

A pick and mix approach: An exploration of a multiple mentor network for developing coaches

Paul T. O'Brien¹, Robin D. Taylor¹

¹ School of Health & Human Performance, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

Author Note

Paul T. O'Brien <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5076-8817>

Robin D. Taylor <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9530-8355>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul O'Brien, Dublin City University, Collins Avenue Extension, Dublin 9, D09 V209, Ireland

E-mail: paulobrien.gaa@dcu.ie

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of mentees in a multiple mentor network (MMN) in a Gaelic Games tertiary education environment. The primary purpose was to identify the effectiveness of a MMN for student-coaches, while the secondary purpose was to explore the impact of programme design. A multi-methods research design was adopted. Mentors (n = 4) and mentees (n = 6) completed online reflective journals throughout the eight month programme. Semi-structured interviews were completed before, during and after the programme, which were analysed using Reflective Thematic Analysis. The findings explored a) the role of the programme coordinator, b) programme design, c) the mentoring process and relationships developing d) the development of an informal mentoring community, e) in-situ coach education, and f) changing coaching practice of mentees and their epistemology. Consequently, the findings have implications for the implementation of mentoring programmes and a need for understanding contextual factors when delivering.

Keywords: formal mentoring, mentees, student coaches, coach education, programme coordinator

Introduction

Coach Learning

Sports coaches have been shown to learn in a variety of different ways, encompassing formal (e.g., NGB accredited coaching courses), informal (e.g., ad-hoc interactions with peer coaches) and non-formal (e.g., annual coaching conferences) learning (Nelson et al., 2006). There has been considerable critique of formal education for coaches, in that they lack contextual sensitivity (Chesterfield et al., 2010), and influence or even indoctrinate a coach's thinking (Nelson et al., 2006). A coach's personal epistemology means they may view these formal coach education opportunities as insufficient to support their varying needs (Olsson et al., 2017). A coach's epistemology can be characterized along a continuum from naïve to sophisticated, with a naïve epistemology viewing knowledge as simple, specific and handed down (Grecic & Collins, 2013). A more sophisticated epistemological stance views knowledge as complex, uncertain and context dependent (Crowther et al., 2022). Furthermore, coach learning literature has shown that coaches place value on unmediated experiential learning through interactions with other coaches (Leeder & Cushion, 2020; Stoszowski & Collins, 2016). Consequently, the provision of freedom and less formal opportunities for coaches to recognise and explore their coaching with others has been identified as a means of developing more effective coaching strategies and more reflexive thinking (Cope et al., 2021). For example, as experiential and contextually based learning has been advocated ahead of other formal options, mentoring is a relational and contextualised education method with significant potential for impact (Bailey et al., 2019). As such, coach mentoring is a tool which can support the perceived needs of developing coaches (Sawiuk et al., 2022). The role of the mentor in progressing a mentees epistemology along a continuum from naïve to sophisticated can help balance the mentees current desire for concrete answers with a more conditional consideration of options for action (Olsson et al., 2017). This can be achieved by positioning the learning in

the contextualised working environment of the mentee, where greater understanding of contextually specific learning needs can be identified (Bailey et al., 2019).

Mentoring and Multiple Mentor Networks (MMN) in Coaching

Mentoring is defined as a process where a more experienced person serves as a role model, provides guidance and support to a developing novice (Weaver & Chelladurai, 1999).

Mentoring relationships are typically viewed as either formal or informal in nature. Formal mentoring is when a third party facilitates pairing based on certain characteristics or protocols, while informal mentoring represents relationships that develop organically, through a desire to help or seek help (Ragins et al., 2000). Benefits of mentoring in a sports coaching context include, broadening perspectives, access to a critical friend (Jones et al., 2009), increased career and psychosocial support (Schempp et al., 2016), increased self-reflection, and increased commitment to enhancing effectiveness as a coach (Nash, 2003). Mentoring of sports coaches has been positioned as a pedagogical approach, which may address criticisms of formal coach education, due to its ability to support the experiential learning of coaches in a contextualised manner (Ives et al., 2023; Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021). Mentoring can address these criticisms as the mentor scaffolds the mentees development, through appropriate instruction, resources, guidance, challenging and questioning (McQuade et al., 2015). This is not without challenge, as the identification of mentors who are knowledgeable and possess the right amount of social, cultural, and symbolic capital (through experience and qualifications) to obtain the respect from their mentees has proven difficult (Jones et al., 2009). Following the identification of suitable mentors, their training has been shown to be haphazard due to ill devised episodic training and naïve interpretation of mentoring in action (Leeder & Cushion, 2020; Sawiuk et al., 2022). The reason for mentor's willingness to engage in the mentoring process varies ranging from box ticking for career progression (Sawiuk et al., 2018) through to

a moral compass aligned to care for, and to help others (Ives et al., 2023), which contributes to a framing of this research through social exchange theory (see section below) (Homans, 1961).

