Fostering psychosocial characteristics within an English academy soccer Academy

Mitchell, T.O; Cowburn, I.H.J.; Piggott, D.

Research Centre for Sport Coaching, Carnegie School of Sport

Littlewood, M.A.

Research institute for Sport and Exercise Science, Liverpool John Moores University

Tony Cook, Doncaster Rovers Football Club

Till, K.

Research Centre for Sport Coaching, Carnegie School of Sport

Leeds Beckett University

Abstract

The possession of certain psychosocial characteristics can offer performance advantages in a range of domains. However, integrating a programme to support the development of psychosocial characteristics is a lengthy process and involves context specific knowledge and effective working relationships with stakeholders. The aim of this article is to present a real-life example of the design, delivery, and implementation of a theoretically informed psychosocial development programme for players within an academy soccer setting to include player workshops, coach delivery and ways to influence the environment. This multifaceted approach included formal and informal meetings, observations, coach education and social media groups. Initial reflections suggested workshops are an effective method to 'teach' some of the aspects within the programme. Integrating coaches throughout design and implementation is recommended. Key stakeholders should consider investing time in education for coaches to develop strategies to foster psychosocial development in their players. Limitations and future recommendations are discussed.

Introduction

Youth soccer academy settings are appropriate locations to foster psychosocial development as young boys can be within such systems from the age of 8-18 years old which offers [potentially] long term exposure to systematic, age-stage appropriate, developmental opportunities through exposure to training and competition. English academy soccer is guided by the Elite Player Performance Plan (Premier League, 2010) which is a long-term initiative to support the development of talented players within soccer clubs in England. The EPPP (2010) advocates a four-corner model to consider; Technical, Physical, Psychological and Social aspects of talent development (Simmons, 2004). To support coaches, there are a range of coaching qualifications to obtain including the Advanced Youth Award which is underpinned by a 'technical and tactical programme with the physical, social and psychological disciplines, as well as a closer integration of the Long-Term Player Development Model' (FA, 2021).

Alongside regulatory requirements, staffing levels, periodic audits, and best practice guidance, the EPPP dictates how football clubs operate age specific groupings and outlines three distinct development phases namely, Foundation Development Phase (FDP) for Under (U) U9-U11, Youth Development Phase (YDP) for U12-U16 and Professional Development Phase (PDP) for U17-U23. As a result, football clubs are encouraged to deploy resources to attend to each of these aspects. Upon periodic 'audits', 'categories' are assigned to clubs from CAT1 (highest level) to CAT4 (lowest level) with the main differentiators surrounding funding received, full time staffing, infrastructure, and the age of player selection. For example, CAT1-3 academies operate an early specialization model and are required to employ a full-time match analyst, strength and conditioning coach, head of recruitment, head of education, lead sport scientist, goalkeeping coach and phase lead coaches working with players from the age of nine years old. CAT1 academies require a full time Sport

Psychologist (SP). Alternatively, a CAT4 academy would operate a late specialization model (i.e., from 17 years old) and have specialized roles full-time, part-time, or not at all (EPPP, 2010).

Throughout the paper we will refer to 'psychosocial' as defined by Gledhill et al., (2017) to be the individual interrelation of psychological characteristics with social influences and to the ways in these might shape and guide behaviours. The possession of psychosocial skills and characteristics can be advantageous for athletes in dealing with the ups and downs of sport performance (e.g., form or experiencing scrutiny), career progression (e.g., youth to senior transition) (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gledhill et al., 2017; Larsen, 2013; Rongen et al., 2020) and life (Jones & Lavallee, 2009). For clarity around terms used we referred to Dohme et al.'s (2017) review of terms where skills were defined as 'The ability to use learned psychological methods (e.g., self-talk and goal setting). Skills need to be explicitly taught and practiced to be effective' and characteristics were defined as 'Predispositoned, fairly stable traits that strongly impact upon the successful development of athletes' (e.g., motivation and self-confidence) (p. 155). Favourable psychosocial skills and characteristics associated with talent development in soccer include self-awareness, confidence, self-regulation, motivation, mental toughness, coping skills, motivation, imagery, and social skills (Gledhill, et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2020). As a result, efforts to systematically foster such psychosocial skills and characteristics within performance and talent development settings is likely to support their development.

The responsibility for who should foster psychosocial skills and characteristics in talent development settings is open to debate and largely centred around 1. SPs and 2. coaches. Firstly, the role of a SP is often framed around the use of scientifically informed techniques to facilitate the enhancement of performance (Barker & Winter, 2014) and offer pastoral care in the support of non-performance areas (Gamble et al., 2013). SPs are required

to work within and sometimes wrestle with ethical and professional boundaries such as confidentiality, informed consent and out of session contact (Andersen et al., 2001; Moore, 2003). Unfortunately, within the context of English soccer, barriers surrounding negative perceptions, financial implications, lack of knowledge of the role have been reported (Johnson et al., 2011; Pain & Harwood, 2004). As a result, there remains a lack of clear consensus about 'what works' in academy soccer contexts from an applied practice perspective.

