control over situations and the importance of communicating with players afterwards to instil belief in them, praising their efforts, resilience, and specific skills even in defeat. One player described the game's highlight as how we praised her efforts despite losing, "I like that the coaches told me I did well today and that they were proud of us even though we lost" (player, post-match reflection). Despite this setback, the structures of the competitions eventually grouped teams of similar abilities, leading to more balanced and enjoyable games. In the county final, facing a team of similar skill level to us, one player highlighted the enjoyment derived from the appropriate level of challenge, reaffirming the value of such experiences in youth sports, saying she "just loved the challenge

of it" (player, post-match reflection). This comment highlights that motivation and interest are increased when activities are at a suitable level of challenge for players (Ketchmar 2006).

Social Interaction: As teachers, we understood the importance of building positive relationships with children in school, and it was as important to us to develop positive relationships with the players, too. Azzarito and Ennis (2003) found that teachers should aim to foster a strong developed sense of community within the classroom and carefully consider all relationships in that learning environment (student-student and student-teacher), this is applicable also within a sporting environment. At the start of the season, I found it difficult to build relationships with all players. To help overcome this challenge, I decided to greet players as they arrived at training to support the development of positive coach-player relationships (Jowett 2007). As I became more confident and got to know players better, I sometimes joined in warm-up activities, passing the football around while discussing various things. As the season progressed, I began to understand that each coach had their own unique way of communicating with players. I found fist-pumping and high-fives were most natural for me, and offering praise for their effort, while my mentor would often cheer loudly and use humour to build relationships with players. All the different communication methods helped create a positive and welcoming environment for the players. As the year progressed, I knew I wanted to be a coach who offered positive, constructive, and meaningful feedback to players because I believed in the value of praise (Caoimhe, research diary). There were players of all abilities playing on our team. I applied a behavioural technique that I sometimes use in school called *'catch them being good'* to praise an attempt or successful execution of a skill to motivate them and build confidence in themselves. Praise and coach approval are more important to some players. One player described that the most enjoyable part of participating in a game was liking, "when I came off, my coaches told me I played well" (player, post-match reflection). Strong social interactions between coaches and players enhance the playing experiences of players and these interactions foster a supportive environment, that can increase motivation and enjoyment for players (Smith *et al.* 2007; Jowett and Cockerill 2003).

Meeting and being with their friends are an essential part of team sport. In an end-of-year survey in which 36 players participated, 28 listed meeting their friends and "getting to play with my friends each week" (player, end-of-season survey) as the most enjoyable part of playing football this season. Balancing the time players must connect with their peers while attempting to develop and teach new game concepts was a challenge for me as a novice coach. When discussing a training session with the other management team members, I remarked that

"the girls just love talking" (Caoimhe, research diary). I suggested encouraging the players to come a few minutes early to training and to give them the first five minutes of each training session to catch up with their peers rather than us starting the session immediately and the players wanting to catch up with friends and potentially interrupting the training session for longer. I found this a very successful way of giving the players a balance. Research in an Irish context (Women in Sport 2019) identified that one of the five anchors that can make sport more meaningful for teenage girls is having a support network that focuses on friends. Additionally, Michie *et al.* (2011) found that friendships are one of the main reasons teenage girls remain in sport. We decided to group our players by age and apply mixed ability grouping to ensure players got to be with their friends throughout a session. This decision allowed the players to play with and learn from their peers while also communicating with them as they rotated between groups.

Fun: We were committed to creating a fun environment for the players to coexist alongside the competition throughout the season. At the end of each training session, we played a cooperative game, which helped instil a sense of fun and play in the group. Often, coaches joined in, and we chose various ways of deciding the winners of the race rather than who completed it the quickest. We rewarded teamwork, the best effort, and the funniest incident to create laughter and fun for the group.

At the training session before the final, one player asked if they could bring a speaker to training to play music, as the players wanted to create a dance together in small groups. Giving the players autonomy to make decisions assisted in making their experience of football fun and made it more meaningful and personal for them. Reflecting on that training session, "It is so far removed from my own training environment. We play music in the dressing room before matches and training sessions, but to create a dance instead of practicing for fifteen minutes is a first. This reminded me of the differences between elite and youth sports environments and the importance of giving the players a voice" (Caoimhe, research diary). Trojanovic (2021) explained that an activity cannot be fun without the social interaction being positive and this is what we strived for throughout the season as a coaching team.