Traditionally, dyadic approaches to mentoring have been adopted, where dyads are matched in anticipation that one mentor will provide all the desired support for the mentee (Sawiuk et al., 2017). However, such an approach has been critiqued for its one-dimensional nature (Sawiuk et al., 2022). The concept of Multiple Mentor Networks (MMN) or Developmental Networks were originally posited during the original introduction to mentoring theory (Kram, 1985). These MMN's have been identified to address these issues in other domains, as mentees can utilise support from various sources depending on the type or amount of support required (Higgins & Kram, 2001). In sport, it has been suggested that mentees should access a variety of mentors, including cross sport and non-sport mentors (Sawiuk et al., 2017). MMN consist more broadly of individuals who actively take an interest in, and actions to, develop the proteges career and provide them with direct assistance (Sawiuk et al., 2017). This approach gives the learner the opportunity to learn from multiple sources and consider what to apply from the various mentors (Sawiuk et al., 2017). Thus, positioning the mentee central to the learning rather than being marginalised, with knowledge constructed with, not through, people (Cope et al., 2021). This Freirean concept can address the suppression of the learners involvement in learning in traditional coach education models by positioning them as co-constructors of a curriculum, thus affording them the freedom to learn in their context, while being cared for by an experienced other (Cope et al., 2021). The implementation of a MMN in sports coaching can help overcome some of the inherent micro-political problems, such as panoptic relationships that control mentees or indoctrinate them into organisational methods and values (Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). Diversification of mentors within a MMN can help spread the source of knowledge beyond one overall knowledge source (Sawiuk et al., 2017). Furthermore, non-sport and cross-sport mentors were suggested to provide holistic support to

the mentees (Sawiuk et al., 2018). Mentors are also protected by not needing to fulfil every need for their mentees as they can signpost to others (Sawiuk et al., 2017).

Programme Design

Much of the criticism that is directed towards formal coach education (Cope et al., 2021) and of traditional dyadic formal mentoring (Jones et al., 2009; Sawiuk et al., 2017) suggests that an opportunity to adopt hybrid models of coach education could be beneficial. The selection of mentors who also coach in multiple different environments can protect mentees against programmes which try to institutionalise mentees to specific agendas (Sawiuk et al., 2017) and/or subtly align mentees with culturally accepted coaching models (Leeder & Cushion, 2000; Zehntner & McMahon, 2019). It is often the case that mentors are selected to prepare mentees for a formal assessment, rather than promoting positive coaching pedagogies and learning opportunities in practice (Sawiuk et al., 2022). Mentoring with an aim of delayed gratification regarding the development of coaches, alleviates the need to justify the success of mentoring programmes through the provision of measurable outcomes for funding purposes (Sawiuk et al., 2018). It is the many different contexts in which coaches operate that poses problems for large scale, overly formal education programmes (McQuade et al., 2015). Contextually bound mentoring requires specialized coaching expertise and contextual sensitivity (Griffith & Armour, 2012), and it could be argued that heightened awareness and sensitivity is required when the mentees are likely to transfer their coaching to multiple environments. The global or macro understanding for the wider or long-term needs of mentees, in this regard could lie with the Programme Coordinator (PC).

The delivery of any formalised mentoring programme is likely to rely on a PC. Yet they are frequently disregarded within the literature, due to ill-defined episodic supports of mentors and mentees, rather than an embedded function as part of relationships (Sawiuk et al., 2022). While attendance at PC-led mentoring training does not guarantee meaningful and positive

mentoring relationships, it may help to provide consistency and clarify role expectations (Sawiuk et al., 2022). Within formal mentoring, deformatizing training builds trustworthiness between mentors and mentees (Ives et al., 2023). Mentor training rarely extends beyond episodic workshops (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), yet with the PC supporting across relationships, it provides the opportunity for in-situ collaborative development of mentors. The PC can observe interactions between mentors and mentees in the field and their isolated coaching practices, enabling the provision of feedback. Thus, the PC must have sufficient declarative knowledge and understanding of the context of the programme to support mentors and mentees, and use their knowledge appropriately. This requires a PC to use their professional judgement and decision making (PJDM), using conditional knowledge on the basis that knowledge and context interacting forms the basis for optimal interventions (Collins et al., 2022). Through PJDM, the PC should be able to progressively weaken dependence for mentees on certain mentors as their epistemology develops (Olsson et al., 2017), leading both mentors and mentees to different roles as their relationships develop.

Social Exchange Theory

As a theoretical frame for this study, Social Exchange Theory emphasizes a series of interactions that are interdependent and contingent on the actions of another person (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). With such transactions having the potential to generate high-quality relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Therefore, the relationship between a mentor and mentee can be described as a social exchange between two individuals (Hallmann et al., 2021). Individuals engage in social exchange if the benefits outweigh the costs of the interaction (Homans, 1961). A key characteristic of Social Exchange Theory is the concept of reciprocity, a state in the relationship in which both parties are benefiting while expending the same costs (Foa & Foa, 1974). While a reciprocal state is unlikely to occur in a social exchange, it is also uncommon that only one side is burdened with the cost of the relationship while the

other side receives the benefits (Hallmann et al., 2021). It is well identified that mentees can receive numerous benefits from mentoring relationships. Mentors may receive benefits from contributing to their profession and intrinsic rewards from personal investment in an individual (Gillham et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2009), learning to refine their instructional methods and new techniques (Gillham et al., 2015), where these benefits for mentors lie in terms of the costs of the interactions may dictate their level of engagement.

