

Original Paper

Research-informed and Evidence-based Quality Assurance and Enhancement in Amateur/Grassroots Football: Strategic Educational Inquiry for Coach Leaders/Administrators

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Abstract

Coach leaders/administrators in diverse amateur and grassroots football contexts are increasingly accountable for sustaining strategic, state-of-the-art, evidence-based, effective, and efficient programs, initiatives, and services. However, coach leaders/administrators within these organizational settings face significant challenges (e.g., insufficient organizational support and research expertise) in enacting research-informed and evidence-based practices. Strategic Educational Inquiry (SEI) is a flexible and rigorous approach to practitioner research and is particularly useful for coach leaders/administrators to gather evidence for quality assurance and enhancement purposes. This paper critically examines whether and how SEI is applied in diverse amateur/grassroots football coaching contexts. Drawing on case study research using multiple case design, preliminary findings from this study indicate that SEI situates specific amateur/grassroots coaching programs and initiatives within the relevant research and professional literature; it focuses SEI on organization-specific priority research objectives, ethical inquiry, and appropriately aligned research methodology; and involves systematic data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of best practices. Critical organization-specific supports to facilitate implementation of SEI in diverse amateur/grassroots football contexts include: strategic coach education and skills training (e.g., access to state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional development experiences and expert mentoring support).

Keywords

Coach education, strategic educational inquiry, evidence-based practice, quality assurance and enhancement, coach leaders/administrators

1. Introduction

Amateur/grassroots football organizations and coach leaders/administrators around the world are increasingly under scrutiny and required to account for the sustained quality, impact, efficiency, and/or ongoing improvements to their coaching programs, initiatives, or services (CIES Sports Intelligence, 2020; FIFA, 2020a & 2020b; Hubball & D íz-Cidoncha Garc ía, 2020). Drawing on twenty years of extensive research and coaching experience in diverse amateur/grassroots football contexts, this paper critically examines whether and how Strategic Educational Inquiry (SEI) is applied for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in local and international amateur/grassroots 55-65+ football coaching settings. SEI is ideally suited for coach leaders/administrators in amateur/grassroots football since it is a flexible and rigorous approach to practitioner research which is customized to the unique needs and circumstances of complex football organizations in order to provide relevant evidence (e.g., to sustain state-of-the-art coaching innovations, improvements and/or high impact program outcomes) for quality enhancement and quality assurance processes. While notions of quality assurance and enhancement are not new in these settings (Taylor & Groom, 2016), in practice, scant attention is paid to cutting-edge research on program offerings or toward systematic, rigorous, evidence-based practice. Typically, coach leaders/administrators face significant structural barriers, including limited resources and a lack of relevant research expertise to conduct strategic, effective, and efficient quality enhancement and quality assurance processes. This paper provides a theoretical framework and critically examines whether and how SEI is applied for quality assurance and enhancement practices in diverse amateur/grassroots football coaching contexts. Readers are invited to consider the following questions:

- *To what extent does research-informed and evidence-based practice shape the development of state-of-the-art football coaching programs/initiatives in your coaching context?*
- *How effective is an existing coaching program/football initiative in your coaching/organizational context? What key improvements are required? How and when will you know if this is achieved? What is the evidence of impact?*
- *What sort of challenges do you face in order to conduct strategic educational inquiry for quality assurance and enhancement of coaching programs/football initiatives in your organizational context?*
- *What organizational supports are required to support strategic educational inquiry for quality assurance and enhancement of coaching programs/football initiatives in your coaching context?*

1.1 Theoretical Underpinnings: Strategic Educational Inquiry (SEI) for Coach Leaders/Administrators

Strategic Educational Inquiry (SEI) is a flexible, systematic, and rigorous approach to practitioner research, and is particularly useful for coach leaders/administrators with limited resources in complex amateur/grassroots football settings. Essentially, SEI draws upon an eclectic range of research methodologies (depending on the nature of organization-specific research objectives) to provide relevant evidence-based practice for quality assurance and enhancement purposes (i.e., to sustain state-of-the-art

coaching program innovations, improvements, and/or high impact program outcomes). With adequate organizational support, SEI can foster an organizational culture for cutting-edge research and coaching excellence, and can help amateur/grassroots football organizations to become better known within and beyond the communities they serve (Allison, 2016; CIES Sports Intelligence, 2020; Hubball, Reddy, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018).