Secondly, sport coaches themselves have a role to play in supporting psychosocial development through their applied practice. For example, Côté and Gilbert (2009) proposed an integrative definition of coaching effectiveness as '*The consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve athletes' competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts*' (p. 318). There is increasing advocation to support the notion that a coaches' role should include the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics in participants within sport to include teaching participants to manage emotions and attend to matters of player welfare and wellbeing to achieve optimal development (International Council for Coaching Excellence, ICCE, 2016; Lara-Bercial & Mallett, 2016; Zakrajsek et al., 2017;) and more specifically within youth soccer (Football Association, 2019; Premier League, 2011; Simmons, 2004). As such, the role of the coach includes attending to the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics.

Promisingly, youth sport coaches report that they recognize the importance of and the need to develop psychosocial skills and characteristics within youth athletes (Zakrajsek et al., 2011). Furthermore, frameworks exist to support youth sport coaches in conceptualising what might be important to foster when designing programmes to support development of psychosocial skills and characteristics through sporting engagement. These include

UNIFORM (Horn et al., 2011), the 5Cs (Harwood, 2008), First Tee (Weiss et al., 2013), Four Corners (Simmons, 2004), Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs; MacNamara, et al., 2010a, 2010b), PROGRESS (Harwood & Anderson, 2015) and GOAL (Danish, 1996). However, whilst many studies or frameworks have presented well informed ideas to foster psychosocial development, many fail to reflect the reality of how such development strategies are initiated and operationalised in situ to support youth sport coaching, and often fail to either provide practical, 'on the ground' information or solely present the 'product' without exploring the processes involved. Additionally, in reflection of the complexity in this area, there have been a range of evaluative procedures undertaken to include validated questionnaires pre and post (Horn et al., 2013) focus groups (Weiss et al., 2013) and reflective diaries (Harwood, 2008). This absence of a consistent evaluative procedure makes judging the effectiveness across programmes a challenge to practitioners making decisions of what to include and how to implement psychosocial development practices their own settings such as other sports teams or individuals.

Coaches have also been seen to establish environments that prioritise particular psychosocial skills in academy football, for example, research has emphasised hard-work, accountability, rules, but also player education, relationships across generations, and a strong 'family feel' (Larsen et al., 2013; North, 2017); Conversely, research has suggested establish environments that are challenging, perhaps even, at times, adverse, to facilitate the learning of mental toughness, resilience, and coping skills (Bell et al., 2013; Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Pierce et al., 2016).

Despite research advocating the importance of developing psychosocial skills and characteristics, numerous barriers exist for coaches fostering such development, which include; (1) coaches find it difficult to describe strategies and concrete situations used to facilitate psychosocial development that is connected to effective coaching literature

(Lacroix, et al, 2008); (2) coaches may not know how to effectively develop psychosocial skills and characteristics in sport practices (McCallister et al., 2000); (3) youth sport coaches tend to focus on the development of skills and match performances (Camiré, 2015; Santos et al., 2018); (4) within English soccer contexts, coaches report a greater emphasis on technical skills over the development of psychosocial characteristics (Morley et al., 2014) and concerningly (5) as a result of long standing traditional notions of professionalism youth coaches in soccer contexts have been cited as having an aggressive, harsh, authoritarian, autocratic and belligerent attitude towards players (Cushion & Jones, 2006). This includes abusive language, direct personal castigation, and threats of physical sanction (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Potrac et al., 2012). At worst, this could result in players with no autonomy, voice, or right to respond, and with no attempt made to account for individual differences (Cushion & Jones, 2006; Manley et al., 2016). Such barriers may compromise the effectiveness of coaches in fostering the development of psychosocial characteristics in their coaching. Resultantly, this presents SPs with opportunities to work with coaches to further support their capacity in fostering psychosocial development within the players they work with.

Concerningly, given the multidisciplinary teams, to include SPs and coaches, associated with soccer academies, we know little about the practices associated with psychosocial development, how they are designed and delivered within these settings to who, by who, and how. This lack of knowledge surrounding practice may result in varying levels of service to players and coaches which could compromise the quality of coaching provision in these populations and could negatively affect the success rates (i.e., players progressing through the system to senior team) of such systems as well as limit the global health advantages that systematic development of psychosocial characteristics may bring. Therefore, to address such concerns, the primary aim of this article is to present a real-life example of

the design, delivery, and initial implementation of a psychosocial development programme for players within an academy soccer setting. The secondary aim is to provide initial reflections and offer guidance for practitioners seeking to develop psychosocially orientated programmes in their own settings.