Gaelic Games Landscape

Gaelic Games are a central part of Irish identity and culture, catering to all levels of society, through approximately 500,000 playing members and 100,000 coaches (Gavin et al., 2024). The indigenous Irish sports of Gaelic games have been a key social, cultural, and political thread in the fabric of Irish society since 1884, with a community-driven, volunteer ethos in over 2500 clubs across all of Ireland and internationally (Jackman et al., 2024). To date, research in Gaelic Games has focused on performance supports such as physiology characteristics, physiotherapy and performance analysis (Boyle et al., 2023), however recently coaching research has become more prevalent (Gavin et al., 2024; Moran et al., 2024). Despite this growth in coaching research, much of it has focused on coaching as opposed to coach development (Gavin et al., 2024). The Gaelic Games Association (GAA), along with the Camogie Association and Ladies Gaelic Football Association, recently conducted research into the state of coaching and coach education in Gaelic Games (Horgan et al., 2021). The report highlighted that the existing coach qualification system is inadequate and does not fit the needs of coaches in practice (cf. Cope et al., 2021). Specifically, it was noted that much of the coach education provision does not suit the learner, instead serving the agenda of the educator (cf. Stodter & Cushion, 2019). Furthermore, among respondents, mentoring was identified as a learning opportunity, with 35% of coaches being mentored and 32% acting as mentors to others (Horgan et al., 2021). Additionally, coaches identified observing and working with other

coaches (79%), collaborative reflection (78%) and working with a specific mentor (45%) as some of the most important activities to support learning (Horgan et al., 2021), All of which are informal activities which could potentially be done with a mentor. Recommendations that stemmed from the report included; creating a sustainable coach support programme, more collaborative reflection opportunities and needs based learning opportunities (Horgan et al., 2021). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of mentees in a MMN, within a Gaelic Games tertiary education environment. The primary purpose was to identify the effectiveness of a MMN for student-coaches, while the secondary purpose was to explore the impact of programme design.

Methods

Considering the context of investigation, a pragmatic approach was employed to provide practical solutions to contemporary problems experienced by people in social contexts (Giacobbi et al., 2005). Pragmatism adheres to an evidence informed approach, focusing on what works in practice, guided by empirical evidence, rather than rigid adherence to certain ontological or epistemological assumptions (Jenkins, 2017). Pragmatism offers a flexible and outcome-oriented approach to understanding, in this sense, diverging from positivist and constructivist positions by focusing on what works in practice and can be empirically justified (Jenkins, 2017). The PC was a co-constructor of knowledge with the participants (Giacobbi et al., 2005); a process facilitated through immersion within the tertiary Gaelic Games environment in this study. Consequently, a multi-methods research design was employed. This design utilised two forms of qualitative data, namely reflective journals and semi-structured interviews.

Participants

A purposeful sampling approach was employed for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Embedded

in a purposeful sampling approach is the ability to compare experiences identifying similarities and differences in the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). The ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ construction of the research team helped avoid the selection bias associated with purposeful sampling. The sample size was not viewed as a limitation, due to the sample being information-rich in relation to the aims of the study on mentor-mentee experiences and the specificity of their own experiences in this phenomenon, suggesting there is sufficient ‘information power’ across the sample (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants in this study consisted of four student-coaches who were mentees and six mentors, with varied skill sets and experiences as mentors and coaches. Mentors were identified in the four field codes of Gaelic Games (Hurling, Camogie, Ladies Football and Men’s Football), mentors were all involved in coaching or held performance roles in the institution (See Table One). All mentors and mentees appear as pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Mentors were contacted by the PC, where the programme concept was outlined in detail, with opportunity for questions provided. The four mentees were all student-coaches managing or coaching teams in the third level institution, who all exhibited a desire to progress as coaches. The programme facilitated mentors mentoring more than one mentee, and mentees engaging with more than one mentor.

[Insert table one near here]

Programme Design

The programme resided in a tertiary education environment, with teams playing at various levels from participation to performance. Following approval from the university ethics committee, (which covered issues around anonymity, and data security), and participant recruitment outlined above, initial training was delivered. Training for mentors and mentees consisted of an in-person information and networking session at the outset outlining; the programme, introduction to social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), potential engagement types, skills required and potential programme outcomes. Mentors and mentees

could network in this initial meeting, before being contacted on an individual basis to allow for questions and to ensure understanding. As per the details in the in-person meeting, the exact nature of the next meeting was left up to each dyad to decide; this freedom around engagement type was used with the aim of allowing for the strengths of informal mentoring to accrue (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). The PC contacted participants throughout the eight month programme and was accessible for ongoing support and supervision. This was required as mentors were recruited due to exhibiting the requisite cultural capital (in terms of their status as coaches), yet still needed to be supported in areas where they had deficiencies (cf. Leeder et al., 2019). Furthermore, mentor training rarely extends beyond episodic workshops (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), and does not guarantee meaningful and positive mentoring relationship, but can help to provide role clarity (Sawiuk et al., 2022), thus the need for ongoing PC support.