Diverse perspectives of SEI are shaped by context-specific frameworks (each with inherent limitations), including ontological (e.g., constructivist, post-positivist, pragmatist, and critical world view perspectives), epistemological (i.e., theoretical frameworks for generating knowledge, how we know what we know), and ethical (i.e., informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, conflict of interest) considerations (Webb, Hubball, Clarke, & Ellis, 2020). In practice, perspectives of SEI situate the quality of specific amateur/grassroots coaching programs/initiatives within an organizational needs assessment, relevant research literature, and related coaching communities of practice. SEI also focuses on organization-specific research objective priorities, ethical inquiry, and appropriate alignment of the research objectives and methodology; and SEI involves systematic, rigorous data collection methods and analysis, and dissemination of best practices (FIFA, 2020a; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997; Green, 2008; Hutchings, 2002). Moreover, SEI is a cyclical and iterative process; thus, it is advisable to consider “dissemination of best practice possibilities” during the initial needs assessment phase when identifying organizational-specific research objective priorities.

These research objective priorities vary from place to place, and are commensurate with the needs and circumstances of the particular setting. A starting point for identifying priority SEI objectives and formulating preliminary SEI questions emerge from coach leaders/administrators problematizing their coaching context. Preliminary SEI questions typically focus on “What is the effectiveness or impact of ‘X’?”, “What are the strengths and further developments of ‘X’?”, “What improvements can be made to ‘X’ and can these improvements be made with limited resources?”, “Why is ‘X’ happening?”. Thus, preliminary SEI questions point to the central intent of conducting SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes, as well as the sorts of critical insights sought about specific coaching programs/initiatives (Hubball & Reddy, 2015). By considering these issues, coach leaders/administrators are also challenged to consider broader and inter-connected factors (e.g., theory-practice integration and process-outcome relationships) related to different phases (i.e., context, process, outcomes, or longer-term impact) of their coaching programs/initiatives. The framework in Figure 1 assists coach leaders/administrators to consider, prioritize, and formulate SEI questions within their particular setting. Figure 1 takes into account complex amateur/grassroots football contexts and reflects a wide range of potential time-phased SEI questions.

