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# Developing athletes into cooperative learners: the potential in viewing coaches as educators and coaching as teaching

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## ABSTRACT

Talent development environments are usually group-based, meaning athletes comprise each other's learning context. Consequently, athletes' ability to learn with and from each other is essential. This implies that there is a key role for coaches to play in cultivating reciprocal, cooperative athletes and creating talent environments in which participants can 'learn to learn'. The aim of this study was to create knowledge on day-to-day coaching conduct that supports the development of athletes' reciprocal abilities. Observations of 75 h of football (soccer) lessons within the Swedish Football Association's school sports programme – a cornerstone of the FA's talent development system, located in upper secondary schools – were carried out over the course of three school semesters, and included in-depth interviews with the teacher-coaches. Data were analysed using the five key teaching pillars within a cooperative learning approach: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills and group processing. Findings show how teacher-coaches engage in activities that focus on *organization* of lessons and structuring of group work to create situations where individuals are motivated to learn, but also motivated to support other group members' learning. Thereby, teacher-coaches place more emphasis on positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction. In contrast, findings also show how teacher-coaches to a lesser extent perform coaching conduct associated with lesson *content* that has the potential to develop the skills and abilities required to participate in and benefit from group work – interpersonal skills, and group processing. This means that while teacher-coaches seem well-equipped to create learning environments that support reciprocal learning, they may benefit from challenging the role of the coach as an expert and tackle the preconceptions around cooperative behaviours that athletes bring from club football contexts. Taken together, these findings point to the need for a better understanding of overlapping learning sites within talent systems.

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## Introduction

Talent development environments are usually group-based, meaning that athletes comprise each other's learning context. Consequently, athletes' ability to learn together is crucial (Bjørndal &

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Rongland, 2018; Cranmer, 2018; Ryom et al., 2020; Storm et al., 2020). Indeed, this ability to learn with and from others has proven important for the learning of specific sports skills (Bjørke & Moen, 2020; Bores-García et al., 2021), as well as for development of the social skills, self-awareness and coachability needed to develop into an elite athlete (Storm et al., 2020).

From Physical Education (PE) research, we know that the PE teacher has a fundamental role in creating socially inclusive learning environments that stimulate development of subject knowledge via cooperative practices (e.g. Bores-García et al., 2021; Wilkinson & Penney, 2022). However, whereas PE research and practice operate with the basic assumption that the teacher is an educator, this is far from evident in talent development research and practice. In the context of youth sport, the coach has been conceptualised as omnipotent, dictating of group climate (cf. Cushion & Jones, 2006; Storm & Svendsen, 2023) and the source from which knowledge is distributed rather than collaboratively constructed between and among instructors and athletes (cf. Cassidy et al., 2015; Cushion et al., 2012). The type of knowledge distributed has furthermore often been understood as technical and sport-skills directed (Stone et al., 2021), rather than focused on generic learning abilities. Given the established importance of athletes' reciprocal abilities in particular, the lack of understanding regarding how coaches may support the development of such abilities is especially concerning.

Indeed, this focus is validated by the few studies that have paid attention to athletes as learners and learning as a social process, and which position the interrelation between participants and context as a key determinant for learning outcomes (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2016; Kirk & Kinchin, 2003; Renström & Stenling, 2019). The importance of this perspective is furthermore confirmed by research demonstrating that successful talent environments have a supportive group climate that encourages athletes to share learning experiences and participate in decision making (Bjørndal et al., 2017; Ryom et al., 2020). Studies also show that coaches acknowledge being coachable and being able to function within a team as key success factors in the development of young athletes (Cranmer, 2018; McCleery et al., 2022). Also, athletes acknowledge peers' ability to support learning through cooperative behaviours (Renström & Stenling, 2019). Collectively, this body of work points to the importance of fostering athletes' reciprocal and cooperative qualities to increase their potential to benefit from the learning processes that take place in talent development contexts. Importantly, this research also suggests that the role of a coach extends beyond providing instruction for the development of motor skills – it also includes organising a learning environment that supports the development of athletes' reciprocal and cooperative qualities (e.g. Cushion, 2011; Ryom et al., 2020). Our effort here is therefore situated in the broader and collective endeavour (cf. Cassidy et al., 2015; Cushion, 2011; Nelson et al., 2014) aimed at recognising the potential in conceptualising the coach as an educator (e.g. Jones & Rongland, 2018), and coaching as co-construction of knowledge. To explore the central role the coach may play in setting up a pedagogical practice that cultivate athletes into effective, reciprocal learners (Deakin Crick, 2014; Deakin Crick et al., 2007), we draw on a conceptualisation of cooperative learning (CL) – a pedagogical approach that has proven effective in supporting the inclination and ability to learn together (i.e. to develop the reciprocal learning disposition, Carr & Claxton, 2002) in contexts other than talent development (Bjørke & Moen, 2020; Gillies, 2016).

Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore day-to-day coaching conduct that may support and develop athletes' reciprocal abilities. We venture to provide theoretically imbued illustrations of such coach doings that may support athletes' development into reciprocal learners. Conceptually, we take our point of departure in the pillars that make up a cooperative learning approach (e.g. Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020; Dyson & Casey, 2016), aiming to illustrate what each of the pillars may entail in terms of coach conduct in the context of talent development.

The empirical setting explored to address our purpose is a team sports talent development context. Christensen et al. (2011; see also Ryom et al., 2020) suggest that such contexts are particularly demanding of athletes' ability to make use of and contribute to the learning environment, simply because athletes cannot learn team sports skills in isolation from other players. Team sports therefore offer fertile empirical ground to explore the coaching conduct that may cultivate athletes into reciprocal learners. In line with this, we build on observational and interview data

from one instantiation of Nationellt Godkänd Idrottsutbildning-Fotboll (NIU-F), the Swedish Football Association's centrepiece structure for the development of individuals marked as football talents in Sweden (Lund & Söderström, 2017). Just as the NIU programmes for some 50 other sports, NIU-F is embedded in the Swedish public upper secondary school system (ages 16–18). The programme's systemic location thus reflects the prominence assigned to school sport in many countries' talent development systems (Bjørndal et al., 2017), including Sweden's (Lund, 2014).

Importantly, although the Swedish Football Association reaps the benefits of NIU-F, the programme's placement within the school system makes it a distinct learning environment, governed by educational goals and school regulations stipulated by the Swedish National Agency for Education. Pupils play for and train in their football clubs, but NIU-F is separate from both PE and club sports and there is no formal football team associated with the NIU-F. The organisation of NIU-F and its placement within the school system allows NIU-F teachers (teacher-coaches), who are highly trained by the Swedish Football Association but who hold regular teaching positions, to focus on the development of individuals vis-à-vis learning goals. Importantly, although cooperative learning is not a formalised method at NIU-F, there are learning goals explicitly connected to developing pupils' cooperative abilities (Skolverket, n.d.), meaning the context lends itself well to our purpose here.

The study makes two main contributions. The first relates to Nelson et al.'s (2014) acknowledgment of the significance of making critical considerations around the type of learner that coaches and the coach literature should play a part in developing. Linked to this, the study contributes to raising awareness among coach educators and practitioners of the importance of athletes' generic learning abilities and of the value of coaches having the competence to support the development of such abilities. The study's second and more theoretical contribution is that it produces knowledge that can unveil coaching conduct that may support athletes' development into reciprocal learners who can increase their ability to benefit from their talent development environment. The study's contribution therefore speaks to the efficiency of talent development systems.

## Conceptual framework

Researchers in the educational field draw on the notion of learning dispositions to conceptualise individuals' readiness, willingness and ability to engage in educational activities (Carr & Claxton, 2002; Claxton & Carr, 2004; Colley et al., 2003). Of relevance for the present study is the reciprocity learning disposition, which denotes individuals' propensity and preparedness to use themselves and others as resources in learning processes (Carr & Claxton, 2002; Christensen et al., 2011; Ryom et al., 2020). From conceptual and empirical work on learning dispositions, we know that reciprocal learners are effective learners (Carr & Claxton, 2002; Deakin Crick, 2014) and while dispositions develop during childhood and are considered durable (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984), they are also transformable (Bloemer & Hodkinson, 2000; Claxton & Carr, 2004; Colley et al., 2003). These insights provide a lens to explore how educational practices may be arranged to support the development of pupils' reciprocity disposition. In the context of this study, this refers to how teacher-coaches' conduct engenders pupils becoming equipped to learn with and from others.

