COACH EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL:

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING THE PATH AND

WALKING THE PATH

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BExSc, MExSc

This thesis is submitted to fulfil the requirements for the award of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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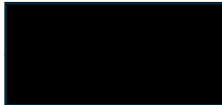Victoria University

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ABSTRACT

Formal coach education represents an important component of the coach development landscape. With that said, there is a lack of research that addresses coach education in Australian football (soccer). To remedy this, the current doctoral thesis undertook an exploratory, responsive approach to inquiry, which led to the emergence of three interwoven studies. Each followed a qualitative methodology, ranging from semi-structured interviews, to critical conceptual analyses. In Study One, 20 highly-credentialed Australian football coaches were interviewed, gleaning perspectives on: (i) coach education, (ii) their role as coaches, and (iii) practice design. Findings revealed that coaches were generally critical of Football Australia's current educative model, deeming practices as ineffective in preparing them for the realities of coaching. This was traced to the delivery of abstract content within decontextualised settings. In response, Study Two critically analysed the epistemological foundation of the current coach education model in Australian football. This led to the advancement of a *situated approach* to coach education, grounded in the relationality of *enskilment*. Study Three concretised this situated approach by interviewing 28 Australian football coaches, coach educators, and football administrators. Interviews oriented three predetermined themes: (i) the benefits of adopting a situated approach, (ii) the barriers associated with such an approach, and (iii) potential strategies for its successful integration. While each study contributed to the discourse, collectively, they helped assemble a strategic report that is to be delivered to Football Australia, offering key recommendations for how a situated approach to coach education could be integrated in Australian football. While further work is required, the implications of this doctoral thesis are wide-reaching, primarily extending to improved educative experiences for Australian football coaches.

STUDENT DECLARATION

I, Erch Selimi, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'Coach Education in Australian Football: the difference between *knowing* the path and *walking* the path' is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University's Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures.

Signature: ███████   Date: 31/07/2024

Ethics Declaration

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee and compliance (VUHRECC). Approval numbers HRE21-021, HRE22-031 & HRE23-164

Signature: ███████   Date: 31/07/2024

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"*When you know the fourfoil in all its seasons root and leaf and flower, by sight and scent and seed then you may learn its true name, knowing its being: which is more than its use. What, after all, is the use of you?*"

– A Wizard of Earthsea, Ursula K. Le Guin

and I believe we achieved this goal thanks to their enthusiastic and heartfelt participation.

Turning to my academic supervisors and mentors. Ron and Rose, I'm deeply grateful for your guidance during my first year. Your knowledge, empathy, and enthusiasm inspired me and confirmed my decision to pursue a PhD. Alex, it's been an absolute pleasure getting to know you over the last few years. I am grateful for your friendship and contributions to this thesis. To Fabio, my secondary supervisor, the support you provided me early in my academic career was a major factor in my decision to pursue further studies. I appreciate your guidance, mentorship, and, most importantly, friendship during this journey.

Finally, to my primary supervisor, Carl. It has pained me every time I've used the word "I" in this thesis, for nothing could be further from the truth. It is difficult to accurately describe your contribution and influence not only on this thesis but also on me as an individual. So, inspired and adapted from one of my favourite sketches, I'll conclude this section with this somewhat quirky but accurate statement. The dictionary defines "superlative" as being of the highest kind, quality, or order; surpassing all else or others; supreme. I define it as Carl Woods. As a supervisor, as a mentor, as a man, and as a friend, he is of the highest kind, quality and order; supreme.

DETAILS OF INCLUDED PAPERS: THESIS WITH PUBLICATION

Chapter No.	Publication Title	Publication Status	Publication Details
Chapter 3	Exploring football coaches' views on coach education, role, and practice design: An Australian perspective	Published	**Selimi, E.**, Lascu, A., Serpiello, F., & Woods, C. T. (2023). Exploring football coaches' views on coach education, role, and practice design: An Australian perspective. *PloS one, 18*(5*)*. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285871 Published: May 16th, 2023
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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Publications

Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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Chapter 5

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFC   Asian Football Confederation

CCC   Club Coach Coordinator

CLA   Constraints-Led Approach

CoP   Community of Practice

CPD   Continued Professional Development

FA   Football Australia (Formerly known as Football Federation Australia)

FCA   Football Coaches Australia

FCP   Football Coaching Process

LPP   Legitimate Peripheral Participation

MF   Member Federations

NFC   National Football Curriculum

NGB   National Governing Body

PFA   Professional Footballers Australia

TD   Technical Director

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

Established in 2004, Football Australia (FA) is the national governing body for football[1] in Australia. In conjunction with nine member federations (Capital Football, Northern NSW Football, Football Northern Territory, Football NSW, Football Queensland, Football South Australia, Football Tasmania, Football Victoria, and Football West), FA aim to "bring communities together through football – connecting Australia to the world" (Football Australia, 2021). In line with this vision, FA introduced the *XI Principles for the future of Australian Football* in 2020. This document, derived from extensive feedback across the Australian football landscape (Football Australia, 2020), outlines a set of guiding principles that intend to shape the future of the sport. Since publishing these principles, FA has set out on its journey to 'transform' Australian football, addressing various challenges the sport faces, while charting a course for its future development and growth (Football Australia, 2020, 2022).

Given my personal, academic, and professional engagement in football coaching, I was particularly drawn to Principle Six, titled '*Create world-class environments for coach development*' (Football Australia, 2020). This principle encompasses a range of promising measures that include fostering a strong culture of coach development, improving coaching standards through a quality-assured system, modernising coach education delivery methods, increasing the number of coaches by removing the barriers to coach education, creating opportunities for further education and professional development of Technical Directors (TD), and reviewing course content (Football Australia, 2020). The overarching goal of these measures is to strike a better balance between coach accreditation and coach development, thereby enhancing the quality of coaching across the country. This doctoral thesis, thus, targets its investigation focus

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[1] Association football, the sport's official name, is commonly referred to as 'football' globally. However, variations in terminology exist, including 'fútbol' and 'soccer' among others. From this point on, it will be referred to as "Australian football".

around this sixth principle.

The release of the XI Principles coincides with a pivotal juncture in Australian football. The unprecedented rise in popularity of the women's national team (Matildas) and the sustained interest in the men's national team (Socceroos) have each collectively positioned the sport for a transformative period (Football Australia, 2020, 2022, 2023b). This is particularly evident through increased participation rates across the country, with over 1.7 million registered participants representing the most diverse and globally connected sport in the Australian sporting landscape (Football Australia, 2020, 2023b, 2023c). Pertinently, this number is projected to increase following the inspiring and unifying success of the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup, co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand (Football Australia, 2023c).

The subsequent effects of this increased participation have extended to the coaching sector, with a purported increase in coach education programs being delivered across school, community and advanced pathways (Football Australia, 2023c). This initiative has led to a notable increase in coach registrations, bringing the current total number to 57,488, with the country now boasting one of the highest rates of certified coaches per capita (Football Australia, 2020, 2023c). Further, recent data from FA indicates a significant uptake in advanced coach education, with over 1,500 participants engaging in over 95 Advanced Coaching courses across Australia (Football Australia, 2020). However, it is of note that a gender disparity persists, with 74% male and 26% female coaches currently registered (Football Australia, 2023c), highlighting an imbalance that FA are actively seeking to rectify (Football Australia, 2023a).

Within this context, coaches are not only seen as an essential component in nurturing the talent of Australian players, but are also significant to the game's overall growth and development (Football Australia, 2023b). As such, formal education programs are widely recognised by FA as a cornerstone to the development of skilled coaches across the

footballing community (Football Australia, 2015, 2020, 2023c). Formal education delivered by FA aims to provide coaches with a framework for acquiring the requisite theoretical knowledge, tactical acumen, and practical skills to effectively train and support developing players (Football Australia, 2013a, 2013b; Karim, 2016; Leeder, 2022). As such, the content of formal coach education programs typically encompasses a broad spectrum of topics, including – but not de-limited to – sport-specific techniques, training methodologies, strength and conditioning interventions, player development models, and aspects of sports psychology and athlete well-being. By engaging in these programs, it is thought that coaches can deepen their understanding of the game, refine their coaching practices, and ultimately contribute to the holistic development of Australian football players. Beyond the individual development of coaches, it has been posited that the formal education of coaches can also significantly influence the ethical development and conduct of coaches (Lumpkin et al., 1994), thus playing a pivotal role in cultivating a positive sporting culture associated with the game (Lyle, 2002; Vaughan et al., 2021). Therefore, the effective development of coaches can, in turn, have a ripple effect on players' well-being, participation, development and performance within the game (Football Australia, 2013a, 2015; Moen et al., 2015; Smith & Smoll, 2017).

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the burgeoning popularity of football in Australia over the past decade, the landscape of coach education within the sport remains largely under-researched. Moreover, the limited research that does focus on coach education in Australian football has predominantly targeted discrete aspects of the educational landscape, revealing a notable incongruity between what coaches actually 'do' and what is promoted by FA (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor & Larkin, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2017a, 2017b; O'Connor et al., 2022). For example, Karagiannis and Pill (2017) noted that while coaches appreciated the National Football Curriculum (NFC – elaborated on in Chapter 2), their actual coaching practices rarely aligned with the recommendations it espouses.

This apparent disconnect does raise serious concerns about the efficacy of the NFC and FA's educative strategies that are purported to influence coaching practice. However, although these studies have yielded valuable insights, their emphasis on community and volunteer coaches does limit the generalisability of their findings, leading to an enticing gap within our current understanding that this thesis aims to address.

The scarcity of research, coupled with the opportunities presented by FA's Principle Six creates the impetus for this doctoral thesis. This thesis attempts, not only to respond to the needs of FA and the coaching community, but to make an original contribution to the scientific knowledge of this field. To do so, it follows a responsive and exploratory approach to inquiry, emphasising open-endedness over the testing of prior-established hypotheses. This responsive exploration is particularly crucial in this context, as it allows for a comprehensive and unbiased exploration of a relatively uncharted domain, potentially uncovering novel insights and perspectives that may not have been captured through conventional research designs (Schwab & Held, 2020).

1.3 Research Questions and Thesis Aims

The overarching aim of this thesis is twofold: first, to develop a deep and comprehensive understanding of the coach education landscape in Australian football, exploring how it shapes the experiences and development of coaches at all levels; second, to propose an evidence-based, strategic roadmap for the advancement of coach education that moves along a *different* path. To address these overarching aims, the following research questions will be considered in the forthcoming research Chapters:

- How do coaches view the current state of coach education in Australian football?

- How does the current coach education system in Australian football influence the development of coaches?

- What theoretical framework(s) underpin Football Australia's National Football

Curriculum and how do Australian football coaches interpret and identify with them?

- What theoretical framework(s) underpin coach education in Australian football, and how do they influence educational practices, coach learning, and development?

- What alternative pedagogical approaches could help coach development in the unique context of Australian football?

- What are the practical challenges and potential strategies for integrating alternative approaches for coach education in Australian football?

1.4 Significance of the Thesis

Through a series of three interwoven studies, this doctoral thesis aims to contribute new knowledge that advances a deeper theoretical understanding of coach education and development within Australian football. The significance of this thesis and its subsequent findings are, thus, wide-reaching, primarily implicating the design and integration of a *different* approach to coach education in Australian football that subverts limitations associated with the current model. An exploration of alternative pedagogical approaches may serve as a catalyst for transforming coach education across the country, leading to more contextually relevant educative experiences for football coaches. Beyond this, the current doctoral thesis holds practical significance. It seeks to provide an authentic portrayal of the coaching landscape within Australian football, affording the coaching community (i.e., coaches, coach educators, administrators, and researchers) with a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural constraints that shape coach education and development in this context. This has the potential to pave the way for the transformation called for by FA, moving coach education in Australian football into new territory.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

To set the context for this thesis, I would like to outline my own position in relation to the research. As such, this section provides insight into how my personal, professional, and academic experiences shaped my PhD program. After completing a Bachelor of Exercise and Sport Science in 2015, I pursued a Master of Sport Science and Football Performance in the hope of gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of the various careers available in high-performance sport. In 2016, near the conclusion of my first year, I undertook a Performance Analysis internship with a semi-professional football team competing in the top tier of National Premier League in Victoria.

Having received complementary feedback about my performance from both the coaching staff and playing group, I aimed to enhance the analysis program and my contribution to the football program in my second year. Initially believing that the quality of my work was largely dependent on how much quality data I could collect, analyse and report, I increased data collection and analysis, recruited three interns and delivered more statistical reports and video presentations. While these contributions were welcomed, influencing decisions made on our playing style, player feedback and team selection, I gradually encountered challenges in communicating the context in which my work should be interpreted to both players and coaches. This led to a period of deep reflection, during which I began to appreciate the role of the analyst not solely in terms of its technical characteristics, but as another form of coaching, albeit with different responsibilities, points of contact, and mediums of communication.

To broaden my perspective on the role of the coach, I made the decision to pursue formal coach education with FA. Like most coaches, I undertook the 'C' Licence, not only as a way to meet my accreditation requirements, but to also develop my coaching knowledge and practice. While I appreciated the social aspects of the course and the discussions around topics such as training design, session delivery, and game model, I felt the courses lacked depth and practical application.

My concerns also extended to on-course practical and video assessments. The pressure of being evaluated and analysed by peers and coach educators in contexts that were largely manufactured and unrealistic caused significant anxiety and self-doubt. The disconnect between course content, knowledge, and practices I wanted to learn and the course's design and expectations, created not only a sense of dissonance among the majority of coaches and educators, but it also dawned on me that the experiences and content I was engaging with would have little to no practical utility in the real world. While unsure of the specific problems within coach education, better still how they could be overcome, I was sceptical of its design and delivery. Despite this, I persisted, enrolling in the 'B' License, hoping for a more positive and influential experience. However, the 'B' License proved to be largely a repetition of the 'C', reinforcing my concerns about the value and effectiveness of coach education in Australian football.

My participation in the 'B' License coincided with two major developments in my professional and academic life. I assumed a new role as Technical Director at North Sunshine Eagles Football Club, focusing on coach development and curriculum design, and I had just completed my Master's degree. These experiences, combined with the challenges I faced during my coaching and coach education journey, provided the impetus for a PhD focused on coach education and development in Australian football. Thus, the following chapters represent a journey into the unknown, exploring the Australian football coach education landscape in the hope of understanding, learning, and helping to overcome the challenges associated with current coach education models and practices.

1.6 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into seven chapters. As noted here, Chapter 1 offers a brief background to the research and my positioning within it. Further, it highlights the problem statement, research questions, and thesis significance. Chapter 2 provides a narrative

review of the literature, situating the current thesis within the broader academic field of coach education. This lays the foundation for the forthcoming empirical studies presented throughout Chapters 3, 4 and 5. Each adopt a unique qualitative, exploratory research design, with the intent being to follow the thread each expose – thereby creating a broader, more responsive narrative that flows throughout the thesis. This culminates in Chapter 6, which translates the key findings into practical recommendations for FA by way of a tailored report. Finally, Chapter 7 rounds the thesis out, cap-stoning its main conclusions, while foregrounding some prospective avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction: Football Australia's Roadmap for Coach Education

In 2009, FA unveiled the NFC. Positioned as a new strategic initiative aimed at propelling Australian football to a more prominent global standing, its goal was to provide "the roadmap to international success" (Football Australia, 2013a). For many, its release was long overdue, with some in the field even labelling it a turning point for football in Australia (Fleetwood, 2018; Murray, 2016)[2]. The purpose of the NFC was to provide a standardised framework for the game that would help bring the Australian football community together, uniting coaches and players through the development of a unified national footballing identity (Football Australia, 2013a). Beyond the NFC providing a means for unification, FA also called for a "fundamental transformation" in Australian football (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 1). In what could be described as an ambitious mission, FA set out to become world leaders in the game (Football Australia, 2013a), necessitating a significant overhaul of player development, coach education, and the ensuing national playing and coaching philosophy. Importantly, the Football Coaching Process (FCP), also released in 2013, stated that this transformation would require "more than just minor cosmetic tweaks" (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 17). Rather, it demanded a fundamental shift in how the game was played and coached across the country. Since this ambitious declaration, FA has implemented a variety of measures aimed at actualising the NFC vision. These include taking a 'holistic' approach to coach education, grounding courses and practices on a 'scientific' foundation, and aligning with renowned international standards (Football Australia, 2015, 2020, 2023b).

It is of considerable note that after more than a decade since its inception, there has been little research into the NFC's impact on the coach education landscape in Australian football. Existing work has primarily focused on observing coaching practices in relation to the NFC's underlying principles, with findings revealing that while practice tasks are

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[2] These referenced articles provide an interesting insight regarding the communal perceptions of the NFC.

largely structured in accord with NFC recommendations, coaching behaviours often deviate from the player-centred, constraints-led approach it advocates (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2017; O'Connor et al., 2022). While these studies are helpful, shedding light on Australian football coaches, they are yet to comprehensively examine the direct impact of both FA's formal coach education programs and the NFC on day-to-day coaching practices and behaviours. Moreover, they have primarily focused on community coaches with limited exposure to FA's coach education pathway, which means that findings may not be reflective of the broader coaching community in Australia. Thus, the extent to which FA's coach education program and the NFC influence coaching behaviours and practices across different levels of expertise remains unclear, leading to some critical questions:

- How effective has the NFC been in developing a unified national coaching philosophy that coaches align with?

- How do coaches interpret and identify with the content espoused in the NFC?

- How effective have FA's coach education programs been in developing competent coaches?

Prior to FA realising its goal of 'creating world-class environments for coach development' (Football Australia, 2020), such questions need to be carefully addressed. Additionally, the perspectives of those most directly implicated by coach education initiatives – that is, Australian football coaches themselves – must be considered when responding to such questions (Nash & Sproule, 2012). This doctoral thesis aims to trace some responses to these questions by drawing on the experiences of coaches, coach educators, and various other stakeholders. To lay the foundation for this empirical investigation, the forthcoming sections of this Chapter will critically examine the current Australian football coach education landscape. This will include: (i) outlining the current coach education pathway, detailing respective courses and qualifications offered by FA,

(ii) exploring the foundations of FA's current coach education model, (iii) reviewing the content within the NFC, and (iv) offering a critical analysis of the NFC's theoretical foundations. The overarching aim of this Chapter, then, is to establish a deeper insight to the current state of coaching and coach education in Australian football, starting with a delineation of the current coach education pathway.

2.2 The Current Coach Education Pathway

The Australian football coach education system is broadly comprised of two distinct developmental pathways: the Community Coaching and the Advanced Coaching pathways. Prior to exploring these, it is worth noting that FA – in conjunction with its nine member federations – are responsible for the design and delivery of the subsequent educative experiences coaches encounter on these respective pathways (Football Australia, 2020). Thus, while each member federation coordinates the course activities, they are generally bound by what FA advocate.

2.2.1 The Community Coaching Pathway

The Community Coaching pathway is tailored toward coaches of participation levels, with players typically being aged between 5 to 17 years. Broadly, education courses are short, running for 1 to 2 days, with the content primarily focused on providing coaches with information related to practice task design and coach feedback strategies (Football Australia, 2013a). Within this pathway, coaches work toward the attainment of the 'Foundation of Football' certificate, which can be gained through the successful completion of two main courses: the *MiniRoos* and *Foundation of Football* courses.

The *MiniRoos* course is designed for volunteer coaches working with novice players up to the age of 10 years of age (Football Australia, 2023d). It emphasises a practical, games-based approach to coaching (for a detailed overview as to what a games-based approach to coaching could entail, please see Pill (2016)). Moreover, by prioritising enjoyment and learning through play, the course aims to foster a lifelong love for football

in young participants. This means that the during the course, coaches are primarily exposed to fundamental game rules, being guided on how to create safe and enjoyable practice environments (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d; Leeder, 2022). Similarly, the *Foundation of Football* course is designed to support volunteer coaches working with players up to the age of 15 years (Football Australia, 2023d). Progressing from the *MiniRoos* course, this course introduces key soccer skills and general playing principles through practical sessions. The course is not graded, which allows participants the freedom to explore various ways of 'doing' during the practical sessions (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d).

2.2.2 The Advanced Coaching Pathway

The Advanced Coaching pathway is primarily geared toward those working in the performance phase of football. Courses are more intensive than the Community pathway, typically requiring 10 to 14 contact days, with content designed to cover FA's 'Coaching Expertise Model', presented within the NFC and FCP, that comprises three demonstratable competencies: (i) *training design*, (ii) *match analysis*, and (iii) *management* (Football Australia, 2013a, 2013b, 2023d). There are four levels of senior accreditation within the Advanced pathway: the 'C', 'B', and 'A' licence, and a 'Pro Diploma'. Briefly, the 'C' licence is designed for coaches working with players aged 12 years and above, ranging in skill level from beginners to competent players (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d). The curriculum builds upon the Foundation of Football certificate by progressing into the technical aspects of the game, which includes education around the various types of passing, receiving, dribbling, and defending that players will likely be required to develop as they advance. The 'B' licence also targets coaches working with players aged 12 years and above, but who are generally competent footballers (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d). Demonstrating the pathways sequential structure, the prerequisite to this licence is a 'C' licence, which must have been active for at least 12 months (Football Australia, 2023d). The primary focus of the

'B' licence is to educate coaches regarding the application of attacking and defending principles of play, with its assessment undertaken during periods of coaching small-sided games (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d). The 'A' licence is designed for coaches working with highly competent to expert players aged 16 years and above (Football Australia, 2023d). As such, its focus is to help coaches analyse the diverse ways teams apply attacking and defensive principles, in addition to integrating research-informed performance preparation models (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d). Assessments are usually geared toward a coach's skill at coaching players 'in the game', which involves 9v9 or 11v11 scenarios (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d). Lastly, the 'Pro Diploma' is a more intensive course aimed at coaches working with professional players. It consists of four key themes: (i) *leading oneself*, (ii) *leading others*, (iii) *leading culture*, and (iv) *the business of football*. A strong emphasis is placed on leadership in the Pro Diploma, both on and off the field, encouraging coaches to learn how to manage the demands placed on professional players and surrounding support staff (Football Australia, 2013a, 2023d).

Given the sequential nature of the Advanced Coaching Pathway, the 'C' and 'B' licence are designed in such a way that encourages coaches to adopt FA's vision and philosophy of the game (Football Australia, 2013b; Leeder, 2022). It is only at the 'A' licence (approximately 24 months into the coaching pathway) where coaches are encouraged to develop and establish their own vision and philosophy of the game, which upon developing, are then expected to clearly articulate to FA (Football Australia, 2013b). Moreover, on completion of the 'A' licence, it is expected that coaches will be able to demonstrate knowledge in the following areas: *Match Analysis*; *The Objectives and Structure of Football*; *The FA Philosophy and Vision*; *The FA Team Model*; *The Coach Expertise Model*; *Football Analysis; Plan, Prepare, Conduct and Evaluate Training Sessions; Time Management*; and *Change Management* (Football Australia, 2013b; Football Victoria, 2021).

It is important to note that despite the purported benefits of the Advanced Coaching

Pathway, it does present considerable challenges and barriers related to its rigid and sequential structure, its associated costs, and its geographic positioning (Football Australia, 2015; Karim, 2016; Leeder, 2022). This is exacerbated by the formalised and time-consuming nature of the course assessment process, including mandatory attendance at all sessions, a formal exam, and the requirement of video assessment of coaching practice (Leeder, 2022). Indeed, although an assessment process may be necessary to maintain a certain standard of coaching at the advanced level, the structure of the current assessment presents issues of equity and inclusion (Karim, 2016; Leeder, 2022). For example, the rigidity of the course delivery, coupled with its exuberant costing structure, may present barriers for coaches from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds or for those living in regional areas where accessibility is a significant constraint to course completion. These challenges foreground an interesting juncture in the Advanced Coaching Pathway, which can be broadly surmised across five key questions:

1. Does the accreditation process effectively translate the pedagogical principles of the NFC into coaches' practice? Otherwise stated: Are coaches equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement the curriculum's pedagogical approaches in their coaching practice?

2. Does the universal nature of the NFC meet the diverse needs of coaches across different contexts and levels of the game?

3. How do coaches actually take up and engage with the NFC and ensuing accreditation process, and do they view it as a valuable process that enriches their educative journey?

4. Is the current educative system fostering a culture of continuous learning and development, or is it merely driving a status quo?

5. Does the NFC shape coaching practices and outcomes positively, or are there

unseen negative connotations that drive a culture of indoctrination and homogenisation with regards to coach education?

Currently, these confronting questions remain largely unexplored. This is concerning, as it would seem that prior to developing a world-class coach education environment (Football Australia, 2020), FA would need to turn inward and critically evaluate what is currently in place. In an attempt to initiate this process, the following sections of this Chapter will take a closer look at the foundations of coach education in Australian football.

2.3 The Foundations of Coach Education in Australian Football

Coach education has been identified by FA as a key component of its football development plan, emphasising its significance in enhancing coaching quality and effectiveness across all levels of the sport (Football Australia, 2013a). As mentioned in the section above, the current structure of coach education in the Advanced Pathway is based on FA's 'Coaching Expertise Model', which delineates the various competencies that coaches are expected to develop and demonstrate at different levels of accreditation (Football Australia, 2013a). The aim of this section is to explore the foundation of FA's current coach education model, paying close attention to three founding dimensions: (i) the delivery of content, (ii) its didactic undertone, and (iii) its grounding in a metaphoric model of transmission. Bringing such foundations to the surface will be of considerable use in paving a way for a *different* approach to coach education that subverts associated pitfalls.

2.3.1 The Delivery of Content

One of FA's primary concerns in designing and delivering coach education is ensuring that the multifaceted nature of coaching is not decomposed into individual parts that are then taught in isolation (Football Australia, 2013b). Here, FA aims to provide coaches with a holistic understanding of the knowledge required in the profession through

'contextualised' content and modules relating to the Coaching Expertise Model (Football Australia, 2013b). This emphasis on contextualised learning aligns with recommendations in the literature (Cushion et al., 2003; Stone et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2023), which advocate for incorporating real-world coaching scenarios and experiences into coach education programs. Yet, despite this intention, coach education within the Advanced Coaching Pathway is known to compartmentalise knowledge and skills into discrete, 'acquirable' entities, oft-presented in classroom settings far removed from the actual coaching environment (see Karim, 2016). The foundational basis for this model, wherein knowledge is viewed as a commodity that can be transferred from expert to novice (see Woods, 2021), contrasts with FA's purported intentions to help coaches advance their knowledge in context (Nash, 2023). Though, FA are not alone in this apparent misalignment, with coach education models across the world being criticised for delivering abstract content in contexts that have little meaning for participants (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Jones & Allison, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2013; Paquette et al., 2019).