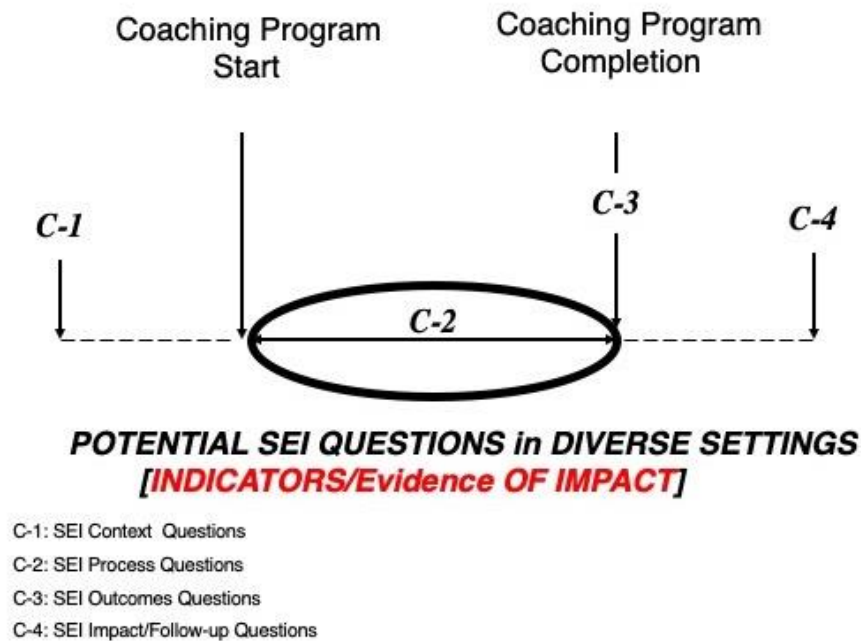


Figure 1. A Heuristic Model for Investigating Potential SEI Questions

SEI context questions. These questions focus on critical structures that shape coaching programs/initiatives. For example, priority SEI questions might include: To what extent do the scale and scope of amateur/grassroots program offerings reflect the organization's strategic vision? To what extent do program offerings/facilities meet the needs and circumstances of their stakeholders? To what extent do program offerings reflect effective cost-benefit analysis? To what extent is quality assurance and enhancement integral to program practices? What needs further development, why, and how?

SEI Process questions. These priority SEI questions might be formative in nature and focus on periodic assessments of issues of importance that arise during coaching programs/initiatives. For example, what are effective coaching methods in this program? To what extent are quality competition/game formats provided for participants? What is the quality of the participants' experience? What needs to be further developed, why, and how?

SEI outcome questions. These priority SEI questions might be summative in nature and focus on issues of importance that occur as a result of completion of a coaching program/initiative. For example, what were the intended and unintended outcomes from a specific program/initiative? To what extent do program processes and outcomes reflect the organizational context? How do participants effectively demonstrate program outcomes on completion of a program? What needs further development, why, and how?

SEI long-term impact questions. These priority SEI questions might focus on issues of importance that arise as a result of the longer term impact of coaching programs/initiatives over months or years. For example, to what extent do participants sustain long term active involvement with the organization's programs? To what extent are participants' perceptions of successful long-term program outcomes

integrated within current program processes? What is the long-term impact of specific program processes and outcomes? What needs further development, why, and how?

Epistemological considerations (i.e., the theoretical frameworks for generating knowledge and how we know what we know) regarding specific SEI methodologies (e.g., action research, appreciative inquiry, case study research, ethnographic inquiry, phenomenological inquiry, or self-study research) are aligned with the nature and foci of the organization-specific research objective priorities (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017; Putman & Rock, 2017; Webb & Welsh, 2019; Yin, 2018). Building on an appropriately aligned methodology, data sources for systematic, rigorous quality assurance and enhancement SEI can include qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods data analysis. For example, qualitative data sources might include relevant documents (e.g., organizational strategic visioning documents including budgets and resources; historical program, team, and player development reports; coaching field notes and performance archives; organizational meeting minutes; plans for facilities and competitive game structures; organizational website information; media reports; and research outcomes); focus group interviews with club officials, coach leaders, players, and/or support staff (either face-to-face or via online video conference platforms); club video recordings and vignettes; and feedback surveys of key stakeholders. In contrast, quantitative data sources for SEI might include rating scale or Likert-type surveys; numeric records of participation, attendance, and organizational performance outcomes; strategic staffing, budget projections, and related accounting variables; or physiological measures related to player development such as aerobic capacity, anaerobic threshold, heart rate recovery, step counts, % body fat, and performance analysis measures (e.g., individual technique, acceleration, and distance travelled).

Qualitative data sources can be analyzed using a range of methods (e.g., content analysis, codification, thematic analysis, interpretive analysis, pattern recognition, constant comparative method, or categorization) to establish major themes and data patterns, and to discern complex commonalities, contradictions, and interactions (Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Saladana & Omasta, 2017). This may be done manually or with the use of software such as NVivo™. In contrast, quantitative data sources can be subjected to the appropriate statistical analysis to detect any differences or correlations within and across variables. The use of iterative and multiple data sources, and triangulation between two or more qualitative and/or quantitative data sources, establishes the trustworthiness and validation of SEI findings (Coe et al., 2017).