Away from training, we aimed to make the experience of being part of this group fun and enjoyable for players. The players went on a day trip, had ice cream after games and celebrated our victories by parading around the local community. All these experiences helped create a fun and enjoyable environment for the players to be part of. This is reflected in the responses

in the end-of-year survey that described the year as fun and how the “comradery amongst the team was my highlight of the year” (player, end-of-year survey). As per research by Ketchmar (2006) and Hopple (2018), fun alone is too low an aim, but it can result in new or existing relationships, motivation, increased effort and learning, which is true for this research as fun was the vehicle used to enhance the players' experiences and motivation to remain in team sport.

Providing opportunities for our players to have fun while playing Ladies’ Gaelic Football helped the children see the value of playing a team sport. It demonstrated that team sports can effectively make friends, meet with friends, have fun, and develop skills.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter described my journey in learning to create a player-centred environment. The findings demonstrated my learning and growth in confidence in using the Game Sense approach to facilitate player growth and critical thinking. Player voice proved a valuable source of learning for me throughout my coaching journey. It demonstrated the empowering method player voice can have in creating critical thinkers and improving the learning environment for all. Balancing competition with other elements of participation proved crucial, along with providing alternative measures of success to motivate players differently and more meaningfully.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides conclusions from the main findings of this research study and outlines the limitations, recommendations, and implications.

7.2 Summary of Findings and Contribution

This study highlights the significance of overcoming self-doubt and developing confidence among novice coaches through mentorship, reflection, and experience. As per research by Mallet *et al.* (2014) and Harmon (2022), coaches can often feel some sense of isolation in their learning and through interaction with their peers and fellow coaches within the club, coaches' self-confidence improves. It highlights the role of trusting relationships with mentors in fostering growth and competence in coaching. Having a mentor is beneficial for coach learning (Taylor *et al.* 2014). Aligned with Bertram *et al.* (2017), this study found that a peer-coach facilitator has the ability to obtain instant *'buy-in'* from coaches and assist with making coaches feel more comfortable and willing to share their experiences. Furthermore, it discusses how coaches' philosophies evolve over time, emphasising the importance of aligning personal values with coaching practices to create a supportive learning environment for players.

Implementing the Game Sense approach emerged as pivotal in fostering a player-centred environment that enhanced skill development and decision-making among all players. This approach supports inclusivity by adapting games to individual player abilities, thereby promoting learning and growth at the level. Additionally, fostering player voice through reflective practice and inclusive decision-making empowered players, contributing positively to their experience. These findings build on the existing literature by demonstrating how the Game Sense approach and player voice integration specifically benefit youth players in the LGFA context, adding practical insights on how these strategies can improve retention and engagement in sport (Light 2013; Kidman 2001). This research study bridges the gap between theory and practice, providing valuable guidance for coaches aiming to create more supportive and effective coaching environments

This study revealed the complexities surrounding competition in youth sports and advocates for a multifaceted approach that prioritises inclusion, participation, and enjoyment alongside competitive success. It suggests alternative measures of success beyond winning and losing,

focusing instead on skill development and personal growth. By de-emphasising the competitive aspect of sport, coaches created an environment where all players, regardless of their ability, can thrive and develop. The findings of this study add to the existing literature of Fraser-Thomas *et al.* (2005) and Côté *et al.* (2009) by providing practical strategies for coaches to balance competition with holistic player development, reinforcing the importance of a supportive environment for all players. This study contributes new insights by highlighting the practical implementation of inclusive practices, demonstrating how coaches can effectively foster positive experiences in youth sport.

7.3 Limitations

This research sought to improve the practices of one novice coach by engaging in a self-study of my current practices. Therefore, the learning experiences I encountered on this journey may not reflect the learning journey of other novice coaches but may be used to inform their practice and enhance their learning experience.