Procedure

Online reflective journals were collected monthly, through Google Forms, throughout the eight-month programme and used to understand the mentors and mentees experiences. The focus of the journals varied at different collection points, with the PC's perspective on the functioning of the relationships being used as a guide for the questions (e.g., how did they find the initial meeting? Has your coaching practice changed since September? If so, how and why?). Reflective journals acted as a stimulus to explore the nuances of experiences during the semi-structured interviews, providing participants the opportunity to outline their subjective experiences (Schutz et al., 2003). The reflective journals were limited by the participants own interpretation or perspective on their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) thus, to allow more depth qualitatively, individual semi structured interviews were used as an additional means of data collection. These interviews were guided by reflective journal entries to make sense of experiences and interpretations. A total of twenty interviews took place face to face in a quiet room convenient and familiar to all participants. These interviews were with mentors

($n=8$) and mentees ($n=12$), with the mentor's interviews taking place mid and post programme, while the mentee interviews had an additional data collection point pre programme, to ascertain their coaching experience, programme outcomes and perspective of mentoring. Interview guides were created with reference to the literature and research context, as well as the information provided in the reflective journals. The interviews lasted between 22 – 76 minutes, (mean = 38 minutes). The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim before analysis.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was employed to analyse the reflective journals and interviews (Braun et al., 2019). The PC actively engaged in interpreting data through the lens of their own cultural membership, social position, and ideological commitments, as well as their scholarly knowledge (Braun et al., 2019). This required the PC to use reflexivity to reduce personal bias and reflect openly on the data collected. Furthermore, as the first author, the PC was an 'insider' to the environment under investigation, the second author acted as an 'outsider' to the tertiary Gaelic Games environment with extensive experience in another sport and as a researcher in sport. This 'insider' and 'outsider' perspective was seen as a resource in the collection and analysis of data, as without this insight there is potential for weakened theoretical sensitivity leading to reduced quality of findings (May & Perry, 2022). A six-phase analysis process was used. Firstly, familiarisation with the data took place. This engagement was trying to draw connections between data and existing literature to allow for direction of future coding (Braun et al., 2019). Secondly, generation of codes using qualitative software analysis (QSR NVIVO-12 (2020, R1)). The coding phase in RTA is about focused attention, to make sense of data systematically and rigorously (Braun et al., 2019). Then, in depth searching for themes within the codes took place to assist in the construction of an insightful narrative around the data. Then there was considerable back and forth reviewing, defining, and naming themes

before the production of the final report. Rigor and trustworthiness were addressed via ‘a critical friend’, where an additional author challenged interpretation through a process of critical dialogue (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This process was not designed to achieve a consensus but encourage reflexivity and reduce bias, through the exploration of alternate explanations and perspectives (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Findings

Through the data analysis, three themes were identified with a total of twelve subthemes (See Table Two).

[Insert Table two near here]

The Protagonists in Mentoring

The theme of the protagonists in mentoring consisted of four subthemes, *mentor characteristics*, *mentee characteristics and how they learn*, *relevant others* and *perceptions of others within scheme*. Under the subtheme of *mentor characteristics*, there were different attributes that mentors had but there were common ones of being approachable, respected, “both very modern and progressive coaches” (James), honest “[Anne] is to the point and will say it as it is instead of trying to sugar coat it” (Ciara) and knowledgeable, “[Phil] brought a scientific approach” (James). While mentors had different motivations for mentoring, they were largely guided by altruistic reasons, such as past experiences “I have had great mentors, so I know the power of having great mentors, so it was just to pay that forward” (Phil) and “when I started off coaching I found it quite difficult to get any support locally” (Colm).

Through the subtheme of *mentee characteristics and how they learn*, mentees were described as curious, caring, hardworking and teachable. The impact this had on the process was outlined by Phil, “[his] reciprocity was so evident, he is so enthusiastic, that I’m enthusiastic about it, so you feed off that”. The mentees also had different motivations for their involvement in coaching, which impacted upon the subsequent mentoring process. Some of

this was dictated by how mentees acquired coaching knowledge, namely books, social media, other coaches they've both observed and played under, "little nuggets from those lads that I've tried to take to my own coaching, as I think success definitely does leave clues, if you can absorb what they're saying" (James). The problematic issue of contextually redundant formal coach education was highlighted as a coach learning source, which only satisfied Gaelic Games coaches to an extent, "they're great for someone who is starting out but I do think [other mediums] give more niche advice" (James). James further emphasised this as the mentoring process developed:

If you have a set curriculum of how you develop coaches, are you not making the same type of coach? Therefore, developing the same type of players and your losing creativity. So, that's what I liked with [Colm], he wasn't telling me what to do he was giving me ideas and then I could act on that and then maybe ask a couple of question or maybe figure it out myself (James).

The mentors and mentees were not the only people who impacted interactions, this was explored in the subtheme of *relevant others*, where mentoring can impact within, across and outside of individual dyads. Role models both positive and negative shaped interactions from both the mentor and mentee standpoint. They used their prior personal experience of engaging with someone to shape what they wanted to give or take from their relationships. Additionally, mentors felt that the role of the PC in prompting connection and suggesting activity types was important, "this conversation will re-spark me to engage" (Colm) and they sought feedback from the PC on how their individual dyadic relationships were going in comparison to others, to ensure better practice. The mentoring process also helped shape mentees interactions with their peer coaches and those they were working alongside in practice, as it helped mentees navigate difficult situations, "[mentor] guided me in dealing with a difficult conversation with one of my [peer] coaches" (Niall). While, the notion of learning from peers was further

emphasised, “I found [peer coach] was very good tactically, so I even learned from him, just because he would be able to see things quicker” (Ciara).