2.3.2 A Didactic Undertone

In association with its purported abstract and decontextualised content delivery, FA's current model of coach education is structured didactically, whereby coaches are often viewed as passive recipients of secondary information that has been imparted by experienced counterparts (Karim, 2016; Maximos et al., 2022). This model, as Abraham and Collins (1998) suggest, may promote a singular and presumed 'correct' approach to coaching, as recipients are lulled into following what has been prescribed *for* them, thereby limiting opportunities for exploration and creativity. Additionally, coach education is often criticised for its homogenisation, with a didactic undertone neglecting the influence of broader environmental constraints on coaching behaviours and practices (see Vaughan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2022). This didactic undertone to coach education in Australian football may inadvertently encourage a surface-level or

superficial approach to learning, in which coaches prioritise the fulfilment of accreditation requirements through various forms of 'studentship' (Chesterfield et al., 2010), rather than critically engaging with the course content (Football Australia, 2013a; 2023d; O'Sullivan et al., 2023).

2.3.3 A Metaphoric Model of Transmission

Following this didactic undertone, it appears that the nature of formal coach education delivered by FA is rooted in what has been referred to as a 'model of transmission' (Ingold, 2011; Woods, 2021). Broadly, this model views knowledge as a secondary, objective entity that can be instilled into the minds of others (Woods, 2021). Accordingly, knowing becomes a matter of storage and application, which means a knowledgeable coach is one who can draw upon a vast repository of stored, transmitted content – by way of rules, concepts, and representations – that is to be applied in practice when the time is 'right' (Ingold, 2011, 2017; Woods, 2021). This model aligns with Lave's (1990) critique of the 'culture of acquisition', where learning is seen as a cognitive process occurring abstractly and sequentially. Recent work in the context of football coaching supports this critique, suggesting that formal approaches to education that are grounded in a model of transmission are largely ineffective in preparing coaches for the realities of coaching (Cushion et al., 2010; Kuklick & Mills, 2023; Leeder, 2022; Nelson et al., 2013). It is, thus, of little surprise that literature exploring the practices of Australian football coaches have raised concerns about the effectiveness, relevance, and value of the Australia's current coach education model (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; Karim, 2016; Siokos, 2011).

When these three founding dimensions are considered, it becomes apparent that the current coach education model in Australian football may be largely ineffective in preparing coaches for the realities of coaching. Though, at present, there is little research that corroborates these claims against the sentiments voiced by coaches themselves.

2.4 The National Football Curriculum

A key component of the current coach education model in Australian football is the NFC, which was originally released in 2009, and then updated in 2013[3]. One of the main motivations behind the design and implementation of the NFC was a perceived lack of 'direction' related to the growth and development of football in Australia (Football Australia, 2013a). At the time of its release, the NFC aimed to address key strategic initiatives related to youth participation and coach education (Football Australia, 2013a). With specific reference to the latter, the NFC aimed to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for coach education, based on a clearer understanding of the desired player profile and the corresponding 'type' of coach needed to develop them (Football Australia, 2013a, 2013b). The NFC was thus expected to foster a distinct 'Australian way of coaching'. Currently, it still forms the basis for all formal coach education courses conducted by FA, which means its importance in shaping coach behaviours cannot be overstated. This section of the narrative review will undertake a comprehensive analysis of the NFC, beginning with an examination of its origins. From here, it will then explore how it depicts the role of the coach, and then conclude with an analysis of its theoretical underpinning.

2.4.1 Origins of the NFC

Since its inception, the NFC has aimed to provide coaches with an understanding of the national 'playing' and 'coaching' philosophy, whilst attempting to consider the socio-cultural constraints that shape Australian football (Football Australia, 2013b). Interestingly, although the idea of this socio-cultural appreciation was generally well-accepted by the Australian football community (Karim, 2016; Maximos et al., 2022), the NFC has faced considerable cynicism for two main reasons. First, FA's technical staff responsible for the development of the NFC predominantly originated from the

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[3] While the fundamental principles remained consistent between both versions, the 2013 edition offered a more comprehensive and expanded elaboration of them.

Netherlands (Karim, 2016; Maximos et al., 2022). Why this has been a cause for concern is that it led to the widespread belief that the curriculum was modelled on the 'Dutch' approach to player and coach development (Fleetwood, 2018; Maximos et al., 2022; Murray, 2016). Second, the perceived alignment with other international playing styles and methodologies fostered the belief that the national identity FA sought to cultivate was in fact a derivative, inauthentic amalgamation of international football cultures (Karim, 2016; Maximos et al., 2022). This sentiment was exemplified by a recent finding from Maximos et al. (2022), who noted that FA technical staff had extensively studied international player and coach development models in an attempt to adapt them to an Australian context. This curriculum "copy and paste" has been heavily criticised in the literature (see O'Sullivan et al., 2023), and has even been labelled as a "failure" by Steve O'Connor (2013) – the chief of the Australian Institute of Sport soccer program:

> "I don't think you can import systems wholesale from one country to another and expect it to work. There are the ways the Dutch do things, the Germans, the French and they have been very successful. But there are all different reasons for that." (as cited in O'Sullivan et al., 2023, p. 1)

Along similar lines, (North et al., 2014) cautioned against the adoption of coaching curricula from other countries, arguing that such practices can lead to decontextualised approaches that overlook the unique socio-cultural constraints shaping football practices within various locales. This concern is echoed across the literature, which suggests that 'cherry-picking' various coach education practices may be leading to a homogenization of coaching practices across the world (Nash et al., 2017; O'Sullivan et al., 2023). Indeed, incorporating insights from other cultures can undoubtedly foster a vibrant exchange of ideas within coaching. But neglecting the unique socio-cultural constraints of a specific context may result in the uncritical adoption of practices, cultivating only a superficial understanding of their underlying principles (O'Sullivan et al., 2023).

From an Australian football perspective, this could lead to the stagnation of coach education – both in policy and practice – as there becomes a tendency to simply regurgitate imported content without considering how it resonates (or not) with the Australian context. It is of note that this 'copy and paste' concern is voiced by Professional Footballers Australia (PFA), who highlight the need for coach education to be contextually relevant and responsive to the specific needs of Australian football:

> "We should not limit our scope to what has worked here in the past or elsewhere in the present […]. Shaping and nurturing this culture is a shared responsibility – as it was a generation ago. It is a challenge that transcends a curriculum or methodology and involves every part of our game." (Professional Footballers Australia, 2019, p. 9)

Yet, despite the acknowledged importance of context sensitivity, Australian football coaches are still expected to adhere to the national coaching philosophy, as outlined within the NFC. As noted earlier in this Chapter, it is only during the 'A' license that coaches are explicitly encouraged to develop and implement their own individualised philosophy to coaching, which raises serious questions about the balance between standardisation and individual expression in coaching. Otherwise stated, while a unified national philosophy may indeed promote consistency, coherence and generalisation across the sport, it could stifle creativity, limiting a coach's flexibility to adapt their approaches to the specific needs of their unique socio-cultural contexts (Vaughan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2022). Further investigation is thus needed to assess the impact of the NFC on the Australian football landscape, particularly regarding how coaches engage with the content that has been prescribed *for* them.

2.4.2 Role of the Coach According to the NFC

To help coaches in differentiating expected coaching behaviours and practices across varying age groups, skill levels, and player experience, FA developed a framework for player development, which outlines specific player development phases of progression

(Table 1). Each phase is characterised by a distinct set of coaching objectives and practice design guidelines that combined, comprise the role of the coach. This framework, situated within the NFC, is purported to serve as a valuable tool for coaches, helping them tailor their approach to the unique needs and developmental stage of the players they work with. To this end, it is worth noting that it is on the *Performance Phase* that this doctoral thesis will focus.

Table 1. *Player development phases and role of coach as defined by FA in the NFC*

Phase	Player Age	Role of Coach
Discovery	5-9	To facilitate the players discovery of the objectives of football and the basic player actions required by providing a fun football environment.
Skill Acquisition	9-13	To prepare players for team football by developing the functional game skills.
Game Training	13-17	To prepare skilful players for performance phase football by teaching them to apply the functional game skills in a team setting.
Performance	17+	Preparing teams for a competition environment where winning becomes the main aim.

While the above framework does provide a delineation of coaching in the context of Australian football, it also presents an overly simplistic, and at times 'traditional' view of the coach's role. For example, contemporary perspectives acknowledge the broad impact a coach can have on player development, including (but no de-limited to) physical, psychological, emotional, and social well-being (Cronin & Armour, 2015; North, 2017). This speaks to the widely recognised view that coaching – at all phases, but especially at the Performance Phase – is a complex and multifaceted practice, shaped by a variety of interacting constraints and path dependencies (Lyle & Cushion, 2016b;

Stone et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019).

Focusing on Australian football, the deeply ingrained value placed on a 'preferred' playing style[4] likely constrains (wittingly or not) the ways in which coaches explore alternate ways of 'doing', manifest through practice designs and prescribed styles of play imposed by the NFC (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 17; 2013b). Concurrently, long- and short-term performance pressures, like seasonal expectations, can significantly influence the activities of a coach on a day-to-day, week-to-week and month-to-month basis (Roberts et al., 2023). Thus, it appears that Australian football coaches operating at this elite level of performance are required to navigate a variety of constraints that operate across varying timescales (for similar sentiments, see O'Sullivan et al., 2023). This brings into question the importance of a standardised, national view as to what a coach's role actually entails.

Following the above, some critical questions have begun to emerge with regards to the NFC and its utility in educating, supporting, and preparing coaches to succeed at the Performance Phase. Specifically:

1. How do Australian football coaches conceptualise their role with regards to performance preparation?

2. Is their alignment between coaches' conceptualisations of their role and the expectations set out by FA within the NFC?

3. How does FA's conceptualisation of the performance coaching role influence coach education programs?

Once again, addressing such questions will be critical if FA are to succeed in their

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[4] FA have summarised Australia's preferred playing style in the following statement: "A pro-active brand of football, based on effective possession, with the cutting edge provided by creative individuals. Defensively the key components are quick transition and intelligent collective pressing" (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 17).

ambition of creating a world-class coach education environment (Football Australia, 2020). Notably, should there be misalignment between coaches' perceptions of their role and that of the governing body expectations, then the very foundation of the NFC's recommendations could be drawn into question.

2.4.3 Theoretical Underpinnings of the NFC

From a coach education perspective, the NFC and its accompanying manual, *The Football Coaching Process*[5] (FCP), aims to provide coaches with a theoretical framework to underpin their coaching practice (Football Australia, 2013a, 2013b). More directly, this theoretical grounding intends to define the "Australian Way of Coaching" (Football Australia, 2013b), which encompasses three main concepts: (i) *a 'holistic' approach to coaching*, (ii) *an information processing model of motor learning and skill acquisition*, and (iii) *a player-centred approach to coaching*. The forthcoming will examine how each are embedded within the NFC accordingly.

2.4.3.1 A Holistic Approach to Coaching

According to FA, a holistic approach to coaching is one that seeks to develop key aspects of the game in conjunction with other key aspects of the game (Football Australia, 2013b). For example, a holistic approach to coaching would encourage activity designs that address player physiology in game-specific contexts through the careful manipulation of task and environmental constraints, such as player numbers, pitch and goal size, and scoring outcomes (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 68). While not explicitly stated, it appears that the espousal of this 'holistic' approach is aligned with key tenets of the Constraints-Led Approach (CLA) (O'Connor & Larkin, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2022; Renshaw & Chow, 2019). As a pedagogical tool, the CLA encourages coaches to facilitate emergent player behaviour, not through the rote drilling of pre-determined

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[5] The FCP is a document intended to act as a complementary resource for those attending FA's Advanced Coaching Pathway courses.

actions, but through the careful *design* of *representative practice tasks* that amplify or dampen various *opportunities for action* (Pinder et al., 2011; Renshaw et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2020). This process of 'learning by design' (Robertson & Woods, 2021) helps coaches cultivate practice environments that support the development of adaptable, creative, and self-regulating performers (Button et al., 2020).

While advocating for this 'holistic' approach to coaching, FA concurrently discourage what they refer to as an 'isolated' approach to coaching:

> "Many coaches, and indeed countries, still hold the [traditional] belief that football must be broken down into its many small components and that these components should then be practised in isolation until the techniques are deeply ingrained: we call this the 'isolated' approach." (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 70, text in brackets added)

As the above points toward, an 'isolated' approach decomposes key aspects of game-play in the hope of 'instilling' or 'drilling in' purportedly important, and presumed correct, 'techniques' (Pill, 2013, 2016). Yet, here is where some confusion starts to appear. Notably, while FA advocate for a holistic approach and discourage an isolated approach, the NFC does appear to state that in certain circumstances – i.e., when coaches have exhausted all other options – isolated and unopposed practice tasks may be used (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 73). To this, the NFC actually includes examples of drill-based, repetitive and isolated session designs, which significantly undermines the document's apparent adherence to its 'holistic' approach. It is of little surprise, then, to note apparent confusion and misalignment of practice within the Australian football community. O'Connor et al. (2017a), for example, noted that while practice sessions are often structured in accord with NFC recommendations, the ensuing coaching behaviours do not align with the holistic approach it purportedly advocates. Further insight is thus warranted to glean deeper perspectives as to this potential misalignment between what

the NFC advances, and what is actually 'done' by coaches on the pitch.

2.4.3.2 Information Processing Model of Motor Learning and Skill Acquisition

In what is seemingly another point of theoretical confusion and misalignment, the holistic approach FA advocate is underpinned by an information processing model of motor learning and skill acquisition (Football Australia, 2013a). Fundamentally, this model is grounded on the mentalist tradition that the brain operates like a computer to input, process, and output various 'drilled in' movement responses (Anson & Elliott, 2005). As is shown in Figure 1, this sequential process is actually visually presented in the NFC as a chain of linear events orienting 'perception', 'decision' and 'execution' (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 21).

PERCEPTION ➡ **DECISION** ➡ **EXECUTION**

Signals from the eyes and ears processed by **THE BRAIN**   The information was processed and a decision made by **THE BRAIN**   **THE BRAIN** sent a signal to the muscles
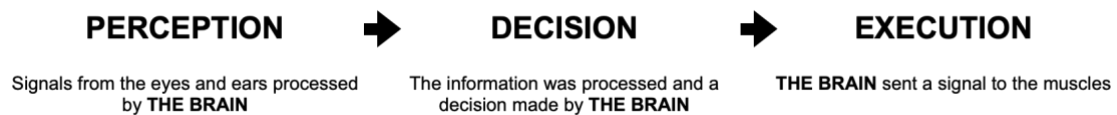
Figure 1. *The information processing model of motor learning and skill acquisition advanced by FA in the NFC*

To explore the implications of this model of motor learning and skill acquisition in the context of coach education, it is worth noting that it starts with a unit of analysis that is almost exclusively scaled to the performer (Araújo & Davids, 2011). This speaks to its metaphoric comparison with computational processes that occur in the mind to explain relatively permanent changes in a performer's movement capabilities (Renshaw et al., 2022; Woods et al., 2021). The explanatory rationale for such a computational view is that the environment is *impoverished* (cf. Chow, 2013), meaning that information in the environment is insufficient in helping a performer control their action – that is, it only offers *cues* (Klein, 1993). These cues are then integrated with a performer's long-term memory to construct a representation purported to support an outputted action (Klein, 1993). Perceiving and acting are thus internal processes, which means that what is

'acquired' through training are rules or propositions that specify how movements are to be controlled by the body (cf. Chow, 2013).

Critically, this model of motor learning and skill acquisition implicates how coaches would go about educating players. For example, if skill is understood as the acquisition of internalised rules or movement propositions, then education would become a process of information transmission, where coaches would attempt to impart (or *transmit*) knowledge into the minds of novices by way of repetitive and isolated practice. Interestingly, while promoting its holistic approach, FA actually speak to this isolated and sequential sentiment, stating:

> "Passing practices will focus on EXECUTION, as they are unopposed or use a rotating passive defender, but the clever coach tries to build in some PERCEPTION and DECISION" (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 99, capitals in original)

While this model of motor learning and skill acquisition continues to influence the education of Australian football coaches (Light, 2013; Light & Evans, 2010), there are growing calls to 'restore the balance' between the performer and environment in sports coaching (see for example, Davids et al., 2012; Renshaw et al., 2022; van der Kamp & Renshaw, 2015; Woods et al., 2021). Yet such calls appear to be scantly referenced by FA, which is of note considering their frequent emphasise on a "scientific" foundation for their holistic approach (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 5). This raises important questions that this thesis intends to address, relating not only to theoretical (mis)alignment within the NFC, but to the extent at which FA's holistic approach is actually grounded in empirical research.

2.4.3.3 Player-Centred Approach to Coaching

Through the delineation of the holistic approach, FA has *attempted* to establish clear expectations regarding how player development should be viewed, how practice should be designed and conducted, and how the coach should view their role in Australian

football. This is emphasised in their statement:

"Players learn by 'doing' and the coach must guide and facilitate this learning process" (Football Australia, 2013, p. 69).

Following this, FA posits that for learning to 'transfer' to the game, players need opportunities to solve 'game-specific' problems in training (Football Australia, 2013b). Going further, FA state that "when conducting training sessions, it is important for the coach to remember *it's all about the players*. The focus should be on helping the players to improve" (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 73, emphasis added). These sentiments rather clearly speak to what is oft-referred to as a 'player' or 'athlete-centred' approach to coaching (Pill, 2018). Underpinned by concepts like 'empowerment', a player-centred approach to coaching promotes learning through responsive ownership, where the player progressively takes control of their learning and educative journey (Pill, 2018). A key component of facilitating this approach is allowing players the freedom to discover and subsequently solve problems without coach intervention (Renshaw et al., 2010; Renshaw et al., 2016). Moreover, while it centres the player at the core of their learning journey, it concurrently shifts the positionality of the coach – moving them from a hierarchical position of control, to one that works 'with' and 'alongside' the athlete (Lascu et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2022).

Once again, though, despite these apparent calls for player-centredness in coaching, there is growing evidence that demonstrates misalignment between what is espoused by FA in the NFC and what is actually 'done' by coaches in the field (see Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2017b). This, again, speaks to the apparent confusion among the Australian football coaching community, which – as has been shown here – could be traced to various theoretical inconsistencies in what FA espouse within the NFC. Thus, given the NFC serves as the current foundation for all coach education programs delivered by FA and its member federations, it is imperative to identify and attempt to

remediate these apparent inconsistencies such that what is 'said' and what is 'done' by coaches yields alignment.

2.5 Chapter Summary

This Chapter began by introducing FA's roadmap for coach education, which calls for a 'fundamental transformation' in the sport. Following this, it overviewed the two key coach education pathways in Australian football: the Community Coaching and Advanced Coaching pathways. This was followed by an exploration of the foundations of FA's coach education model, which appears to be rooted in a 'model of transmission'. Recent literature suggests that this model may be ineffective in preparing coaches for real-world scenarios, raising concerns about its the relevance and value for educating coaches. This suggests that a fundamental transformation in Australian football may necessitate a further analysis and revaluation of the epistemological underpinnings of coach education.

With a specific focus on the Advanced Coaching Pathway, it then critically analysed the NFC, exploring its origins and its depiction of the coaching role, while raising some pertinent questions regarding how coaches align with this depiction. This brought about an exploration of the theoretical foundations of the NFC, drawing on key literature to support and challenge its associated assumptions. This included an examination of FA's holistic approach to coaching, its use of the information processing model of motor learning and skill acquisition, and its advocacy of a player-centred approach to coaching. In each, there were theoretical inconsistencies noted between what FA espoused and what appears to unfold in practice.

In summary, this narrative review has raised more questions than answers, which reflects the relatively unexplored nature of the Australian football coaching landscape. Importantly, this actually supports the proposed exploratory and responsive approach to inquiry that is followed in this thesis. The subsequent research Chapters of this thesis

will seek to address many of the questions asked here, contributing both practical and theoretical insights to support the development of Australia's football coaching community. Moreover, the forthcoming research Chapters aim to fill a broader gap within the Australian football coaching community: that is, hearing from the coaches themselves.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING FOOTBALL COACHES' VIEWS ON COACH EDUCATION, ROLE, AND PRACTICE DESIGN: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Publication constituting this chapter:

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Abstract

Despite the importance placed on the design and delivery of formal coach education programs by FA, there remains a lack of research relating to how formal coach education strategies support Australian football coaches and their coaching practices. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, 20 highly qualified and experienced Australian senior football coaches shared their perspectives on: (i) *coach education*, (ii) their *role as coach*, and (iii) *practice design*. Findings revealed that formal coach education in Australia was largely ineffective in preparing senior coaches for the realities of senior football. Coaches attributed this to a number of factors, including the content's quality, structure and delivery, which they viewed as rudimentary, outdated, repetitive and lacking in relevance and depth. Coaches also revealed there was an expectation of conformity to the content and practices endorsed by the NFC, limiting the value and impact of formal coach education in supporting the development of coaches' theoretical and practical dispositions. These findings point towards a number of broad and systemic issues relating to the conceptual, theoretical and practical foundations of the NFC and subsequent courses. If FA are to reach their goal in designing and delivering effective and meaningful coach education programs that support the highly complex and multifaceted role of senior coaching, formal coach education may need to adapt and evolve in a manner that better supports the multi-dimensional and context-specific needs of Australian senior football coaches.

Keywords: Coach Development; Interpretivism; Representative Learning Design

3.1 Introduction

Sports coaching is a complex task (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). Socio-cultural constraints operating at relatively long timescales (i.e., sporting identity, club culture, path dependent behaviour within an organisation) are likely to implicate how a coach views their role when situated within a broader ecology of relations (Stone et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019). While at shorter timescales, the pressure to win and perform (especially in high-performance sport), coupled with consideration of other stakeholders (i.e., players and support staff), likely implicates how coaches go about taking up with the day-to-day nuances of their role (Stone et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019). Football coaching is no different. Coaches are required to operate in complex socio-cultural environments, while attempting to implement effective performance preparation frameworks at daily, weekly, monthly, and even yearly scales. Such complexity, in part, has contributed to the recent growth of interest – both practically and academically – in the professional education and development of sport coaches (Callary & Gearity, 2019; Wood et al., 2023).

In 2020, FA – the national governing body overseeing the development of football in Australia – released the *XI Principles for the future of Australian Football*. This document outlined eleven fundamental principles for the future growth and development of football in Australia (Football Australia, 2020). Of particular interest to this Chapter is Principle Six, titled: *'Create world class environments for coach development'.* In an effort to raise the standard of coaching and coach development, a number of promising measures have been proposed by FA, including: the need to foster a strong culture of coach development by emphasising the role's importance in player development, modernise the method of coach education delivery, and review the content of coach education courses and the Australian coaching methodology (Football Australia, 2020). At present, the Australian football coach education system is underpinned by the NFC. Released in 2009, and updated in 2013, the NFC aims to provide coaches with an understanding of the national 'playing' and 'coaching' philosophy, advocating for a (i) holistic approach to

coaching, (ii) an information-processing model of motor learning and skill acquisition, and (iii) a player-centred approach to coaching (Football Australia, 2013a). Each of these tenets are purported to establish a coaching culture where the implementation of theoretically-informed and evidence-based practice is a central component (Football Australia, 2013a). Despite the importance placed on formal education and accreditation by FA, there remains a relative paucity of research addressing how FA's formal coach education strategies and the NFC support coaches and their coaching practices.

Currently, the football coach education system in Australia offers two distinct development pathways: the Community Coaching and the Advanced Coaching Pathways. The Community Coaching Pathway is tailored toward coaches of participation players, aged between 5 to 17 years. Courses are relatively short, running for 1 to 2 days, with the content primarily focused on providing coaches with practice design and delivery guidelines (Football Australia, 2013a). Interestingly, although practice sessions are largely structured in accordance with NFC recommendations, recent work shows that coaching practices and behaviours are generally not reflective of the player-centred, holistic approach promoted by FA (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2017b). While findings from these studies have been important, such insights have mostly been based on community coaches with limited experience and accreditation. As such, the findings may not offer a representative view of the quality of coach education and content within the NFC.

The Advanced Coaching Pathway is primarily targeted toward those working in the performance phase of football. Courses are more intensive than the Community pathway, often requiring 10 to 14 contact days, with content designed to cover FA's Coaching Expertise Model that outlines a list of themed competencies (*training*, *the match*, and *management*) that a coach must acquire (Football Australia, 2013b). There are four levels of senior accreditation offered: the 'C', 'B', and 'A' licence, and a 'Pro Diploma', with the central tenet of this process aimed at ensuring the NFC's coaching

principles are easily understood and brought to life (Football Australia, 2013b). As such, the 'C' and 'B' licence are designed in a manner that encourages coaches to adopt FA's vision and philosophy. Only at the 'A' licence level are coaches encouraged to develop and establish their own vision and philosophy of the game, which upon completing, are expected to be able to clearly articulate (Football Australia, 2013b). In addition, coaches aiming to work at the National Premier League level or higher are required to hold at least a 'C' licence, further signifying the important role FA's formal coach education system has on Australian coach's development and accreditation journey (Football Australia, 2013a).

Globally, formal coach accreditation processes are thought to be important for quality assurance, ensuring a baseline of knowledge and competency across a variety of coaching cohorts (Cushion et al., 2010; Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2020; Leeder, 2022; Lyle & Cushion, 2016b). Numerous countries have developed national coaching curricula (Gurgis et al., 2020), aiming to assist coaches "hone their craft and become effective and ethical at achieving desirable ideals" (Callary & Gearity, 2019, p. 2). This increase in the provision of formal coach education is due, in part, to the professionalisation of modern-day coaching, where coaches are now tasked with greater responsibilities, both on and off the pitch (Malcolm et al., 2014). For example, professional coaches are often overseeing, not just the on-field performance of players, but are likely having a significant input to their off-field development, manifest through well-being and player welfare. As such, there is a growing consensus within high-performance sport that coaches are not just individuals who (co)design game plans and devise training strategies, but are *managers of people* – both players and support staff (Becker, 2009; Côté et al., 2007; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). These emerging requirements of professional coaches point toward one of the many reasons we have seen an increase in the level of interest in the development of coach education programs from a variety of stakeholders (North et al., 2018), leading to a more scrutinised and regulated industry

(Garner et al., 2021).