The findings of this study suggest the important role of mentorship in developing a novice coach. However, the experiences of a mentor-mentee are dependent on a number of significant factors, including trust and honesty. Access to a suitable and experienced mentor was available to me throughout my journey, which may not be the case for all novice coaches. The quality and effectiveness of mentorship can vary significantly, impacting the experiences and growth of novice coaches differently.

While I was an inexperienced coach, my background in teaching and playing experiences helped me significantly and complimented each other well. Aligned with Allen and Reid (2019), playing experience gives coaches confidence in the technical aspects of the game. I had the content and skill knowledge from my playing experience and inclusive methodologies from my teaching experience. Novice coaches without similar backgrounds may face different challenges.

As this study was carried out over a single season, it is difficult to assess the long-term impact of the coaching practices and the player-centred approaches on both the coaches' and players' development.

The findings of this research reflect one case study conducted in a singular context with a specific team, age group, location and group of coaches. As such, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences and perspectives presented in this research study may not be

universally applicable to all coaching contexts. Each coaching environment's unique dynamics and individual characteristics may result in varied experiences and outcomes. Therefore, while the insights from this study contribute to overall research, the findings should be interpreted within the context in which this study took place and may not represent the experiences of the broader coaching community. Future research should aim to explore a wider range of contexts to enhance the generalisation of findings in coaching.

7.4 Recommendations and Implications

This research adds to the dearth of research on novice coaching and how coaches learn to coach. Little is known about the journey from playing to volunteer coach developing, within a community sports club (Hogan 2022). This research explored the experiences of a coach coaching female players aged 12-14. It would be advisable to explore the experiences of males transitioning from non-competitive structures to formalised competition to identify if the same conclusions can be made for males.

Additionally, researchers may choose to explore how players' experiences may change over time. It would be interesting to track players across a number of seasons to determine if and when competition becomes more significant to players. This study focused on one season, during which many players were experiencing competitive matches for the first time. It would be interesting to track their progress for an additional year to track their development.

Findings indicate the value of novice coaches engaging in self-study research. Reflective practice and tracking my development as a novice coach helped me ascertain the type of coach I want to become to provide the most meaningful experiences for the players. This research aligned with the findings of Hogan *et al.* (2022) that coaches value the importance of reflecting on their own practice and the practice of others to learn from complex coaching issues in real-life situations. Self-study is an area I can now adapt to other areas of my life, such as my role as a teacher and a player. It is important for coaches and those engaging in self-study to be open to change; it will result in better experiences for both you and your players.

This research describes how one management team introduced competition to girls aged 12-14 while attempting to ensure the environment for all players promoted inclusivity and player development. Providing players with opportunities to share their opinions and recommendations with coaches was empowering and helped us as coaches co-construct an environment that was relevant and meaningful to the players. Coaches may follow similar steps to create such an environment for their players.

For novice coaches, I recommend finding a mentor coach to support you on your learning journey. Initially, I was reluctant to seek support as I saw it as a sign of weakness, but it was transformative to my understanding and practices as a coach. My mentor greatly enhanced my experience and offered support and advice throughout my research journey. They were both a friend and critic who wanted me to develop as much as I wanted to develop. It is important to have a strong relationship that is built on honesty and trust to ensure that the advice is supportive, critical and constructive.

I recommend that the National Governing Bodies (GAA, LGFA and camogie) provide greater advice and clarity on playing time for players aged 12-14 and define competitiveness more clearly. The lack of clarity on dividing players into teams can lead to undue stress on coaches and clubs who are unsure if ability-based groups, mixed-ability groups or age-based abilities are best for their players. Players need to experience a level of challenge that is *just right* for their ability to succeed and have a meaningful experience in sport. Currently, there are no provisions for times when this is not the case, and advice should be provided to ensure the playing experiences are meaningful and relevant to players' needs and interests.

7.5 Final Reflections on my Coaching Philosophy

Undertaking this self-study was a transformative journey, rich with personal growth and invaluable lessons. The guidance and mentorship of my fellow coaches and the players we coached were instrumental in this process.