In the subtheme of *perceptions of others within programme*, there was a sense of humility in how the participants viewed themselves, one mentee described an initial apprehension, “I felt that this guy’s high up, he mightn’t have time for some fella to be asking stupid questions, based on the position that he held” (James), this was later deemed to be an inaccurate initial impression as their relationship developed. Mentors were impressed with mentees desire to learn, “these guys want to be critically minded and they’re curious, very impressed with their drive, want to learn and curiosity” (Phil).

The Development of a Mentoring Programme

The theme of the development of a mentoring programme content consisted of four subthemes, *optimum programme design, engagement type, barriers to mentoring and developing an informal community*. In the subtheme of *optimum programme design*, participants talked about the benefit of the flexibility within the programme and the formal-informal balance:

The relationship that I have with [James] has grown from the informality and the one with [Mark] probably could’ve grown a bit more if there was a small bit more formality to it, even if it was just a box to be ticked where we would’ve been forced to make more time for each other. (Colm)

The initial meeting format helped break down boundaries, “the [introduction] meeting was great, it was a light fun introduction to each other and the programme” (Declan) and importantly allowed for everything to get a sense of each other “it created a sense of relaxation and a comfort with mentors” (Mark). Despite its strengths, there were still areas for improving the programme, more regular formal engagement points for sub optimal dyads was suggested, along with further workshop formats to further expand informal networks, “there’s value in having formal touchpoints, that would’ve facilitated me and [Declan] into situations where

you'd have more conversations" (Colm). A mentee also suggested the idea of current mentees being mentors in future years, "a student coach acting as a mentor would be even more relatable to mentees next year" (James), solidifying the sustainability of the programme.

The subtheme of *engagement type*, illustrated the breadth of activities that mentors and mentees engaged in. Activities such as meetings both structured and ad hoc, phone calls and messaging all had benefit and were described as "opportunities to bounce off him" (Declan) and "a sounding board" (Niall). It was apparent that hands on practical activities really showed the opportunity the scheme can afford mentees. Mentors afforded all mentees an open door to how their own teams are run, admittance to communication platforms and open access to training sessions and team meetings. For example, "I said whatever I'm doing, you can shadow me, they took me up on bits and pieces. I would've given them context why we were doing things" (Colm). These opportunities were accepted by some mentees but not always utilised with certain mentors, as they felt they were imposing, "he never took me up on it, he thought that was imposing" (Colm) and:

At the start of our mentorship, I asked him did he want me to come down and watch sessions, but he said no, and I invited him to come to ours, he didn't. I know he doesn't really do much of the coaching, but I still think it would've been good to see us as a coaching team, you know deal with the different sections and react to different things. (Declan)

Consequently, there was evidence of *barriers to mentoring*. Lack of availability, clashing schedules arose frequently and clarity over who leads relationships. The role of the PC in steering relationship to address barriers was identified, "since Christmas I was more conscious to be proactive rather than wait for mentees to be proactive" (Colm). Furthermore, due to the multi-mentor network layout, not all mentors were utilised by all mentees, "I haven't felt the need to go to [Laura] cause I've really enjoyed what I've been doing with [Colm &

400 Phil]” (James).

401 Within the subtheme of *developing an informal community*, the culture of protecting
 402 intellectual coaching property, which has the potential to hinder mentoring was discussed. The
 403 mentors identified an existing Gaelic Games coaching culture of protection of ones methods
 404 and ideas, which can lead to distrust and scepticism, “there is a scarcity mindset in GAA
 405 coaches sharing ideas” (Phil) and;

406 The GAA community, when it comes to managing or coaching, I found could be very
 407 protective of what they do and their systems are very much their own. People were very
 408 reluctant to help, because I felt, they felt they were opening up their secrets to
 409 everybody (Colm).

410 Participants talked about how within a safe environment, coaches were interacting more
 411 frequently and collegially and the benefits this brings to the club; “a culture is developing, they
 412 are meeting each other on the side of the pitch and relationships are building rather than coaches
 413 working in silos” (Laura), and “This time last year, if any of the student coaches passed me in
 414 the corridor I wouldn’t know them, whereas now there’s just more of a community feel. Some
 415 of that has been organic, because of this process” (Colm).

416 **The Process of Mentoring**

417 The theme of the process of mentoring consisted of four subthemes, *the non-linearity of*
 418 *relationships, mentoring in action, navigating challenge in coaching* and *impact on*
 419 *participants*.