At a general level, one aspect of cultivating pupils' ability to learn with and from others is the creation of a classroom culture that values reciprocal dimensions (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In educational settings, the development of reciprocity has been found to be related to educators' use of a cooperative learning approach, which focuses explicitly on educators' organisation of group work in ways that support pupils' inclination to cooperate in learning endeavours. The approach has proven effective in the development of participants' ability and inclination to make use of themselves and others as learners (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016). It is, therefore, particularly apt as a starting point for the exploration of coaching conduct that may develop athletes' reciprocal abilities that is undertaken in this study.

Cooperative learning is an umbrella term for classroom practices where participants work in small groups to enhance learning for all group members (Dyson & Casey, 2016). The approach usually

encompasses five pillars: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills and group processing (Dyson & Casey, 2016). The first three suggest how group work should be structured to create situations where individuals are motivated to learn, but also motivated to support other group members' learning. Positive interdependence recommends that educators organise tasks so that participants perceive that they cannot succeed unless other groups members do. Individual accountability refers to arranging the group work in such a way that participants are forced to take responsibility for their part in reaching group goals, where each participant contributes with their knowledge or skill so that the group can solve the overall learning task. Face-to-face promotive interaction involves educators tasking students with providing help, supportive dialogue and praise to promote learning.

The remaining two components indicate selecting teaching content that develops the skills and abilities required to participate in and benefit from group work (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017). Supporting the development of interpersonal skills include facilitating communication, conflict solving, decision making and the ability to lead or follow other participants, and promoting group processing refer to engendering the enhancement of participants' ability to discuss/asses to what extent they have reached the learning objectives and how well they have worked together. Although the cooperative learning approach is not a single teaching model or method (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020), it provides a fruitful conceptual starting point in our attempt to explicate coach conduct that supports participants' development of cooperative abilities. This is because the pillars constituting the framework speak to overall teaching strategies linked to such learning goals.

## Methodology

### *Context, site and participants*

This study builds on data from a larger project that, based on an ethnographic and interpretive approach, examined school sports teaching and learning activities aimed at talent development. Because our focus here is the day-to-day coaching conduct that may support the cultivation of cooperative abilities, the paper builds on observations and teacher interviews from this larger research project. Data were collected in the context of one out of approximately 70 local instantiations of NIU-F. The selected site is typical of the way in which NIU-Fs are organised and delivered. As such, it admits up to 20 pupils annually. The football education is offered in combination with 'non-sport' upper secondary school programmes. Lessons are mainly gender-mixed, and the bulk of NIU-F activities consist of three 90-minutes theoretical and practical lessons within the subject 'special sports' per week.

To negotiate access, the first author explained and discussed practical and ethical aspects during a meeting with the two main NIU-F teacher-coaches (TCs) and the three principals of the school in which the selected NIU-F was located. After discussions with the principals and the TCs, two NIU-F classes (years one and two) with a total of 29 pupils (16 boys and 13 girls) were selected for observation. The pupils of the two classes were presented with the project during a lesson, and all agreed to participate. Throughout the study, we followed the Swedish Research Council's (2011/2017) ethical guidelines for the humanities and social sciences. All pupils where 15 years or older at the time which allowed them to decide for themselves whether to participate or not. However, as the study included adolescents, we took great care to explain the research ethics throughout the study. This included repeatedly informing participants of the purpose of the project, the meaning of and right to anonymity and the right to discontinue participation at any time. Data storing conformed to protocols of the Swedish Research Council (2011/2017).

### *Data collection and materials*

Data collection was iterative, recursive (Cohen et al., 2011) and extended over three school semesters à 20 weeks, with most observations made during the second semester. Multiple data sources were

used to close the gap between data and context, thereby bringing more quality into specific data and enhancing the analysis (Lillis, 2008). This approach generated data consisting of handwritten field notes, photos, movie clips and interview transcripts.

### **Observational data**

Observations of lessons were loosely guided by didactical theory, meaning that interest was paid to the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of classroom activities (Quennerstedt & Larsson, 2015). Informed by research that demonstrate learning impactful educator behaviours (Claxton & Carr, 2004; Hattie, 2009), observations focused particularly on TCs' organisation of activities and their instructions and feedback to pupils.