The pillars that underpin my coaching philosophy, as outlined in chapter three, remained constant throughout this research study. The environment I was immersed in allowed me to better understand my philosophy, values, and approach (Côté and Gilbert 2009). There were critical incidents throughout the year that, despite my best intentions, I was not always true to my personally acclaimed philosophy. It demonstrates the complex and dynamic nature of coaching (Cushion 2007), especially with young female teenagers. I trust that the four pillars act as a consistent and reliable framework, supporting my growth as a coach in contexts beyond this experience.

- *Balancing Skill Development and Enjoyment:*

  Throughout the season, I came to realise that this is an important pillar in my coaching philosophy, as both skill development and enjoyment complement each other. In my initial description of this pillar, I described my commitment to integrating enjoyment into my training. However, I learned throughout this process that enjoyment occurs as

a result of careful consideration of where the players are and making the skills being taught relevant and achievable for every player.

- *Reframing Success:*

  While I needed to remind myself of this pillar throughout the season when my goals became short-sighted towards winning, I was able to refocus and consider the long-term goals of success. By looking beyond the metric of winning and losing and reframing success to look at the overall development and success of each player, I realised that nurturing their skills and confidence was essential for their growth as individuals and players.

- *Empowering Players:*

  Focusing on empowering players throughout the season and gradually giving them increased responsibility and ownership of decisions motivated them to improve. Crucial to the success of this pillar was ensuring the players' voices were acknowledged and acted upon. I learned over the course of the season, through my engagement with my mentor, that ensuring players are appropriately challenged leads to increased self-confidence. Providing them with suitable opportunities to develop fundamental skills in LGFA can lead to players feeling empowered.

- *Nurturing Retention:*

  When I contemplated this pillar at the start of this research, I considered player retention as the cornerstone of my coaching philosophy, having observed significant dropout rates from sports in my local area and nationally. Forty-three players participated in this research study, all of whom continued playing LGFA at either the U14 or U16 levels in the year following its completion. While this research did not specifically investigate retention and dropout factors, the practices highlighted throughout the study can serve as valuable reference points for clubs and coaches working with this age group. By adapting the practices described in this study, other clubs can create positive, inclusive environments where players feel valued, respected, and listened to, potentially improving retention rates.

This pillar was the most crucial pillar in my initial coaching philosophy, as I believed it would combine the other three pillars. I viewed retention as the key metric of our success as a coaching team. If we could successfully foster a culture of enjoyment, skill development and camaraderie, we could mitigate the factors that might lead to player dropout.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) highlighted in their research that how one learns and the application of the knowledge gained is a dynamic process and that coaches will move back and forth between goals and conditions that support learning within a given cycle. Over the course of the season, it was true for me, and I struggled with doubt throughout the season, but realising this and identifying ways to acknowledge and overcome this through reflection and mentorship significantly enhanced my experiences.

I enjoyed the challenge of coaching and developing positive relationships with players. While I acknowledge that many of the players will see me as a role model who promotes staying in sport, at the end of this experience, I feel I can contribute more to players as a coach and a role model.

7.6 Conclusion

Through self-study research, the learning experiences of one novice coach balancing competition, inclusivity, and player development were investigated. The findings illustrate the importance of novice coaches overcoming self-doubt and developing confidence through mentorship and self-reflection. Furthermore, the findings emphasise the importance of developing a trusting relationship with a mentor in fostering growth, confidence, and competence. The Game Sense approach was found to be a successful approach to creating a player-centred environment that enhanced skill development and participation. Player voice enhanced the experiences of the players and provided me with many useful reference points. Finally, this research advocates for a balanced approach to competition by prioritising inclusion and personal and skill development. Taking direction from these findings may enable other novice coaches to create a coaching environment that promotes inclusivity and player development while improving their practices. By engaging in this research, I have informed my practice as a coach and will hopefully continue to grow and develop as a coach through continued reflective practice.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Fun Maps (Visek *et al.* 2015; Visek *et al.* 2020)

Appendix B: ICOACHKIDS 10 Principles (adapted from Lara-Bercia *et al.* 2022)

Appendix C: Mentor Coach Informed Consent Form

MENTOR COACH INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study title: 'Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition'

The aim of this research is to explore the role competition has in the retention of girls who are moving from U12 to U14 age levels and transitioning from non-competitive games into formal competition. The research will also explore other factors that influence dropout and retention and how as coaches, we balance competition, inclusion, and participation. The data will be gathered using online surveys with parents, interviews with coaches and feedback conversations with players. Your name will not be published in any part of the research.