As with many forms of inquiry, we argue that SEI in amateur/grassroots football contexts is based on three underlying assumptions about knowledge generation: 1) it is inherently situated, 2) it is socially mediated, and 3) it is locally constructed in order to meet the unique needs and circumstances of programs/initiatives (Hubball & Lopes, 2019). Each assumption provides directions and cautions for SEI. For example, the first assumption cautions that SEI is inherently situated within broader communities of practice (i.e., host football organizations/clubs, with their particular cultural context and political landscape, strategic priorities, access to available resources, and levels of support) that

typically frame coaching program/initiative experiences. In short, SEI and contexts are inextricably linked and determine each other in significant ways (Webb, Hubball, & McKenzie, in press; Myatt et al., 2018). Pertaining to the second assumption, the socially mediated dimension (i.e., shaped by key stakeholder support and engagement by respective on-site tournament leaders, officials, coaches, and players) of knowledge construction speaks to the importance of arriving at a shared understanding of context-specific (e.g., age and ability level of participants, facilities, finance, and staffing) coaching programs/initiatives and how they can be effectively implemented within the specific practice setting. Coming to a shared understanding requires collaborative leadership, open dialogue, active engagement, and effective communications between diverse stakeholder representatives. The co-constructed knowledge that arises from such engagement is essential for effective communities of practice in amateur/grassroots football that uphold and honor knowledge as being always complex and dynamic (Friedman, 2008). Finally, the third assumption cautions that local conceptions of the “good” in coaching programs/initiatives will always be part of how they are continually improved, adapted, and understood within contextually-bound settings (FIFA, 2012; Franks, Lilley, Hubball, & Franks, 2019; Hubball, Franks, Sweeney, & Kauppinen, 2018). These three characteristics of knowledge construction are central for conducting SEI.

Very little research has critically examined whether and how SEI is applied for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in amateur/grassroots football coaching contexts. Drawing on case study research methodology using multiple case design in local and international 50-65+ small-sided football settings, this study is guided by two SEI questions:

- **Research Question #1.** What are specific applications and outcomes of SEI for quality assurance and enhancement in diverse amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts?
- **Research Question #2.** What are critical challenges and key organizational supports for coach leaders/administrators to conduct SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in diverse international amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts?

2. Methodology

2.1 Case Study Research Using Multiple-Case Design

Case study research is a systematic in-depth inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context (Pearson, Albon, & Hubball, 2015). Case study research methodology internalizes theory and practice by drawing on a wide range of contextually-bound data, which for this study includes engagement of key personnel at football club/organization institution such as coach leaders, administrators, officials, players, and volunteers. For the purpose of this study co-researchers included the Chair of the *Grassroots International Masters Small-sided Football World Cup Tournament*, and the Manager of the Amateur/Grassroots Football Department at FIFA, Switzerland. Essentially, case study research methodology invites coach leaders/administrators to consider which site issues are key

for examination (e.g., strategic, effective and efficient quality enhancement and quality assurance processes), how to engage key stakeholders in the process, what data to gather, when and how to collect and analyze these data, and, finally, to consider how these findings might be of interest to the respective club organizations and coach leaders/administrators, as well as to the broader football community and football organizations. Multiple-case design refers to case study research in which several instrumental bounded cases are selected to understand the similarities and differences between the cases, and to develop a richer and more in-depth understanding of the phenomena than a single case can provide (Yin, 2018). Thus, case study research using multiple-case design is highly generative in nature and is therefore particularly well-suited for this study to critically examine whether and how SEI is applied for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in diverse amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts.