Given this, formal coach education, for all intents and purposes, is considered an integral and necessary component of a coaches developmental journey (Erickson et al., 2007; Erickson et al., 2008). Despite significant empirical reports, the transfer of theoretical knowledge from formal coach education to the pitch has been difficult to demonstrate (Callary & Gearity, 2019). This could be related to the lack of alignment coaches feel with the theoretical material being covered (Cushion et al., 2010). Further, a continued and over-balanced focus on technical and strategical aspects of the game could limit the development of pedagogical and interpersonal competencies coaches feel are required to 'do' their job effectively (Chapman et al., 2020; Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2020; Koh et al., 2022; Mallett et al., 2009; Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

The complex nature of coaching not only makes formal coach education challenging to implement (Webb & Leeder, 2022), but "seriously calls into question the legitimacy and value of an overly-instrumental approach to coach learning and its provision" (Cushion et al., 2010, p. 3). Critiquing along similar lines, Nelson et al. (2006) referred to formal education settings as a process more aligned to 'indoctrination' rather than 'education', while Abraham and Collins (1998) suggested that formal coach education is often caught attempting to convince coaches of a singular and appropriate way of coaching, preventing exploration. This risks a view of formal coach development and accreditation regressing into a 'box ticking' exercise, rather than a valuable and integral part of their development journey. Formal coach education – *in its current state* – may thus not be able to foster the development of all the key skills the multi-faceted role requires (Mallett et al., 2009; Nash & Sproule, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). To this end, the aim of the current study was to explore: (i) how Australian football coaches take up with formal coach education, (ii) how Australian football coaches conceptualise their role with regards to performance preparation; and (iii) how/why Australian football coaches use various practice strategies to support player development.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Study Design

This study used an interpretivist, qualitative research design. This interpretivist position allowed for coaches to articulate unique meanings of their experiences and practices within their coaching domain (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), appreciating that the understanding of individual perspectives can only occur through observation and interpretation (Ling, 2016). Ethical considerations for the research project in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research was undertaken (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). Additionally, a detailed ethics proposal was submitted and approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: HRE22-031).

3.2.2 Participants

A purposive, criterion-based sample of Australian football coaches were recruited to participate in this study (n = 20). In order to provide a comprehensive and well-founded account of their experiences during FA's coaching courses and subsequent coaching content, coaches were required to have at a minimum: (i) an FA 'A' licence, and (ii) accumulated 3 years of senior coaching experience within Australia. Altogether, 16 coaches held an 'A' licence, and four held a 'Pro Diploma'. The sample level of senior coaching experience at the time of the interviews (defined temporally in years), ranged from 4 to 30 years.

Participant recruitment involved utilising existing networks within the Australian football community, social media posts, messages, emails, or through face-to-face conversation. After initial contact, participants received information regarding the project, example topics of conversation, and were able to ask questions to clarify the interview or data analysis process prior to an interview being organised. Written consent was obtained from participants prior to the interview starting. Consent was provided on the

understanding that interviews would be anonymised. Thus, participant identities were coded numerically throughout all analysis (defined from HC1–HC20).

3.2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews that focused on three pre-defined themes related to the studies aims: *coach education*, their *role as coach*, and *practice design*. The questions were pre-planned yet open-ended, which allowed the conversation to flow naturally in a direction guided by the key themes (Jamshed, 2014). The open-ended nature of the questions also provided this study with a broader understanding of the topics discussed while enabling participants to provide richer and deeper insight relative to close-ended interviews (Jones et al., 2013). The questions used to guide the flow of the semi-structured interview are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. *Themes and subsequent questions explored in the semi-structured interviews*

Theme	Questions
Coach Education	How would you describe your experiences on the coaching courses?
	What were your thoughts on the content delivered on the courses?
	What did you learn from the coaching courses?
	Do you feel the content delivered, prepared you for senior coaching?
Coaches' Role	What is coaching to you?
	How would you describe your coaching approach?
	What do you consider your main role is as senior coach?
	What skills do you need to be an effective coach at senior level?
Practice Design	How do you approach practice design?
	What type of training do you feel best prepares players for the game?
	What do you think is the most effective way to develop skilful players?
	How do you view your role with regards to performance preparation?

The first author reflected on the interview process after each interview in order to evaluate the structure and appropriateness of questions. This resulted in only very minor modifications to basic wording, with no other changes made following reflection. All interviews were conducted by the first author online or in person between May and

September, 2022. The duration of the interviews ranged from 73 to 145 minutes and were recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

3.2.4 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim in Trint (Trint Ltd) by the first author and then transferred to Microsoft Excel for thematic analysis. A pragmatic, six-staged thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first coding stage, undertaken by the first author, included an inductive approach, which entailed data immersion by re-reading transcripts, re-listening to interview recordings and highlighting any interesting quotes or passages. From here, lower and higher-order codes were constructed, helping identify, group and map the data. It was at this stage that the second author joined the analysis, helping construct and challenge existing codes, ensuring that codes encapsulated the essence of the data analysed. Stage three, four and five involved (i) locating, (ii) reviewing and (iii) grouping codes into potential themes, in which both authors went back and forth between each stage to help verify interpretations and grouping of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, a deductive analysis was conducted to compare the literature on (i) *formal coach education*; (ii) *coaches' roles*; (iii) *practice design*. The final stage included identifying and presenting the most vivid and compelling excerpts from the interviews, which were selected to help elucidate the findings. Thus, for brevity, both the results and discussion are presented concurrently.

3.2.5 Research Rigour

Given the relativist position taken, we implemented several measures to create a qualitative research design that was flexible, dependable, and trustworthy in data handling, interpretation, and presentation (Creswell, 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2018). One of these measures included purposive sampling of participants. Here, we implemented a strict participation criterion that would help ensure not only a comprehensive and credible exploration of formal coach education delivered by FA could be undertaken, but the sample size was small enough to allow for a thorough and in-

depth analysis of the data (Sandelowski, 1995). Further, to encourage complete transparency from participants, they were repeatedly informed before, during, and after the interviews that their data would be kept confidential and anonymised.

To improve our methodological rigour, the first author conducted five pilot interviews to further refine the interview format and questions, ensuring their effectiveness in encouraging discussions directly pertaining to the research questions. Recognising the potential influence of personal bias and subjectivity, particularly given the first author's participation in FA's Advanced Coaching Pathway, reflexivity was critical in establishing data trustworthiness (Finlay & Gough, 2008). To ensure accurate interpretations and to reduce the impact of personal biases, researcher triangulation between first and second authors involved consistent critique, challenge, and refinement of codes and themes (Denzin, 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

3.3 Results and Discussion

Given the magnitude of data collected, only excerpts that the authors felt best captured and reflected the sentiments expressed by the participants were included. The presentation of results and discussion section are guided by the three pre-determined themes: (i) perspectives on formal coach education, (ii) coaches' role, and (iii) practice design. Each theme is composed of sub-themes that are either: (i) representative of the specific pre-determined topics discussed or (ii) a collection of recurring themes that emerged from the openness of the interviews.

3.3.1 Theme 1: Perspectives on Coach Education

The first theme to be explored relates to coaches' perspectives on formal coach education in Australian football. According to FA, there are three major areas of competency that senior coaches must develop: *training*, *the match*, and *management* (Football Australia, 2013b). As such, the interview questions were developed around these three sub-themes of coach education, while concurrently affording opportunities

for participants to elaborate on their general coach education experiences as they felt necessary.

3.3.1.1 Preparing Coaches for Senior Football

National sporting organisations, such as FA, oft-attempt to support the development of coaches by providing well-designed and applicable coach education programs (Lyle & Cushion, 2010). Hence, there was a particular interest in the role formal coach education played in preparing coaches for the realities of senior football. A common sentiment shared among participants was the influence of the courses, particularly the 'C' and 'B' licences, in providing them with a framework to help plan and structure training sessions effectively. This is exemplified by an excerpt from HC18, who stated:

> "I was pretty green and raw going into the whole coach education process. I felt like I really needed something that I could hang my hat on and use as a starting point to then progress forward from. I had some ideas based on my coaching, but I wasn't sure how to translate those necessarily across onto a football field. It just provided me with the structure that I needed, it gave me a framework and a tool kit that I could lean on."

This sentiment is in keeping with the literature (see Karagiannis & Pill, 2017), and should come as little surprise, given that FA's earliest Advanced Coaching Pathway courses are largely guided by *The Football Coaching Process*, which is a document designed to support coaches in planning, structuring, and delivering practice sessions (Football Australia, 2013b). Given there is suggestion that coaches practice their craft with little reference to a coaching process (Cushion et al., 2006), FA seem to have good reason to focus on delivering a framework that helps coaches' plan and structure training sessions. Though, despite participants expressing positive sentiments about the formalities of coach education on their basic practices, particularly in planning and structuring their training sessions, the changes in their coaching makeup seemed to be

more *methodological* than *theoretical*. This was emphasised by HC14:

> "When you're starting out, it gives you all the tools that you need to make sure that the perception is that you know what you're doing, you're organised, and it seems like you're doing a good job."

In other words, the positive sentiments expressed by the participants seemed to point towards basic procedural developments in their practices. This was demonstrated in the fact that participants often remarked on the ineffectiveness their formal education had on preparing them for the role of senior coaching. This reinforces the notion that the senior coaches role extends beyond the development, design, and implementation of game plans and training sessions (Nash, 2014). It also requires strong inter- and intra-personal competencies in order to cater for the diverse social contexts they find themselves in (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). A sentiment also shared by HC13:

> **"**I don't think the A licence prepared you [for senior coaching] to be honest. It was meant to be preparation for a professional coaching career, the qualification required to coach in the A-League as an assistant. But I don't think it prepares you for that. If you've never been in that environment, there's still a lot of learning to do when you get in there. So, I think it does leave you underprepared from a management perspective and what to expect around that environment. But it does give you preparation in terms of the daily process of training and giving you clarity in terms of a football process and identifying what you want to work on."

These views are in keeping with reports that formal education has typically left coaches feeling unprepared for the rigours of senior coaching (see Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nash & Sproule, 2009). This is expected, though, given that coaching courses have traditionally been criticised for delivering abstract content far removed from current practice (Cushion et al., 2010). If the objective of formal coach education is to develop coaching knowledge, behaviours, and practices, then it seems important for FA to find a

balance between the 'development' of coaches and the 'accreditation' of coaches. As noted in the excerpt presented above, these two things are not the same.

Guiding the development of coaches is FA's Coaching Expertise Model, found within the NFC, which outlines a list of competencies (*training, the match,* and *management*) and football knowledge (*principles of play, strategy,* and *tactics*) that are considered essential to become an 'expert coach' (Football Australia, 2013a). Though, despite the importance placed by FA on the attainment of football knowledge within this model, participants felt the courses did not adequately address this area and were somewhat dissatisfied with its delivery:

> "They [coach educators] always assumed that you had the football knowledge when you first come in. That was sort of the prerequisite. They thought you should just know. So, I think there could be a lot more work done in terms of developing football knowledge." [HC11]

> "I think that [the lack of football knowledge] is probably the biggest weakness in terms of content across all of the courses." [HC15]

When asked about why the development and attainment of football knowledge was an important feature of senior coaching, most participants were of the view that a deep knowledge *about* the game was essential for supporting the growth of a player's knowledge *of* the game (see Woods & Davids, 2021). As HC12 explained:

> "The reason [knowledge *about* football is important] is they'll [players] call your bluff in two seconds. So, if I was to have no football knowledge, in the difficult times when you're down at half time, when the players need something from you that gives them credible evidence, a tangible thing to take away that can improve their own and their team's performance, and if you don't provide it, you'll get called out in two seconds. I think it's [knowledge *about* football] absolutely key to the coaching toolkit. Football people are football people and if you're not a football person, unless you're Ted

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Lasso, it's not happening for you."

The importance placed on the acquisition of football knowledge is supported in the literature (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Moreover, the appreciation of football knowledge is conveyed by FA, who suggest "without in-depth football knowledge, the quality of what the coach does will be adversely affected" (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 13). Despite this, 'football knowledge' is not considered as one of the three pillars of competency. Instead, FA encourage that 'football knowledge' be acquired through a variety of unmediated and informal ways such as: '*playing', 'coaching', 'analysing*', and *'talking'* about football (Football Australia, 2013b). However, although, coaches express a strong appreciation between football knowledge and coaching expertise (see Côté et al., 2007), research suggests that the attainment of football knowledge alone is inadequate to become an effective coach (Becker, 2009; Rieke et al., 2008). Rather, the development of football knowledge coupled with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are regarded as an essential requirement for an effective coach (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Referred to as '*management skills*' by many of the participants interviewed, this was another area participants believed the courses did not adequately address. For example, HC8 and HC14 stated, respectively:

> "The courses have helped with the coaching process, but the coaching process is only one aspect. How you deal with people, how you respond to setbacks and challenges is another thing and that's a big part of coaching. And that's not catered to enough in the courses."

> "I almost feel like it's back to front in the management area and learning how to relate and be in a group of people. Those types of [management] skills, I feel like there's a whole piece missing there or it's too late in its introduction."

These findings are in keeping with the literature, which indicates that the support of inter-personal skill is disproportionately supported relative to sport-specific knowledge

(Lefebvre et al., 2016). Although FA views 'management' as a key pillar of coaching competency, and its delivery is heavily prioritised in the 'Pro Diploma', participants voiced feelings of dissatisfaction with the amount of attention and content devoted to management. Consequently, it may be beneficial for FA to reconsider the placement, delivery and the amount of time spent on developing management skills during the courses. Crucially, these findings point towards a potential disconnect between FA and the participants' perceptions of the competencies required to be considered an *effective* senior coach and, perhaps more importantly, how coaching competency should be *assessed.* As HC7 discussed:

> "Had a coach educator come to where I was working and spent a week with me, for example, in the planning process and in training sessions and team meetings on game day, you get a much better window into who the coach is. Are they an A licenced coach? Maybe or maybe not. But you can tell very quickly if that person is going to be a good coach or not. And that should be the basis of passing or failing or recommending further development. But at the moment, you're in a group of 30 to 40 people, maybe you contribute once or twice in the classroom, you put on a session nervously, with a load of guys that don't really want to be there. It either goes well, or if it doesn't, you fail and then you're suddenly not in A licence coach. Or, you have a personal relationship with the coach educator, or you're an ex-Socceroo and suddenly you're an A licenced coach. Yeah, it's pretty backwards."

This sentiment highlights the challenge FA have in *developing* and *assessing* coach competency in its current format. Indeed, participants often felt like they were "*acting*" [HC19], eluding that the courses were merely a "*box ticking exercise*" [HC16] that had minimal influence on their coaching approach. Such findings are in agreement with the literature, in that coaches undertaking formal coach education are often seen engaging in 'studentship' tactics to convey qualities desired to pass the course (Chesterfield et al., 2010). To address this issue, participants remarked on how forms of "mentorship" within

the coach education process "could add another layer of value to the coach education process*" [HC15], providing a more "learner-friendly environment that allows you to be a lot more expressive, leading to a more personalised assessment of competency" [HC7]. Indeed, it has been suggested that coaching competency can be better *understood* and *developed* in a coaches respective coaching environment (Wood et al., 2023), implying that the *assessment* of coaching competency may also need to take place in such representative settings. Thus, in order for formal coach education to meet the needs of senior coaches, FA may need to re-conceptualise and re-structure the *development* and *assessment* of coaching competency, permitting learner-centred approaches (i.e., mentor- apprenticeship) to guide coach development.

3.3.1.2 Coaches' Perceptions of the Course Content

According to the majority of participants, the quality of content presented on the courses was one of the key reasons why they felt formal coach education did not prepare them effectively for senior coaching. The content on the 'C', 'B', and 'A' licences was described as "rudimentary" [HC8, HC16], "outdated" [HC20], "repetitive" [HC3, HC4, HC5, HC13, HC18, HC19], and needing "an absolute revamp" [HC12]. This is further reiterated by HC7:

> "I'm certainly not afraid to say that the biggest jump I made as a coach was doing the C licence, and from there I kind of thought, I'll go into the B, A, and the Pro, and I'm going to make all these huge leaps. But the reality is the B was really an extension of the C, and the A an extension of the B. I was underwhelmed by the B and the A. I think the learning was very minimal, the content, structure and methodology of coach education was disappointing. But as we know, it's a box that everybody has to tick. And it certainly felt like everybody was there just to see the time out and get their boxes ticked."

The participants perspective that the course content lacked relevance was one of the

most frequently cited reasons for their dissatisfaction. Participants revealed that they performed under vastly different contexts and conditions than those presented by the NFC, making the content challenging to connect and identify with. The following remarks capture this position:

> "A coach looks at it [the NFC] and says, I'm under pressure, we're in the bottom half of the table, we're closer to relegation than we are to winning the competition, and people are telling me I should have this philosophy because that's what the national curriculum says? That's nonsense, it erodes the confidence of people. These procedural documents that define what the game should be, it doesn't match the reality. I think that disenfranchises people that are saying, well, in those circumstances it doesn't apply to me, it's irrelevant to me. I just need to survive." [HC3]

These sentiments are consistent with the literature, in which the decontextualised manner of formal coach education means that the unique context that each coach operates in is usually ignored and disregarded, resulting in a lack of relevance and significance for coaches (Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). This points to one of the biggest challenges facing the make-up and delivery of content within formal coach education: if it is unable to meet the individual needs of coaches, it is likely that many will simply ignore the content delivered and continue to practice as they have in the past (Wayne et al., 2016). Thus, FA may need to reconceptualise the content within the NFC to better reflect the daily needs of senior coaching.

Beyond the participants dissatisfaction with the quality and relevance of the content delivered, there was an overwhelming sentiment that perhaps the most frustrating feature of the coach education process was the lack of freedom to explore. The expectation to *conform* was denoted amongst most participants, even into the later stages of the 'A' licence. It is worth quoting three participants at length here, given the richness of their responses related to feelings of constraint:

"If you take that freedom away from people when they're going through the coach education process, the freedom to think differently, you're kind of just indoctrinating in a certain way of thinking, and I'm not sure that's what we should be trying to do." [HC3]

"I felt like it was very repetitious. It felt like everybody was trying to do the same thing on the courses. It was very homogeneous. It was almost expected that you had to toe the line and coach a certain way in order to pass the course. And again, I just don't know if that's conducive to robust learning and becoming a better coaching community if we're going to do it that way. I just felt we could have had more different types of sessions or contrasted more with the national curriculum to sort of make you appreciate it or understand its weaknesses more in coaching that way." [HC16]

"I think that we have tried to take that [exploration] away from a lot of coaches and make them all cookie cutter coaches. And then you get robots and nasty, sterile coaches that, you know, if everybody's learning to coach the same way, how are they going to adapt when they come up against something different? I think that's one thing that was missing from the courses, right the way through." [HC4]

These responses are unsurprising given that the 'C' and 'B' licences are explicitly designed to encourage coaches to adopt FA's vision and philosophy. There is an expectation from FA that by the time coaches progress to the 'A' Licence or 'Pro Diploma', they should be able to develop and articulate their own philosophy (Football Australia, 2013b). Despite this stance, participants believed that the 'A' and 'Pro' licences were still heavily based on the NFC, limiting their ability to explore, develop, and expand their vision and philosophy of the game. These sentiments are prevalent in the literature, where coach education is frequently accused of indoctrination, merely employing a one-size-fits-all approach (Nash et al., 2017). Accordingly, if FA are to realise their goal of developing 'world-class' environments for coach development (Football Australia, 2020), then formal coach education may have to move beyond a standardised football curricula

based on transmission and application – giving coaches a 'toolbox' of professional knowledge – and aim toward a deeper, more meaningful change that encourages search and exploration.

3.3.1.3 Coaches' Perceptions on the Delivery of Content

Recent literature has emphasised the important role coach developers have in the delivery of formal coach education content (Allanson et al., 2021; Cushion et al., 2019; Watts et al., 2021b). However, for the participants in this Chapter, coach developers were seen as "good guys and professional coaches, but not always great educators. You can tell the [coach developer] never taught anybody anything" [HC12]. Coach developers were considered generally ineffective at communicating, presenting, and delivering content, as further discussed by HC7:

> "The message between the curriculum and the application in the coach education space was really lacking. I saw coach educators who were so authoritative and rigid and structured and upon reflection, I thought, now this wasn't meant to be applied like this. And somewhere the message has been lost."

Although the above reflections are noteworthy, some assert that much of the criticism levelled at coach developers can be attributed to broader, systemic issues that reside beyond their control (i.e., situating 'education' in a model of transmission, not primary experience and careful exposure) (Watts et al., 2021a). While we are cautious about drawing too negative a conclusion about the (in)effectiveness of coach developers here, our findings do suggest that future work needs to examine ways in which coach developers working within FA's coach education pathways can be better supported in developing, structuring, and presenting course content.

3.3.2 Theme 2: Conceptualisation of the Coaching Role

The next theme explored the conceptualisation of the coach's role, which will concurrently encapsulate coaching approach, expertise, and knowledge needed for

senior coaching. This component of the interview allowed participants to share their beliefs toward coaching and its function within a senior football environment.

3.3.2.1 Coaching is Multifaceted

A football coach's roles and responsibilities are vast in both scale and scope (McCarthy et al., 2022). Because of the multifaceted nature of coaching, coaches are frequently required to develop knowledge and expertise in a variety of fields, which can often be found outside their sport (Nash & Sproule, 2012). This was no different for the participants in this study, as noted by HC15:

> "It's a mixture of stuff. It's a leader. It's a motivator. It's a CEO. It's a mentor. It's a father. It's a brother. It's not one thing. It's a moving target. And you need to be robust in your makeup as a person, psychologically and emotionally and in every way. You need to be sensitive to the environment around you. You can't be oblivious to it. It's a whole lot of stuff. And then by the way, you need a little bit of football knowledge because, that at the end is the bit we're doing."

This response highlights the multi-dimensional nature of 'coaching' at the high-performance level. For the vast majority of participants, articulating the role of the senior coach was difficult, resulting in lengthy responses that further illustrated the role's complexity. This could also be said of FA, whose description of the senior coach's role – "to prepare successful teams" (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 58) – may considerably understate the role's scope. Perhaps it is apt to question whether the title 'coach' is adequate in describing the wide range of duties and responsibilities that an individual may undertake and be accountable for, particularly in performance phase settings? Nash (2014) supports this notion, arguing that due to the role's uniqueness and idiosyncratic features, no definitive description can be established. Regardless, gaining deeper insight into the complexity of coaching, as well as the varying needs associated with different contexts is critical if FA are to design coach education programs reflective of the

scenarios and contexts senior coaches find themselves in.

3.3.2.2 Coaching Approach

As stated earlier, FA advocate for a 'player-centred approach' to coaching (Football Australia, 2013a). Defined by "a style of coaching that promotes athlete learning through athlete ownership, responsibility, initiative and awareness, guided by the coach" (Pill, 2018, p. 1), player-centred coaching practices actively encourage players to be involved in the decision-making and problem-solving process. While participants generally favoured player-centrism, the nature of high-performance football and subsequent pressure appeared to make it challenging for them to consistently take up with such an approach. Some participants were "happy to have a little bit of dialogue with players, but when push comes to shove, and I say it's going to be that way, it's got to be that way" [HC11]. An excerpt from HC8 discusses this in depth:

> "I try to be very inclusive and be a facilitator. I think on reflection, if I coach in a senior environment again, [I'll need to be] more strict, more dominating, for lack of a better word. And when I say more, I only mean a little bit, I don't mean I should go to the complete opposite end of the scale, but I feel like I was too nice or too flexible, allowing them to take the lead. Although there's massive benefits to having that [player-centred] approach and engaging your playing group, you still have to be the ultimate authority. You have to have someone who can make a final call, who has the respect from people under them to make that call, and then they will follow that person's decision."

Although participants saw the advantages of supporting greater player ownership and accountability through a player-centred approach, the apparent socio-cultural constraints of high-performance football seemed to make this difficult to implement on a consistent basis. These sentiments are consistent with the literature, which suggest that coaches who work in high-pressure contexts are more likely to regress to controlling, directive,

and prescriptive coaching (Morbée et al., 2020; Pill, 2018; Rocchi & Pelletier, 2017). If FA are to progress with a player-centred approach, then it is vital that they more clearly show how this can be achieved within the socio-cultural constraints of high-performance football.

3.3.2.3 Management and Interpersonal Skills

Senior football coaches are required to interact frequently with a broad range of stakeholders. Accordingly, it has been suggested that a coaches' effectiveness is largely dependent on their capacity to nurture meaningful and productive relationships (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). This sentiment was also shared by participants here. Namely, despite the role requiring a diverse set of competencies, the ability to help develop people and build sustainable relationships appeared key to the senior role:

> "Coaching is all about relationships. There are other facets to it, like the way that you communicate, deliver a message and the process you go through but I think without strong relationships you are doomed to fail because no matter how knowledgeable you are at your craft, if you can't connect with someone, the chances of them hearing your message, let alone taking it on board and running with it, are very limited." [HC18]

> **"**The role is to develop people. You have to be a better person after you've come through that environment. They have got to be a better footballer, a better personality, a better leader. And then under all of that is winning of course, you've got to win. Because, if you're a senior football coach, you're there to win games or you're there to win relative to whatever your objectives are. So, that's a non-negotiable part of being a senior coach." [HC11]

This appears to align with the literature, which suggests that coaches who invest time in building strong relationships with players are likely to promote a connected and interactive environment that supports player development (Dieffenbach & Thompson,

2020; Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). Moreover, considering all participants had coached teams that were focused heavily on performance outcomes (i.e., winning), they each seemed appreciative that team cohesion and performance outcome were not mutually exclusive. This is of note, as although FA consider 'management' to be one of the key pillars a coach needs to be competent in, such skills are only briefly touched on in *The Football Coaching Process* (Football Australia, 2013b), and may not be sufficient in supporting coaches at the required level. These results suggest that further emphasis and investment in supporting the development of management skills (i.e., interpersonal, and intrapersonal) could be of use within the coach accreditation process in Australian football.

3.3.2.4 Delivering a Vision, Playing Style, and Getting Results

Senior coaches in high-performance sport are largely evaluated on the results obtained. In other words, coaches are expected to "win football matches, first and foremost" [HC4]. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the need to produce results is a significant source of pressure for senior coaches (Morbée et al., 2020). These findings showed that given this pressure, the importance of the NFC diminishes overtime: "senior coaches don't care about the curriculum, they care about results" [HC8]. This sentiment was also shared by HC2:

> "You need to get the results first before looking to develop players. Unless you've come from a previous background where you've had some good results or you've been a high-profile player, I think you get a little bit more time then. But if you're a young coach and no one knows you, you have to pretty much get results straight away."

Despite the importance of getting results, there is a growing expectation within the football community that coaches also need to deliver a 'club vision' and 'playing style'. This belief is echoed by FA who have summarised Australia's preferred playing style in

the following statement: "A pro-active brand of football, based on effective possession, with the cutting edge provided by creative individuals. Defensively the key components are quick transition and intelligent collective pressing" (Football Australia, 2013a, p. 17). Participants expressed an expectation and pressure "to be competent enough to articulate your vision and your playing style" [HC11] such that supporters, the club, and other stakeholders could identify with it. Thus, it appears important for senior coaches to not only get 'results', but to do so in a way that reflects a club vision. This further demonstrates the complexity of coaching at the high-performance level. Findings suggest that the NFC and subsequent content delivered on the coaching courses needs to better represent the requirements, expectations and perhaps even echo the pressures associated with the senior coaching role.