• I have read and understood the mentor coach information sheet.	yes/no
• I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.	yes/no
• I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving myself, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.	yes/no
• I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.	yes/no
• I am aware that my identity will not be disclosed in any way.	yes/no
• I consent to taking part in this research study.	yes/no

_____ _____ _____

Mentor's Name (PRINTED) Mentor's signature Date

Appendix D: Mentor Coach Information Letter

PARENT/GUARDIAN PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

Dear Coach,

My name is Caoimhe Costelloe and I am completing a Masters in Physical Education at Mary Immaculate College. I am conducting a research study on the effects transitioning from non-competitive games at Under 12 to structured competition at Under 14 has on participation levels of girls in sport. I would like to invite you to participate in this research. I am interested in studying what activities encourage and maintain participation and the effects competition has on player retention at the U13/U14 age group.

I propose to gather data over a 6-month period for approximately 1 hour each week as part of a broader coaching team. The research is aimed at improving my practice as a coach and gaining a better understanding of what sustains girls' interests in sport. To collect the relevant information to help with my research, I propose to observe and discuss sessions with you, my mentor coach, to help me better understand and develop as a coach throughout the season. This data will be recorded and reflected upon in my research diary.

You have the option of not taking part in the research process or withdrawing from the process at any time. It will not affect your daughter playing football or training at any stage.

The data collected in this research will be used for academic and professional purposes only, and the identities of all participants will remain confidential. The research data collected in this research study will be stored for five years and will only be accessible only to myself and my supervisors. The research findings of this project may be used in research papers and presentations in the future.

Please sign the attached parental/guardian consent form if you would like to participate in the study.

This research project is being supervised by:
Dr Richard Bowles (Richard.Bowles@mic.ul.ie)
Prof Deirdre Ní Chróinín (Deirdre.NiChroinin@mic.ul.ie)

You can contact me by phone on 087 2989487, by email at 14138581@micstudent.mic.ul.ie or I can meet you in person at any time you are available.

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:
MIREC Administrator,
Mary Immaculate College,
South Circular Road,
Limerick
061-204515.
mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours Sincerely,

_____

Caoimhe Costelloe

Appendix E: MIREC Ethical Approval

MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
COLÁISTE MHUIRE GAN SMÁL

MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:	A22-005

1. PROJECT TITLE

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Caoimhe Costelloe
Department / Centre / Other:	AEPE
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher

3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

☐	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
✓	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair ***pro tem*** without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
☐	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
☐	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied that it meets with MIREC requirements.

The Safeguarding Statement is fully fit-for-purpose.

The application is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	24th May 2022

Appendix F: Club Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR CLUB

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

The aim of this research is to explore the role competition has in the retention of girls who are moving from U12 to U14 age levels and transitioning from non-competitive games into formal competition. The research will also explore other factors that influence dropout and retention and how as coaches, we balance competition, inclusion, and participation. The data will be gathered using online surveys with parents, interviews with coaches and feedback conversations with players. Your child's name will not be published in any part of the research.

• I have read and understood the club information sheet.	yes/no
• I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.	yes/no
• I am aware that the club's identity will not be disclosed in any way.	yes/no

I _____, Chairman of _____
consent to the participation of _____ Club in the Research Study entitled 'Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition'

SIGNED: _____ DATE: _____

Appendix G: Club Information Letter

CLUB INFORMATION LETTER

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

Dear Chairman,

My name is Caoimhe Costelloe and I am completing a Masters in Physical Education at Mary Immaculate College. The aim of my research is to explore the role competition has in the retention of girls who are moving from U12 to U14 age levels and transitioning from non-competitive games into formal competition. The research will also explore other factors that influence dropout and retention and how as coaches, we balance competition, inclusion, and participation.