2.2 Data Collection

In order to gather evidence for this inquiry a purposeful sample of contextually-bound data were gathered from the following:

- a) For research question #1, a meta-analysis was conducted from a purposeful sample of recent (2017-2020) peer-reviewed studies in diverse local and international amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching settings pertaining to specific applications and outcomes of SEI (e.g., types of research objective priorities, alignment of research methodologies and data collection methods employed). Regarding the overall impact of SEI in these settings, data were augmented with a review of relevant grassroots organization and program documentation such as website information and longitudinal data pertaining to international tournament organization development, participation trends, performance/awards, research contributions, evolutionary program changes, innovations, challenges, and program impacts pertaining to the *Inter UBC Masters Small-sided Soccer Academy Program* at The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

- b) For research question #2, site visits were conducted over an eighteen-month period in 2018-2019 at a purposeful sample of innovative and long-standing 55-65+ amateur/grassroots football organizations and clubs in North America, the UK, SE Asia, the Gulf States, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe.

Site data included:

- Invited research workshop sessions, and program observations at national/regional football associations and local clubs in Canada, USA, England, Wales, Guernsey, Jersey, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Hong Kong, Singapore, Gibraltar, Spain, Oman, Qatar, Australia, and New Zealand. These data were augmented with a review of relevant organization website information and strategic visioning documents pertaining to quality assurance and enhancement practices.
- Meetings and focus group interviews with program stakeholder representatives, including team leaders, administrators, participating seniors' players, and officials. Participants met in groups of five to eight in either face-to-face venues or online video conference platforms, with

a frequency ranging from once per month for 3 months to three sessions in total during the study period. Specific interview prompts included:

- How is quality assurance and enhancement understood, interpreted, organised, delivered, experienced, and/or institutionalised?
- To what extent do you conduct research-informed and evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement processes?
- What are the most common areas of best practice for quality assurance and enhancement?
- What are the most common challenges that hinder research-informed and evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement?
- What are the roles of players and coach leaders/administrators in quality assurance and enhancement?
- What organizational supports are provided or would be helpful to assist coach leaders/administrators to conduct research-informed and evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement?

Qualitative data sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method through categorization, and finally to thematization (Coe et al., 2017; Friedman, 2008). Next, member checking was utilized to establish major themes and data patterns, and to discern complex commonalities, contradictions, and interactions. The use of iterative and multiple data sources established the trustworthiness of the research findings through triangulation.

3. Results

3.1 Research Question #1. What are specific applications and outcomes of SEI for quality assurance and enhancement in diverse amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts?

Table 1 reports on a purposeful sample of SEI projects. These projects were grounded within organization-specific amateur/grassroots settings, as well as within relevant and cutting-edge research literature (e.g., published in international and professional journals) and football clubs' and organizations' websites for best practices. Moreover, particular research methodologies, and aligned data collection methods, were employed depending on the specific nature of priority research objectives within these contexts. Action research, appreciative inquiry, self-study, and case study research methodologies were particularly prevalent in these diverse SEI projects. Table 1 demonstrates the alignment of specific methodological approaches and data collection methods depending on the specific nature of the organization-specific SEI priority research objectives.

Table 1. Applications of SEI in Amateur/Grassroots 50-65+ Small-Sided Football Settings