3.3.3 Theme 3: Practice Design

A fundamental priority for coaches in performance environments is the successful design and integration of performance preparation frameworks capable of supporting athletes in regulating behaviour in training and competition (Woods et al., 2020). Accordingly, this final component of the interview presented an opportunity for participants to explore the practice strategies used, and why, in helping support the development of football skills.

3.3.3.1 Approaches to Practice Design

When it came to identifying what type of practice strategies participants preferred, all favoured the need for 'realistic' or 'representative' environments. Here, we refer to such practice through the lens of 'representative learning design' (Araújo et al., 2005); defined as training activities that are representative of the informational constraints of competition (Pinder et al., 2011; Woods et al., 2020). It is thought that players who are exposed to representative learning designs will learn to 'pick up' key sources of information used to directly regulate their behaviour in competition environment (Woods et al., 2020). This was a sentiment articulated by HC10 and HC7, respectively:

"I think representative design is crucial to be able to get the learnings across efficiently and effectively. If training is not representative of the actual scenario faced on the weekend or the problems faced on the weekend, I think you're going to miss the mark, to be honest."

"Representative design is massive. Training has to look like the game. That doesn't mean we play 11 v 11 in every session, but it means that generally the game is directional, there's always opposition and more often than not, the attention is focused centrally towards a goal scoring point. 95% of our sessions will involve those principles. On a simplistic and fundamental level, training is designed so players are playing football competitively, that reflects the game."

These responses are consistent with FA's position on practice design, who state that for 'proper' learning to occur, training exercises require 'game-specific resistances' (i.e., opponents) that replicate the actual football situation in which the problem occurred (Football Australia, 2013b). Despite this stance, FA do state that in certain circumstances when coaches have exhausted all other options for developing a player, isolated and unopposed training may be used (Football Australia, 2013b). Such a sentiment seemed to be shared by participants, who despite advocating for representative learning design, accepted that a place for unopposed practice remained:

"Unopposed game patterns, which is something I use in the preseason working on what I call the 'what if' scenarios. I spend a lot of time in pre-season working on that, building a cohesion and I guess synergy. In the first instance, unopposed, maybe mannequins, but starting from different parts of the field and working through scenarios and options, just presenting them with alternatives. If this happens, there's an alternative. And by repeating and repeating and repeating and repeating, firstly, without competition just patterns, they start building their own decision making based on the 'what if's'. Then, as you introduce a passive opponent and that passive opponent hypothetically leans right, then we go to option three, they go left, we play

through the line beyond the press, and we do this." [HC15]

This perhaps highlights a theoretical inconsistency. For example, research suggests that practice designs containing specifying information leads to effective and efficient skill transfer from training to competition, whereas practice designs containing non-specifying information may lead to a more general transfer (Passos et al., 2016). The majority of participants shared the belief that isolated and unopposed training had merit and would likely transfer into competitive games, a belief likely found on the assumption that breaking up tasks into isolated components is beneficial to enhance performance (Lee et al., 2001; Schmidt & Lee, 2005). Although despite this belief, it was of note that most participants were well aware of the limitations of unopposed practice with regards to the development of football skill. Moreover, some participants mentioned that unopposed practice was implemented to cater to areas such as introducing new tactical concepts, manage player physical load, and increase confidence of players prior to a competitive match. This was exemplified by HC7:

> "I'm certainly not anti-unopposed practice, there's just a place for them. If we play on a Sunday and we have one session between then and a Wednesday game, may be the best way to get a tactical idea out without compromising the loading [of players] is to do an 11 v 0 and an unopposed type of session. So, I will use them if that's the best tool to get something out in a short period of time. But I think you neglect long term learning by doing anything unopposed. For me, a pre-set pattern is fragile. If I say, right, this is how we will build up to create a chance and this is the pattern that we work on repetitively unopposed at training. What happens when that doesn't become available in the game? But if we train over and over again with the right level of opposition and problems to solve, we will create long term learning and problem solvers and collective problem solving cannot happen without putting them in problems to solve over and over and over again."

Such sentiment indicates that additional factors, like training and playing schedule, are

likely to influence practice design approaches for senior football coaches. Although participants favoured representative design, the nature and complexity of the high-performance environment meant ideal training methodologies were compromised. Indeed, there are other ways of reducing the complexity of practice while preserving its representativeness (see Chow et al., 2015), and given that most participants recognised the limitations of unopposed practice for sustained learning, FA could consider integrating such ideas into the NFC, like manipulating constraints in practice to preserve functionality in representative ways. Practice, in other words, could be reduced in complexity through *simplification*, rather than *decomposition* (Chow et al., 2015), thereby offering greater theoretical coherence in senior coaches undertaking their accreditation processes.

3.3.3.2 Theoretical Sentiments Associated with Practice Design

In this part of the interview, participants were asked if they were guided by a particular theoretical framework of practice design and player development. According to FA's coaching philosophy, which is underpinned by an information-processing view of motor learning and skill acquisition, 'perception', 'decision', and 'execution' are considered as three distinguishable processes a player undertakes before completing a football action (Football Australia, 2013a). This appears to have influenced some participants, as noted in responses by HC8 and HC12, respectively:

> **"**There is a literal chronological process of how decision making takes place in the brain, which is first you receive communication, so you perceive words and body language, it goes into your brain. Then your game insight, in other words, your knowledge, your experience as a player determines what solutions pop up in your brain and that you see as options. And then you obviously pick one and then you execute."

> "The 'perception', 'decision', 'execution' is the single biggest failure of us coaches

over my period [in Australian football]. We have to allow the players to make decisions, I don't care what decision you make, as long as you make one. Execution is purely about repetition, executing something is the output of the first two [perception and decision making]."

These responses suggest that at a superficial level, the information-processing view of motor learning and skill acquisition presented by FA has influenced how some participants conceptualise player behaviour. By FA's own account, the complexity of football requires players to rapidly select a particular response from a wide range of possible options and execute them under pressure (Football Australia, 2013b). Although this perspective on motor learning and skill acquisition still holds a strong position in player development models, ecological dynamics has emerged as a theoretical alternative in the explanation of learning and behaviour (for a detailed overview of its key tenets, see Button et al., 2020). Despite the opposing theoretical stance of FA, it was of note that a handful of participants mentioned that an ecological dynamics rationale influenced their view of player development, practice design and their role in performance preparation. For example, when asked if they followed a particular theoretical framework, HC7 responded:

"An ecological dynamics approach. You went through the [education] process without really being exposed to the theory around ecological dynamics and the constraints-led approach. [The NFC] didn't feel right, and that coaching in the manner we were asked to do, with a lot of unopposed stuff, a lot of over-structured coaching felt really unnatural to me."

Despite miss-guided and uninformed criticisms, ecological dynamics offers a *blended* theoretical framework that brings together key ideas from ecological psychology and dynamic systems theory (see Araújo et al., 2006; Button et al., 2020). It is far from a 'one-size fits all' approach, offering sports practitioners with a theoretical positioning that explains behavioural emergence without relying on abstract mentalistic and mechanistic

concepts. This helps guide the design of informationally rich and representative practice tasks (see O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Interestingly, these sentiments were noted by HC3:

> "There's never going to be a secret of how you score, because it's an emerging concept that depends not just on what you do, but on the opposition. So, for me, all these ideas of trying to come up with some mechanistic approach misses the point. I see the game as a complex, dynamic system with the scoring of the goal an emergent concept that really depends on the interactions of many parts. I don't control an individual and I don't control the individual process, I don't control it in microscopic detail. But what I need to do is ensure that there are certain forms of interactions which happen within that system that generate certain emergent behaviours. If a player or playing group can come up with an idea that maybe I was missing right then, if they come up with it themselves, it will stick. If I say it, it may or may not stick, because the process of conceiving something I think ingrains it in the mind much more so than passively receiving that information."

These findings, in conjunction with earlier sentiments regarding the rigidity of course content, demonstrate divergent theoretical perspectives on motor learning and control within the participants. Regardless of theoretical positioning, it is clear that FA need to consider supporting coaches in the exploration of theoretical concepts that resonate with them. This could take shape in the delivery of alternative theoretical frameworks and their implications for a coach's role and practice design. Such diversity in the content of the NFC may thus foster ongoing exploration, not replication – a theme noted earlier as being diminished through the current delivery of rigid content.

3.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study had inherent strengths and weaknesses that prompt further lines of inquiry. Namely, despite the breadth of data collected across the 20 interviews, it is important to acknowledge that our findings might not fully represent the Australian coaching

community as a whole (Brinkmann, 2018) and may only represent perspectives from a certain point in time (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Further, the retrospective nature of the interviews brings forth the possibility that participant responses might have been subject to recall bias (Bryman, 2016; Hassan, 2006), perhaps leading to exaggerated, incomplete or inaccurate descriptions of their experiences (Brinkmann, 2018). Given these limitations, future research could look to use complementary study designs, such as online questionnaires, to reach a wider cohort of the coaching community. Moreover, ethnographic approaches could be used to gain a more nuanced and real-world view of coach education. Lastly, a conceptual study of FA's coach education model could elaborate on the theoretical underpinning of the model (i.e., the existing 'paradigms' behind the design of the coach education), and whether it is capable of effectively meeting the developmental needs of coaches.

3.5 Conclusion

The aim of this Chapter was to explore Australian football coaches' perspectives of formal coach education delivered by FA. Doing so allowed light to be shed on how coaches conceptualise their role, and what practice strategies they employ to support player development. With regards to formal coach education, the findings indicated that while courses supported a coaches' basic methodological and procedural practice (i.e., structuring and planning training), the Advanced Coaching Pathway was largely ineffective in preparing coaches for the rigours of senior football. This was primarily due to the nature, structure, and delivery of the content, which led to sentiments of indoctrination and conformity. When discussing their role in high-performance settings, participants emphasised its complexity, requiring competence across multiple domains. This appeared to be under-appreciated in the content delivered as part of the accreditation process. Finally, when discussing what practice strategies participants used, most expressed a strong preference for designing practices that are 'representative' of the competitive environment. Though, some did mention that utility of

unopposed practice in high-performance settings, albeit for reasons other than skill development.

Collectively, findings demonstrate that FA faces challenges far beyond simple cosmetic upgrades to the structuring and delivering of content on their courses. Rather, they point to broader, systemic issues relating to the conceptual, theoretical, and practical foundations of the NFC and subsequent courses. If the intention of FA is to develop 'world-class' coach development environments capable of effectively developing the behaviours, knowledge, and practices of Australian football coaches, then greater emphasis on delivering coach education in a manner that meets the needs of the coaching community is required. It is hoped that these findings encourage FA and researchers to continue engaging with the Australian coaching community and collectively seek ways to develop future iterations of the NFC and coach education programs, thus better supporting and enhancing the theoretical and practical orientations of Australian football coaches.

CHAPTER 4

ENSKILMENT INTO THE COACHING LANDSCAPE: TOWARDS A SITUATED APPROACH TO COACH EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

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Abstract

This Chapter explores how an enskilment approach could be harnessed to guide coach education in Australian football. To do so, it first overviews current coach education practices in Australian football, looking specifically into the foundation of FA's coach education model, rooted in a transmissive metaphor. Then, drawing on key ideas from Tim Ingold, we move toward a different approach to coach education, grounded in the relationality of enskilment. This leads us to reconceptualise the very notion of 'education' – moving from the transmission of secondary information, toward an approach in which people are led out into the world by experienced companions, encouraged to primarily experience things for themselves. Such a shift foregrounds the third section of our paper, where we explore a more situated approach to coach education, leaning into key concepts from Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger. In doing so, we propose a situated approach to coach education that consists of three interwoven dimensions: (i) *exposure to real-world contexts*; (ii) *legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice*; and (iii) *mentorship*. We bring life to each dimension through the presentation of examples in the context of football. In summary, to prepare Australian football coaches for the realities of coaching, coach education needs to consider a move from the transmission of secondary information, toward exposure to first-hand experiences of actual coaching.

Keywords: Apprenticeship; Coach Learning; Knowledge; Situated Learning; Mentorship

4.1 Introduction

In 2009, FA released the NFC, which was positioned as an educational resource and curricular framework for formal coach education in Australia (Football Australia, 2013a). Its introduction was intended to help FA fulfil its ambition of creating a 'fundamental transformation' in the way football is played and coached in Australia, seeking to cultivate a culture of theoretically informed, evidence-based coaching practices across all levels of the football landscape (Football Australia, 2013a). Despite the importance placed on formal coach education by FA, the results uncovered in Chapter 3 revealed crucial limitations in course design and delivery. Such was the magnitude of these limitations, some coaches labelled the courses as "rudimentary", "outdated", "repetitive" and needing "an absolute revamp", questioning their effectiveness in preparing them for the complexities of coaching (Chapter 3). Consistent with the broader and well-documented critiques of formal coach education (see Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Jones & Allison, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2013; Paquette et al., 2019), much of this criticism has been pointed towards abstract content delivered in decontextualised settings far removed from a coach's performance context. These critiques also highlight the scant recognition, within formal courses, of how the broader environment shapes coach practice and behaviours (also see Vaughan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2022).

Aiming to unify the Australian football ecosystem, FA unveiled its *XI Principles for the Future of Australian Football* in 2020. This strategic document delineates a comprehensive vision for the sport's future growth and sustainable development within the Australian landscape (Football Australia, 2020). Among the XI Principles' various measures, one (Principle Six) focuses specifically on coach development. This multifaceted initiative encompasses several key components: (i) fostering a robust culture of coach development by emphasising the crucial role of coaches in player development; (ii) modernising the delivery methods for coach education; and (iii) comprehensively reviewing the content of coach education courses and the Australian

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coaching methodology itself (Football Australia, 2020). However, if FA aspires to enact true transformation in the way football is coached in Australia (Football Australia, 2013a, p. x; 2020, p. 8), thereby creating world-class coach education environments fit for the complex and multifaceted role (Football Australia, 2020, p. 32), then the issue of decontextualisation, highlighted in Chapter 3, must first be addressed.

This critical conceptual analysis aims to sketch a reconceptualisation of coach education in Australian football, focusing its critique on the issue of decontextualisation. Indeed, while this is an issue that has been explored elsewhere (see Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2013; Piggott, 2012), to date, scant attention has been directed toward an Australian context. This Chapter is split into three main sections. The first focuses on the current foundation of FA's coach education model. Grounded in what is referred to as a *model of transmission*, it is suggested that current practices of coach education delivered by FA are founded on a cultural ideology of 'acquisition' (see Lave, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In section two, we work toward a *different* episteme, grounded in the relationality of enskilment (Ingold, 2021; Woods et al., 2021). This paves the way for section three, where a contextualised, situated approach to coach education in Australian football is sketched. Specifically, leaning concepts espoused by Lave and Wenger (1991), a situated approach to coach education is outlined, prioritising *learning-by-doing-in-place*. In doing so, we speak to three interwoven dimensions: (i) *exposure to real-world context*; (ii) *legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice*; and (iii) *mentorship*. While by no means is this sketch complete, it is hoped that this initial step opens lines of inquiry that could prove fruitful in the ongoing journey that is coach education.

4.2 Coach Education in Australian Football: Reflections on Current Practice

Despite the importance placed on coach education by FA, results from Chapter 3 have raised some pertinent questions regarding the effectiveness, relevance and value of its

formality. Designed to support coach development, the coach education delivered by FA is often structured didactically, with coaches being seen to *acquire* knowledge from more experienced others (i.e., coach developers) (Karim, 2016; Maximos et al., 2022). Usually, this acquisition process occurs through the transmission of secondary information, a process typically undergone in decontextualised settings far removed from the coaching environment (Chapter 3). As Lave (1996) suggests, this didactic process reduces 'teaching' and 'education' to a matter of mastering the knowledge created, and transmitted, by others (also see Pierce & Telford, 2023). The corollary is that coaches spend a significant amount of time learning in settings that do not represent their performance context. Further, the homogenised and prescriptive nature of this transmitted secondary information – which is produced, packaged and presented by FA – is often seen as having little practical utility by coaches themselves (see Chapter 3 in addition to Cushion et al. (2010); Kuklick and Mills (2023); Piggott (2012); Townsend and Cushion (2017)). This is not to say, however, that the delivery of secondary information is not without its uses in coach education. Rather, its over-reliance in current formats appears to yield significant implications, especially if learning is to be viewed as a deeply embedded, ecological phenomenon (Button et al., 2020).

The pervasive over-reliance on secondary information in coach education (cf. Cushion et al., 2010; Leeder, 2022; Wang et al., 2023) has deep ties to the metaphoric model of transmission (see Ingold, 2017). According to this model, knowledge is seen secondarily and objective; a (pre)package-able entity that can be instilled into the receptacle minds of others (Woods, 2021). Knowing, in such a view, is a matter of storage and application, which holds that a knowledgeable coach would be one who is able to draw on a large amount of stored content – presumably manifest in rules, concepts and representations – to be applied in practice when the time is 'right' (Ingold, 2011; Woods, 2021). This reflects an ideology that Lave (1990, p. 310) refers to as "the culture of acquisition", where learning is seen to be a cognitive process that occurs abstractly and sequentially.

Broadly, it follows that one first acquires a general body of knowledge about a topic that is to be stored in the mind following its transmission, and then one retrieves such knowledge to construct an action, which is to be applied in the 'proper' context (Lave, 1990; Renga, 2022). From a coaching perspective, this is to imply that in order 'to coach', one must first possess some 'basic', 'fundamental' or 'rational' type of coaching knowledge that mediates their interactions, with this process of 'knowledge acquisition' being initiated in formal education settings.

4.2.1 Education or Indoctrination?

Although discussing memory, David Rubin's (1988) metaphor of a 'complex-structure' captures Lave's culture of acquisition rather eloquently (also see Woods & Davids, 2023). According to such, knowledge can be understood by way of concepts, rules or representations that are determined *prior* to their application in practice. In other words, knowledge:

> "[…] takes the form of a comprehensive configuration of mental representations that has been copied into the mind of the individual, through some mechanisms of replication, even *before* he or she steps forth into the environment. The application of this knowledge in practice is, then, a simple and straightforward process of sorting and matching, so as to establish a homology between structures in the mind and structures in the world" (Ingold, 2011, p. 159, emphasis added).

A knowledgeable coach, in accord with this metaphor, would be one who is able to classify and characterise the various things they look *at*, matched against a prior formed ideal of what such things *should* be (Woods & Davids, 2023). Here, this perspective is explored through the distinction in ecological psychology of knowing *about*, and knowing *of* that which is of interest to us (Gibson, 1966, 1979; Reed, 1996; Turvey & Kugler, 1984). Knowledge *about* can be surmised as secondary information produced by another human individual, often taking shape through the presentation of words, codes, pictures

or symbols (Araujo et al., 2009; Woods & Davids, 2023). This knowledge is bound to the categorial confines of that which has been produced by another human individual, with a coaching manual or game model representing such knowledge in the context of sports coaching. Such documents, for example, may tell a coach and player *about* certain formations or the various places one should stand in order for them to be applied in practice. Indeed, while such secondary information may be beneficial by way of referential meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Reed, 1996), it is fundamentally limited, in that its secondary nature constrains one's search, narrowing their focus toward the application and enactment of what has been prescribed *for* them by another. In other words, focusing too much on knowing *about* coaching may limit a coach's opportunity to grow their knowledge *of* it (O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2021) – a sentiment eloquently noted by Reed (1996, p. 94):

> "When one is examining the world for oneself there is no limit to the scrutiny – one can look as carefully as one wishes, and one can always discover new information. But this is emphatically not the case with [transmitted] second-hand information" (text in brackets added).

This view is shared in recent football coaching literature (Chapter 3), which suggests that formal education, grounded in a model of transmission, may be ineffective in preparing coaches for the realities of coaching (Cushion et al., 2010; Kuklick & Mills, 2023; Leeder, 2022; Nelson et al., 2013). This can be attributed, in part, to the insistence that coaches adhere or conform to a standardised curriculum, preventing them from exploring alternative ways of knowing *in* coaching. Comparable to a process of indoctrination or enculturation (Vaughan et al., 2022), formal coach education in Australia typically encourages coaches to 'adopt' and 're-enact' pre-determined practices and behaviours in order to obtain accreditation (Chapter 3), which reflects concerns about homogenization in some corners of the academic literature (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Cushion & Nelson, 2013; Leeder & Cushion, 2020; Nelson et al.,

2006).

Critiquing along similar lines, Abraham and Collins (1998) suggested that formal coach education is often caught attempting to convince coaches of a singular and appropriate way of coaching, over-constraining opportunities for exploration. This highlights one of the inherent limitations of the transmissive model common to coach education in Australian football, which is that despite best intentions, the nature of how knowledge is presented, 'acquired' and assessed inadvertently encourages indoctrination and conformity, risking coach education regressing into a 'box ticking' exercise rather than a valuable and integral part of an ongoing educative journey (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Cushion & Nelson, 2013; Leeder & Cushion, 2020; Nelson et al., 2006). Collectively, this "seriously calls into question the legitimacy and value of an overly instrumental approach to coach learning and its provision" (Cushion et al., 2010, p. 3). Ironically, rather than bringing the coaching community together in its differentiation, the pervasive requirement to conform to transmitted knowledge about coaching likely pushes many away from identifying and engaging with course content; as voiced by a coach in interviewed in Chapter 3:

> "A coach looks at it [the National Football Curriculum] and says, I'm under pressure, we're in the bottom half of the table, we're closer to relegation than we are to winning the competition, and people are telling me I should have 'this' philosophy because that's what the national curriculum says? That's nonsense! It erodes the confidence of people. *These procedural documents that define what the game should be...it doesn't match the reality.* I think that disenfranchises people who are saying, well, in those circumstances, it doesn't apply to me, it's irrelevant to me. I just need to survive" (emphasis added).

This sentiment is consistent with the literature, according to which national governing bodies, such as FA, are accused of being overly concerned with regulating the attitudes, behaviours and practices of coaches, while the unique context in which a coach operates

in is often disregarded or overlooked completely (Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2019). It highlights a central limitation of FA's current coach education process: *in prioritising the transmission of knowledge about coaching, have FA undervalued the importance of supporting coaches to grow their knowledge of it, embedded in the contexts in which they practice?* While the forthcoming response to this question is in the positive, we do not intend to imply that such shortcomings are, by any means, deliberate. Rather, it is contended that the issues highlighted here are the result of the underlying and often unchallenged 'culture of acquisition' that has led to a transmissive model of coach education in Australian football. Thus, we next move toward a *different* approach to coach education, one that is grounded, not in transmission, but *exposure*. In doing so, we hope to lay a path for coach education in Australian football that swings away from the pervasive ideology of acquiring knowledge *about*, toward one in which coaches are supported in growing their knowledge *of*.

4.3 Toward a Contextually Situated Approach to Coach Education

> "Minor, cosmetic changes will not be enough to make the difference: *a fundamental transformation is necessary*." (Football Australia, 2013b, p. 17, emphasis added)

To start this second section, it is worth revisiting the earlier distinction; knowing *about* and knowing *of* one's environment. Contrasted to knowledge *about*, knowledge *of* is primary, grown by experiencing the coming-into-being of a surround (Gibson, 1979; Reed, 1996). It is the knowledge, according to Gibson (1979, p. 242), that is not transmitted or acquired but grown by *looking*, along with *listening*, *feeling*, *smelling,* and *tasting*. It is the knowledge, in other words, forged through *exposure* to the beings and things which surround us (Gibson, 1979). Indeed, knowledge viewed in such a primary way has important implications for how we are to conceptualise what it means 'to know'. Notably, it implies that knowing *of* a surround is not just a matter of ascribing labels to its constituents, but of becoming more attentive to the information that directly specifies its

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key features; a process often referred to as *attunement* (Ingold, 2021; Woods, 2021).

In a counter-metaphor to that of the complex-structure discussed earlier, Rubin (1988) introduced that of a 'complex-process', which captures the directly active and processual episteme we are foregrounding here. The active process of knowing, according to this metaphor, is prioritised over the property of knowledge, which is to say that knowledge is not an entity to be 'acquired' and then 'applied' in practice, but to know is by *way of practice* (Woods et al., 2022). Far from being produced, prescribed and transmitted into the mind of a passive recipient, knowledge viewed as a complex-process is continually grown through exposure and immersion within an unfolding field of relations (Ingold, 2011). A knowledgeable coach, for example, would not necessarily be the one who can recite game models or patterns of play transmitted to them, but the one who is able to pick-up, and attentively respond to, key features of an environment in a way that resonates with their action capabilities and those of the players and support staff they work with (Araujo et al., 2009; Morris et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2021).

Pertinently, this perspective holds that knowing is not a point that a coach can reach through the recitation and regurgitation of transmitted secondary information. It is not, in other words, a sequential process of 'filling up' a receptacle mind with secondary information (Woods & Davids, 2023). Rather, knowing is an ongoing process of attuning to the ever-changing coaching landscape – that is, coaches do not just know more, but progressively know *better* (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). For instance, the past two decades have witnessed a growing recognition of sports coaching as a profoundly relational practice influenced by an array of nested and interacting socio-cultural constraints (Cushion et al., 2010; Horn, 2008; North, 2017; Vaughan et al., 2022). Such constraints implicate coaching through their influence upon learning, the sports position within the community, how interpersonal dynamics emerge, and how socio-political factors shape opportunity and access to resource. Thus, how coaches become perceptually attuned to such socio-cultural constraints is through immersion, learning to resonate with key

information in ways that corresponds with inhabitants (O'Sullivan et al., 2023; Woods & Davids, 2021).

This process of attunement, as Gibson (1979) emphasises, unfolds through the exposure to varied contexts. It is through this exposure that people become more aware of things and perceive more opportunities to act, learning to differentiate between sources of information in a surround (Gibson, 1979). Such a distinction has significant implications for how we conceptualise and comprehend the coach education process and the role of an experienced other (i.e., coach educator). Accordingly, if we are to take seriously these distinctions, then coach education requires a shift from its current grounding in a model of transmission, to an approach that appreciates the deeply situated and processual nature of what it means 'to know *of*' – a shift we feel responds to the quote with which this section opened.

4.3.1 From Indoctrination to Enskilment

Following the work of Woods et al. (2021) and Ingold (2021), we propose that the notion of enskilment could offer fruitful grounding in working toward such a situated approach. Enskilment is a type of local 'know-how' or 'knack' that progressively emerges as an individual becomes intimately familiar with a task and environment. It can be defined as:

> "Understanding in practice…in which learning is inseparable from doing, and in which both are embedded in the context of a practical engagement with the world" (Ingold, 2021, p. 416).