420 In the subtheme of *the non-linearity of relationships* showed how previously discussed
 421 perceptions and initial interactions shaped future interactions. Compatibility influenced
 422 relationships, as a mentee highlighted that methodological difference meant he steered away
 423 from a particular mentor. While another mentor also had differences with the same mentee but
 424 decided to challenge himself to engage with the different viewpoint, “After the first meeting, I

425 actually didn't know how it would go. We had a different outlook on what football was about
 426 and why we both wanted to do [mentoring programme], we'd different ways of approaching
 427 it" (Declan). This is contrasted by other dyads seeing themselves as similar and attracted to
 428 each other, "I see myself in [Mark], it's exciting because it almost puts you back when you're
 429 20 and you're learning. So many dots are getting connected and I can see that with him" (Phil).
 430 These initial issues were hurdled, "it can be nerve wracking meeting someone you don't know
 431 for the first time and meeting them weekly but then it becomes normality and it's like meeting
 432 a friend" (Mark). Mentors were cognisant of this initial reluctance from mentees, "[Niall]
 433 probably just got more comfortable with me and the whole concept of the programme. Once
 434 we got to know each other a bit more, it was easier" (Declan), yet with the programme design
 435 it wasn't always necessary for mentees to develop relationships with all the mentors to meet
 436 their needs, evidenced by the female mentee gravitating towards the female mentors and
 437 developing strong connections there, with mentors she considered to be strong role models.
 438 She outlined how within Gaelic Games female coaches can feel intimidated, "being a female
 439 coach in a male dominated industry can sometimes make you feel like you're not qualified"
 440 (Ciara).

441 Under the subtheme of *mentoring in action* participants explored what the process
 442 entailed. This mentoring in action and growth from encounters like this, described by Phil "I
 443 gave him some resources and he came back the next day with really articulate questions. That
 444 was really impressive and that gets me excited, and it gave me energy and I veered towards
 445 [James] during this process", showed how it facilitated relationships developing. Participants
 446 further highlighted the value of good questions, different perspectives, disruptive thinking, and
 447 reflective practice on mentees developing. This was emphasised by the following, "he's helped
 448 me develop that critical thinking side of things, rather than learn and regurgitate what he's told
 449 me, he's giving me tools to solve my own problems if that makes sense" (James). This approach

was further highlighted by mentors, “I didn’t want to turn it into I’m a drill or game provider. I wanted them to try think about issues what were happening within their own teams” (Colm).

The subtheme of *navigating challenge in coaching*, illustrated how understanding contextual problems was part of the learning process. The opportunity to tease out mistakes, such as poorly designed training sessions and communication with players, within the mentoring process was helpful to mentees in not ruminating on mistakes, “At the start, I didn’t understand the temperament and personalities of some players. I probably done things the wrong way, but simple things like just by talking through these scenarios, then improving your coaching and communication as a result” (James). The mentors also assisted with outlining how some processes that afforded quick wins might not always lead to the same outcome, thus challenge successes too, “it’s a bit greyer than that, when you’re young you just want yes or no, you don’t want to hear it depends, it’s just tell me. But it does depend, there’s context” (Phil). Mentees navigating their own beliefs on development versus winning, was also assisted by drawing on different mentors. This was highlighted by Phil outlining interaction with a mentee, “if I was looking at a bar chart of deep principles to more superficial type of tactics, from before too after Christmas, the line on the graph will be gone down on principles to more tactics”, highlighting the mentee’s desire to get results focused answers closer to competitive games, where engagement was almost every day in lead up to a final with another mentor on results focused support.

Under the subtheme of *impact on participants*, mentors illustrated how mentees challenged them, “it forced me to think more critically about my own practice and the decision I’m making” (Declan) and;

“he had enough knowledge to ask really good questions, that would make me think very hard about how I would want to articulate my answers to him so, I just learned as much as him because I learned how to refine my thoughts and mastering my own delivery.”

(Phil)

Mentees gained really tangible benefits, with their thinking and perspective being significantly challenged, “my critical thinking aspect of design and trying to solve problems, trying to get players to solve their problems themselves, that has definitely changed” (James) and this change was noticed by the mentors as they observed a shift in the mentees outlook on coaching broadening rather than tactically focused, “he’s definitely improved, he’s more aware of the holistic approach rather than being all technical and tactical football, he was very much tactically driven at the start” (Colm). Mentees highlighted subtle changes to their communication and the use of buzzwords, learning simple communication principles and creating more collaborative team environments.

Discussion

The data in this study supports the suggestion that a multiple mentor network (MMN) can support the development of student coaches (cf. Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021; Olsson et al., 2017). The MMN approach in this setting helped reduce the probability of dysfunctional mentoring (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), advancing beyond one-dimensional traditional dyadic relationships and potential micro political issues (Sawiuk et al., 2017). A MMN has the benefits of mentees being able to decide where they acquire information depending on the diversity of the mentors available.

The Protagonists & Programme Design

There are two critical points to consider. First, the concept of mentee abandonment has been identified previously in mentoring literature (Fraina & Hodge, 2020), the likelihood of this is reduced through the MMN, however there is the opposite effect of a mentor being underutilised and feeling that abandonment that is usually experienced by mentees. Second, a potential pitfall of the MMN is mentees seeking much of their support from individual mentors, this can be addressed through an understanding of the mentees needs. Thus, the cultivation of strong

relationships has been considered vital for successful mentoring programmes, as it is effectively a relational activity (Bailey et al., 2019).