SEI Project	Methodological Approach	Data Collection Methods
Strategic Grassroots International 60+ Small-sided Football World Cup Tournament Development: FIFA Scholarship Application (submitted to CIES-Hubball, Franks, Kauppinen, Lopes & Christensen, 2020).	Longitudinal single-case study research focused on strategic development, implementation, and impact assessment, with examination of context-specific best practices.	Mixed methods with qualitative analysis of stakeholder focus group interviews, strategic planning documentation, and archival program materials; and quantitative analysis of team and individual performance variables.
Development of a Grassroots International 50-60+ Small-sided Football World Cup Tournament & Symposium, 2006-2017 (Hubball, Reddy, et al., 2018).	Appreciative inquiry with stakeholder engagement to investigate strategic development of context-specific best practices and key organizational supports.	Qualitative methods to analyze focus group interviews, strategic planning documentation, and semi-structured participant surveys.
Strategic Program Development for Grassroots 50-65+ Small-sided Football Programs in Diverse International Settings (Hubball & Diaz-Cidoncha Garcia, 2020).	Case study using multiple case design to examine context-specific team and player development program practices, key challenges, and organizational supports.	Mixed methods with qualitative analysis of focus group interviews, strategic planning documentation, and field observations; and quantitative analysis of participation and sustainability variables.
Performance Analysis in Amateur/Grassroots 50-65+ Small-sided Football: Strategic Team and Player Development for International Competition (Hubball & Lopes, 2019)	Program action research methodology to examine effective context-specific team and player development practices, key challenges, and further improvements	Mixed methods with qualitative analysis of team focus group interviews, team game plan documentation, and game video recordings; and quantitative analysis of team and individual performance variables.
Injury prevention and performance enhancement for grassroots 50-65+ players in international small-sided football competition settings (Franks et al., 2019)	Self-study inquiry to collect baseline data on current context-specific norms, barriers, actions, and rationales, as well as perceived strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis).	Qualitative methods with onsite physiotherapist analysis of competitive game situations and consultation regarding injury prevention with select 50-65+ players, and semi-structured participant surveys.

Data collection strategies for these SEI projects tended to be qualitative in nature, although in some cases, mixed-method approaches combining both qualitative and quantitative were employed. Qualitative data sources for these SEI projects were particularly well-suited to explore, describe, and/or explain complex, multifaceted, and contextually-bound phenomena (e.g., best practices for tournament, team/player development, and impact assessment) in amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football settings. It is important to note caution with these findings since all research (including objectives, data collection, and interpretations of quantitative data) has inherent ontological and epistemological (value-laden) assumptions about the nature of truth and knowledge construction, and is thus limited. For example, in these contexts, coach leaders/administrators were active participants in the SEI process. Therefore, systematic rigorous SEI (including site-specific collaborations, deep knowledge of practice contexts, and triangulation of data sources) was designed to reduce outcome bias and contributed to the authenticity, validity, and reliability of findings within these settings.

Over a decade of implementation, SEI has been integral to quality assurance and enhancement of these organization-specific coaching programs/initiatives. Data suggest that timely applications of SEI have substantially benefited coaching program processes and outcomes. First, SEI has significantly contributed toward the success and 20-year longevity of the Grassroots 50-65+ *Inter UBC Masters Soccer Academy Program*. This includes sustained and responsive small-sided football team and player development initiatives; winning local, regional, and international tournaments, and invitations to play 50+ small-sided football exhibition games against former professional players at Chelsea FC and Aston Villa FC in England, UK, as well as local, cross-border and cross-continent connections with an array of talented and like-minded 50+ masters football enthusiasts.

SEI has also significantly contributed toward to the success and 15-year longevity of the Grassroots *International Super Masters Small-sided Football World Cup Tournaments (2006-2022)*. This 2-day tournament is hosted annually at amateur/grassroots football clubs/institutions/universities and organizations throughout Europe and the UK. For example, the 2021 tournament will be hosted in Copenhagen, Denmark and includes 24 amateur/grassroots club/group/rep teams (60+ & 65+) registered from Denmark, England, USA, Scotland, Germany, Finland, Hungary, Gibraltar, Oman, Wales, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Republic of Ireland, France, Canada, Belgium, and Team UN. The 2022 tournament will be hosted at the FIFA Headquarters, Zurich, Switzerland. This tournament has included former national players (e.g., Netherlands 65+ team), professional players (e.g., FC Barcelona 50+ team), 60+ teams from professional clubs (e.g., Werder Bremen, Germany), as well as a sustained grassroots international masters football community, and the joy of participation in cross-border and cross-continent connections with an array of talented and like-minded 50-65+ masters football enthusiasts. Finally, sustained SEI activity over these years has contributed to significant research productivity, peer reviewed publications, invited presentations, and engagement with amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football organizations around the world.

3.2 Research Question #2. What are critical challenges and key organizational supports for coach leaders/administrators to conduct SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes in diverse international amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts?