The inseparability of learning-by-doing-in-place the above excerpt highlights is important for this broader thesis, as it speaks to the growth of knowledge advocated for in coach education: *of*, not just *about*. Moreover, as noted in the above referral of 'practical engagement', the knowledge central to enskilment is not secondary, but primary; it is not transmitted, but grown by doing-in-place with others (also see Harris, 2005; Hsu & Lim, 2020; Woods & Davids, 2021). In a wonderful ethnography with Icelandic fishing

skippers, *Enskilment at Sea*, Pálsson (1994) showed that becoming an enskiled skipper was an ongoing process of learning to attend to changes in environing conditions. Simply, it was a process of attunement, of learning to notice things, paying attention to the unfolding of one's surround. For example, skippers often spoke of the importance of learning to 'read' weather patterns, ocean currents and avian movements, as such dynamic environmental features implicated the various locations one may decide to fish (Pálsson, 1994). Learning to become a skipper, according to Pálsson (1994), is thus a deeply embedded process that can only occur at sea:

> "For skippers…enskilment in fishing is not a matter of formal schooling and the internalisation [and transmission] of a stock of knowledge [about]; rather it is achieved through active engagement *with* the environment, in the broadest sense of the term…'Real' schooling is supposed to take place in actual fishing" (p. 916, text in brackets and emphasis added).

Skippering and coaching are perhaps not that dissimilar, especially when starting from the premise that both could be understood as an ongoing process of enskilling into a respective land- (or sea-) scape. Accordingly, if we are to follow this line of thinking, and view learning as inseparable from doing-in-place, then the development and subsequent assessment of coaching skill would need to occur in the context in which the coach practices; reflecting the above sentiment that 'real' schooling is supposed to take place in *actual coaching*. This contextualisation would likely provide crucial insight into the unfolding of coach behaviour, understood as a deeply situated phenomenon. Interestingly, this view resonates with the perspectives of a coach interviewed in Chapter 3:

> "Had a coach educator come to where I was working and spent a week with me, for example, in the planning process and in training sessions and team meetings on game day, you get a much better window into who the coach is. Are they an A licenced coach? Maybe or maybe not. But you can tell very quickly if that person is

going to be a good coach or not. And that should be the basis for passing or failing or recommending further development. But at the moment, you're in a group of 30 to 40 people, maybe you contribute once or twice in the classroom, you put on a session nervously, with a load of guys that don't really want to be there. It either goes well, or if it doesn't, you fail and then you're suddenly not an A licence coach. Or, you have a personal relationship with the coach educator, or you're an ex-Socceroo and suddenly you're an A licenced coach. Yeah, it's pretty backwards."

In other words, for coach educators to gain a deeper insight into coach practice, they may need to place themselves in the real-world context of coaches, thereby seeing coaches in the midst of *doing* in *their* environment. By adopting this more embedded and situational approach, coach education could shift its practice from understanding knowledge and skills as 'entities' that can be acquired in isolation, to seeing such things as being nested within a broader system or field of relations that continually unfold (Lave & Wenger, 1996; Lave, 2009). The concept of enskilment, thus, invites us to reconsider the fundamental nature of how knowledge, skill and learning are conceptualised, foregrounding the importance of situatedness. In coach education, this leads to a shift away from standardised curricula based on a model of transmission, towards exposure and primary experience. As discussed next, this imbues an educative process that is "about attending to things, rather than acquiring the knowledge that absolves us of the need to do so; about exposure rather than immunisation" (Ingold (2017, p. 11). Perhaps, then, it is worth (re)considering the very word, 'education'?

4.3.2 From 'Teaching' to 'Leading Out'

In an exceptional essay on the education of gaze, Masschelein (2010) invites us to consider two etymologies of 'education': *e-ducare* and *e-ducere*. The first, *e-ducare*, roughly means 'to teach' and refers to the idea of becoming more aware or conscious *about* a specific subject matter in order to develop a better understanding (Masschelein, 2010). Most Australian football coaches who have participated in the coach education

system would inadvertently be familiar with this view of education, as it starts from the premise that 'knowledge' is a tangible entity to be acquired from more knowledgeable others (i.e., teachers or coach educators). In contrast to this more conventional interpretation, Masschelein (2010) introduces *e-ducere*, which roughly means 'to lead out'. Rather than becoming more aware or conscious about features of the world, *e-ducere* is concerned with liberating or displacing one's view through exposure. In other words, education – from this view – is about encouraging people to primarily experience different features of an environment, opening new opportunities for further exploration (Morris et al., 2022).

These contrasting interpretations lead to an interesting point in this Chapter's journey. Namely, if we take education as a process of leading others out into the world, then what would coach education look like? In response, we next draw on concepts from Lave and Wenger (1991), supported by sentiments expressed by coaches in Chapter 3. This allows us to sketch a situated approach to coach education in Australian football that consists of three interwoven dimensions: (i) *exposure to real-world contexts*; (ii) *legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice*; and (iii) *mentorship*. Following a brief introduction to these dimensions, each is brought to life in reference to their respective implications on coach education in Australian football. Though, prior to this, we do wish to briefly signpost our intentions here. Namely, this sketch aims to provide key insight regarding how a more contextually situated approach to coach education *could* unfold, thereby striking a more parsimonious balance between 'coach accreditation' and 'coach development'. Given that formal education is overwhelmingly tilted toward the transmission of second-hand information, this sketch aims to show how coach education in Australian football could move toward *exposure*, thereby helping coaches enskil into their respective environments. While far from complete, it is hoped that this sketch opens a fruitful path for work to come in the next Chapter.

4.4 Real Schooling Happens in Actual Coaching: Sketching a Situated Approach to Coach Education

Pioneered by Lave and Wenger in the early 1990s, the framework of situated learning starts form the premise that meaningful learning is not only situated within the specific contexts that people participate in, but is also deeply shaped by, and shapes, the socio-cultural practices of that community (Miner & Nicodemus, 2021). This directly contrasts with the earlier discussed 'culture of acquisition', which posits that learning is an abstract, context-free phenomenon that unfolds sequentially through transmission (Lave, 1990). From a situated perspective, learning is far from an abstract and sequential endeavour. It is an embedded process that unfolds within a broader environment, which means learning is not only entangled in doing, but doing is entangled in varying socio-cultural practices (Heft, 2013). Simply put, situated learning posits that people (i.e., coaches) are more likely to effectively learn their craft by practising it in context (Ingold, 2021; Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to the findings of Chapter 3, the emphasis on contextualisation espoused in situated learning is resonate with what football coaches in Australia are calling for:

> "[FA] could intersperse the course with actual work in a real environment and you get to experiment and try things that you're learning on the course in a real setting. I think there'll be more influence and more learning from those courses as opposed to just come here, we'll teach you, here is all the information. Bang, bang, bang. Now, off you go and enjoy".

In other words, by grounding coach education in exposure, coaches could experience, and be supported in, aspects of their journey not otherwise encountered through current practices. This could help them grow their knowledge *of* coaching, not just *about* it. As espoused in the above excerpt, the distinction between knowing *about* coaching and knowing *of* coaching is something that coaches appear to intuitively value and appreciate. That is, coaches are understanding of the fact that formal coach education

(in its current state) can only prepare them to a certain point, and it is primarily by doing (i.e., coaching) that they can grow a deeply contextualised knowledge *of* coaching (Jones et al., 2012). For example, as voiced by two coaches interviewed in Chapter 3:

> "There is a distinct and noticeable difference between people who know [*about*] football and people who coach. And it requires very different skill sets".

> "I don't think the courses prepared you [for senior coaching] to be honest. If you've never been in that environment, there's still a lot of learning to do when you get in there."

It is contended here that a situated approach could offer a critical point of difference to the transmissive model germane to current coach education in Australian football. Specifically, a situated approach has the potential to be a viable way of bringing to life the relationality of enskilment. To do this, however, it must constitute *learning-by-doing-in-place*. Thus, we next discuss a situated approach to coach education as a process that unfolds across three intertwined dimensions: (i) *exposure to real-world contexts*; (ii) *legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice*; and (iii) *mentorship*.

4.4.1 Dimension 1: Exposure to Real-World Contexts

Situated learning emphasises that learning is context-dependent, embedded within the place in which a particular task unfolds (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This, for example, implies that if coaching is of developmental footballers in a particular socio-cultural region, then the educative opportunities coaches are exposed to should be situated in – or at the very least, represent – such contexts (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). This perspective is in direct contrast to the current coach education practices facilitated by FA, which tends to compartmentalise knowledge and skills into discrete, 'acquirable' entities, only to then present them in classroom settings far removed from a coaches performance context (Karim, 2016). A potential drawback of such an approach is that coaches may become unresponsive to the needs of their context and instead simply repeat and reproduce the

predetermined criteria solely for the purpose of obtaining accreditation (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). Conversely, with its emphasis on authenticity, context and active participation within a community, exposure to real world contexts may enable coaches to explore and develop their own coaching identity, which fosters a deeper commitment to learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 1996).

The importance placed on context here aligns with the place-based, relational undertones of enskilment (Ingold, 2021; Pierce & Telford, 2023; Woods et al., 2021). According to Ingold (2021), learning 'about' a place is inseparable from being 'in' a place, as it is through 'dwelling' that people learn to become intimately familiar with the behaviours, customs, tasks and respective features that constitute it (also see Woods et al., 2021). When this line of thinking is followed into the realm of coaching, it becomes evident that learning entails more than mere storage and replication of predetermined behaviours and practices that are detached from their respective contexts. Consider the example of skippering noted earlier. An inexperienced skipper could indeed spend vast amounts of time being 'schooled' *about* how to fish by more experienced others. But to become enskiled into the seascape, they must – at some point – be *exposed* to the changing winds and currents, and actively engage with the broader socio-cultural practice of fishing (Pálsson, 1994). This would imply that for coaches to become enskiled into the coaching landscape, education must make more room for exposure to real-world contexts, thereby supporting and guiding coaches in the midst of actual coaching (also see Land & Jonassen, 2012; Stein, 1998). It is of note that such a call for exposure was voiced by two Australian football coaches interviewed in Chapter 3:

> "I think the courses give you structure, but I don't think it necessarily teaches you football. *You can't learn football in a classroom*. You have to make mistakes; you have to lose games. you have to win games. I don't think it necessarily teaches you a deep knowledge *of* football".

"Does something that you learn on courses automatically make you a better coach? Maybe, maybe not. But I still think as a coach, you learn more by *doing* than by seeing a PowerPoint presentation".

When presented with suggestions for contextualising coach learning, apprenticeships as contended by Lave and Wenger (1991) emerge as a viable educative form that situates coaches in performance contexts that are representative, thereby enhancing the visibility of the practices, tasks and knowledge that constitute the fundamental components of coaching (Nash, 2023). For example, instead of Australian coaches spending their educative experiences in decontextualised settings (i.e., classrooms), coaches could undertake a short-term apprenticeship with a certified FA Club or Mentor. Here, coaches would be immersed in actual coaching, growing first-hand experience of how a mentor handles complex training and game situations, including but not de-limited to, managing staff and players, designing and implementing practice, adjusting tactics, navigating conflict, and so on. Thus, exposure through apprenticeships not only provides coaches with first-hand experience of what coaching entails in the real-world, but also becomes the context in which learning takes place.

4.4.2 Dimension 2: Legitimate Peripheral Participation within a Community of Practice

Instead of conceptualising learning as the mere 'acquisition' of transmitted secondary information, Lave and Wenger (1991) position learning as a process that unfolds in the midst of participation with and alongside others. To this end, learning could be said to involve participation in a community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1996). As a conceptual device, a CoP can be defined as a group of people "who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by *interaction on an ongoing basis*" (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). The emphasis on participation and interaction within a community aligns nicely with that of enskilment in its advocacy of skills being shaped by the socio-cultural contexts in which

they are practised (Ingold, 2017). This means it is the practice of a community that creates the basis for what *can* and *is* learned – that is, its 'curriculum'. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) note this through their referral to how social relationships and structures "define possibilities for learning" (also see Kinchin & Kirk, 2003). In this sense, each community becomes a hive of activity, in which skill is not viewed as a 'thing' that can be passed down or transmitted, but is grown through participation in a living tradition that adapts and transforms over time (Ingold, 2017; Wenger, 2011).

The process by which an individual learns within a CoP is captured through what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). The concept of LPP is a "way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). When first entering a CoP, newcomers are likely to start their journey on the periphery, usually by participating in activities that are accessible and relevant to their current action capabilities. As they continue to engage and contribute to a community's unfolding practice, newcomers progressively enskil into their respective environment, and it is through the consensus of mentors and experienced participants that newcomers slowly partake in tasks and activities that are more central to those of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Considered in the context of football coaching, an aspiring coach may commence their educative journey by assuming the role of an apprentice within a club, undertaking tasks that reside on the periphery. Then, slowly, they may work their way more centrally into the community by undertaking more central tasks – a process that could manifest, for example, in the progression from a development coach, to an assistant coach, and then to a head coach.

To enact this, FA could establish a program through which clubs become certified CoPs, thereby allowing them to host apprentices and foster opportunities for LPP. In this regard, learning is legitimate because apprenticing coaches actively participate and contribute to the overall functioning of the CoP they are involved in. Moreover, learning is peripheral

in the sense that apprenticing coaches are more likely to engage in activities and tasks that correspond to their current action capabilities (e.g., setting up main training practices, facilitating smaller training activities, taking notes while observing team meetings, and so on). As part of this process, and as discussed in detail next, FA could concurrently promote the active role of a mentorship program, through which apprenticing coaches work with experienced mentors in the midst of navigating challenges experienced during their educative journey. Indeed, such recommendations are still very much abstract in nature, requiring careful consideration from many prospective stakeholders. This, however, should not be considered as a weakness of our current position, but rather a strength, as it opens an opportunity to work with the broader footballing community in Australia to consider ways of successfully enacting this approach in practice – a path explored in the next Chapter.

4.4.3 Dimension 3: The Role of the Mentor

Apprenticing by way of LPP within a CoP offers opportunities for people to learn their trade within dynamic and collaborative spaces, in which individuals with shared interests come together and guide their attention toward a particular concept (Wenger, 2002). Within the multifaceted structure of a CoP, it stands to reason that mentorship emerges as a pivotal aspect, playing a multifaceted and indispensable role in supporting community members (Culver & Trudel, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). One of the primary roles of mentorship in a CoP is to lead the sharing of ideas, establish resources supportive of skill development and provide the structure to the tasks critical to the community's functioning (Cushion et al., 2006; Wenger, 2002). As noted by a coach interviewed in Chapter 3, such mentor-apprentice interaction in football coaching is an important, yet axillary, aspect of the current formalised coach education process:

> "Having people, like peers or mentors around you, learning and listening and having
>
> the willingness to be humble and open and ask questions and be curious and then,
>
> you know, sort of visit their environments if you build that relationship with them, I

think that could definitely be a positive of coach education."

As echoed in the above, the role of a mentor in a more situated approach to coach education would be one of collaboration and guidance *without* specification (Ingold, 2013). By guidance without specification, we mean that the mentor helps expose the apprentice to opportunities to discover things for themselves in a safe, but uncertain way (Morris et al., 2022). This could be achieved through the use of what Rudd et al. (2021) refer to as 'soft' pedagogical approaches, like nudging or questioning, which encourage inexperienced others to attend to things directly. Indeed, such a view on mentorship is consistent with that of an enskilment approach, in that the experienced practitioner (mentor) works with the mentee, softly guiding their attention by showing them where to look, but not necessarily telling them what to see (Wood et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2021). It is of note that this view of mentorship from a more situated approach was voiced by a coach in Chapter 3:

> "I feel like mentorship is important, but not like a mentor who stands over you. You know [a mentor] who thinks that they're better than you. I'm not keen on those dynamics anymore. I just feel like the more that everyone can be on the same level, no matter where you are, we all have something to learn from each other. And it's important as an experienced coach that we're giving that respect to that other person; they have knowledge and drawing that out of them is important to learning."

Extending our call in the second dimension, we contend that mentorship be considered a key dimension within a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. As espoused earlier in this Chapter, FA could facilitate this through a mentorship program, which allows apprenticing coaches opportunities to learn *with* and *from* experienced companions in the midst of their actual coaching practice. Further, this would enable FA to broaden their reach across the coaching landscape by leveraging the coaching community as another source of 'expertise', while grounding learning in contexts that are

important to coaches. By conceptualising the role of mentorship through the situated approach we are advocating for here, FA could concurrently cultivate a new generation of coaches who are not only attuned to the dynamics of changing contexts, but also have the ability to help softly guide aspiring coaches starting their journey by participating on the periphery of a supportive community.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this Chapter was to explore how the notion of enskilment could be harnessed to guide the establishment of a more situated approach to coach education. To achieve this, we first overviewed current coach education practices in Australian football, looking specifically into the foundation of FA's transmissive model. This could be traced to what Lave (1990) referred to as a 'culture of acquisition', in which learning is viewed as an abstract and sequential process. Following this critique, we then set out to explore a different approach to coach education, drawing on the relationality of enskilment (Ingold, 2021). Doing so led to the reconceptualisation of education, which paved the way for us to sketch a more situated approach. Drawing on key concepts from Lave and Wenger (1991), this situated approach constituted three key dimensions: (i) *exposure to real-world context*s; (ii) *legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice*; and (iii) *mentorship*.

Indeed, while this sketch is far from complete, it does contribute to this broader thesis by uncovering the specific challenges and opportunities of transforming coach education in Australian football. In this respect, it plays an important step in this thesis. Accordingly, we would like to conclude here with some questions that are picked up in the next Chapter. First, if we are to move toward the situated approach advocated for here, how, would, or could, FA accredit this process? Second, how could FA navigate the pragmatic challenges associated with implementing a large-scale, national coach apprenticeship program? Third, how could FA carefully mitigate challenges associated with the

establishment of CoP's in competitive coaching environments where participants may be hesitant to share with counterparts? Questions such as these are just some of the pertinent considerations that would need to be resolved if future work is to concretise the various lines of inquiry that have been exposed here. While addressing such questions would be challenging on multiple fronts, the move toward a more situated approach to coach education in Australian football is a warranted one. Namely, if FA are serious about ensuring that coaches are prepared for the realities of coaching, then prioritising exposure to contexts that coaches actually coach in appears a critical step. After all, echoing the sentiments of Pálsson (1994), 'real' schooling happens in the midst of *actual coaching*.

CHAPTER 5

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION: CHARTING A COURSE FOR A SITUATED APPROACH TO COACH EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL

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Abstract

Following on from Chapter 4, the aim of this Chapter was to explore the benefits, barriers, and strategies to integrate a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. To accomplish this, an interpretivist qualitative research design was used, in which a series of semi-structured interviews with Australian football coaches, coach developers, coach educators and administrators (n=28) were carried out. Participants expressed a strong desire for coach education to be firmly grounded in real-world coaching contexts, alongside the guidance of mentors, affording coaches a richer landscape to learn the 'realities of coaching'. Real-world learning experiences were also deemed to be more meaningful and relevant to coaching practice, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of coaching practice, addressing some of the shortcomings associated with FA's current coach education model. However, participants also identified a number of systemic, institutional and cultural barriers associated with integrating a situated approach, including a perceived lack of value placed on coach education by Football Australia; a 'closed-off' culture in the coaching community; and governance issues related to mentorship. Against the backdrop of these challenges, participants were optimistic about the prospects of integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. As a result of these findings, we map out a way forward for a situated approach to coach education that focuses on two key strategies: (i) establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) integrating mentorship as a core pillar of coach education.

Keywords: Coach Development; Contextualisation; Enskilment; Mentorship; Situated Learning

5.1. Introduction

Formal coach education is viewed as an inevitable and important feature of a broader coach development landscape that strives to provide coaches with relevant and valuable learning experiences (Leeder, 2022). Typically functioning as a quality assurance measure, formal coach education is thought to play a key role, not just in helping to establish a baseline of competence for coaches (Cushion et al., 2010; Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2020; Lyle & Cushion, 2016b), but also in helping to shape key behaviours and practices within the coaching community (Lyle & Cushion, 2016b). However, despite its role within coach development, a growing body of empirical research has been critical of formal coach education for its apparent inability to promote and support meaningful changes in coaches' learning and practice (Callary & Gearity, 2019; Chesterfield et al., 2010; Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Watts & Cushion, 2017). Consequently, the requirement for sporting National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to deliver effective formal coach education is more important than ever, especially given the significant implications it has for coaches, athletes, organisations, and the broader sporting community (Judge & Smith, 2023; Lyle & Cushion, 2016a).

Recognising this, FA recently articulated their intentions of "creating world-class environments for coach development" in their 2020 strategic document (Football Australia, 2020, p. 32). Within this document, FA proposed a number of promising measures, including plans to modernise coach education delivery and course content to better align with the needs of Australian football coaches (Football Australia, 2020). Yet despite these aspirations, results from Chapter's 3 and 4 demonstrate that formal coach education delivered by FA has been largely ineffective in preparing coaches for the realities of coaching, with coaches citing the abstract nature of course content, along with its delivery in decontextualised settings, as major sources of frustration. This echoes a broader criticism of formal coach education in the coaching literature that suggests NGBs prioritise regulation and standardisation over acknowledging the rich and diverse

contexts within which coaches operate (Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2014). This misalignment has been further compounded through the pedagogical approaches used by FA, which have not substantially changed since the inception of the NFC in 2009. In Chapter 3, this stagnation was attributed to a cultural ideology of 'acquisition' woven through FA's coach education model (also see Lave, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991), leading to the view that knowledge is a tangible entity that can be transmitted from expert (i.e., coach educator) to novice (i.e., coach). While thought to be providing a foundation of theoretical knowledge, this model of transmission typically fails to address the dynamic, context-dependent, and embodied nature of coaching practice (Cushion et al., 2010; Kuklick & Mills, 2023; Leeder, 2022; Nelson et al., 2013).

In response to this criticism, Chapter 4 advanced a situated approach to coach education, grounded in the relational concept of enskilment (see Ingold, 2021; Woods et al., 2021). Specifically, Chapter 4 foregrounded a situated approach that prioritised three interwoven dimensions: (i) exposure to real-world contexts; (ii) legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice; and (iii) mentorship. These dimensions were not only deemed essential for enskilling coaches into their respective environments but offered a pragmatic and feasible pathway for its integration within existing coach education frameworks. Briefly, the first dimension underscores the importance of exposing coaches to environments reflective of the context-specific challenges of their practice. The second dimension emphasises the importance of legitimately participating within a community of practitioners who "share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic" (i.e., coaches within a football team) (Wenger, 2002, p. 4). The third dimension speaks to the benefit of mentorship in coach education, in which experienced individuals guide less experienced counterparts through their ongoing development journey (Lascu et al., 2024). These three dimensions of a situated approach to coach education could offer opportunities for coaches to learn from and with more experienced companions in the context of their actual coaching practice.

While such work remains theoretically promising for coach education, it has yet to be practically explored in Australian football. As such, the aim of this Chapter is to collaborate *with* the coaching community, consisting of coaches, coach developers, coach educators, and various stakeholders with vested interest in coach education, to explore the benefits, barriers, and potential strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. More directly, this work asks the following questions: (i) *What are the benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football?*, (ii) *What are the barriers to integrating a situated approach, and how can they be addressed?*, and (iii) *What strategies can be employed to effectively integrate a situated approach into coach education programs?* While acknowledging the breadth of these questions, their responses have the potential to inform policy and practice in coach education, ultimately contributing to the growth and development of the sport at all levels in Australia.

5.2. Method

5.2.1 Study Design

This Chapter used an interpretivist, qualitative research design. The interpretivist position encouraged participants to articulate the nuanced meanings of their experiences and practices within the coaching domain (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Ling, 2016), recognising that the comprehension of individual perspectives necessitates scrutiny and interpretation of the data. Ethical considerations aligning with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research were followed (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018), with ethics approval being gained by the respective university Human Research Ethics Committee.

5.2.2 Participants

A purposive, criterion-based sampling approach was employed in which participants were selected based on their experiences within and with FA's coach education courses.

As such, participants were required to have coached in Australian football for at least three years and/or demonstrate a vested interest in coach education since the release of the second edition of NFC in 2013 (within the past decade). A total of 28 participants contributed to this chapter, with the majority holding multiple roles as either a coach, coach educator, coach developer, and/or stakeholder at various points during their involvement in football. Thus, for brevity, participants' primary role is depicted below in Table 3. The sample's level of coaching experience at the time of the interviews (defined temporally in years), ranged from 1 to 35 years. Participants from this study were recruited through existing networks, social media, direct messaging, email, and in-person contact. Following initial contact, participants were given more detailed information about the study goals, a list of sample conversation topics, and the opportunity to ask questions about what to expect during an interview and how data would be analysed. All participants provided written consent, with the understanding that interviews would be conducted anonymously. Participant names were thus numerically coded from P1 to P28 throughout the analysis. Six participants from this Chapter also participated in Chapter 3, with their overall interpretations and perspectives on coach education remaining consistent.

Table 3. *Participant demographic data*

Demographic Features	Type	Count
Coaching Accreditation	Community Certificate	4
	C Licence	3
	B Licence	6
	A Licence	10
	Pro Diploma	5
Primary Role	Coach	14
	Coach Educator	5
	Coach Developer	4
	Stakeholder	5
Current Level of Involvement in Football	Community	6
	Semi-Professional	10
	Professional	12
Gender	Male	23
	Female	5

5.2.3 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach based on three predetermined themes that aligned with the study's goal: (i) the benefits of adopting a situated approach to coach education, (ii) the barriers and challenges associated with integrating this approach, and (iii) potential strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education. All interview questions were open-ended for conversational purposes, with suggested key themes serving as discussion guides (Jamshed, 2014). The open-ended format increased the scope and depth of topics discussed when compared to closed-ended interviews (Jones et al., 2013), as well as providing greater flexibility in allowing participants to provide insights into the given topic(s). Table 4 shows examples of specific questions utilised during the semi-structured interviews.

Table 4. *Themes and subsequent questions explored in the semi-structured interviews*

Theme	Questions
Benefits of a Situated Approach	What are the benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football?
	How can a situated approach influence coach learning and development?
	What are the benefits of learning in real-world contexts?
	What are the benefits of mentorship?
Barriers of a Situated Approach	What are the barriers to integrating a situated approach, and how can they be addressed?
Strategies for a Situated Approach	What strategies can be employed to effectively integrate a situated approach into coach education programs?

The first author conducted a reflective process to evaluate the interview structure and question appropriateness (Clarke, 2013). This review resulted in only minor, semantic changes to the wording of some questions, with no further changes being made after the fifth interview. The first author conducted all interviews online, between January and April 2024. Interviews lasted 51 to 147 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and then

analysed.