I am writing to enquire if you would be willing to allow me carry out part of my research with the U14 Ladies' Gaelic football team? I propose to co-coach this team over the course of the season for 1 hour each week. The children will take part in a range of familiar activities that will draw on the fundamental skills of Gaelic football including running, soloing, kicking, handpassing, and catching. I will coach these skills through the games-based approach.

Data will be gathered using online surveys, interviews with coaches and feedback conversations with players. Children, parents and coaches have the option of not taking part in the research process or withdrawing from the research process at any time. The data collected in this research will be used for academic and professional purposes only and the identities of all participants will remain confidential. The research data collected in this research study will be stored for five years and will only be accessible only to myself and my supervisors. The research findings of this project may be used in research papers and presentations in the future.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any further questions regarding the research process and club's involvement, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can contact me by phone on 087 2989487, by email at 14138581@micstudent.mic.ul.ie or I can meet you in person at any time you are available.

This research project is being supervised by:
Dr Richard Bowles (Richard.Bowles@mic.ul.ie)
Prof Deirdre Ní Chróinín (Deirdre.NiChroinin@mic.ul.ie)

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:
MIREC Administrator,
Mary Immaculate College,
South Circular Road,
Limerick
061-204515.
mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours Sincerely,

_____

Caoimhe Costelloe

Appendix H: Parent/Guardian Information Letter

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Caoimhe Costelloe and I am completing a Masters in Physical Education at Mary Immaculate College. I am conducting a research study on the effects transitioning from non-competitive games at Under 12 to structured competition at Under 14 has on participation levels of girls in sport. As part of my masters' research and I would like to invite your daughter to participate in the research. I am interested in studying my practice as a coach and how I can encourage girls to remain in sport, while exploring the effects competition has on player retention at the U14 age group.

I propose to gather data over a 6-month period for approximately 1 hour each week as part of a coaching team. The purpose of this research is to improve my practice as a coach and gain a better understanding of what sustains a player's interest in ladies' football. To collect the relevant information to help with my research, I propose to have feedback conversations with players after some training sessions and matches. These feedback conversations will take no longer that fifteen minutes and the questions will be based on the child's experience of the match or training session and how I could do certain things different to improve their experiences and make the sessions more meaningful to them.

The data collected in this research will be used for academic and professional purposes only and the identities of all participants will remain confidential. The research data collected in this research study will be stored for five years and will only be accessible only to myself and my supervisors. The research findings of this project may be used in research papers and presentations in the future.

Please sign the attached parental/guardian of child participant consent form if you would like your daughter to participate in the study.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, or if you would like to withdraw your daughter from the study, do not hesitate in contacting me, the team manager, or the LGFA chairman.

This research project is being supervised by:
Dr Richard Bowles (Richard.Bowles@mic.ul.ie)
Prof Deirdre Ní Chróinín (Deirdre.NiChroinin@mic.ul.ie)

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:
MIREC Administrator,
Mary Immaculate College,
South Circular Road,
Limerick
061-204515.
mirec@mic.ul.ie

Yours Sincerely,

_____

Caoimhe Costelloe

Appendix I: Child Participant Information Letter

CHILD PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

Dear Player,
I am doing a project looking at what activities make ladies football enjoyable to play and how you find playing matches against other teams as part of a competition. I would love for you to take part in my study but if you don't want to take part, that is ok too. You won't get in trouble, you will still be able to play matches and go training. If you agree to take part, I would like you to:

1. Take part in training sessions and matches when you can
2. Answer questions in small groups after trainings about what you thought of the training session or how the match made you feel and how we can make trainings more enjoyable for you. Sometimes, you will write your thoughts on little post-it notes.

If, when you are taking part, you want to stop that's okay. You will still be able to go training and play the matches like normal. I will share the findings with other people who are interested in understanding girls' sport, but I won't use your name and people won't know who you are. If you have any worries about taking part, you can come talk to me or to your parents or the other coaches. You can ask me questions if you do not understand something on this page.