Observations included 45 football practice lessons (approximately 75 h in total), two video analysis lessons and one gym lesson. The first author conducted overt, non-participatory observations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), but frequently engaged in small talk, asking the TCs questions about ongoing practices (e.g. 'What is the basic idea underpinning this particular drill?'). Field notes were taken in a chronological pattern (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), starting some minutes before the TCs formally started the lesson and ending some minutes after lessons formally stopped. Supported by photos and short movie clips, the field notes were elaborated and transcribed shortly after each lesson. This resulted in approximately 30 pages of field notes. These described: (1) the lesson's overall focus (e.g. offence, defence, theory); (2) teachers' organisation, both in terms of the overall approach (holistic vs specific) and the ways in which practices were individual, pair or group-based and how pupils were physically positioned; (3) how teachers framed tasks in their explanations of main learning objectives and statements of expectations for pupils' attitudes and behaviours; and (4) who provides feedback, around which aspects, when, how and to whom. This included notes on whether feedback was positive or negative, and whether it was provided verbally or through body language.

### **Interview data**

To obtain deeper insight into TCs' perspectives of the observed lessons, formal interviews with TCs Niklas and Karl (pseudonyms) were carried out 2 months into the observation period. The interviews had a semi-structured format (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), lasted approximately 75 min each, and were transcribed verbatim by the first author. According to Kvale and Brinkmann's quality criteria for interviews, summaries and follow-ups were used to clarify and verify descriptions and interpretations of interviewees' actions and meaning making.

### **Analysis**

With the aim of constructing knowledge about the day-to-day coaching conduct that may support or develop athletes' reciprocal abilities, data from the larger project were analysed using the cooperative learning (CL) framework. By necessity, the data analysis was an interpretive exercise that sought to link data to the respective pillars of the CL framework, thus providing empirical illustrations of what each of the approach's pillars may imply in terms of coaching conduct in the context of talent development programmes. The analysis was carried out in three steps, all of which relied on the comparing/contrasting technique (Charmaz, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

First, to allow for an overview of lesson content, data were sorted according to the general timeline of the lesson content (i.e. all warmups, all technical drills, all small team play practices). In a second step, the five pillars of the CL approach were used as an analytical scheme. Assessing the data from a CL perspective, this step implied an initial focus on the observational data, analysing, for example, when and why groups are used, the content of group activities and how individuals are expected to contribute to the group. Thereafter, the data from the formal interviews were used to further gauge the underlying rationales for teaching activities. Because the aim of the paper is to gain insight into coaching conduct that may cultivate athletes' development as learners,

the third and final step focused on establishing essential teacher-coach doings within each CL pillar. Our overall purpose and the nature of the analysis meant that our primary focus was to put ‘empirical flesh’ on the pillars via interpretation, meaning any account below concerning the relative presence in the data of conduct related to each of the pillars is indicative rather than absolute.

## Findings and discussion

This section is divided into two main parts, where the first deals with the three pillars that relate to conduct that appear to be most accessible to coaches, namely that associated with the *organising* of lessons. The second accounts for the two pillars that focus on lesson *content*, elements of the cooperative learning framework that we found fewer empirical illustrations of, and which we suggest are less available for coaches because of its less than apparent connection with organising football lessons.

### *Coach conduct associated with organisation of lessons*

#### *Positive interdependence*

Observation data show that during this study, TCs organise almost all content in pairs or groups, like passing/receiving drills, small group tactics analysis, offence/defence sequences and small team football playing. Also, the TCs explicitly emphasise cooperation as an essential football playing ability during lessons:

“Stoop! (everybody stops). Look, (friendly voice) if Stefan is standing here, and you Sophie here, then this space (points to a large area between pupils) will be too wide for one defender to handle. Help each other out, think of it from the defender’s perspective”. And later during the same exercise, “Yeeees! (clapping hands) Now you are helping each other, well done! (smiling, pupils smiling back)”. (Observation, small team practise, Niklas)

As illustrated by this observation, TCs often vividly and enthusiastically explain the meaning and importance of cooperation between players. During some of the exercises, TCs also use video to provide more detailed feedback on individuals’ performance. In addition, much of the individual feedback from the TCs resonates with reciprocal aspects and is concerned with how players contribute to solving a collective task by taking on collective perspectives, striving to be in the right position to assist other players.