5.2.4 Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim using Trint (Trint Ltd) and then transferred to Microsoft Excel for further analysis. A pragmatic, six-staged thematic analysis approach was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author initially immersed themselves in the data, reading and re-reading transcripts to familiarise themselves with key terms, passages, and themes related to the research questions. The second phase of the analysis involved generating lower and higher-order codes, aiding in identifying, grouping and mapping the data. Here, the second author joined the analysis process, providing an alternative perspective and challenging the codes representativeness and relationship to the original extracts. As Braun and Clarke (2006) note, the process of thematic analysis is often non-linear in nature and at times requires moving back and forth from one phase to the next, which involves the searching, reviewing, grouping and naming of codes into potential themes. A deductive analysis was then conducted to organise identified themes in relation to existing literature on (i) *the benefits of a situated approach to coach education*, (ii) *the barriers associated with its integration*, and (iii) *potential strategies for its integration*. This led to phase six of the analysis, where vivid and compelling quotes from the interviews were selected to help illustrate the findings in the results and discussion section. For brevity, both the results and discussion are presented concurrently.

5.2.5 Research Rigour

Having adopted a relativist position, we implemented several measures to produce a qualitative research design that was flexible, reliable and trustworthy in its data handling, interpretation and presentation (Creswell, 2014; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Purposive sampling of participants was employed to recruit and account for a diverse group of participants from the coach education sector. This approach aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives from volunteer to career coaches, inexperienced to highly

experienced individuals, and those with varying levels of engagement with formal coach education. By including a broader range of participants, we sought to obtain richer insights on the coach education landscape, ensure our research's relevance beyond traditional formal structures, and enhance the credibility of our findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Given that there are no straightforward guidelines on how many participants is enough for qualitative interviews, the decision to conduct 28 interviews was predicated on methodological and practical considerations (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Specifically, we sought to make sure the sample size was large enough to allow for the unfolding of new and rich insights, but small enough to allow for a deep and comprehensive analysis (Sandelowski, 1995). Additionally, we stopped participation recruitment once the first author observed little to no new insights were being offered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Here, we established an inclusive participation criteria to attract not only large number of coaches, coach developers, and coach educators but also stakeholders with vested interest in coach education, such as club and coach education administrators. Moreover, to ensure participant responses were genuine reflections of their views, participants were consistently informed before, during and after the interview that their data would be confidential and anonymised.

To enhance our methodological rigour, the first author conducted three pilot interviews to refine the interview format and questions, ensuring their effectiveness in eliciting discussions directly related to the research questions. Recognising the potential influence of personal bias and subjectivity, especially given the first author's background as a participant in FA's Advanced Coaching Pathway and as a published author on coach education in Australian football, reflexivity played a crucial role in establishing data trustworthiness (Finlay & Gough, 2008). Researcher triangulation between the first and second author involved consistent critique, challenge and refinement of codes and themes to ensure accurate interpretations between the authors and to reduce the impact of personal biases (Denzin, 2017; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

5.3 Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are centred around the three predetermined themes: (i) the benefits of a situated approach to coach education; (ii) the barriers to integrating a situated approach; and (iii) strategies for integrating a situated approach into coach education. Excerpts that best captured the sentiments of the participants are featured throughout this section.

5.3.1 Theme 1: The Benefits of a Situated Approach to Coach Education

Drawing specifically on the three dimensions espoused in Chapter 4: (i) exposure to real-world contexts, (ii) legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice, and (iii) mentorship, the first theme highlights the benefits of a situated approach to coach education. Despite all three dimensions being interwoven, in the interest of clarity, each are explored separately, enabling a more nuanced discussion of their relevance in the context of coach education.

5.3.1.1 Benefits of Exposure to Real-World Contexts

Generally, participants felt that learning experiences based in real-world contexts offered coaches better opportunities to "learn the complexities of coaching" [P28], were more "meaningful and relevant" [P6], and emphasised that "real learning and development" [P24] takes place "at the coalface" [P28]. The value of learning through exposure was especially well-noted by P7, who stated that "the key thing in learning is exposure; most people [in coach education] aren't exposed to the realities of coaching". Although some participants still viewed the current approach to formal coach education as having an important role in coach development, the majority of participants argued that "actual practice in real life plays the biggest role" in a coach's learning journey [P6]. In expressing a similar sentiment, P24 stated that learning in one's own club environment, with familiar players and surroundings, would be "so helpful" in ensuring coaches could become the best versions of themselves. Moreover, exposure to real-world contexts, according to

some, provided a richer landscape for coaches to "find" themselves and was seen as the "only real way to truly learn their identity and coaching process" [P16]. Lave and Wenger (1991) speak to this very sentiment, contending that learning one's own (coaching) identity is not simply a matter of 'acquiring' new knowledge, but that identity is inseparable, grown in 'relation' to one's own practice in the real-world. Consequently, participants expressed a strong desire for coach education to be firmly grounded in real-world coaching contexts, expressing "there is nothing better than experiencing coaching first-hand and working through mistakes. I think the opportunities for personal growth there are massive" [P15]. Participants often spoke towards this preference in relation to their frustrations with the current coach education model, criticising its abstract content and lack of context. The two excerpts below highlight the lack of practical relevance and applicability that participants mentioned:

> "Coach education courses don't reflect the reality of coaching. You go on a coach education course and you either don't have the players of the context that you're working with or you're using the coaches on the course." [P22]

> "My experience has been that after coaches leave the course, all of a sudden, they're confronted with situations that just weren't covered on the course and all of a sudden it's 'what do I do now?'" [P25]

These sentiments resonate with broader criticisms of formal coach education explored throughout this thesis (also see Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion et al., 2010; Jones & Allison, 2014a; Nelson et al., 2013; Paquette et al., 2019). For example, it has been argued that traditional coach education often fails to resonate with coaches due to the content not authentically representing the complex and dynamic nature of coaching (Chapter 3 and 4). This finding is somewhat unsurprising, though, given that FA's current coach education model is underpinned by what one participant termed a "copy to create pedagogy" [P28], whereby coaches in their early stages are given a framework to

emulate, with the expectation that they will eventually develop their own coaching approach as they gain experience. This copy to create approach, however, has considerable limitations – namely that it often fails to recognise how the broader environment shapes coaching (Vaughan et al., 2021; Vaughan et al., 2022). Moreover, coaches generally consider the abstract content delivered in decontextualised courses as being irrelevant to their coaching context (Nash et al., 2017; Stodter & Cushion, 2019), leaving them feeling 'disenfranchised' by the process. This perpetuates concerns that coach education has regressed into a 'box ticking' exercise rather than a meaningful component of a coach's learning journey (Chesterfield et al., 2010; Cushion & Nelson, 2013; Leeder & Cushion, 2020). Therefore, by embedding learning within real-world contexts, coaches may be exposed to the complexities of coaching, which extend beyond technical and tactical knowledge; something that the current model of coach education fails to capture:

> "On the A licence, I expected it to be a little bit more around management and how to deal with people, especially considering there are prerequisites to get on to the course, and then you get on the course, and you learn nothing about coaching in those environments. There's a lot of stuff that you miss, especially around how to handle players and staff, manage up and down, none of that gets taught." [P4]

This perceived inadequacy of current coach education is largely attributed to the emphasis on reproducing standardised curricula and assessments that do not fully account for the diverse contexts within which coaches operate (Cushion et al., 2019; Lyle & Cushion, 2010). Consequently, it appears coaches do not feel adequately prepared to navigate the complex social, emotional, and organisational aspects of their roles, which represent the "realities of coaching life" [P28]. These sentiments underscore the benefits associated with a more relational and situated approach to coach education (Wood et al., 2023). By re-positioning educational experiences within real-world coaching contexts, coaches may be able to develop a more relevant, holistic, and nuanced

understanding of the coaching profession, thereby supporting their ongoing developmental journey.

5.3.1.2 Benefits of Legitimate Peripheral Participation

As noted in the second dimension of the situated approach espoused in Chapter 4, legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice is an integral component that supports exposure to real-world contexts. Such participation emphasises the importance of 'doing' with and alongside others. It extends the idea that effective learning is not just a matter of being exposed to real-world contexts, but it also entails legitimately participating within a community of practice, such as assuming the role of an assistant coach. This concurrently speaks to the importance of social interaction and active engagement in the learning process. A notable benefit of such legitimate participation, as voiced by participants, was its potential to foster a "feel" for the game, defined here as an embodied and intuitive understanding that transcends theoretical knowledge. This tacit knowledge, or 'knowledge of' (Gibson, 1966, 1979), emerges through first-hand experience of actual coaching, grown by getting one's hands dirty – that is, by 'spending time on the grass'. This is in contrast to 'knowledge about' coaching, which is declarative information transmitted at second-hand (Woods & Davids, 2021); a distinction aptly noted by P16:

> "I think when you've got time on the grass, you have the opportunity to design and deliver training sessions and work through factors that you're not made aware of during the courses. You actually need to 'feel' those problems, feel success, feel the frustrations when things don't go well and learn from those. I really believe that spending a lot of time on the pitch delivering training sessions early on in my coaching allowed me to learn more from that as opposed to anything else."

The emphasis on legitimate participation resonates with the place-based, relational underpinnings of enskilment (Ingold, 2021; Pierce & Telford, 2023; Woods et al., 2021).

Specifically, Ingold (2021) argues that learning 'about' place is inseparable from being 'in' that place, and that dwelling is how people (i.e., coaches) become intimately familiar with the kinds of behaviours, habits, and tasks that constitute an environment (also see Woods et al., 2021). Therefore, within this context of coach education, it comes apparent that learning is not about the mere memorisation and reproduction of predefined content outside of its context, but 'learning' to resonate with the contexts that they inhabit (O'Sullivan et al., 2023). In relation to this sentiment, participants noted that if coaches are afforded legitimate participation within actual coaching contexts, free from the constraints placed on them by formal coach education, they are more likely to discover their "own style" [P21] and forge a sense of "authenticity and integrity" [P2] in their practice. This benefit, notably, is in direct contrast to the current model of coach education in Australian football (see Chapter's 3 and 4), which as P16 suggests, inadvertently discourages exploration in favour of promoting a 'right way' to coach (also see Chapman et al., 2020):

> "So, once you finish a course, I don't think that's enough time to really develop a really strong understanding [of yourself] and all the concepts presented. What you do is you get the introductory of those concepts and it might flick a switch, but you need time to really build it out. And I think in the process of upskilling and upscaling, you really need to have the opportunity to put those things into practice and then it becomes authentic because you believe in it. And when it's authentic, the players understand you as a leader more and they don't feel like you're trying to fabricate some type of method that isn't really you."

The emphasis on 'authentic' in the above underscores a paradigm shift relating to how participants perceive the value of coach education. Rather than merely seeking 'knowledge about' coaching, participants appear to claim for a deeper, more embodied 'knowledge of' coaching, enabling them to navigate the complexities of their specific context in a manner that aligns with their values and beliefs. This speaks to a value

placed by participants on learning experiences that foster legitimate participation alongside others (Leeder et al., 2021; Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016; Van Woezik et al., 2021). Yet despite this, the current FA coach education model, with its emphasis on standardisation, "makes it almost impossible for coach educators to meet the specific needs of coaches" [P12].

Another notable benefit of legitimate participation, as expressed by participants, was its potential to cultivate a more conducive environment for the sharing by way of peer-to-peer learning. This, in turn, could facilitate deeper reflection on practice, collaborative problem-solving, and the establishment of a more supportive and psychologically safe learning environment (Edmondson, 2004). This was particularly evident in discussions around preferred learning settings, where participants often found the most valuable aspects to their development were largely informal interactions and exchanges that occurred outside of formal education:

> "There is so much benefit of having someone with either more experience or even just different experience, that you can tap into. I'm working with five coaches less experienced than myself, and I just offer them that support, and they seem to be coming on very well, not necessarily because of what I know, but just the ability that they've got someone to come to when they're not sure on something and they've got that ability to say, 'I've got this idea, what do you think?' A big part of that is the support of having someone that understands what the coach is going through as well." [P11]

By fostering opportunities for coaches to learn from and with each other, grounded in real-world coaching contexts, coach education programs may be able to draw on the collective experience of the coaching community, facilitating a more collaborative, engaged and meaningful environment. This emphasis on collaboration and peer-to-peer learning goes hand-in-glove with the promotion of mentorship within a situated approach to coach education.

5.3.1.3 Benefits of Mentorship

This leads to the third dimension of the situated approach espoused in Chapter 4: the benefit of mentorship. Asked on how mentorship has or could benefit(ed) the educative experience, the following participants mentioned:

> "Mentorship has played an important and large role in my development as a coach. I'd almost go as far as to say that it's been pretty integral to my pathway and career to date." [P16]

> "I am very proud of my apprenticeship, being mentored by some of the best names in football and working with them as their assistant. I learnt a lot about my ability, and I guess my coaching philosophy was influenced through those apprenticeships." [P7]

Having personalised feedback and support, situated within a particular coaching context, was often regarded as a key benefit of mentorship. Participants found that working alongside, collaborating with and getting feedback from mentors provided insights into their practice that could be hard to gain in decontextualised course settings that often present abstract content. For example, when coaches complete a course, they leave and "all of a sudden, they're confronted with situations that weren't covered on the course, or are left wondering 'what do I do now?' Mentoring could fill those gaps" [P25]. Within this context, mentorship could be understood as a way of growing coaches' '*knowledge of*' coaching, as opposed to the somewhat sanitised nature that formal coach education can often take, where it merely transmits '*knowledge about*' it (Wood et al., 2023). One way in which mentors may facilitate this development is through their ability to provide situated and contextual feedback:

> "Ultimately, as much as you try coach education you can't replicate it [mentoring in someone's own context]. So, I think having exposure to the realities of someone's context, the challenges they face, the players that they deal with, the constraints that they're under, you'll gain a true understanding of what they have to deal with. That's

where you start to see the intricacies of coaching and what it requires. And that can be something really difficult to explain and work through in a classroom. That's where the real value of mentorship lies." [P12]

Indeed, it has been proposed that coaching competency can be better understood within the specific coaching environment of coaches (Wood et al., 2023). This suggests that the education of coaching competency may also need to occur in such representative settings (see Chapter 4). Possessing a nuanced appreciation of one's unique circumstance could foster a positive, safer, and more supportive environment for coach development (Wood et al., 2023). Many participants, for example, emphasised that mentorships often create a space where coaches feel more comfortable expressing themselves, leading them to take risks, make mistakes, and ask questions without fear of judgment or ridicule; an aspect that the current model of coach education is unable to provide:

"Unfortunately, on these football courses, there's a lot of ego and you can see that ego playout throughout the course. And now you're being judged for what you've done as a player or a coach prior to being in that environment, as opposed to what you can actually do on the course." [P23]

The sense of safety associated with mentorship is likely to promote an environment supportive of experimentation and innovation in coaching practice, leading coaches to try things while supported by experienced others (Lascu et al., 2024). Not only would this safe experimentation foster difference in practice, but it could cultivate a more inclusive and welcoming coaching community bound by differentiation:

"I think [mentorship] would go some way towards breaking down some of the cultural barriers I've spoken about before, where the coaching fraternity often is closed rather than looking to support one another." [P6]

"Mentorships open up coaching to all types of people. Not only 'football' people,

especially for people who haven't seen themselves as coaches". [P21]

Of particular note was that participants who identified with underrepresented groups (e.g., those based on gender or cultural and linguistic diversity) often perceived the current coach education environment as intimidating and exclusive. Mentorship could provide a safer space for learning, allowing coaches to comfortably share ideas, ask questions, and experiment with new concepts (Martins et al., 2024). This benefit is in direct contrast to the current educative system's tendency to move toward standardisation and indoctrination, which has been accused of alienating those who do not conform to a predetermined identity (Bradbury et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2018). As P23 noted:

> "Courses do a really good job at weeding coaches out, rather than developing them and improving their confidence to perhaps want to progress or stay in coaching".

While these findings echo concerns raised in the literature regarding potential marginalisation and discrimination within formal coach education programs (Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2008; Lewis et al., 2018), they also underscore the potential of a situated approach to mitigate these concerns. This is primarily due to its emphasis on fostering social interaction and the sharing of ideas (Lave & Wenger, 1991), while helping coaches develop a sense of belonging and connection, which can be crucial for their ongoing learning and development (Wenger, 2002). Participants also emphasised the benefit of mentors who question existing practices, encouraging them to think critically about what they are doing. In other words, mentorship not only helps coaches to self-reflect, but it can guide coaches to improve their ability to know "what to reflect on" [P28]. As P17 noted, mentors have the potential to ask "really relevant questions" that prompt coaches to reflect on their practices and consider alternative perspectives:

> "He would tell me upfront, 'I'm here to help you as a resource. You tell me what you want me to do'. And it helped me to justify my approach and then justify it to the

players about why we're doing something. I think you're a better coach for having someone that you can do that with."

5.3.2 Theme 2: Barriers to Integrating a Situated Approach

While the perceived benefits of a situated approach to coach education in Australian football were considered, there were also barriers challenging its successful integration. As will be explored in this section, these barriers anchored around three sub-themes: (i) systemic and institutional barriers; (ii) cultural resistance to change; and (iii) the governance of a situated approach.

5.3.2.1 Systemic and Institutional Barriers

Systemic and institutional barriers were considered by participants to be significant challenges to the integration of a situated approach to coach education. Two key areas of concern emerged during the interviews: (i) a perceived lack of value placed on coach education and development by FA; and (ii) ineffective internal structures and processes. The former of these was particularly noted by P23:

> "I think Football Australia needs to take coaching seriously and genuinely listen to coaches, their diverse experiences, and cater for that. I don't know if it's because they [Football Australia] don't have money or they don't really value coaching, but they just don't care enough about investing in coaches, coach education and coach development. And that's really the crux of the issue. But we [coaches] need a lot more than that because we play a huge role in facilitating the environment. Without coaches, you don't have players, and you don't have quality players. So, I think they really need to take coaching more seriously."

This perceived lack of value, according to participants, is evident in the limited funding and resources allocated to coach education. It appeared to some participants that "FA are good at making statements about developing world-class coaches, but coach education requires investment. It seems more like a marketing scheme by FA time and

time again" [P18]. The lack of resourcing allocated towards coach development and education by FA was seen as insufficient to meet the needs of both the coaching community and the coach education sector, thereby challenging how a situated approach may be feasibly integrated. This was echoed by P1 who explained that this lack of resource almost 'forced' coach developers and coach educators to create and deliver programs that were "secondary, sometimes tertiary priority for the people who have to do it". Some participants lamented the lack of FA investment into coach education, while others questioned the priorities of the governing body:

> "Working within FA's coach education sector, you try and find different ways to reinforce the importance and value of coaches and coach development, but for whatever reason, there isn't a strong enough voice or champion with enough sway to be able to say it's not alright and it's not where it should be." [P12]

Moreover, a contradictory focus on the generation of revenue through coaching courses emerged, which appeared to come at the expense of quality educative experiences. The view that coach education is (successfully) geared towards generating revenue is "an undeniable fact because I've seen the budgets and been a part of the cost setting" [P8]. A purported prioritisation of financial gain over coach development has the potential to negatively impact the overall quality of coaching in Australia, in addition to challenging the integration of a situated approach to coach education. Paradoxically, it appears that current approaches to coach education, and the allocated resources, are either not designed to meet the developmental needs of coaches or are not being reinvested back into the coach education sector: "[In the space of a decade] we went from running 11 courses to over 100 courses around the country. But the resourcing to do that didn't change" [P24].

Another source of concern was related towards FA's structure and internal operations, with one participant describing FA as "one of the most inefficient organisations I ever had

the pleasure of working with" [P18]. Such sentiments indicate scepticism about FA's commitment to "create world-class environments for coach development" (Football Australia, 2020). Consequently, new initiatives, like a situated approach to coach education, could be systemically difficult to introduce, given a combination of barriers related to resourcing, communication, collaboration, and strategic decision-making. This perceived inefficiency was largely attributed to the disconnect between FA and its member state federations, which was seen by participants as contributing to inconsistencies in coach education, deterring the establishment of a more unified approach across the country:

> "A large part of the problem with coach education in Australia is that the state federations are never on board with Football Australia, and they don't have to be. The state federations always control the narrative in the end. Football Australia doesn't have the ability to have a clearly defined national plan around coach education." [P7]

This mismatch between FA and member federations has also been acknowledged by FA (Football Australia, 2020). In addition to hindering collaboration and progression across the coach educational sector, it can also stifle the development of new initiatives, such as a situated approach to coach education. As voiced by P5:

> "Coach education right now in Australia is the Wild West, because anybody can do it, and everybody does it their own way and there's no consistency and that's why we're not progressing."

When coupled, a perceived lack of prioritisation and disorganisation within FA has the potential to create multifaceted barriers that challenge the integration of a situated approach to coach education. More than this, these barriers can also contribute to an organisational or even sport-wide culture that becomes path dependent and resistant to change (see Rothwell et al., 2020). These findings resonate with previous research on

organisational change in sport, stressing the key roles of leadership, culture and structure that enable innovation and novel practices (Sahin, 2022; Skinner et al., 2018). So, transitioning to a situated approach in Australian football may require that FA rethinks its investment in coach education, positioning the development of coaches as an important pillar of sport-wide development. However, addressing these resource constraints alone may not be sufficient to initiate and integrate a situated approach. As will be explored next, significant cultural barriers may need to be concurrently surmounted.

5.3.2.2 Cultural Resistance

Following the above, a cultural resistance to change was noted by participants as a barrier to the integration of a situated approach to coach education. This resistance seemed to manifest in various forms, ranging from an unwillingness to embrace new ideas and methodologies, to a staunch defence of current coach education practices. Several participants expressed concerns about a prevailing mindset among some coaches, coach developers, coach educators and administrators to prioritise the maintenance of the status quo in coach education:

> "Football [in this country] suffers from its success in terms of numbers. It's a case where what we're doing must be okay [because of participation numbers] rather than saying, no, we can do it better. It seems to me that the culture around coach education is very much, no, we just do what we do and it's all about X's and O's." [P25]

This resistance to change is further reinforced by a perception within FA that previous iterations of coach education were considered "world-leading" and "industry standard" at their time of instantiation [P16]. Perhaps the purported resistance to change could be attributed to vested interests within the football community, where established practices and associated positions may be threatened by the paradigm shift required to integrate

a situated approach to coach education (see Djelic & Quack, 2007; Wenger, 2002). Several participants actually spoke to this sentiment when discussing why previous attempts to integrate more *in-situ* approaches failed to generate change. For example, P25 mentioned that "some people [within coach education] drive a culture that isn't appreciative of change", while P7 stated that the current educative system is "controlled and managed to keep people employable". While rather damning, such sentiments do lead us to ask whether individuals who benefit from the existing coach education system are open to a situated approach, as it could disrupt established hierarchical structures. It is of note, however, that participants generally did not feel as though this path dependency was insurmountable. By engaging in responsive conversation, presenting evidence of the benefits of change, and demonstrating the effectiveness and influence of a different approach, participants felt it possible to foster a more collaborative and adaptable culture within the coaching community. To this, some participants mentioned the need for leadership that moves toward a clear vision for coach education reform: "someone who can champion this new approach and get everyone on board" [P22]. In sum, it seems that a successful transition to a situated approach requires a commitment from leaders within the football community to actively support doing things differently.

In addition to a resistance to change, participants spoke to a competitive ethos ingrained within the Australian football community as another barrier to the integration of a situated approach to coach education. This ethos was noted to implicate a situated approach in two main ways: (i) preventing collaboration, and (ii) constraining the recruitment of suitable mentors. Here, participants described a widespread 'closed-off' mentality among the Australian football coaching community, in which coaches are reluctant to share their approaches, plans and overall experiences. For instance, P11 noted that coaches in Australia can be "very secretive, everyone wants to keep their ideas to themselves", while P28 noted that coaches, especially at the semi-professional level are "more reluctant to share with people who could someday be in a position to take their job". The

competitive ethos in a community can generate a form of 'anti-learning culture', in which sharing knowledge and collaboration are disincentivised by interpersonal competition and a perceived lack of career opportunities, leading to forms of 'gatekeeping' (Wenger, 2002). This, according to some participants, contributes to a coaching culture that is "all about the win" [P24] – from grassroots to high-performance environments. This competitive ethos among coaches is not limited to Australian football (Norris et al., 2017). Indeed, while competition can help to drive improvement, it can also contribute to the reproduction of negative consequences, such as anxiety, burnout and reduced willingness to collaborate (Sakib, 2021; Teques et al., 2019; Upenieks et al., 2023). To this, participants mentioned the precarity of their jobs should they not attain results on the pitch, perpetuating a short-term focus at the expense of a long-term career ambition:

> "Accreditation becomes a box-ticking exercise for some. I need the points [results] so I can keep my job. So, I don't really care what you're going to tell me [on coaching courses] because my method of pre-season has worked for me for the last 10 years". [P2]

> "There's a lot of pressure from the club, from the board, from the fans, to win every game. And that can make it difficult to take risks or try new things, because you're worried about losing your job". [P15]

This reluctance to collaborate, according to participants, would also influence the availability and recruitment of suitable mentors. Here, it was thought that the 'gatekeeping' of information throughout the coaching community was fuelled by coaches' egos and anxieties about being "found out" [P5] or judged by their peers. There seems to be an unwillingness for coaches to share, leading many to "run a closed shop" and "not let people in" [P7]. This led to a belief that Australian coaches needed to set aside their "self-doubt and ego" [P5] and "buy into" [P25] ideas like mentorship. It seems that in order to successfully integrate a situated approach into coach education in Australian

football, particularly mentorship, Australian "coaches must be prepared to *mentor* as well as be *mentored*" [P4].

5.3.2.3 Governance of a Situated Approach

In addition to the systemic and cultural barriers reported above, the governance of a situated approach was also considered as a complex barrier to its effective integration. Overall, participants' responses fell into three categories: (i) governing the mentorship experience, (ii) mentor recruitment, and (iii) learning assessment. Indeed, while mentorship was portrayed as beneficial, participants acknowledged the difficulties in establishing and maintaining effective mentor-mentee relationships. Consistent with research on mentorship in the context of coach education (see Jones et al., 2009; Koh et al., 2014), participants spoke towards the potential for power imbalances, personality mismatches or a lack of clarity on roles as barriers to the integration of mentorship within coach education. P1 spoke towards the importance of fostering a positive and supportive mentor-mentee relationship that is based on collaboration and reciprocation, where both parties learn and grow together:

> "We need to make sure that coaches [mentees] have mentors who are very understanding and patient about their [mentee's] journey. I've seen it too many times, where a lot of information gets pushed, a lot of agendas being pushed by mentors because it makes sense in their own context rather than the context of the mentee. But if you can develop a system-wide thinking to developing that mentee-mentor relationship, then yeah, it's absolutely viable".