These concerns can be addressed through the PC. On a macro level, the PC must apply their PJDM and epistemology to interpret the correct long- and short-term actions needed for optimal programme functioning (Crowther et al., 2022). An appreciation that mentoring within a MMN is not limited to the interactions between individual dyads and interactions within individual dyads can impact across dyads. Consequently, the PC has a challenging task providing support to mentors and mentees to ensure the programme is functioning effectively. Achieving this coherence requires an understanding of the interactions between individuals and awareness of their needs at different times. When trying to ensure this effective functioning on a micro or meso level, the PC must encourage both mentors and mentees to critically consider their roles and relationships within their respective contexts (Corsby et al., 2022). The need to address previous concerns around lack of role clarity for mentors and mentees can be addressed by the PC (Bailey et al., 2019). The PC can provide instructional scaffolding to promote interdependency of the dyads (Vinson & Parker, 2019), but understanding the level of scaffolding that is required on a meso and micro level is crucial for effective functioning of dyads (Vinson & Parker, 2019). Without this PC support, practice may be solely based on internal assumptions of what the perceived actions of a mentor or mentee should be (Bailey et al., 2019). At a micro level, the PC may facilitate a workshop on reflective practice, to aid individual dyad functioning. At a meso level, the PC may try to facilitate the learning gained by mentees to other coaches within the program on an informal basis.

From a formal mentoring perspective, the PC has a crucial role in mentor selection, ensuring their accessibility and availability are crucial for individual mentees. The PC having a widespread network within the organisation can be crucial in identification of mentors and establishing relationships which can facilitate the functioning of the programme (Sawiuk et al.,

2022). The PC must also be acutely aware of the needs of the mentees and how some might need access to a certain type of mentor, while others might need something entirely different, this really aligns with the perspective that mentoring is a relational endeavour (Bailey et al., 2019). Subsequently initial matching should be considered carefully against the context of the intervention (Collins et al., 2022). This matching in a MMN may be deemed less important, as the mentees have access to several mentors, but it requires ongoing linking and coordinating to ensure that the changing needs of the mentees are addressed. Often in formalised mentoring programmes the PC recruits mentors based on a subjective approach, selecting individuals who they feel embody a desired set of dispositions and attitudes (Leeder & Cushion, 2020). The PC must be cognisant within a MMN programme to identify very different mentors, to ensure that the varying needs of mentors are catered for. Training can be difficult to apply properly as so many of the relationships are unique, but this is where the PC can provide role clarity.

In terms of future identification of mentors, mentees indicated they would adopt roles as mentors themselves, to further reduce the mentor-mentee epistemological gap and allow for continued shared experiences at the same level. In line with previous research, this data suggests that those who received positive mentoring experiences are more likely to be good mentors themselves in the future (Arnold et al., 2021). Peer mentoring has been evidenced to be effective in coaching as there is a narrower epistemological gap between mentor and mentees, with the peer mentor providing effective psychosocial support (Olsson et al., 2017). It has also been shown that within a supportive framework or programme, mentees feel a level of security with the mentor, accepting that mentor's are acting in their best interests (Bailey et al., 2019).

Furthermore, involvement in a formal mentoring programme can facilitate the development of informal mentoring networks as both mentees and mentors involved identified the benefits of growing their informal network and engaging with others critically. This aligns

with how coaches can learn from multiple different sources building their declarative and conditional knowledge, through sharing, and critical reflection and discussion (Olsson et al., 2017). This informal network can allow for collaborative learning as coaching is effectively a socially constructed activity (O'Dwyer & Bowles, 2021). Participants highlighted how the formal programme helped to address some of the secrecy that can materialise within coaching environments in the protection of intellectual property (Sawiuk et al., 2018). Breaking down these barriers and sharing openly, allows organic relationships to grow, with the mentees providing peer support to other coaches at their existing level (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2016). Informal mentoring has been previously evidenced to be more impactful and long lasting than formal programmes (Leeder & Sawiuk, 2021), thus well executed formal programmes can help to create more sustainable informal cultures within organisations. The leap towards knowledge sharing in volunteer settings is yet to become a common cultural practice (Walsh, 2014), but the deep-seated volunteerism at the heart of Gaelic Games environments could facilitate these programme becoming cultural embedded.

The Process of Mentoring

Furthermore, the data highlights areas for improvement and areas for sustained focus to ensure formal mentoring programmes can support the development of coaches across several different levels. The nuances within the findings indicate that if applied thoughtfully and understood from a contextual perspective, it can guide evidenced-informed practice for coach education programmes at various levels and sports (Taylor et al., 2023). Therefore, simply replicating mentoring programmes in different environments is unlikely to be effective, as the conditional knowledge acquired within this setting may not apply in other setting (Bailey et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2022). However, again the role of the PC is important here, as the mentee may continue to seek knowledge and learning in areas where they 'want' information but identifying gaps and what the mentee 'needs' is important to ensure the curriculum is

expansive. This aligns with previous research, where mentoring was viewed as responding to mentees needs in a responsive rather than an initiatory manner (Bailey et al., 2019). While there is a role for mentees to identify their own needs, there is a danger this can limit learning and the mentors need to identify additional support mentees need (Bailey et al., 2019), as many coaches struggle to make sense of the complexities of coaching on their own (McQuade et al., 2015). In line with traditional coach education methods, mentees may simply expect the answers to their needs from mentors, and this provision of supports may suffice at the beginning of a relationship (Olsson et al., 2017). Yet, these developing coaches need to move from the reproduction of behaviours exhibited by those they perceive as experts (i.e., a naïve epistemological view) and increase their critical thinking and questioning of their own practice (i.e., a sophisticated epistemological view; Crowther et al., 2022). Thus, the PC can assist in creating awareness in, mentors upon building relationships sufficiently, that they can progressively weaken this type of support for mentees, as they become more of a collaborator or consultant (Olsson et al., 2017).