The context was a CAT3 professional soccer academy based in the North of England. The academy was aligned to a professional soccer club playing in the third tier of English soccer. The academy's primary aim was to support the development of talented players from the age of 8 to 23 years old and to transition the most proficient players into the first team squad. Players would typically take part in four interactions per week to include coaching, gym, video analysis, psychosocially orientated educational workshops, lifestyle workshops, and a weekend competition games programme. Each annual age group (e.g., U9s) had two coaches employed on a part time basis. The academy employed a full-time Academy Manager, Head of Coaching, and a Sport Science support team containing two full time members of staff. Part time staff included an Education and Welfare officer as well as a newly created consultancy / delivery role of Head of Psychosocial development (The first author). The first author was a senior lecturer at a local university who had 15 years to teaching experience on undergraduate and postgraduate sport-related programmes, held a PhD based on the effects of long-term exposure of soccer academy environments on the personal and social development of players, was a professional member of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (BASES), a Football Association qualified coach, had over 5 years' experience of working with players to deliver educational programmes and published peer reviewed research around the impact of the environment on psychosocial development and career transitions in academy soccer. This newly created consultancy role involved supporting players, on team levels, with psychosocially orientated educational workshops as well as working with coaches to explore how their coaching practice could further support the development of psychosocial

characteristics on the basis 1-2 days per week of engagement. The integration of the psychosocial development role was part of a wider coach development project over a preceding 12-month period to re-design the entire coaching programme to integrate, technical, physical, and psychosocial aspects into a singular, aligned programme for coaches to support the psychosocial development of players.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the commencement of any consultancy or research related works ethical approval was sought and granted from the University Research Ethics committee. Following similar suggestions by Johnson & Andersen (2019) our considerations were centred around (a) informing players and staff about the consultancy work being potentially used for research purposes (b) inviting (on a voluntary basis) and seeking consent from those players and staff to use practitioner experiences of the programme as reflections and guidance for others and (c) ensuring full confidentiality of players and staff through anonymous reporting. Finally, it must also be noted that player and staff experience of the programme was part of their normal daily activities within the academy, and it was the practitioner accounts of the design and implementation of programme itself that was subject to ethical scrutiny.

PART A: Planning the 8 Pillars Programme

Coaches perceived that to maximise the amount of youth players who progressed to the senior team, players required key psychosocial characteristics to cope with and thrive at senior level as well as an increasing understanding of the importance of mental health and wellbeing. Such attention to this aspect of development was also partly in response to the increasing debate around the healthiness of TDEs (e.g., Rongen et al., 2018). The 8 Pillars Programme design was led by the Head of Psychosocial Development in conjunction with a range of other staff, including coaches, in the context. This section seeks to provide a detailed

account of this developmental work. The 8 Pillars are namely, *Communication, Commitment,*

Control, Concentration, Confidence, Resilience, Presence and Self Awareness. Each Pillar is

distinct and has different development strategies associated with it. There is research support

for each of the 8 Pillars as having a positive contribution to sporting achievement and success

as well as more holistic development associated with health and wellbeing. For an overview,

definitions, and research support see Table 1.

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The 8 Pillars programme offers both a theoretically informed and practically driven

resource for coaches and other support practitioners to frame their offering of a psychosocial

development package within a soccer academy setting. The specific characteristics developed

were agreed upon through two main methods namely, theoretical, and practical bases. The

body of literature within this area consistently reports the presence of a range of psychosocial

characteristics in high level sports competitors (see e.g., Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002;

Gledhill et al., 2017; Gould, 2002 and Larsen, 2013) whilst also being vital for more holistic

development associated with health and wellbeing (see e.g., Côte et al., 2016; Holt, 2016).

Moreover, some of the proposed characteristics have previously been suggested to be of great

importance in the psychosocial development of young soccer players. For example, Harwood

(2008) and Harwood et al., (2015) proposed and evaluated a 5Cs programme comprising of

Communication, Concentration, Control, Commitment and Confidence. Given the strength of

this existing work, they were included within the current 8 Pillars framework alongside other

characteristics beyond the 5Cs identified as important in the development of talent including

Self- awareness (Mills et al., 2012, 2014a, 2014b, Mitchell, 2015), Resilience (Fletcher &

Sarkar, 2012, 2016) and Presence (Mitchell, 2015).

The practically driven aspect for the development of the pillars was derived from the more established, full time, coaches and other support staff citing what psychosocial skills and characteristics they wanted senior players to possess (via informal discussions at the training complex around important characteristics associated with more positive outcomes for players) and more formally identified weakness in their delivery model in developing psychosocial characteristics in their players (via internal quality review processes within the club). Embracing the coaches' perspective has been shown to provide further insight into relevant psychological characteristics favourable for progression as well as make to make inter-individual comparisons and use this knowledge to evaluate and predict a player's current and future potential (Musculus & Lobinger, 2018). Additionally expert coaches' assessments are grounded in their varied and lengthy experiences working with different players and as a result such assessments were seen as vital in the process in developing this programme (Jones et al., 2013). Conversely, the possibility of a self-serving attribution bias (Allen et al., 2020; Miller & Ross, 1975) may have been present i.e., presenting a potentially overestimated view of the role of personality traits in talent development. To combat this, we adopted both a theoretically informed and practically driven approach to all decision making as well as a final 'sign off' by both the first and academy manager.