Whereas more traditional mentoring approaches may foster a relationship in which mentees are viewed as knowledge 'recipients' and mentors as knowledge 'providers' (Rachamim & Orland-Barak, 2018). The idea that mentorship benefits should flow in both directions reflects calls for a more reciprocal mentorship relationship (Langdon & Ward, 2015; Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder et al., 2022). As such, for mentorship experiences to be

inviting and rewarding for both mentors and mentees, the relationship ought to be founded on "mutual respect" [P21] and a shared willingness to share and learn from one another (Leeder et al., 2022). Should such relationships lack a collaborative and supportive basis, they can quickly and inadvertently lead to power imbalances, as P21 explains:

> "A mentor for me is a facilitator. As soon as there is a power dynamic of someone being the boss and someone being the mentee, then you lose that power of mutual respect."

These findings highlight the complexities in establishing and maintaining effective mentorship programs in coach education. Moreover, they signal the necessity for mentors and FA to clearly promote the mentor's role as a 'co-learner' (see Langdon, 2014; Lascu et al., 2024), rather than an authority who determines what should and should not be learned (Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder et al., 2022). Yet despite the benefit a mentorship process may hold for coach development, sentiments like the one above clearly illustrate its challenges, especially for underrepresented groups who may face additional barriers related to perceived knowledge gaps and cultural expectations: "If we go down the path of a mentorship model, if people from minority groups don't feel comfortable with who they are paired up with, they'll just back away" [P27]. To overcome such barriers, FA would need to consider how to create a mentorship culture that was supportive and inclusive of all (to be discussed further in the forthcoming theme).

Participants also noted here that not all experienced coaches make good mentors, and a mentor program should consider an individual's "interpersonal skills" [P21], beyond just football experience and knowledge. This contradicts the commonly held view within the football 'community' that a coach with 'many years of experience' is naturally suitable for a mentoring role (Leeder et al., 2019). Additionally, participants considered various (often contrasting) viewpoints around what made for a 'good' mentor. Some prioritised

experience, while others held the view that good mentors were not about having coaching experience alone, "they need to be able to connect with their mentee on a personal level, understand their needs, and offer guidance that is both supportive and challenging" [P12]. Indeed, while experience and expertise are acknowledged as critical, it appears that participants also value the possession of interpersonal skills. After all, "the best mentors are the ones who care about you and want to see you succeed, not just those who want to impart their knowledge on you" [P17]. To this, mentors need not be coaches further along the development pathway but could be those who effectively 'guide by the side' to support coaches through their experiences of coaching (Lascu et al., 2024; Leeder et al., 2022).

While the identification and recruitment of suitable mentors emerged as a barrier, participants also questioned how a learning assessment framework could be used to help govern a situated approach to coach education. Such a framework was deemed essential by participants, not only for measuring the impact of such experiences but also for ensuring alignment with the accreditation requirements imposed on FA by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). Some of the requirements stipulated by the AFC for accreditation are in turn cascaded into the delivery and assessment of coach education in Australia such that "we are sort of hamstrung, in that the AFC say that you have to do three assessments within the course, you have to have an exam, you have to have an oral interview and all these other things" [P24]. Because of these "restrictions around coach education" [P24], there is a need to strike a balance between satisfying accreditation requirements to ensure the full recognition of a coaches' credentials can be obtained and ensuring that assessment methods are both rigorous and contextually relevant.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Strategies for Integrating a Situated Approach to Coach Education

Informed by the benefits and barriers, this theme explores practical strategies for

integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football. Two strategies were specifically noted throughout this section of the interview: (i) club environments acting as the locus to coach education, and (ii) the development of a mentorship program. Critically, both strategies weave together the three interwoven dimensions of the situated approach to coach education proposed in Chapter 4 and as such, will be discussed generally.

5.3.3.1 Club Environments as the Primary Locus of Coach Education

A similar consensus emerged across the participants that the most effective and sustainable way to integrate a situated approach was to make club environments the primary locus of coach education. One purported advantage of this approach is that club environments may act as the domain for all three dimensions espoused in Chapter 4. Moreover, the potential for clubs to foster a culture of development, offering ongoing, tailored support and resources, not only enhances the relevance of learning, but also promotes a more sustainable, long-term perspective on development for both clubs and coaches. This would not be an unrealistic task for clubs, with P24 even noting that some "clubs can do it themselves" by "providing an environment for learning and education". This, however, would require a shift in responsibility from FA to the clubs themselves. Further, FA would need to reposition its role within education, focusing on empowering, upskilling, and supporting clubs to take ownership of their coach development programs, rather than attempting to universalise its agenda. Such repositioning also extends to the coach educators, who could be employed, not to be course presenters as such, but to be "coach developers in terms of mentoring" [P6]. It is of note here that a situated approach has recently gained traction at the community level through the implementation of the Club Coach Coordinator (CCC) program. Delivered by a handful of member federations across the country, the CCC program is based on supporting the development of coaches within their respective club environments, thus empowering clubs to become self-sufficient learning hubs (Football Australia, 2018).

The concept of club-based education also aligns with the notion of enskilment in its advocacy of skills and knowledge being shaped by the socio-cultural contexts in which they are practised (Ingold, 2017). That is to say, it is the practice of a community that creates the basis for what *can* and *is* learned – that is, its 'curriculum' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Thus, by establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, coaches could be afforded with richer opportunities to grow a deeper knowledge of their community's most valued practices, behaviours, and skills. Moreover, it may help cultivate a greater sense of community and belonging across the coaching ecosystem (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2002). By tapping into club's resources and expertise, coach education can become more accessible, cost-efficient, and less dependent on governing bodies and their associated costs, potentially leading to more bespoke educational content, knowledge and skill development, while concurrently addressing the current model's shortcoming (see Chapter 3 and 4).

Following the sentiments of the CCC program, some participants discussed the role of the Technical Director (TD) in club environments as critical in embedding coach education on the ground. Notably, participants envisioned the TD's role as that of a mentor and coach developer, providing guidance, support, and feedback to coaches within their club. As P16 stated: "the role of a technical director should be to help the coaches grow and develop". Such a role repositioning was noteworthy, as TDs hold a unique position in the coach development ecosystem. Most importantly, they are situated within the socio-cultural context in which 'their' coaches' practice, which means that through direct exposure, they have a profound knowledge *of* (not just *about*) the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values that underpin that club's coaching practices. As a result, they are uniquely positioned to provide coaches with feedback that is both contextually relevant and consistent, which is a key feature of effective mentorship (Jones & Allison, 2014b; B. A. Mccullick et al., 2005).

Despite this advantageous position, Australian football remains in "a stage where the

role of the TD generally isn't geared towards supporting coaches on the ground in their own environment, understanding their context, and their challenges" [P12]. This, as P5 mentioned, is most likely due to TDs "wearing many hats, where they handle everything from scheduling, to budgeting and player recruitment. It leaves little time for the tasks called for here, like collaborating with coaches". Some participants expressed concern that even if the administrative burden is reduced, some TDs may lack the necessary skills to mentor and develop other coaches: "I've seen some TDs who are great coaches themselves, but they don't know how to mentor or develop other coaches. They need more training and support in those areas" [P13]. To this, there was a view that many clubs appoint TDs without a clear understanding of their role, leading to a lack of strategic consideration. As P25 noted:

"I suspect that many clubs just put a name in that box of technical director, so they can go, 'we've ticked that, we've got one', without looking at what their function is. That's not to say there aren't some good technical directors out there. I believe there are. It's simply not viewed as part of a strong structure".

To help realise the potential of TDs as coach educators – thereby situating club environments as the primary locus for coach education – a few key actions would need to take place. First, FA would need to invest in their professional development. This might include professional development programs tailored to TDs so as to facilitate the pedagogical and mentoring development necessary for them to enact a situated approach to coach education. Additionally, FA might help revitalise the TD role by restoring a clear, more robust definition of what is entailed by this role; not only articulating TDs' roles and responsibilities within the context of club environments, but also in terms of a wider coach-education landscape. By raising awareness of the significance of the TD position, clubs may be prompted to perceive the role with greater importance, better recognising its value in coach education and development. This was supported by P8, who stated that: "the best-run clubs across the country have great

technical directors who truly understand what their role is. And it's not just about developing players, it's also about developing coaches". Thus, revitalising the TD's role could be a simple but effective component of (re)positioning club environments as the primary locus of coach education, resulting in a more situated approach.

5.3.3.2 Integration of a Mentorship Program

Associated with bringing coach education to club environments, participants strongly favoured mentor- and apprenticeships, viewing them not only as a richer and more effective educative experience when compared to the current model, but also as their preferred learning modality. This resonates with the emerging literature that advocates for situated approaches to coach education that are grounded in real-world contexts (Cassidy & Rossi, 2006; Kinchin & Kirk, 2003; Mesquita et al., 2014). Participants outlined a way to facilitate mentor- and apprenticeships in coach education, using the establishment of a nationally accessible registry of qualified mentors with full profiles of their experience, qualifications and expertise in order to match suitable mentors with coaches.

To incentivise participation in such a program, and thereby mitigate the perceived financial and resource constraints associated with its implementation, participants suggested various mechanisms that ranged from formal recognition within the (re)accreditation processes, to the allocation of continued professional development (CPD) points, and contributions to club rating systems where direct financial compensation from FA was not feasible. Further, participants proposed that FA could help amplify the many benefits resulting from mentorship, including the suggestion that mentors gain a better appreciation of their own practice through their experience with mentees (Hobson et al., 2009; Hudson, 2013; Jones, 2013). The underlying rationale for such incentivisation is to cultivate a self-sustaining culture of learning, development and continued education within the coaching community.

As noted in the second theme, a significant barrier to such a mentorship program lies in mentor availability, which is challenged by limited numbers, temporal constraints, and geographical dispersion. To this end, participants suggested bringing apprenticeships into coach education, with certified mentors. If integrated, this strategy captures all three dimensions of the situated approach proposed in Chapter 4, albeit not directly within the coach's environment. Further, a number of participants proposed that FA could formalise mentorship program by exploring potential partnerships with other sporting codes that can facilitate cross-code apprenticeships, a practice "already being done informally at the highest levels of coaching" [P13].

The structure of such a mentorship program was also brought up by a few participants. For example, P17 noted we really need a "formalising of the approach" to imply some level of quality control and accountability. This view appears to stem from the belief that mentorship itself is a skill, and mentors must learn in order to effectively guide others. To this, P24 stated that: "mentors should be accredited, so that there is accountability and responsibility from both parties". A formal mentorship program offers several benefits – namely, it provides a plausible pathway for FA to incorporate mentorship experiences into coaches' accreditation process, while allowing mentors to be equipped with the right skills in order to mentor effectively. Additionally, it provides a framework allowing for the effective pairing up of mentor and mentees, while setting expectations for both mentors and mentees. The importance of mentors understanding their role as facilitators of learning, rather than imparters of knowledge, cannot be understated:

> "Often, mentors take the approach of telling their mentees what they think they should have done or what they would do, as opposed to using guided questioning, leading questions to help them solve their own problems. Because the reality is that for mentoring to actually be effective, you have to create scenarios to help the person discover the solutions themselves". [P6]

The process of becoming a certified mentor is indeed another challenge that would need careful consideration – one that falls outside the scope of this Chapter. Nonetheless, it is clear that such certification is strongly advocated for by participants, such that mentees have a supportive educative experience. Though, formalisation and subsequent certification are not without their challenges. One concern is the risk of creating a bureaucratic system that discourages participation and limits opportunities:

> "I guess my experience with FA is that incorporating this [mentorship program] may lead to a certification process that drives a monopoly over opportunities". [P8]

It seems that striking an appropriate balance between maintaining rigorous quality standards and fostering inclusivity would be paramount to the success of a formalised mentorship program – whatever it may 'look' like. In sum, our results highlight two strategies that could be of use when considering ways of integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football: (i) situating club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) the development of a mentorship program. Exploring these strategies in further detail thus offers an enticing platform for the forthcoming Chapter in this doctoral thesis.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this chapter has offered valuable insights, there are some limitations that warrant discussion. Namely, despite a broad and diverse participant base, made up of coaches, coach developers, coach educators, and stakeholders contributing to almost 60 hours of interview data, these findings may only offer readers a window into the perspectives of the larger Australian football coaching and coach education community (Brinkmann, 2018); representing viewpoints from a specific point in time (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). As such, in order to account for evolving and broader perspectives, future research may benefit from including study designs that can gather perspectives from a wider audience, such as online surveys and questionnaires, or conducting follow

up interviews and studies. Further, alternative research designs like case studies, observations, ethnographies, interventions, or longitudinal studies could explore the practical implications of a situated approach to coach education. Lastly, while this chapter is grounded in the Australian football context, the theoretical tenets of our situated approach to coach education are universal and applicable across different sporting codes, industries and contexts. However, given the pedagogical, curriculum and practical implications associated with such an approach, we strongly advise researchers, coaches, coach developers, coach educators, and sporting organisations who may be interested in exploring a situated approach, to do so with a comprehensive and deep understanding of the specific challenges, opportunities and benefits unique to their context.

5.5 Conclusion

This Chapter explored the benefits and barriers of integrating a situated approach to coach education, as purported by Australian football coaches, coach developers, coach educators, and football administrators. The findings highlighted the critical need for reform in the current coach education landscape, with participants expressing a strong preference for a situated approach that values exposure, legitimate participation, and mentorship. The Chapter also revealed a number of systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers that could impede the integration of a situated approach. These included, but were not limited to, FA's perceived lack of value for coach education, inefficient and disconnected internal organisational structures, and a culture of resistance to change within the coaching community. Further, the governance of a situated approach is complicated in areas such as establishing effective mentor-mentee dynamics, recruiting and developing appropriate mentors, and developing a comprehensive assessment framework that balances governance and accreditation requirements. Despite these challenges, participants were generally optimistic about the potential for integrating a situated approach to coach education into Australian football. Drawing from participant

responses, a path towards what such a situated approach to coach education could look like was charted through two primary strategies: (i) establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education, and (ii) integrating a mentorship program as a core pillar of coach education. By adopting these strategies, Australian football may be poised to begin moving towards a situated, relevant and collaborative approach to coach education.

CHAPTER 6

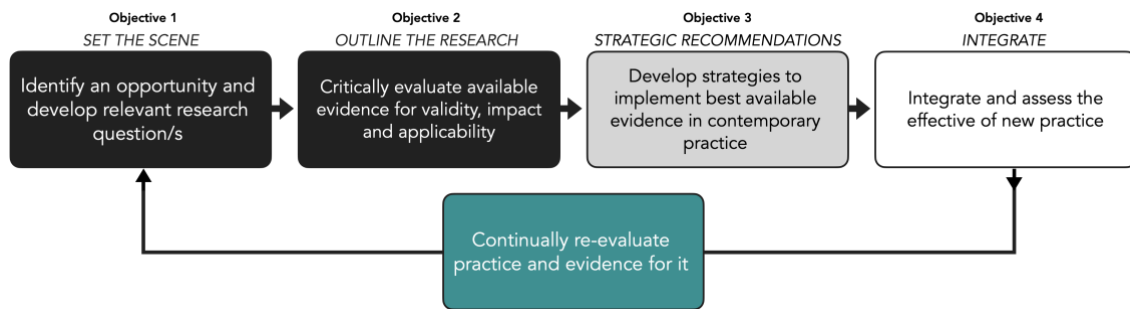# TRANSLATING

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

6.1 Introduction

Following on from Chapter 5, the purpose of this Chapter is to provide FA with practical considerations for integrating a situated approach within coach education in Australian football. Signposted here, this Chapter is explicitly written as a report. The principles and strategies described herein represent an effort to chart a course for its potential integration and thus, are an attempt to bring this research *to life*. Rather than prescribing definitive solutions or a meticulously detailed description of a best-practice approach to coach education, this report is intended to engage FA, such that they notice and attend to features of this research and the current coach education system that may have been overlooked. It is hoped that in some shape or form, this report will help contribute to FA's goal of creating world-class coach development environments (Football Australia, 2020), while fostering further correspondence between the football community, academia, and the FA. The point of which is to facilitate a deeper understanding of the phenomena influencing coach education in Australian football, which has the potential to support the continued growth and development of the game, nationally.

Before progressing on, however, it should be noted that the process of 'translating' research into practice is still poorly understood in the sport sciences (Lyle, 2018; Coutts, 2017). To help stimulate and facilitate this translation – thereby promoting the application of these research findings – I have provided a guiding framework, presented in Figure 2. This framework not only highlights the current stage of 'change' represented by this doctoral thesis, but it provides a roadmap for realising the potential impact of the findings from Chapter's 3, 4 and 5 – a critical goal of sport-related research (Coutts, 2017).

Figure 2. *The sequential process of translating research into practice. Framework adapted from Fullagar et al. (2019)*

Accordingly, this report aims to achieve the first three objectives outlined in Figure 1: 1) *set the scene for the research*: explaining how this opportunity came about and contextualising the research questions addressed; 2) *outline the research*: explaining its implications, as well as its contribution to new understandings of the coach education landscape in Australian football; and 3) *provide strategic recommendations*: laying the next steps for integrating a situated approach to coach education explored in Chapter's 4 and 5.

6.2 Objective 1: Setting the Scene

As noted in Chapter's 1 and 2, the *XI Principles for the Future of Australian Football* were released by FA in 2020 to serve as a strategic document that paves the way for the sport's national growth. Though, it was Principle Six, "Create world-class environments for coach development" (Football Australia, 2020, p. 35), that was of considerable relevance for this doctoral research, as it put forward several promising measures to improve coach education and development. These measures included: (i) fostering a strong culture of coach development, (ii) improving coaching standards through a quality-assured system, (iii) modernising coach education delivery methods, (iv) increasing the number of coaches by removing barriers to coach education, and (v) creating opportunities for further education and professional development of national coaches.

Encouraged by these measures, this doctoral thesis embarked on a comprehensive

exploration into the current state of coach education in Australian football. It aimed to critically evaluate existing practices in light of FA's strategic goals, with the hope of helping support the creation of a "strong culture around coach development" (Football Australia, 2020, p. 35). Central to this process was the need to work *with* coaches directly involved in FA's coach education courses, given the importance of including coach perspectives in the design and development of coach education (Cassidy et al., 2006; Cushion et al., 2010; McCullick et al., 2005; Nash, 2008). Moreover, a detailed understanding of their specific wants and needs from FA courses remained limited. Thus, a targeted focus directed toward their experiences within FA led courses, was critical for gaining a clearer picture of course effectiveness and impact. Listening to coaches' experiences and perspectives can provide NGBs, like FA, with valuable insight regarding how to better support and develop coaches. As a result, this doctoral thesis took an exploratory and responsive approach to inquiry, engaging *with* the coaching community to gain a nuanced understanding of the coach education landscape in Australian football.

As was pointed to in Chapter's 1 and 2, despite the sport's increasing popularity in Australia, the field of coach education is generally under examined. Existing research has primarily focused on specific aspects of the educational landscape, revealing a disconnect between coaching environments and the practices promoted by FA (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor & Larkin, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2017a, 2017b; O'Connor et al., 2022). For instance, Karagiannis and Pill (2017) revealed that while coaches recognised the value of the NFC, their actual practices frequently deviated from its recommendations. This misalignment raised questions about the NFC's effectiveness, along with FA's current approach to education.

The scarcity of research coupled with the opportunities presented by Principle Six provided the impetus for this doctoral thesis. To this, its overarching objective was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the coach education landscape in Australian football, exploring its influence on the experiences and development of coaches at all

levels. Guided by this objective, the following questions were asked:

- How do coaches view the current approach to coach education in Australian football?

- How does the current coach education model in Australian football influence the development of coaches?

- What theoretical framework(s) underpin the NFC?

- What theoretical framework(s) underpin coach education in Australian football, and how do they influence educational practices, coach learning, and development?

- What alternative pedagogical approaches could help coach development in the unique context of Australian football?

- What are the practical challenges and potential strategies for implementing alternative approaches to coach education in Australian football?

These questions served as the foundation for a series of three research Chapters that included over 200 hours of interviews, with a total of 48 Australian football coaches, coach educators, and football administrators. Next, this report will outline the key findings of these research Chapters, leading to the discussion around ways of their integration into practice.

6.3 Objective 2: Outlining the Research

To provide context for the research undertaken throughout this doctoral thesis, I will now summarise the most notable findings from Chapter's 3, 4 and 5. The point of this is to highlight how each informed the design and direction of subsequent investigations, pointing toward the cumulative knowledge grown throughout the thesis.

6.3.1 Chapter 3: Exploring Football Coaches Views on Coach Education, Role and Practice Design: An Australian Perspective

While FA's formal coach education courses offer insight regarding the operational requirements of coaching, the Advanced Coaching Pathway was perceived by coaches as ineffective in preparing them for the multifaceted demands of senior football. This inadequacy was attributed to the nature, structure, and delivery of the content, which fostered feelings of indoctrination and conformity among coaches interviewed. Moreover, when discussing what practice strategies coaches used, most expressed a strong preference for designing practices that closely represented the competitive environment, while some acknowledged the utility of unopposed practice for purposes other than skill development. These main findings pointed toward systemic deficiencies within the conceptual, theoretical, and practical underpinnings of the NFC, necessitating a comprehensive re-conceptualisation of the coach education system. As will be explored next, this extended beyond superficial adjustments to course content, focusing on the epistemological foundations of the educative model itself.

6.3.2 Chapter 4: Enskilment into the Coaching Landscape: Towards a Situated Approach to Coach Education in Australian Football

In response to the findings from Chapter 3, this Chapter critically examined the existing coach education model in Australian football, highlighting its reliance on a transmissive approach to learning. Here, attention was drawn toward the significant implications of theoretically grounding coach education in such epistemological roots. I have outlined this grounding in Figure 3, which details the key characteristics of the current educative model contrasted against the situated approach subsequently advanced.
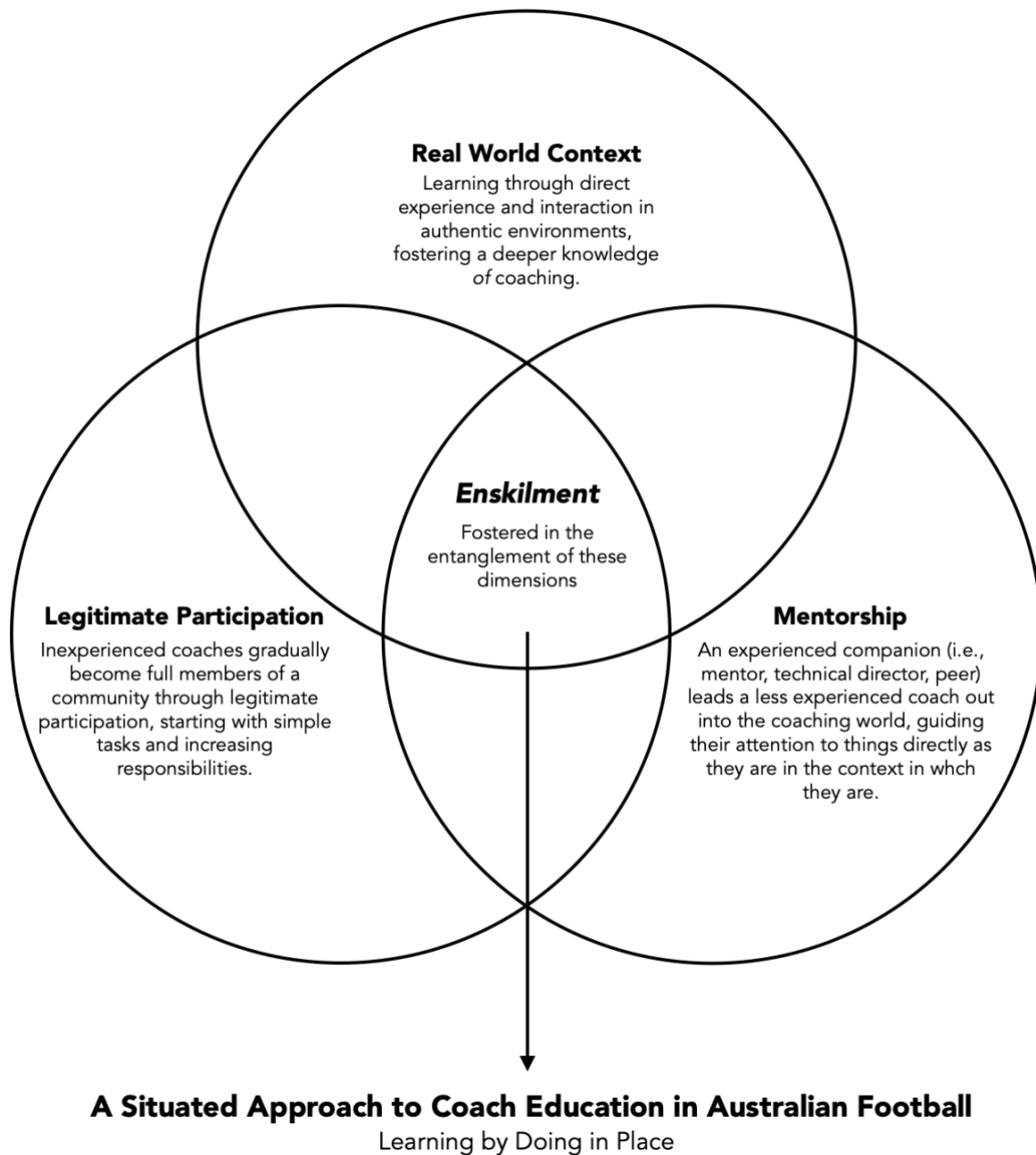
FA *MODEL* OF COACH EDUCATION	EDUCATION MODEL CHARACTERISTICS	SITUATED *APPROACH* OF COACH EDUCATION
Model of Transmission *(Copy to Create)*	**Epistemology**	Enskilment *(Learning-by-doing-in-place)*
De-contextualised (In-direct experiences of coaching)	**Learning Setting**	Context-specific (Direct experiences of coaching)
Educator-Centred	**Pedagogy**	Coach-Environment-Centred
Class-Room based, Courses, On-course Practicals, Online Modules	**Curriculum Design**	Real-World Contexts, Legitimate Participation, Mentorship and Apprenticeship
Knowledge 'a*bout*' Coaching (Acquisition of *second-hand* information)	**Knowledge Generation**	Knowledge '*of*' Coaching (Growth of *first-hand* information)

Figure 3. *Key characteristics of the current and proposed educative approaches*

The transmissive grounding of FA's current educative model is underpinned by what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as a 'culture of 'acquisition'. Knowledge is considered here as an entity that is to be 'acquired' and 'transmitted' into the minds of passive recipients by superior counterparts (also see Woods, 2021). Why this is of concern, is that theoretical grounding carries significant downstream effects in both research and practice (Farrokh et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024a). Specifically, it deeply (and at times unwittingly) shapes the pedagogical approaches that constitute the design of coach education and its subsequent development and delivery, in addition to how knowledge, learning and skill in coaching is understood and assessed.