The in-situ mentoring support in this programme appears to provide more relevant coach development than traditional educational methods (Nelson et al., 2006). Mentors observing mentees in their own environments provided a greater understanding of their contextually specific learning needs (Bailey et al., 2019). Through coherent interaction between mentees, mentors and PC, a MMN can support learning pathways tailored towards the individual across time (cf. Nelson et al., 2006). The data suggests epistemological development of coaches, positing mentoring as an educational tool that can work alongside other coach education tools. There will always be different epistemological gaps between mentors and mentees and facilitating appropriate interactions at different stages of mentee development can ensure learning at appropriate pace.

Across the season the proximity of competition impacted upon the type of mentoring

engagement which ensued. The essence of mentoring rests in facilitating interactions towards learning within a complex environment through a non-linear process (Bailey et al., 2019). Competition scheduling is an environmental factor which needs to be considered when designing programmes. A focus on long-term coach development can be superseded during periods close to competitive fixtures and it is suggested coaches can change their epistemological positions at will (Crowther et al., 2022). During early sections of the year (before competitions ramped up) engagements between mentees and mentors were progressive in nature, with a focus on long term development for the mentees. However, during periods of intense competition the mentees sought support that was going to make an immediate and positive impact on results. This suggests that the timing of mentoring programmes is important, if lasting impact is to accrue. Mentoring can operate on a continuum of long-term development or short-term focus at certain periods. This staggered development is not unusual, as mentees can progress or consolidate at different times, as development is neither uniform nor continuous (Olsson et al., 2017). In fact, it has been suggested that coaches can hold different epistemological beliefs across different contexts (Crowther et al., 2022), while the data suggests here that coaches can hold different epistemological beliefs within a season based on competition structures. A more sophisticated epistemology is evident from mentees when time allows and winning is not an immediate focus, but mentees can revert to a more naïve outlook when immediate winning becomes important, and they want more directive support. It has been found in a Gaelic Games setting that maintaining a clear athlete focused ethos was challenging for coaches within a competitive team environment (O'Dwyer & Bowles, 2021).

Limitations

This study is not without limitation. No systematic observations were undertaken to indicate if the scheme had any impact on the coaching behaviours of the student-coaches. There was also no quantitative means to measure the impact of mentoring, while this is not a

significant weakness, triangulation could potentially allow a further lens for our interpretation. Furthermore, all participants were from the same third level Gaelic Games club, so there are restrictions because of inherent cultural aspects of that club, which the reader should consider when transferring findings.

Practical Caution

We suggest the data indicates that MMN can be a useful educational tool for developing coaches in a university setting, when all parties understand the intentions of the programme. Due to the practical nature of coaching and mentoring, MMN can lead to considerable experiential learning for coaches (Sawiuk et al., 2017). We believe there is transferability for MMN beyond the context of this current study, but replicating such an intervention is likely to be suboptimal. There are critical factors that are consistent across contexts which need to be factored in (Bailey et al., 2019), such as participant recruitment and ongoing support. Mentoring programmes need to be bespoke and contextualized, to allow for mentees to learn in their own environment, at their own pace and for their own needs. The findings of this research can have implications for organisations and teams on several levels; micro (e.g., individual dyadic mentoring), meso (e.g., creating sustainable informal mentoring opportunities) and macro (e.g., organisation or PC considerations).

Future Research

Future research would support further understanding around this complex and multi-layered topic. Firstly, we need to further explore the role of the PC and a potential planned removal of support from the PC, to gain further understanding of the importance of their input. Secondly, this research was conducted in a tertiary environment, there is scope to recreate this research on an individual club level and a county board level, to see its transferability to other Gaelic Games settings. Thirdly, the dearth of coaching research on females in Gaelic Games has been

identified (Gavin et al., 2024), further exploration of mentoring as a coach development tool for developing female coaches is required, as it may help alleviate some of the barriers to females which are prevalent with existing coach education opportunities (Lewis et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of mentees in a MMN, within a Gaelic Games tertiary education environment. The primary purpose was to identify the effectiveness of a MMN for student-coaches, while the secondary purpose was to explore the impact of programme design. Coach development is a nuanced process; thus, consideration needs to be given to various factors to ensure mentoring can be an effective coach education tool. The findings highlight that a MMN can be more beneficial mentoring model than standard dyadic relationships. It was identified that a MMN cannot be applied without critical consideration to both the context and people involved, thus a PC has a fundamental role in planning, designing and implementing a formalized MMN programme. Recruitment of mentors in line with the needs of the mentees is important and the PC understanding how these needs change over time, along with how mentees may need to access different mentors is required. Finally, it's evident that mentoring can be an effective addition for developing coaches, alongside other coach development opportunities in a Gaelic Games environment considering the volunteer nature of the organisation(s) and the willingness of volunteers to engage in a social exchange of resources for the betterment of others within their social context or organisation.

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