A 'hi-vis' approach to the first author's engagement was undertaken (Mellalieu, 2017) through being present at training, within team meetings, in the gym, and the canteen. Being visible in this way allowed for conversation with coaches and players on a range of topics associated with the development of psychosocial characteristics and more specifically, which characteristics were most suited to career progression within soccer. These practically driven viewpoints fed into the theoretical suggestions by reinforcing some of the initial pillars and provided another layer of 'evidence'.

Once theoretical and practical bases for the psychosocial characteristics were established, they were proposed to the wider, part time, coaching staff within the academy via a multimedia presentation and discussions session to include their perspectives and obtain further refinement and agreement from the coaches to ensure they were part of the development process. The session stimulated discussion around terminology and what each characteristic may look like in practice. Coaches often felt that players did not make it to the professional level due to inadequacies in some aspects of their psychosocial characteristics which is generally supported in the talent development literature (see e.g., Abbott & Collins, 2004). There was a clear desire from coaches to ensure that the programme would support the development of resilience which in turn could support players ability to progress through the academy system to first team level. Through their contextual experience, coaches held a view of what it takes to make to professional status including how hard and competitive the process is, hence the need for resilience. Resilience has also been seen as a key factor in the psychological make-up of elite performers (see e.g., Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Such discussions resulted in clearer and more contextualised examples of what resilience may look like in the context of a professional environment which further informed the design of the programme.

To support coaches in understanding what the 8 Pillars may look like in situ, age and staged 'suggested observable behaviours' were provided (Table 2). The inclusion of suggested observable behaviours served several functions; (1) to support the development of a common language and shared mental model (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993) for coaches to consider when planning coaching sessions to support the development of psychosocial characteristics; (2) to refine what coaches seek to develop when planning coaching sessions via clear objectives and to provide clarity around what psychosocial characterises may look like in practical situations; and (3) to support the refinement of talent identification (TI)

processes. For example, having more tangible information on what such characteristics look like in practice it would make it easier for a coach to see them.

The suggested observable behaviours were created in two main ways. Firstly, the incremental nature of the behaviours was designed to be congruent with literatures associated with childhood development stages, namely: mid-childhood, early adolescence, mid-adolescence, and late adolescence (e.g., Erikson, 1950; Gould & Nalepa, 2016; Piaget, 1958; Erikson, 1950). Mid-Childhood (around 6-11 years) is characterised by a need to develop competency in their chosen endeavour. Children are normally quite egocentric, they need concrete examples and begin to learn the differences between winning and losing (Harter, 1999), effort and ability, their self-esteem and -worth are based on a limited number of sources and are dependent on significant others for feedback. They are highly motivated, optimistic in their self-perceptions and generally want to play (Kipp, 2018, p38). Early adolescence (around 10-14 years) is characterised by a need to explore and develop personal values which, for success, should align to the demands of youth soccer. This age group are better able to self-reflect and efforts should be made to support ownership of their own progress over comparison to other peers. They are concerned about feelings and being liked; they can think more critically and use more adult like coping strategies. They have a differentiated view of effort and ability for example, if one player engages in less effort and has the same outcomes as another, they may be identified as having high ability (Nicholls, 1989). Finally, late adolescence (around 15-17 years) is characterised as an ability to apply more abstract thinking, be more self-directed, adopt better moral decision making, have a want for autonomy, an ability to self-manage, further self-reflect, and use a variety of course of information such as from self, coaches, and peers (Horn, 2004). To support the developmentally appropriate design of the programme the emphasis was initially on *familiarity* of each component of the 8 pillars (FDP), moving to *mastery* (YDP), and finally

how to use each pillar to support own or *influence team performance* (PDP). The second way in which observable behaviours were determined was though the first author working with the Academy Manager, Head of Coaching, and other full-time academy coaching staff to explore what each of the pillars may look like in practice. This led to final, agreed statements combining their knowledge of soccer and player development, with the expertise of the first author in psychosocial development. This refining and finalising process was undertaken via ongoing dialogue, a series of meetings, continual informal discussions, watching training together one to two times per week and linking behaviours to pillars and email proposals over a 6-month period until a consensus was achieved.

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PART B: Operationalising the 8 Pillars Psychosocial Programme

Over one competitive playing season, the 8 Pillars programme was delivered in three ways: coach delivery, player delivery and influencing the environment. Adopting a multifaceted approach is in line with previous advocations of the importance of aligned multidisciplinary teams operating in TDEs (Henriksen et al., 2010) and calls for works to better reflect the complex interactions within these dynamic environments (Davids & Araújo, 2010). As guided by the wider soccer coaching programme, as designed by the Academy Manager and Head of Coaching the 8 Pillars programme were split into 4-week blocks where a new tactical, technical, and physical objective was the focus of development. The ordering of the Pillars was chosen in conjunction with the Academy Manager to help reflect the perceived experiences of players and support the creation of a spiral curriculum as players progressed through the system. For example, Communication was first as players may need to quickly work with a new age group coach and incoming players. (See Figure 1).