Challenging this grounding, a situated approach to coach education was advanced, drawing on the relationality of enskilment (Ingold, 2021). As shown in Figure 3, this situated approach differs to the current model, not only in its epistemology, but in its downstream effects related to pedagogy, curriculum design and knowledge generation.

Importantly, this approach constituted three key dimensions, which are outlines in Figure 4: (i) exposure to real-world contexts, (ii) legitimate participation, and (iii) mentorship. While this Chapter theoretically advanced this situated approach, there remained significant questions related to its practicality, paving the way for Chapter 5.

Real World Context
Learning through direct experience and interaction in authentic environments, fostering a deeper knowledge of coaching.

Enskilment
Fostered in the entanglement of these dimensions

Legitimate Participation
Inexperienced coaches gradually become full members of a community through legitimate participation, starting with simple tasks and increasing responsibilities.

Mentorship
An experienced companion (i.e., mentor, technical director, peer) leads a less experienced coach out into the coaching world, guiding their attention to things directly as they are in the context in whch they are.

A Situated Approach to Coach Education in Australian Football
Learning by Doing in Place

Figure 4. *The three dimensions and relational grounding of the situated approach to coach education in Australian Football*

6.3.3 Chapter 5: Continuing the Conversation: Charting a Course for a Situated Approach to Coach Education in Australian Football

Following on, this final research chapter explored the perspectives of key stakeholders in Australian football regarding the shift toward the situated approach espoused in Chapter 4. From a series of interviews with football coaches, coach educators and football administrators, a strong desire for an educative reform emerged. Notably, participants expressed a preference for the situated approach advanced in Chapter 4, emphasising the importance of its dimensions (Figure 4). Each dimension was considered essential for developing a deeper understanding of the game and fostering a more nuanced 'feel' for coaching. This Chapter also identified significant barriers to integrating such an approach. Systemic challenges included a perceived lack of value placed on coach education by FA, inefficient internal structures, and cultural resistance to change within the coaching community. Governance complexities surrounding mentorship, mentor recruitment, and assessment frameworks were also noted as potential obstacles to its integration. Yet despite these challenges, participants remained optimistic about the feasibility and necessity of adopting this situated approach. Based on their insights, a pathway forward for its integration was charted, leaning on two key strategies: (i) making club environments the locus of coach education, and (ii) integrating a mentorship program as a core pillar of coach education.

In the following section of this report, I will build upon the two strategies outlined above, aiming to integrate a situated approach within the Advanced Coaching Pathway. Prior to this, though, it is worth briefly recapping the key findings of this doctoral thesis to provide a concrete foundation for understanding the rationale behind the proposed strategies and their potential impact on coach education in Australia:

- Conducted a comprehensive overview and analysis of the current coach education landscape in Australian football (Chapters 3, 4, and 5).

- Explored coach perspectives on their educational experiences, roles, and practice design (Chapter 3).

- Critically examined the theoretical and epistemological foundations of FA's coach education model (Chapter 4).

- Theoretically proposed a situated approach to coach education, mitigating the pitfalls of the current educative model (Chapter 4).

- Identified key benefits and barriers to integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football, drawing on the perspectives of coaches, educators, and football administrators (Chapter 5).

6.4 Objective 3: Strategies for Integrating a Situated Approach

This section of the report expands upon the key strategies outlined in Chapter 5, thereby helping FA integrate a situated approach into its existing Advanced Coaching Pathway. Accordingly, this section forms the crux of this report by translating the research into an actionable path that could lead to meaningful change on the ground.

6.4.1 Strategy 1: Making Club Environments the Locus for Coach Education

To start, it is worth noting that any strategy intended to help integrate the situated approach to coach education advanced in Chapter's 4 and 5 must be practically feasible. To help with this, the strategies presented in this section of the report were developed through extensive consultation with the Australian football community. These consultations revealed that establishing club environments as the primary locus of education was likely the most effective, feasible, and sustainable way of integrating a situated approach into the Advanced Coaching Pathway. This approach is actually gaining traction in the community sector through the establishment of the CCC program (see Chapter 5). Embedded within club environments, the CCC program aims to transform clubs into self-sufficient learning hubs. By designating a person within each

club as a CCC, the program ensures relevant and valuable coach support is provided within the club environment. The CCCs support coaches by guiding them to conduct quality football activities that enhance both player and coach experiences. Delivered by several member federations, the CCC program exemplifies key aspects of the situated approach to coach education proposed in Chapters 4 and 5 of this doctoral thesis. Specifically, it addresses the call for more situated learning experiences by recognising the value of 'on the job' learning in coach education. Following the CCC program, how might a situated approach be integrated in the Advanced Coaching Pathway if we were to ground the club environment as the locus of coach education?

6.4.1.1 Revitalising the Role of the Technical Director

A key strategy noted in Chapter 5 related to the role of the TD. Comparable to CCCs at the community level, TDs could provide support to meet the developmental needs of coaches at the advanced level. The unique positioning of TDs within the coach development ecosystem is noteworthy. Situated within the socio-cultural context of their coaches' practice, they develop firsthand knowledge *of* the attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and values that underpin coaching practices in *that* community. This enables them to provide coaches with feedback that is both contextually relevant and consistent, thereby supporting coach learning (Jones & Allison, 2014a; B. A. Mccullick et al., 2005).

To help unlock the potential of TDs as club-based coach educators, and thereby establish club environments as the primary locus for coach education in the advanced pathway, FA would need to invest in their professional development. This might involve tailored programs to foster the pedagogical and mentoring skills necessary for TDs to implement a situated approach at the advanced level. However, it is important to acknowledge that while TDs can offer valuable support within coaches' contexts, their integration alone may not fully address all coach learning and accreditation requirements of this advanced cohort. As such, a multifaceted approach that combines the strengths

of TDs with other educational modalities may be necessary to provide a comprehensive and effective coach development framework, grounded in a situated approach.

6.4.2 Strategy 2: Integrating a Mentorship Program

The second key strategy that emerged during discussions with participants in Chapter 5 related to the formalisation of a mentorship program. Such a program was not only viewed as being richer and more effective than the current educative model but was noted by participants as being their preferred mode of learning (i.e., peer-to-peer). This aligns with existing research advocating for situated learning approaches in coach development (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). One way to facilitate mentorships in coach education could be through the creation of a nationally accessible registry of qualified mentors. This registry would include comprehensive profiles detailing mentors' experience, qualifications, and expertise, enabling effective matching with coaches seeking mentorship. Certified mentors could then provide guidance either within the mentee's coaching environment or host them in their own, thereby fostering an apprenticeship-like experience.

Here, mentors and mentees can collaboratively develop tailored plans that address the mentee's specific goals and challenges. To incentivise participation and mitigate financial constraints associated with such a program, various mechanisms could be explored. These could range from formal recognition within the accreditation and re-accreditation processes, to the allocation of CPD points, and contributions to club rating systems, particularly in cases where direct financial compensation from FA is not feasible. A formalised mentorship program offers several additional advantages. First, it provides a viable pathway for FA to incorporate mentorship experiences into the coaches' accreditation process. Second, formalisation ensures that mentors are certified and equipped with the necessary characteristics and knowledge to mentor effectively. Third, it provides a framework for the effective pairing of mentors and mentees. Fourth, it helps establish clear expectations for both mentors and mentees.

Following the formalisation of a mentorship program, there was a resounding endorsement among participants in Chapter 5 for recognising mentorship experiences as valid forms of CPD. This emerged as a straightforward, yet impactful way to facilitate the shift towards a more situated approach to coach education. By acknowledging the value of mentorship under the guidance of a certified mentor, coach education programs can offer more meaningful avenues for coaches to earn CPD points. For example, one participant in Chapter 5 described having to answer more than 600 online questions in a virtualised space as part of their re-accreditation process. This, rather clearly, demonstrates how coaches are currently expected to (literally) 'acquire' knowledge in decontextualised settings far removed from the realities of their actual coaching environments. As evidenced throughout this thesis, this approach is neither effective nor aligned with coaches' preferred learning styles. Incorporating mentorship into FA's CPD framework, thereby allowing coaches to earn points for both mentoring and being mentored, could provide a powerful incentive for experienced coaches to share their knowledge and expertise. This, in turn, could foster a collaborative coaching culture that values continuous learning and development.

While overviewing two strategies that could bring life to a situated approach to coach education in Australian football, there are two more that are worth consideration. These strategies were not as widely voiced by participants in Chapter 5, but were nevertheless discussed across a few instances. As such, I feel it is worth tabling these here, as they could provide interesting avenues for future research.

6.4.3 Additional Strategies: Optional Pathways

Some participants noted that to enhance coach development, it is imperative to acknowledge the diverse learning preferences and needs of coaches. A situated approach should thus not just be seen as a replacement for the current advanced courses, but could rather be a complementary pathway that empowers coaches to take greater ownership of their learning journey. By offering a variety of alternative learning

modalities, such as formal courses, mentorships, and apprenticeships, coaches can choose the approach that best aligns with their individual preferences and goals. In facilitating this optionality, FA could play a crucial role by clearly articulating the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative learning modality, thereby managing the expectations of coaches entering different pathways. This transparent communication could help coaches make informed decisions about their learning pathways and ensure that their expectations align with the intended outcomes of each modality.

6.4.4 Additional Strategies: Scaling along the Accreditation Pathway

A tailored approach to integrating a situated approach into the Australian football coach education pathway was noted by some participants as meeting the specific needs of coaches at different levels, while aligning with accreditation requirements set out by the AFC. For instance, at the C License level, where video assessment has been replaced with on-course evaluations of coaching competency, certified TDs or mentors could assume responsibility for this assessment process, allowing coaches to be evaluated *within* their specific contexts. This shift is rooted in the understanding that coaches in formal courses often adopt forms of 'studentship' (Chesterfield et al., 2010), potentially compromising the authenticity of their assessed coaching behaviours. Consequently, the feedback provided by coach educators may lack contextual relevance and legitimacy. Further, formal courses often fail to capture the full complexity of the coaching role, leading to assessments that may not reflect the actual demands of the position. Therefore, leveraging certified mentors and TDs to assess coaching competency at certain levels of the pathway, such as the C License, could prove advantageous.

At the B License level and above, where expectations and AFC requirements are more stringent, a situated approach may necessitate alternative integration methods. One possibility is to replace the session design requirements with mentorship experiences. This approach aligns with the preferences expressed by participants and promotes more situated learning opportunities. Instead of focusing on theoretical session design,

coaches would receive practical guidance and assessment from TDs or certified mentors on their *implementation* of training sessions in real-world contexts. This could foster a more informal and supportive learning environment, which may reduce the pressure and anxiety often associated with delivering content to coach educators.

Lastly, at the advanced levels of the A and Pro License, where coaches seek more nuanced and specific support, mentorship is likely to become even more crucial. Here, apprenticeships could be integrated into the accreditation process, allowing coaches to work closely with experienced mentors. In cases where suitable mentors within the football community are unavailable, cross-code apprenticeships could offer valuable insights to different sporting contexts. By tailoring the integration of a situated approach across different levels of the coach education pathway, Australian football can create a more comprehensive, relevant, and effective learning experience for coaches at all stages of their development.

In summary, I have presented a series of strategies that could be feasibly integrated into the current Advanced Coaching Pathway that bring life to the situated approach put forward in Chapter's 4 and 5. While continued research is required to bring these strategies to life, my hope is that they stimulate further discussion and ultimately lead to a transformation of coach education practices that are centred around the five key points detailed below:

> **1. Exposure:** Learning should occur within real-world coaching contexts at the club level.

> **2. Legitimate Participation:** Coaches should be actively engaged in all aspects of coaching, ideally with their own team.

> **3. Mentorship:** Coaches should, where possible, be learning alongside more experienced companions that can provide guidance and support.

> **4. Collaboration through communities of practice:** Learning environments

should foster a sense of community and shared learning among coaches, in and outside of club environments.

5. Learner-Centred Pathways: Coach education should enable coaches the freedom to pursue alternative learning pathways that are meaningful and relevant to their individual coaching contexts.

6.5 The Next Steps

In this final section, I want to briefly chart a course for the next steps of this research, drawing upon the fourth objective detailed in Figure 4. As touched on earlier, this framework provides a structured approach for bridging the gap between research and practice, ensuring that these findings inform and enhance real-world coaching practices in Australian football. While I have proposed practically feasible strategies for integrating a situated approach to coach education in Australian football, I do recognise that objective 3 would benefit from further refinement. This might involve a more 'in-house' analysis from FA to ascertain the specific learning modalities, mentorship structures and assessment methods that would best align with the situated approach to coach education advocated for here. Moreover, this refinement process is important in ensuring strategies for integration are continually viable within the changing landscape of coach education in Australian football. From here, the situated approach could be piloted in selected coaching contexts and assessed for its effectiveness. In implementing a pilot program to evaluate the efficacy of a situated approach, FA has a number of viable options that they could pursue. But perhaps the best option would be if FA piloted a situated approach internally, alongside those involved in coach education currently working inside FA.

Another option is to engage with the academic community by offering doctoral scholarships or research grants that are explicitly focused on coach education. This would draw on researcher expertise, allowing for a much more rigorous and complete piloting of the approach. It would also allow for FA to collaborate more extensively with

academics, ultimately producing evidence-based approaches that are then shared more widely throughout the footballing ecosystem. In working with organisations, such as FCA and PFA, FA could draw on established networks in coach development that could provide valuable support in designing and implementing a pilot program. For instance, FCA may be well placed to help recruit mentors and find suitable hosts for participating coaches, while assisting in providing continued professional development opportunities for coaches. Similarly, PFA could offer insight to the perspectives and needs of professional players transitioning into coaching and coach education. Nevertheless, by considering these options and collaborating with relevant stakeholders, FA could develop a robust pilot program that assesses the feasibility and effectiveness of the situated approach to coach education advanced in this doctoral thesis.

6.6 Conclusion

The overarching aim of this report was to translate key findings from this thesis into actionable outcomes for FA, following the framework outlined in Figure 4. Thus, by contextualising the broader purpose of this doctoral thesis, summarising the key findings from Chapters 3, 4 and 5, and then offering strategic recommendations, this report could serve as a roadmap for FA in its attempts to achieve its objective of creating world-class environments for coach development. More than this, though, the guiding framework presented in Figure 4 provides a useful and practical tool for translating research into practice, offering FA with structured guidance surrounding the integration of this research. While the journey towards its full integration is still a work-in-progress, the potential benefits for coaches, players, and the wider footballing community are significant. This report can be seen as a starting point for that journey, providing FA with the necessary insights and recommendations to initiate meaningful change.

CHAPTER 7

GENERAL CONCLUSION

AND

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

7.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter sought to translate the findings from this doctoral thesis and offer FA with a report as to how they could move toward the integration of a situated approach to coach education. This report emerged from the findings of three interwoven studies, representing the culmination of four years of research and exploration into alternative understandings of coach education in Australian football. In what can be best described as a journey rooted in correspondence (Woods et al., 2024b), this thesis has fostered a deeper, more nuanced, and comprehensive understanding of the current coach education landscape in Australian football. Though, this thesis does not represent an endpoint, but rather shows a path ahead, constituted by more questions and subsequent research opportunities. This last Chapter, then, aims to briefly look back, surmising the key findings of this doctoral thesis, to then look forward, proposing some lines of inquiry that future research may seek to address.

7.2 A Brief Look Back

The impetus for this thesis originated from the recognised importance of coach education in Australian football by FA, coupled with the limited research undertaken in this context. This means that I addressed the relatively unexplored coach education landscape in Australian football, deciding rather early on in my journey to adopt an exploratory and responsive approach to inquiry. Given the scant literature available on coach education in Australian football, Chapter 2 constituted a more narrative review of the literature. Doing so led me to provide a rich overview of FA's coach education pathways, an exploration of its theoretical underpinnings, a critical analysis of the NFC and the theoretical frameworks found therein. In doing so, I was able to identify significant theoretical inconsistencies, which signalled the need for further inquiry.

To this, Chapter 3 explored Australian football coaches' perspectives on coach education, their roles, and practice design. Findings revealed that while courses

supported basic methodological and procedural practices, coaches were generally critical of the current educative model, deeming it ineffective in preparing them for the realities of coaching. Pertinently, this was largely attributed to its abstract content, delivered in decontextualised settings. These findings pointed toward broad, systemic issues related to the conceptual, theoretical, and practical foundations of coach education delivered by FA.

Chapter 4 critically addressed the issue of decontextualisation by critiquing the epistemological foundation of the current coach education model. In response to this critique, I offered an alternative epistemology grounded in the relationality of enskilment. Drawing upon key concepts from Lave and Wenger (1991), a situated approach to coach education was sketched. This constituted three key dimensions: (i) exposure to real-world contexts; (ii) legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice; and (iii) mentorship. Combined, these dimensions aimed to shift coach education away from acquiring abstract knowledge *about* coaching, towards fostering embodied, experiential knowledge *of* coaching.

Chapter 5 explored the perceived benefits and barriers of integrating this situated approach to coach education, interviewing a range of Australian football coaches, coach educators, and football administrators. Despite noting systemic, institutional, and cultural barriers that could potentially hinder its successful integration, the situated approach was categorically endorsed by participants. Based on participant responses, two primary strategies for integrating this approach were identified: (i) establishing club environments as the primary locus of coach education and (ii) integrating a mentorship program as a core pillar. Finally, actionable strategies for integrating a situated approach into coach education were outlined in the report that was presented in Chapter 6.

Despite the rich insights this doctoral thesis has gleaned, questions still remain. Though, this is not a downfall of this thesis, but rather a strength. For it has provided a robust

platform from which future research can propel. Thus, subsequent discussion will explore some of these avenues, drawing attention to what could be next for research into coach education in Australian football.

7.3 A Brief Look Forward

Given the scope of this thesis, it had an explicitly narrowed focus on key pedagogical and theoretical aspects of coach education in Australian football. However, there are other dimensions that need to be addressed if a fundamental reform in coach education is to unfold. For instance, there are calls within the literature to consider how broader social, economic, and ethical policies influence coach education (Cushion et al., 2021; Dempsey, 2023). By recognising coach education as part of a wider societal system, researchers may gain a deeper understanding of how Australian football coach education policies are created, the underlying reasons for specific processes, and how they subsequently influence coach education initiatives and programs (Dempsey, 2023). While this would likely require deeper sociological insights than what was explored in this doctoral thesis, it would help in our collective appreciation that education does not occur in a societal vacuum (Cushion et al., 2010; Leeder, 2022; North, 2017).

The systemic, theoretical, and socio-cultural dimensions highlighted within this thesis underscores the complex nature of coach education. Quite clearly, coach education is a contested space where stakeholders, including policymakers, course designers, and coach educators vie for control over course format, delivery, and the underpinning theoretical perspectives and beliefs (Chapman et al., 2020; Dempsey et al., 2021; Leeder, 2022). Therefore, the transition from the current model of coach education in Australian football to a fully operationalised situated approach is going to require inter- and perhaps even trans- disciplinarity (see Rothwell et al., 2020; Vaughan et al., 2019). To further support the growing sentiment of reform emerging from this thesis, I encourage researchers (of a variety of academic disciplines), policy makers, football

administrators, coaches, and perhaps even players to work together, perhaps using the threads exposed in this thesis to integrate a situated approach to coach education. After all, no one discipline will achieve this reform alone – a collective, unified vision of change will be required.

7.3.1 Coach Education at the Crossroads

The coach education landscape is a dynamic space. As new and alternative perspectives, discussions and understandings of topics such as education, learning and knowledge emerge in the literature (O'Sullivan, Vaughan, Woods, et al., 2023; Vaughan et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2023; Woods et al., 2021), the effectiveness of existing coach education models, such as the NFC, are placed under more scrutiny than ever before (Wang et al., 2023). Given the amount of time, money and effort Australian football coaches devote towards their coach accreditation journey and professional development, it should not come as a surprise that there are growing demands being placed on the quality of coach education. Therefore, the claim towards a 'fundamental transformation' (Football Australia, 2013a) perhaps begins with FA fulfilling one of their most fundamental objectives, which is to prioritise coach development over mere accreditation (Football Australia, 2015, 2020). If taken seriously, the process of reconceptualising the very foundations of which coach education is built upon no longer becomes a recommendation that is to be followed, but a natural and necessary step on the journey of transformation.

While it is acknowledged within this thesis that it is highly improbable for any single form of coach development to meet the needs of every coach, the situated approach advocated for here is not intended as panacea for all coach learning. Instead, we hope it is viewed as a genuine attempt to address and meet the developmental needs of coaches by valuing and considering their voices, learning preferences, and challenges. This sentiment is echoed within the literature, with various authors establishing the importance of incorporating coaches' voices in the design and development of coach

education and learning (Cushion et al., 2010; B. McCullick et al., 2005; Nash & Sproule, 2012; Tan & O'Connor, 2023).

Hence, FA stand at a critical juncture. The findings from this thesis, coupled with the increasing level of scrutiny of NGBs and their coach education models emerging from within the literature, highlight both the demand and need to review and transform coach education. Moreover, the release of bold objectives such as 'creating world class environments for coach development' (Football Australia, 2020) has heightened expectations within the coaching community, and if we have learnt anything from them during this PhD, it's that they will be eagerly following with a keen level of interest, passion and engagement. As such, the findings from this thesis may serve as a benchmark for evaluating FA's progress in achieving these objectives.

Given the pressing need for coach education reform highlighted in this thesis, the recent and much-needed appointment of Ernie Merrick as Chief Football Officer has given the coaching community some hope that there is a way forward in addressing the challenges and opportunities afforded by the current state of coach education in Australian football, especially if his most recent remarks are anything to go by:

> "We must invest in Coach Education. Coaching programs need to embrace modern learning methodologies, demonstrate strategic options, and aim to develop technical skills within the match context. Improving game knowledge and awareness is crucial – sessions must encourage game scenario decision-making opportunities." (Merrick, 2022)

7.4 Limitations and Future Research

While this thesis has made significant contributions to our understanding of the coach education landscape in Australian football, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Given Chapters 3 and 5 have discussed some of these, this section will focus on broader limitations of this PhD and how they might be overcome in future research. First, this

PhD was not undertaken in collaboration with FA, despite our best efforts. Although they recognised the significance of our work, they informed us they were not in a position to formally partner with us due to a lack of personnel and resources available. This limited our access to coach education content, processes and key personnel, resulting in certain perspectives and content not being included in our findings. However, we were fortunate enough to receive the full endorsement and support of FCA, a subdivision of FA. While FCA's involvement did not provide direct insights into the governance, design and delivery of coach education, their status and networking within the coaching landscape generated significant interest and support for our research.

After publishing Chapters 3 and 4, I received numerous messages from current and former FA staff expressing interest in our research and seeking opportunities to contribute anonymously. Despite their lack of formal involvement, we were thus able to collaborate with current and former FA coach educators in Chapter 5, allowing us to gain valuable insights to FA and the coach education sector. While collaborating with FA would have provided additional benefits to our research, such as a gaining a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face in designing and delivering coach education, the findings of this thesis remain comprehensive and valuable. In light of this, future research should look to build upon the interest shown by members of FA's coach education sector and explore the opportunities for collaboration with FA on a more formal level.

Another component of this PhD that posed opportunities and limitations was the lack of research on coach education in Australian football. Research that had previously investigated this space mainly focused on discrete aspects of the educational landscape, revealing a notable incongruity between what coaches actually 'do' and what is promoted by FA (Karagiannis & Pill, 2017; O'Connor & Larkin, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2017a, 2017b; O'Connor et al., 2022). While these studies provided valuable insights, they were often based on coaches with limited experience within FA's coach education pathway, limiting

the representativeness of their findings. While this under-researched domain presented an enticing research gap, it also meant we were lacking a clear starting point to build upon. This, in turn, influenced two interrelated aspects of this PhD: first, the research design and second, the initial cohort of coaches chosen for Chapter 3.

The lack of existing literature on coach education encouraged an exploratory and responsive approach to research. Indeed, while we had a direction of inquiry, we were always appreciative and open to the fact that we may uncover threads along the way that were important to follow. For instance, in response to critical findings from Chapter 3, which pointed towards broad and systemic issues related to the theoretical and practical aspects of the NFC and coach education, we conducted a critical conceptual analysis in Chapter 4. This analysis focused on key pedagogical and theoretical aspects of coach education in Australian football. Though, while identifying challenges and opportunities for integrating a situated approach to coach education, unresolved questions remained in Chapter 4. To address these, we inquired further, leading to more nuanced, contextual and practical recommendations in Chapter's 5 and 6. Whilst the findings from this thesis play an important initial step in our emerging line of research, its contributions are primarily on a conceptual and theoretical level. As such, future research could pilot a situated approach to coach education using longitudinal research designs to assess its practical implications, feasibility and effectiveness.

While this thesis is grounded within an Australian football context, the theoretical and practical foundations of our findings can benefit researchers, coach educators, sporting codes, organisations, and industries beyond this context. A fundamental tenet of our research centred around what could coach education look and feel like if it were epistemologically grounded in the relationality of enskilment. This position encouraged us to pursue and work towards a situated approach, consisting of three interwoven dimensions: (i) exposure to real-world contexts; (ii) legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice; and (iii) mentorship. The inseparability of learning-by-

doing-in-place has been a fundamental cornerstone for much of our discussion throughout this thesis, and profoundly implicated how we conceptualised knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum design. Accordingly, we would greatly encourage researchers, coaches, coach educators, and sporting organisations interested in integrating a situated approach to education within their own contexts, to carefully consider the specific needs, challenges, and socio-cultural nuances of their sport or industry. While our proposed strategies in Chapter 5 and 6 make conceptual and practical sense in the Australian football context, they may not be directly applicable in others.

7.5 Concluding Remarks

This thesis embarked on an exploratory and responsive inquiry into the Australian football coach education landscape. The exploration extended beyond merely identifying, analysing, and critiquing the nature, status, challenges, and opportunities associated with coach education, but instead, it culminated in a strategic report advocating for a situated approach to coach education. The thesis uncovered previously overlooked and under-explored aspects of coach education in Australian football by creating an alternative platform for coaches, coach developers, coach educators, and football stakeholders to voice their perspectives and share their stories, resulting in a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of FA's coach education landscape.

I would like to conclude by noting that this doctoral thesis is the culmination of four years of research. Indeed, while coach education in Australian football has evolved during this period, the findings herein are still reflective of the broader Australian football community. This research actively engaged with stakeholders representing diverse backgrounds, experiences, and roles within Australian football, which revealed a profound passion for coach education and development across the community. Thus, I hope that my thesis has helped foster the emergence of new insights that may have otherwise remained salient in the absence of correspondence with the Australian football community. This

not only led to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the coach education landscape in Australian football, but it also served as a gentle reminder that there *is* a difference between *knowing* the path and *walking* the path.

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