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Research methods to enhance amateur/ grassroots football: Strategic educational inquiry for coach leaders/administrators



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Introduction: Around the world, coach leaders and administrators in amateur and grassroots football organizations (AGFO) with limited resources are increasingly under scrutiny and required to account for the sustained quality, impact, efficiency, and/or ongoing improvements to their coaching programs and initiatives. While accountability for program effectiveness is nothing new to coach leaders and administrators in these settings, in practice, seldom is enough attention paid to strategic, systematic, and rigorous quality assurance and enhancement processes. Clearly, the strength of AGFO coach leaders and administrators lies in their deep understanding of their specific football organizational contexts and stakeholders; their vested interests with respective programs, practices, and priorities; and their related background experience, all of which are critical to assessing positive change in these settings.

More often than not, however, AGFO coach leaders and administrators in settings with limited resources face myriad challenges even to conduct strategic, systematic, and rigorous quality assurance and enhancement of their coaching programs and initiatives. Such challenges include a lack of available time, support, and/or research expertise as well as organizational cultures in which evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement are not expected. Furthermore, these coach leaders and administrators are often unfamiliar with the relevant research methodologies and methods for maximizing program innovations, sustaining ongoing improvements, and disseminating high impact outcomes, i.e. tournament, program, team, and individual performances.

Strategic educational inquiry (SEI) is a flexible, systematic, and rigorous approach to practitioner research and is particularly effective and efficient for coach leaders and administrators in complex AGFO settings. De-

pending on the nature of organization-specific research objectives, SEI can draw upon an eclectic range of research methodologies in order to provide relevant evidence-based data for quality assurance and enhancement purposes, i.e. to sustain state-of-the-art coaching program innovations, improvements, and/or high impact program outcomes. Grounded in interdisciplinary research and case study methodology using multiple case design, this article highlights key findings and practical examples of applied SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in diverse AGFO coaching contexts.

Practical examples: Applied SEI for quality assurance and enhancement of coaching programs and initiatives in diverse AGFO coaching contexts

- To ground specific coaching programs and initiatives, AGFO coach leaders and administrators reviewed relevant SEI research and professional literature in international and professional journals, many of which have free access to online articles, as well as football organization website information, e.g. International, Regional, National, and/or Provincial Football Associations.



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- To prioritise coaching program innovations and improvements, AGFO coach leaders and administrators considered a wide range of situation-specific, time-phased investigative SEI research objectives.
 - ◇ Coaching Context questions, e.g. issues pertaining to program recruitment, promotion, cost-benefit analysis
 - ◇ Coaching Process questions, e.g. issues pertaining to coaching effectiveness, team and player experiences
 - ◇ Coaching Outcome questions, e.g. issues pertaining to team and player development, skills improvement
 - ◇ Coaching Long-term Impact questions, e.g. issues pertaining to participant and program sustainability, growth, expansion, reputation
- To address ethical concerns, i.e. informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, conflict of interest considerations, appropriate research methodologies, and/or to align such concerns with situation-specific SEI research objectives, AGFO coach leaders and administrators selected from an eclectic range of methodologies, including action research, appreciative inquiry, case study research, ethnographic inquiry, phenomenological inquiry, and self-study methodology.
- For example, action research methodology provided AGFO coach leaders and administrators a systematic and cyclical process of inquiry that involves criteria- / hypothesis-testing, planning, data collection, data analysis, and ongoing monitoring of evidence-based improvements, e.g. participant recruitment strategies, program facilities, participant experience, strategic team selection, team and player development, coaching effectiveness.
- To collect relevant evidence-based data during SEI

research, AGFO coach leaders and administrators selected from a range of systematic data collection methods: qualitative, e.g. relevant documentation, focus group interviews, video recordings, semi-structured surveys, coaching field notes; quantitative, e.g. Likert scale surveys, numeric participation records, program budgetary projections, physiological measures, performance analysis variables; and mixed methods data collection.

- To disseminate evidence-based coaching programs and initiatives within and beyond the communities they serve, AGFO coach leaders and administrators took part in different SEI-related networking opportunities, such as periodically informing key organizational stakeholders about cutting-edge best-practice program implementation and/or improvement; providing program-specific presentations to local and broader coaching communities; providing program-related newsletter and journal publications; and developing program-specific research grant applications.
- To assist AGFO coach leaders and administrators to conduct SEI in their coaching settings, some key organization-specific supports included strategic visioning documents; strategic football coach education and skills training; strategic communications and encouragement; and strategic forums and related networking opportunities for disseminating best practices.



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For example, strategic football coach education and skills training within these contexts included:

- (i) state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional development experiences, i.e. responsive to the needs and circumstances of coach leaders and administrators in complex AG-FO settings;
- (ii) expert mentoring support to ground specific coaching programs and initiatives within relevant research and professional literature.

Summary: Longitudinal data suggest that SEI provides strategic, effective, and efficient quality assurance and enhancement practices, i.e. coaching programs and initiatives, for AGFO coach leaders and administrators in diverse settings. SEI can foster an organizational culture for cutting-edge research and coaching excellence as well as help AGFOs to become better known within and beyond the communities they serve. Given significant implementation challenges to conduct SEI in these complex settings, critical organization-specific supports for AGFO coach leaders and administrators are required, including access to state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional develop-

ment experiences and expert mentoring support. Despite significant challenges, increasing levels of organizational support are testimony to the growing value placed on SEI for quality assurance and enhancement practices within amateur and grassroots football settings .

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