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Coach Delivery

Coach delivery was comprised of 3 main methods: Coach education workshop, the provision of coaching resources, and coach observations.

Workshops

A pre-season coach education workshop was designed and delivered to all academy coaches where each of the 8 pillars was defined and rationalised. Using photos and videos, the workshop allowed contextualisation of each of the 8 pillars into soccer performance to aid coach understanding of what each pillar might look like 'in-situ' and between age groups. For example, showing video clips of each age group team remaining in *Control* despite losing or having the *Confidence* to keep the ball when in tight situations. Next, written observable behaviours were presented for each of the 3 stages of development (FDP, YPD, and PDP). This activity allowed for further refinement and agreement of what the agreed observable behaviours for each pillar were. Finally, principles of practice design and suggested coach behaviours were offered to support the development of each pillar. The workshop provided opportunities for coaches to discuss each pillar and map some of their current practices onto the development of each pillar ensuring the programme wasn't simply imposed upon them, and they understood that many of their current approaches were helpful in supporting development. Further suggestions were made to coaches of how they may develop each pillar through coaching practice. For example, in the Resilience pillar, the use of overloads to offer a clear disadvantage to one team was suggested.

To aid development of practice designs and associated coach behaviours, the PROGRESS framework (Harwood & Anderson, 2015) was introduced as a tool to support coaches in planning to develop the 8 Pillars in their coaching sessions. PROGRESS is an acronym for; Promote (the psychosocial component), Role model (the psychosocial

component), Ownership (given to players), Grow (the psychosocial component), Reinforce (the psychosocial component), Support (offer support and guidance as a coach), and Self-Review.

Coach Resources

Coach education e-resources were a 3–4-page PDF pack and were provided on a 4-weekly basis in line with the curriculum to re-iterate; (1) the definition of the pillar to be delivered within the 4-week block, (2) observable player behaviours; and (3) how coaches may support the development of the pillar through practice design using the PROGRESS framework. Links to YouTube clips or actual footage of academy age-group teams displaying certain characteristics were incorporated to support contextual understanding. The suggestions were not prescriptive and allowed coaches to use them within their planning which would need to include specific technical, tactical, and physical aspects as prescribed by the wider academy curriculum. Coaches were encouraged to contact the lead author via telephone and email to discuss any issues or experiences they chose to raise and were also part of a WhatsApp group where they could ask questions, debate, and discuss their reflection on practice. This type of background discussion, used by around 60% of the coaches, acted as a form of informal mentoring which has previously been seen as useful in coach development contexts (Mesquita et al., 2014).

Coach Observation

On the third week of every 4-week block an informal observation of coaching practice was undertaken. Observation of coaching behaviours has been a useful method in understanding what coaches do and supporting the effectiveness of coaches (Morgan et al., 2014) and was done on an informal and supportive basis. Using the Coaching Practice Planning and Reflective Framework (Muir, 2012), reflective conversations on psychosocial

session objectives, practice design, participant engagement, and coach behaviours were provided via a face-to-face meeting after training, SMS, telephone, WhatsApp, or email based on preference. The function of observing coaches in situ was to offer further support to in adopting the PROGRESS framework and some of the principles suggested within the monthly resource pack to help foster the development of favourable psychosocial skills and characteristics.

Player Delivery

Workshops were seen to be an appropriate method by which to 'teach' some of the prerequisite skills and have previously been shown to be effective at developing psychological skills in student athletes (Clement & Shannon, 2009). According to Martindale & Mortimer, (2011), the primary function of a talent development environment is to equip the athletes with a holistic skills package of which many of these skills are teachable. Workshops included a range of educational strategies such as, multimedia presentation, questions and answers, video footage, diaries, discussion, peer teaching, and problem-solving tasks. Players received 2 x 45-minute workshops per pillar per month as part of a weekly carousel of activities containing 4 x 45-minute blocks typically including football, video analysis, psychosocial development workshops (alternate weeks), education (alternate weeks), and gym. The carousel activities occurred on Monday evenings; this was an opportunity to have a physically lighter session after weekend games. Workshops were designed and delivered by the lead author and supported by post graduate Sport and Exercise Psychology students. The psychosocial development workshops were housed in week one and two of the 4-week block. In weeks three and four the Education and welfare officer would work with players on education and life skills matters also aligned to the pillar worked on for that block. For each pillar, the first psychosocial development session included a definition of the pillar, its importance in soccer performance and wider life in a similar fashion Miller and Kerr's (2002)

notions of performance excellence and personal excellence. The second session would include strategies to support the development of the pillar. For example, in the Confidence pillar, players were asked to keep a log of their 'Performance Accomplishments' (Bandura, 1977) to help build up a profile of successes in previous games.