Positive interdependence goes beyond interactions, it means group work where resources and tasks are divided and roles are complementary, all aimed at maximising the individual learning of all group members (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017). Importantly, with NIU-F being an elite-developing environment, the interview data reveal that TCs’ intentions are for lessons to constantly challenge each pupil’s current skill level. This underpins TCs’ organisation and re-organisation of groups to establish positive interdependency, as Karl says in the interview:

On the one hand, wingers need to practice cross passes with their right and left foot. But on the other hand, if the pass never is good enough, the pupil supposed to receive it won’t get much practice. (...). And I must consider whether this girl, for example, can make that cross pass long enough (...) sometimes you must change something on the spot to make the exercise work. (Interview, Karl)

Here, the educator role appears to require that TCs consider the balance between immediate content goals (e.g. proficiency in striking and receiving cross-passes) and more long-term goals that speak to the development of pupils as individual learners (e.g. Deakin Crick, 2007; Deakin Crick et al., 2007). Data show that when organising group work in such ways that positive interdependence is established, TCs must consider and address the varying learning and coaching cultures that their pupil-athletes have been and are part of, and which impact on their development as learners (Bjørndal & Rongland, 2018; Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000). One aspect of this is to avoid creating what Johnson and Johnson (2017) term competitive, or negative, interdependence, referring to a situation in which individuals perceive that they can obtain their goals even if other participants

with whom they are competitively linked fail to obtain theirs (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). In the interview, Niklas point to competitive and positive interdependence as an important difference between NIU-F and club educational contexts:

You are sort of supposed to fail here at times, in order to learn. (...) You are not competing for the starting 11, you don't need to show off, you can fail but you keep at it, eventually you will learn. (...) I think this is fundamental, we are here to develop individual players (...) and I think this (learning before achieving) should be the case in the clubs too. But there is often prestige there. (Interview, Niklas)

In their efforts to create situations wherein learning for all pupils precedes 'showing off', TCs must challenge the pupils' experience of a club cultivated competitive interdependence. Representing this, Niklas, during an observed offence sequence drill focused on positioning, repeatedly yelled 'I do not care if you score but you have to position yourself correctly!'. During an informal conversation in a pause between exercises, Karl points to this as a 'typical example' of pupils adhering to achieve club-related goals (scoring although there is no game to be won/lost), which in turn could affect the learning for all pupils. The fact that the NIU-F learning context is supposed to be one of non-competitive interdependence appears to be less than clear to pupils, who are far from consistent in capitalising on coaches' intended learning culture. *Vis-à-vis* this pillar, this requires coaches to constantly highlight the intended distinctive features of the NIU-F context. During his interview, Karl illustrated this when he said, 'Oh, no! (laughs). We need to constantly remind them, like "it's ok to miss, you need to practice using that other foot". (...) And I think, this (centring learning) is something we need to do continuously'.

Overall, football practice seems to lend itself well to organised interdependent, group-related, exercises. Nonetheless, TCs must, first, balance the interdependence built into football with individual motives and capacity to participate as learners and, second, continuously communicate the non-competitive, no-team learning context of NIU-F so as to establish positive and counteract competitive interdependence.

### *Face-to-face promotive interaction*

Face-to-face promotive interaction has to do with educators tasking participants with facilitating and encouraging each other's learning. One way for educators to support face-to-face promotive interaction is by organising tasks that are discovery-based and require interaction, such as discussions, problem-solving and the sharing of ideas (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016). Observations show that TCs facilitate this in repeated 30–60 s time-outs in almost every observed small team tactical exercise. During these, the 'teams' quickly gather and discuss their actions, tactics and alternatives, while the coach stands close to the group, mostly listening, sometimes nodding encouragingly, sometimes giving short comments that are generally positive and encourage exploration: 'try, see what happens!', Karl often says during the observed time-outs. In short, the ways that TCs manage the interaction (encouraging pupils to learn from each other, taking a step back) is well in line with the literature (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2017). A video analysis lesson that takes place in a classroom further illustrates how promotive interaction is organised:

The TCs present five starting points for analysis ('what to look for') and all pupils collectively watch matchlike sequences they performed during a lesson some days ago. Pupils move around to sit with their 'team-mates'. However, they do not form circles or the like, making it hard for all pupils to get equally engaged in the conversation. Two girls are even positioned at the end of a table each, seemingly uninvolved. As during time-outs, the TCs mostly listen, and comment on pupils' analysis with a positive tone: "From your discussion I would say you totally understand why this (tactics) was a good idea, you all get it, good!". (Observation, video analysis 1, Karl & Niklas)

As illustrated above, the TCs do not arrange for all pupils to be seen or heard, nor do they explicitly request individual pupils to add to the discussion. Face-to-face interaction also manifest during observations when some pupils approach the TCs with follow-up questions on the feedback they have received during an exercise, and TCs often engage in spontaneous discussions initiated by pupils,



thereby modelling and supporting pupils' inclination to ask questions as a means of learning from the TCs (Carr & Claxton, 2002; Claxton, 2007). However, this positions the TCs, not pupils, as actors of promotive interactions. In the observed lessons, TCs almost exclusively provide positive feedback, and during interviews they both stress this as a means for learning, as Karl says: 'We know that for every negative comment given, we need to give ten positives. The learning power that comes with positive feedback should not be underestimated'. But, in the lessons observed, the TCs do not teach their feedback skills to the pupils. It is also notable that, except for the above-described tactical discussions, the TCs do not task the pupils with providing feedback to each other.

### *Individual accountability*

Individual accountability refers to educators arranging group work in such a way that participants are forced to take responsibility for their part in reaching group goals (Casey & Quennerstedt, 2020; Dyson & Casey, 2016). In the case of teaching football, coaches distribute accountability for example through assigning interdependent playing/practising positions. The practices entail accountability when each pupil contributes with a specific segment during group exercises and does so in a particular way. In the TCs' opinion, every pupil is accountable for, as they say in the interviews, 'engaging wholeheartedly'. Such expectations around pupils 'giving all they've got' are two-fold. First, it demands every pupil's full physical engagement, especially in match-like sequences. As an illustration, towards the end of most small team practices, the TCs make statements pertaining to energy and speed levels. For example, observations show that Niklas repeatedly yells: 'Now it has turned into jogging! This is match! You must want to intercept! Take that ball!' During an informal conversation immediately after, Niklas stressed the importance of balancing technical skill with physical capacity: 'I know if a pupil can do better (run faster) and still be in control, and then I am very clear, no so-called jogging (smiles)'. The second meaning of wholeheartedness involves pupils' being humble co-creators of learning opportunities for all participants by always doing exercises according to instructions, and including all pupils. This also resonates with the 'prestige in the clubs' mentioned by Niklas when talking about how the club culture sometimes makes it difficult for pupils to benefit from the no-team organisation of NIU-F. Karl elaborates on the inclusive aspect of accountability in relation to small team practices during the interview:

There are some pupils, especially boys, who think they are 'stars', and they can be quite competitive (...) And we (teachers) have really discussed this, we cannot have pupils not getting passes and so on. I mean, the feeling that you don't get passes because you're no good ... That we don't want (shakes his head). We need to communicate this (...) you're supposed to pass the ball to whatever player that is in a good position to receive it (...) not dribble. (Interview, Karl)

When working in groups, individual accountability is ensured through individual follow-ups (Dyson & Casey, 2016). The TCs handle the physical dimension of wholeheartedness by publicly commenting on and praising physical engagement by the group and individuals. However, pupils' contributions to an inclusive learning environment are dealt with in private conversations. During the interviews, TCs describe how they address exclusionary behaviour during individual assessment and follow-up meetings. However, rather than conveying to pupils that their behaviour is adverse, they encourage them to develop the tactical skills that, from the TCs' perspectives, represent an inclusive attitude. Thus, while TCs hold pupils equally accountable for their physical contribution to other pupils learning, there is, as illustrated in the account of the previous pillar, little or no accountability for contributing to the discussions associated with practices (e.g. during time-outs). In sum, individual accountability is secured by the TCs in relation to playing exercises, but less so in other learning situations such as planning lesson content, controlling implementation, or defining assignments.