3.2.1 Critical Challenges

Conducting SEI for quality assurance and enhancement of amateur/grassroots coaching programs/initiatives is a complex and multifaceted process. Preliminary findings from this study in diverse amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football coaching contexts suggest that coach leaders/administrators face a myriad of obstacles. These relate to iterative and interconnected organization-specific factors pertaining to the art, science, and politics of conducting SEI. For example, data suggest that critical challenges pertaining to the “art” of conducting SEI included perceived lack of available time and additional effort required to develop and apply new SEI skills in current coaching duties. Exacerbated by already-heavy and competing coaching priorities, this typically required structural change regarding organizational commitments to SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes. For example, this would involve strategically supporting and re-imagining coach leaders/administrators roles and responsibilities with flexibility to conduct SEI as an integral part (rather than as a “bolt-on” activity) of their leadership practices.

Data suggest that critical challenges pertaining to the “science” of conducting SEI included a lack of SEI expertise and networking opportunities to examine relevant research and professional literature; and difficulty identifying organization-specific research objective priorities and appropriately aligned research methodologies; applying systematic rigorous data collection methods and analysis; and disseminating best practices in their amateur/grassroots coaching setting. Clearly, the strength of amateur/grassroots coach leaders/administrators lies in their deep understanding of their specific stakeholders and organizational contexts and their vested interest with practice-based team/program issues and priorities. Their related experience is critical to assessing change in these settings. More often than not, however, coach leaders/administrators were unfamiliar with SEI methodologies and methods, and did not have the appropriate methodological expertise. Nor, however, was it deemed desirable or feasible to completely “out-source” this process to external consultants. Instead, amateur/grassroots coaching programs/initiatives were often informed by ad-hoc and top-down organizational leadership directives, coach intuition, or informal post-program participant surveys and feedback slips. Although a useful source of data, this evidence represented a limited view of strategic, effective, and efficient quality assurance and enhancement, and often resulted in less than optimal program offerings or sustained participation impacts. In contrast, applications of systematic rigorous SEI methodology and methods provided relevant and timely evidence-based practices with limited resources to maximize and sustain innovations, improvements, and high impact outcomes for tournaments, programs, teams, and individual performances.

Data suggest that critical challenges pertaining to the “politics” of conducting SEI included organizational cultures that did not value research-informed and evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement, and where minimal attention was given to organization-specific supports, incentives, expectations, related leadership and networking opportunities, and specific budget allocations and/or resources. Even under supportive organizational conditions, it was far from easy for many coach leaders/administrators to engage in independent or collaborative SEI. Thus, in order to overcome a myriad of challenges, amateur/grassroots coach leaders/administrators need to be predisposed, enabled, and reinforced to conduct SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes. Despite significant challenges and barriers for conducting SEI, it was noted that increasing levels of organizational support is testimony to the growing value placed on SEI for quality assurance and enhancement practices within amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football settings.

3.2.2 Key Organizational Supports

If organizations want to rely on cutting-edge “evidence-based practice”, then they require “practice-based evidence” (Green, 2008). Preliminary findings from this study in diverse amateur/grassroots 50-65+ small-sided football contexts concur that the benefits of conducting SEI for quality assurance and enhancement can only be realized with key organization-specific supports including:

- strategic organizational visioning documents that espouse the importance of continual quality assurance and enhancement for all its coaching programs, initiatives, and services;
- strategic coach education and skills training. For example, this involves access to state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional development experiences (i.e., responsive to the needs and circumstances of coach leaders/administrators in complex amateur/grassroots football settings) and expert mentoring support to ground specific coaching programs and initiatives within the relevant research and professional literature; to focus SEI on situational-specific priority research objectives, ethical inquiry and appropriately aligned research methodology; to apply systematic data collection methods and analysis; and related networking opportunities to disseminate evidence-based coaching programs/initiatives;
- strategic communications and encouragement (including clear operational expectations, allocation of time, and resources) for coach leaders/administrators to conduct ongoing quality assurance and enhancement as an integral part of program development, implementation, and/or impact assessment. Broader football organizational supports (e.g., *FIFA Research Scholarship*, *UEFA Research Grant Programme*, *CIES Sport Intelligence Support*, *Performance Analysis University Research Grant*, *Scholarship of Educational Leadership University Research Grant*, *Football Association Program Funding Initiatives*) provided further guidance and/or assistance to conduct research-informed and evidence-based approaches for quality assurance and enhancement of coaching programs/initiatives in these diverse amateur/grassroots football settings; and,