Coaches also attended the workshops, this had two benefits; Firstly, coaches could see the respective session and gain further understanding of the pillar being delivered including strategies provided at both player and team level. For example, seeing the delivery of breathing techniques to help regulate heart rate to mediate some of the somatic symptoms of stress and anxiety (Pineschi, & Di Pietro, 2013) would help the coaches to understand the process and ensure player were attempting to try these in training and competition as and when necessary. If coaches could understand signs of stress, then they may better positioned to reinforce the use of breathing techniques as a coping mechanism. Secondly, coaches were able to offer triangulation with the information provided within the monthly coach education resources and recent (or future) competitive situations. For example, where and when might coaches notice anxiety in players and how might they be able to support players in training and competition. Coaches, often ex professional players, also provided further contextual information to support the pillar being delivered from their playing or previous coaching experiences which further enhanced the practical application of some of the pillars. This acted as form of knowledge sharing which has been seen to be beneficial in coach development settings (Jones et al., 2004).

Influencing the environment

The environment is a vital and controllable aspect of successful talent development (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Larsen, et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2017). The regular interaction and engagement of coaches led to formal and informal discussions of how we might shape the

wider environment to further support the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics. There were a wide range of planned, implicit, strategies to support the development of the 8 Pillars via the construction of the environment in which players operated. In essence, such activities were designed to make developmental practices not feel like education or training (Foster et al., 2016). Three examples are outlined below.

To support the Communication and Confidence pillars, several age groups competed at the same time when at home games. All age groups were integrated into a singular warm up activity. This activity was designed to increase familiarity with other age groups, possibly make new friends, allow opportunities for players to ask questions to older players, and get to know coaches of other age groups. A secondary function of this activity was to support players who may be asked to 'play up' or 'play down' in an older or younger age group. For example, if players knew older players and the coach, they may feel more comfortable when asked to play in different age groups.

To support the Presence pillar, players were asked to lead elements of pre-match, half-time, and post-match talks. Additionally, in training, players were given opportunities to feedback back to each other about what worked and what did not in the games. The function of this strategy was to support the players in taking further responsibility for their actions by reflecting and communicating their thoughts to each other. It also identified more dominant individuals who enjoyed such responsibility and those that did not and might need some further guidance.

To support the Self-Awareness pillar, players were given the opportunity to co-create their own objectives via 6 weekly review meetings with their age group coach. Players were asked to identify objectives before the meeting and work with a coach to refine them. Players were also granted 'golden time' in sessions to work on anything they wanted to within the

parameters of space and equipment. This self-directed time provided opportunities for players to take ownership of their development. For example, some players chose to work on shooting or defensive heading. Coaches would intervene and support the refinement of objectives if required.

PART C: Initial reflections and future recommendations

After one year of planning and one season of a complete delivery cycle of the 8 Pillars programme there are several key reflective points to be made which would enhance its conveyance and act as points to consider for soccer clubs, academy managers, and coaches seeking to incorporate psychosocial development into their programmes. The process of reflective practice defined as "A purposeful and complex process that facilitates the examination of experience by questioning the whole self and our agency within the context of practice. This examination transforms experience into learning, which helps us to access, make sense of and develop our knowledge-in-action to better understand and / or improve practice and the situation in which it occurs" (Knowles et al., 2014, p10). Reflective practice has been shown to support the development of coaches (Knowles et al., 2006), experienced SPs (Cropley et al., 2010) and neophyte SPs in developing practice-based knowledge (Cropley et al., 2007). For this programme, the aim of the reflective practice activity was undertaken to facilitate the identification of facets surrounding the creation and integration activities to support the development of psychosocially orientated programme in an academy soccer setting. A reflective diary to support initial reflections (Andersen et al., 2004) was completed on a weekly basis broadly aligning to Gibbs (1988) working from descriptions of meaningful events for example, in workshops, through to planning for future activities. Every fourth week in the programme there was a staff consolidation meeting (See Figure 1), where

coaches and support staff would meet and share their reflections of how areas of the programme were working and what may need to be changed moving forwards. Sharing of view reflections more publicly has been advocated as a useful in facilitating the interchange of view between different parties (see Knowles et al., 2001), in this case this was with coaches and other support staff.

1. Work with Coaches

Working with coaches first is essential, without the opportunity to work with coaches, the potential for impact of 8 Pillars programme could have been compromised. Holding a coach education workshop in the pre-season, monthly support packs, regular consolidation meetings, observations, attending games, and a WhatsApp group all supported coach engagement into the programme, shared ways of thinking, and moved toward a common language (Ashford et al., 2020; Cannon-Bowers et al., 1993) and general collaboration. Such collaboration has previously been referred to as a 'working alliance'. For example, Tod and Andersen (2005) proposed that a key aspect of such an alliance is the rapport between both parties [coaches and consultant] as it aids consultants' efforts to understand athletes' needs and helps determine useful interventions. A working alliance has also been associated with successful service delivery outcomes (e.g., Martin et al., 2000). Nevertheless, enhancing coach buy-in was a challenge at times, some age group coaches were part-time employees and had full-time jobs around their coaching role, this meant that time to work with coaches was minimal. It is also acknowledged that coaches may not have had time to fully engross themselves in the monthly support packs nor have the time to effectively plan to deliver on psychosocial development within their sessions despite good intentions to. Given the EPPP (2010) categorisations and requirements for more full-time staff in higher categories, a programme of this nature may be easier to implement larger academies with larger staffing infrastructure.