### *Summarising discussion*

In this first part, we identified coaching conduct that resonates with the organisational pillars of CL: positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction and individual accountability. Given

the overlap between football practice in sport clubs, it is not surprising that we identified TC conduct associated with them. In that sense, the use of CL practices that partially overlap with the character of football appears readily accessible to coaches as educators. The conduct illustrated above therefore aligns with Stone et al.'s (2021) notion of a continuum of approaches, with TCs mainly acting as the sole experts, including planning all content, diagnosing and providing feedback on technical and tactical details (cf. McCleery et al., 2022) and only occasionally organise for *pupils* to be the experts.

This conduct certainly goes a good way towards creating a learning context wherein participants are supported to develop as reciprocal learners, and the identified conduct therefore illustrates what teaching towards this goal may entail in coaches' everyday work. It is notable that most of the observed TC doings within these pillars reflect an effort to engender a comfortable and effective learning climate where pupils cooperate, consider each other's learning needs and behave in a supportive way. Hence, our analysis demonstrates how coaches can organise their practices in a way that is underpinned by the notion of learning with, not from, peers. Carr and Claxton (2002, p. 15) suggest that 'A classroom can be characterised by the degree and kind of reciprocity that is typically encouraged or afforded'. In talent development contexts such as NIU-F, this implies that coaches who want to develop athletes' capacity to learn from other participants must also create situations where participants are expected to, for example, give feedback, and where they feel entitled to do so. This links to Casey and Quennerstedt's (2020) recommendation that cooperative learning should engender situations where participants 'transform and are being transformed by each other' (p. 1031), as well as to the broadening of the sense of when it is appropriate to use a certain skill or ability as an avenue for stretching learning dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; Carr & Claxton, 2002; Claxton, 2007). In contexts such as that under study here, this could entail tasking pupils with, for example, planning exercises and/or taking on the coach (promotive) role.

### ***Coach conduct associated with lesson content***

Below, we account for the identified coaching conduct that is linked to the content-focused pillars interpersonal skills and group processing.

#### ***Interpersonal skills***

Participating in group work calls for educators to support interpersonal skills such as handling conflicts, democratic decision making and accepting responsibility for one's behaviour (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016). During interviews, TCs repeatedly stress the necessity of a good learning climate: 'To be able to develop into a really good player, a supportive and safe group climate is crucial. If we don't have that within the group (...) we have failed' (Interview, Karl). The TCs manage pupils' interactional behaviour during individual follow-ups as well as in public during ongoing lessons, as this observed situation illustrates:

"I saw that" Niklas says quietly in a sharp tone, giving a pupil a long gaze as they walk towards him, signalling that the pupil should not make a face because the pass from another pupil was no good. "So, you didn't get the ball on your foot, that's no reason for you to give up" he says calmly, still looking intensely at the pupil. (Observation, cross pass drill, Niklas)

Some 'typical' football behaviours, such as yelling, cheering, giving high fives and waving an arm to signal 'my bad' after a poor pass, are certainly present during lessons, particularly so when the practice is more match-like. TCs often model a sport-infused encouraging behaviour by cheering in loud voices and clapping hands. The gender-mixed organisation also highlights the TCs' acknowledgement of football as including physical contact on the verge of foul play, as Karl says in the interview: 'the girls have learned to be just as tough as the boys and that is a good thing (...) You shouldn't be that nice all the time, if you get my point'.

With the TCs planning lesson content and controlling implementation, and with pupils having defined assignments within most of the practices, there seems to be little room for debate or friction

between pupils. Occasionally, pupils proclaim frustration with their own and sometimes others' performances, shaking their heads, or cursing in a loud voice and such behaviour sometimes causes teachers to intervene. During one of the observations, a pupil questions the feedback given to him, prompting an illustrative response from the TC:

"If you want me to do that, you have to tell me from the start (of the drill), you cannot tell me afterwards like now!" the pupil says in a loud, irritated voice. "Ok, I wasn't clear on that one, that's on me. I'll be clear next time. But now you know" the TC calmly says. (Observation, passing drill, Niklas)

The TC's handling of this situation reflects how interpersonal skills are cultivated in the observed environment, namely through teachers' modelling of a responsive, humble and respectful interactional behaviour. However, beyond such modelling by TCs, no observed lesson content is explicitly aimed at the development of interpersonal skills.