- strategic forums and related networking opportunities to disseminate best practices pertaining to amateur/grassroots football coaching programming/services and initiatives within and beyond the communities they serve.

Notably, coach leaders/administrators/scholars from the SEI projects in Table 1, some of whom were based in research-intensive universities, were empowered with appropriate knowledge, abilities, skills to examine relevant research and professional literature; to identify organization-specific research objective priorities and appropriately aligned research methodologies; and to apply systematic rigorous data collection methods and analysis; and disseminate best practices. They also had related networking experiences to conduct SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes within these specific local and international amateur/grassroots coaching contexts.

Given the critical challenges in this regard faced by most coach leaders/administrators, however, the importance of strategic coach education and skills training (e.g., access to state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional development experiences and expert mentoring support) cannot be under-stated. Similar to professional development offerings for SEI in alternative leadership settings (Webb, Hubball, Clarke, & Ellis, 2020), strategic coach education and skills training in this regard can take many forms (individualized or cohort-based) including flexible and responsive formats (e.g., technology-enabled modules to assist coach leaders juggle competing time and coaching priorities in their specific settings), workshops, one-to-one mentoring support, and certification opportunities. Further, strategic coach education and skills training for SEI should be led by internal and/or external coach leaders/administrators/scholars with appropriate leadership expertise and relevant track-record of published research in this field.

4. Conclusion

Preliminary findings in this study suggest that Strategic Educational Inquiry (SEI) is a flexible and customized research methodology that is ideally suited for coach leaders/administrators to provide responsive and efficient evidence-based quality assurance and enhancement in order to maximize the development, implementation, or impact assessment of specific coaching programs/initiatives in amateur/grassroots coaching contexts. No one size fits all. Data suggests that SEI situates specific amateur/grassroots coaching programs and initiatives within the relevant research and professional literature; it focuses SEI on situation-specific priority research objectives, ethical inquiry, and appropriately aligned research methodology; and involves systematic data collection methods and analysis, and dissemination of best practices. It is important to note, however, that SEI is not value-free. Thus, similar to all forms of research, interpretation of SEI requires a healthy skepticism regarding ontological and epistemological considerations, analysis of methodological rigor, and an openness to alternative critique and analysis.

We have provided a theoretical framework, as well as practical examples and considerations for SEI applications in diverse amateur/grassroots football coaching contexts. Data suggest that coach leaders/administrators in these settings face critical challenges related to the art, science, and politics of implementation. They also require key organizational supports, such as strategic coach education and skills training (e.g., access to state-of-the-art customized technology-enabled professional development experiences and expert mentoring support) in order to conduct SEI for quality assurance and enhancement purposes.

Although the case examples presented are ongoing works-in-progress, significant developments and commitments to SEI have contributed to strategic, effective, and efficient quality assurance and enhancement, such as sustained innovations and improvements; high impact tournament, program, team, and individual performances; and related research productivity outcomes. Further, SEI has fostered an organizational culture for cutting-edge research and coaching excellence within these settings; and, has helped amateur/grassroots football organizations to become better known, within and beyond the communities they serve. While there are still many challenges and areas of improvement for coach leaders/administrators to conduct SEI, an organizational commitment can be the basis for effective and efficient quality assurance and enhancement of amateur/grassroots football coaching programs/initiatives in diverse settings.

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