2. Know what you are looking for

The creation of age and staged observational checklists (see Table 2) designed through working with coaches by debating and sharing viewpoints ultimately provided a valuable, centralised, document from which to start to make judgements on whether players were developing the desired psychosocial characteristics and offered coaches a view of where they can individualise support provision to each player. Observation has been shown to be a vital tool in the coach's skill set when identifying talent (Christensen, 2009). The age and staged approach offered practitioners throughout the Academy the opportunity to plan sessions with these observation or behaviours in mind. Finally, the observational checklist provided a clear and common language (Ashford et al., 2020) when discussing areas of psychosocial characteristic development.

3. Workshops are enhanced when coaches are involved

In line with other programmes seeking to develop psychosocial characteristics, workshops were employed to deliver psychosocial development across the age groups and were the basis for the more formal learning aspects. Each workshop session lasted around 45 minutes. Programmes designed to develop psychological or psychosocial characteristics in youth athletes have tended to range from 30 minutes (e.g., Fournier et al., 2005) to 60 minutes (e.g., Dohme et al., 2019; Sharp et al., 2013;) and used a variety of teaching and learning methods to include debate, questions and answers, multimedia presentation, video footage of games, problem solving tasks, and group presentations (Dohme et al., 2019). Despite attempts to contextualise the topics into performance situations, using match footage, the classroom often felt a little detached from the pitch. The addition of coaches being present also supported coach and player buy in and offer coaches the opportunity to provide a layering of vital contextual detail.

4. **Efforts to enhance psychosocial development requires resources**

Bespoke delivery methods required to match the needs of each stakeholder (i.e., coaches and players) involved within the programme takes time and effort. For example, players and coaches needed different types of delivery to ensure they were best placed to receive the most benefits. Gaining contextual understanding, promoting buy-in, planning the player workshops, delivery, coach observations, feedback, informal discussions, and watching games all took time and subsequent resource from the soccer club. Such resource needs to be carefully allocated by football clubs given the range of requirements soccer clubs are required to deploy to satisfy the EPPP auditing (EPPP, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

The process of designing, delivering and reflection is not without limitation. Firstly, having coaches in the workshop may elicit some form of social adjustment. Social adjustment is defined as the degree to which an individual engages in competent social behaviour and adapts to the immediate social context (Crick & Dodge, 1994). The possible impact of this is something we did not assess. Secondly, the programme was only rolled out over one season to date and as such this was something of a snapshot. We have been unable to reflect on the journey a young player may have though what could be 10 years of academy involvement and their experiences of the programme over the longer term. Thirdly, the circularisation of the 8 Pillars only allowed for focus on one at a time. Many aspects of the 8 Pillars programme emerged in various situations across every week. This may result in missed opportunities for coaches to work on other aspects beyond those that were planned.

After a season of delivery, there are several directions in which to build upon the existing programme. Firstly, a robust monitoring tool to incorporate all 8 Pillars should be designed to support self (player) and coach-led development over time. Such information

could then feed into wider evaluative mechanisms (e.g., technical, tactical, and physiological data) to support development plans, and release or retain decisions. One suggestion would be to develop a long-term individualised profiling tool for each stage of development within an academy setting for players and coaches to complete based on the early principles of Butler and Hardy (1992). Player and coach scores could be compared to assess differences which could act as discussion points to further develop self-awareness. Secondly, given that the environment is both important and controllable (Larsen et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2017) a further focus on the environment to support the development characteristics within the 8 Pillars is warranted. Such work could include assessing the efficacy of aspects such as match day protocols, team tours, engaging in the wider community, managing exposure to responsibility, and ownership of own development. Thirdly, further investment of time with coaches in situ is needed to empower coaches to plan effective practices to support the development of psychosocial characteristics in their participants. Football club academies should consider facilitating activities to support coaches in developing psychosocial competencies when planning their CPD offering and allocating further resource in this area to allow external staff to support such developments.

Conclusions

This paper advocates the development of psychosocial skills and characteristics in football academies through a planned and resourced programme within the wider coaching syllabus. The 8 Pillars programme is a theoretically informed, contextually specific programme to support the development of psychosocial characteristics in youth soccer players and service delivery of coaches in this area in a highly specific context. The programme seeks to positively influence players and coaches whilst attending to regulatory requirements and accepted notions of best practice. To maximise impact of the programme extensive immersion, clear contextual understanding, time, and a multifaceted approach with

a range of stakeholders, i.e., players and coaches, is recommended to foster the development of psychosocial characteristics in soccer TDEs. The need for immersion into the context and effective working relationships with key stakeholders to create and deliver programmes of this nature have resource implications which need to be carefully considered by key stakeholders within soccer academies.