This research project is being supervised by:
Dr Richard Bowles (Richard.Bowles@mic.ul.ie)
Prof Deirdre Ní Chróinín (Deirdre.NiChroinin@mic.ul.ie)

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact:
MIREC Administrator,
Mary Immaculate College,
South Circular Road,
Limerick
061-204515.
mirec@mic.ul.ie

Kind regards,
Caoimhe Costelloe

Appendix J: Parent/Guardian Informed Consent Form

PARENT/GUARDIAN OF CHILD PARTICIPANTS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study title: 'Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition'

The aim of this research is to explore the role competition has in the retention of girls who are moving from U12 to U14 age levels and transitioning from non-competitive games into formal competition. The research will also explore other factors that influence dropout and retention and how as coaches, we balance competition, inclusion, and participation. The data will be gathered using online surveys with parents, interviews with coaches and feedback conversations with players. Your child's name will not be published in any part of the research.

• I have read and understood the parent/guardian of child participant information sheet.	yes/no
• I understand what the project is about, and what the results will be used for.	yes/no
• I am fully aware of all of the procedures involving my child, and of any risks and benefits associated with the study.	yes/no
• I know that my child's participation is voluntary and that he/she can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.	yes/no
• I am aware that my child's identity will not be disclosed in any way.	yes/no
• I consent to my child taking part in this research study.	yes/no

_____

Child's name (PRINTED)

_____ _____ _____

Parent/Guardian's Name (PRINTED) Parent/ Guardian's signature Date

Appendix K: Child Participant Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR PLAYER PARTICIPANTS

Competition: The Motivator or The Deterrent? - A Self-Study into the practice of one coach and girls aged 12-14 transitioning from non-competitive games to structured competition

My name is _____. I know that I am going to participate in ladies football sessions that look at what makes playing football enjoyable.

I know that during the research I will be:

1. Taking part in ladies football matches and training.

2. Answering questions about what I thought and how I felt during matches and training sessions

3. Sometimes I will write my thoughts on post-it notes at the end some matches and training sessions

My parents/guardian have talked to me about being part of the research study and I know that:

- I don't have to do the activity if I don't want to.
- My name will not be used in the research.
- If I feel like stopping that's okay. I won't get in trouble, and I don't have to say why I feel like stopping.
- This isn't a test or an exam and by doing the activity I am just helping the people from Mary Immaculate College.

If I have any questions or concerns about the project, or if I would like to withdraw from the project, I can tell Caoimhe, the team manager, my parents or the LGFA chairman.

SIGNED: _____ DATE: _____

Appendix L: Research Diary Template

Entry: _____ **Date:** _____

Context:
Critical Incident(s):
Reflection:

Appendix M: Prompt Sheet

- **Awareness of Biases:**
    - What biases or assumptions might I hold about this topic, situation, or individual?
    - How might my background, experiences, or beliefs influence my perspective?
- **Examining Perspectives:**
    - What alternative viewpoints or perspectives exist on this issue?
    - How might others with different backgrounds or experiences perceive this situation?
- **Challenge and Critique:**
    - What arguments or evidence might challenge my existing beliefs or biases?
    - Am I willing to entertain perspectives that contradict my own?
- **Reflective Practice:**
    - How do my biases impact my decision-making or interactions with others?
    - What steps can I take to mitigate the influence of biases in my thoughts and actions?
- **Feedback and Dialogue:**
    - Am I open to receiving feedback from others?
    - How can I engage in constructive dialogue with peers or mentors to gain new insights?

Appendix N: Children's Questionnaire

1. Was winning tonight's game important to you before we started the game?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

2. Did you enjoy playing tonight's game?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

3. What did you enjoy the most about tonight's game?

Enter your answer

4. What was the least enjoyable thing about tonight's game?

Enter your answer

5. Is there anything your coaches could do to make the games more enjoyable for you?

Enter your answer

6. Is there anything you think we could improve on as a team for the next match?

Enter your answer

7. Can you tell me one thing you did well in tonight's game?

Enter your answer

8. Is there anything you would like to improve on for the next game that your coaches might be able to help you with?

Enter your answer