### *Group processing*

The final CL pillar is group processing, which denotes organised reflection on how the group engages in and solves its tasks, and what can be done to improve such processes (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016). In group work like the video analysis and time-out playing sequences described earlier, TCs organise discussions among pupils but they neither evaluate discussion quality nor offer suggestions on ways to improve them. Supporting group processing includes the usage of procedures, tools and time dedicated to the development of group processing skills are required (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016), aspects completely absent from the observed practices. In the lessons observed, data also show that, while video-recordings of training sessions are sometimes used to provide feedback on individual and group performances, discussion sequences are neither documented nor analysed together with the pupils. Thus, discussion skills seem to be valued for their contribution to football learning but lack value in and of themselves.

### *Summarising discussion*

Contemporary coaching perspectives include coaches' facilitation of collective communication and joint reflection to allow athletes to take responsibility for learning (McCleery et al., 2022), thereby accentuating the need to support the development of interpersonal skills and group processing. The almost complete lack of observed activities that resonate with the content-focused pillars is perhaps unsurprising, as these two pillars extend beyond the innate character of football. They also require lesson content specifically aimed at the development of skills and abilities required to participate in and benefit from group work (Dyson & Casey, 2016; Gillies, 2016), such as tasking pupils with assessing time-out discussions and tactical reflections. Practising interpersonal skills and group processing are educational activities that are not evident in football practice (O'Connor et al., 2018). Nor are they core to coaching practice (Stone et al., 2021) and might therefore be less accessible for TCs in their organisation and content planning. This suggests that to stretch athletes' reciprocal dispositions (i.e. developing them as learners), coaches need to challenge their 'traditional' role of the coach as an expert and athletes' preconceptions around the importance of obedience (Cushion, 2011; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Cushion et al., 2012), consequently stretching their own dispositions to include other perspectives and lesson content that facilitate athletes' engagement in discussions with peers.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study explores how day-to-day coaching conduct supports and develops athletes' reciprocal abilities. Specifically, it provides illustrations of in what ways such conduct supports athletes' development of the generic learning ability to learn from and with peers. Drawing conceptually on a cooperative learning approach and the five key teaching pillars of positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, interpersonal skills and group processing, we show how

the TCs in this study tend to engage in practices that are more associated with the three first pillars and less with the remaining two. This means that they focus more on the organising of lessons than on the content of them. It also means that they tend to do more of what we recognise as a traditional football practice (positive interdependence, face-to-face promotive interaction and individual accountability) and less of what we would think of as educational activities (interpersonal skills and group processing). By extension, this highlights the potential in viewing talent development as an educational practice and points to the need for talent environments to confront dominating views of effective coaching as associated with athletes' acquisition of sport-skills (e.g. Cushion et al., 2012) and sporting success (e.g. Côté & Gilbert, 2009). These findings resonate with research on how interrelated learning sites merge into learning cultures through participants' mobility (e.g. Bjørndal et al., 2017; Hodkinson et al., 2007). This implies that for talent development to nurture learner-athletes, coaching conduct in all sites of the system, including sports clubs, need to be addressed. This suggests that future research with an educational approach to coaching research might fruitfully combine the concept of effective learners with an understanding of overlapping learning sites within talent systems. Such research might also want to consider involving athletes in observations and/or interviews to gain insights into their understanding of, views on and experiences of learning from and with their peers.

While providing contributions to research on talent development systems in terms of raising awareness of the value of supporting the development of generic learning abilities and point to the conduct that may be conducive to such development, they are limited in their potential transfer to other contexts. So, even though there are merits in focusing on one specific sport under a longer period of time, we acknowledge that while football might have certain characteristics that makes it similar to for example ice hockey, it has others that makes it distinctively different from tug-of-war (which is also a team event). Arguably, reciprocity and reciprocal abilities can to some extent imply different things in different sports. Our study is also limited in the sense that although we used multiple data sources to close the gap between data and context, including following up questions and checking for contradictions during interviews as well as observations, it is possible that TCs' descriptions of their doings during the lessons we did not observe were not as frequent or representative as they said.

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