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Table One: 8 Pillars Definition and Research support (Adapted from Till et al., 2020)

Psycho-Social Component	Definition	Research Support	Coaching Interventions
Communication	Sending / receiving messages effectively including coach to player and player to player interactions	Harwood, (2008); Hill, MacNamara, & Collins (2015); Jones & Lavallee (2009)	Provide constructive feedback positively.
Control	Can regulate own thoughts and emotions	Harwood, (2008); Gross & Thompson, (2007); Jones & Lavallee (2009)	Promotes that mistake will happen and encourages correct behaviour.
Commitment	Quality and quantity of motivation to get better in training and competition.	Deci & Ryan, (2001); Harwood, (2008); MacNamara et al., (2010a; 2010b)	Rewards effort over performance
Confidence	Belief that they can execute skills to a desired level for themselves and the team.	Harwood, (2008); Bandura, (1977)	Designs tasks to create success
Concentration	Can focus on a specific task and avoid distraction	Orlick and Partington (1998); Harwood (2008); Gould et al., (2002)	Designs tasks with multiple stimuli
Resilience	Role of mental processes and behaviours in protecting themselves from negative stressors.	Fletcher & Sarker (2013); MacNamara & Collins (2010a; 2010b); Gould et al., (2002); Jones & Lavallee (2009)	Provides challenge to players
Presence	To stand out as an individual person	Mitchell, (2015)	Offer opportunities to lead elements of activities.
Self-awareness	To know one's strength and areas for development in given contexts.	Mills et al., (2014); Ravizza, (2006); MacNamara et al., (2010a; 2010b); Gould et al. (2002); Jones & Lavallee (2009)	Challenging athletes to reflect on their progress and performance.

Table Two: Aged and staged observable behaviours associated with the 8 Pillars.

	Foundation Development Phase	Youth Development Phase	Professional Development Phase
Communication	Asking questions to the coach – seeking clarification, talking to each other about the game / training – offer some ideas to each other, can easily make friends and converse	Listen to teammates / coaches with respect, support and encourage, positive, constructive criticism to teammates if e.g., a move has broken down, body language always positive and purposeful (coaches need to model and agree what this looks like?)	Encourage and raise the intensity of the team, manage frustration by encouraging what the team can do next, body language always positive and purposeful
Control	Attention (if practice design is aligned), don't get bogged down after errors, keep trying	Responding quickly and positively after success OR error, quick mental preparation at set pieces or corners, very little arguing with e.g., a ref if decisions are not correct.	Knowing when to speed up or slow the game, quick mental preparation at set pieces or corners, slowly getting up after a foul to help own team to organise, look to raise energy levels of the team.
Commitment	Arrives early, Eagerness to engage in learning, effortful in all aspects of training and competition.	Staying involved in the play, looking to create opportunities in training and games, showing for teammates	Play through pain / fatigue, chasing a bad pass down to ensure they receive it, never give up
Confidence	Volunteering to e.g., demonstrate, wanting to answer questions, plays, and moves with purpose, tries new skills before others. ,	Spring in step throughout the session, wanting the ball when losing, plays with a sense of urgency, try passes or skills without fear	Demanding the ball, want to receive under pressure, try passes, shots, or skills without fear consistently
Concentration	Respond quickly to instructions, show understanding quickly, don't need to be told new information many times.	Adapting correct positions in open play, stay focussed when tired, anticipate movements of opponents, quickly refocus after a break in play	Communicate information to others, win in high % of personal battles in games, accurately recognises a range of cues and triggers.
Resilience	Sticks at a task they find hard or challenging, keeps 'going 'when errors are made	A deep seeded self-belief that they can do something, keeping level-headed in games if losing or receiving incorrect decisions.	Stability in the face of challenge, associated with learning to be a professional. Coping with playing U18's one week then U23's another week then back to U18's, seek support if they have a problem / challenge.
Presence	Eye contact, funny / engaging, good manners / respectful, positive body language, always on toes in games Tries to help others	Self-motivated to extras, not afraid to ask a question Willingly and authentically helpful, only need telling once, tries to help others	Add value to the session Influence others to support the team X factor – Something in the eyes Take every session as an opportunity to impress. Look like they are grabbing the opportunity every session.
Self-Awareness	Can articulate own strength and weakness with some support, can reflect on performances and development with support, these players appear driven and internally motivated	Takes personal responsibility, can independently reflect on performances and development, can set own goals, these players appear driven and internally.	Can identify own development needs, can drive own development needs, doesn't need lots of feedback, calm, cool, collected, has perspective on a range of situation, these players appear driven and internally motivated.

Figure One: Cyclical nature of the academy curriculum delivery