

Making the Case for Realist Research to Inform Sports Coaching Policy and Practice: What works for whom, in what circumstances and why?

We submit this document as **a best practice summary** in the stream of: **10 - Other (general) Coaching research**

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a considerable focus on the recruitment, training and professional development of sports coaches in the UK. As such, provision of coach education programmes and the importance attached to them has increased significantly (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Lyle, 2002). In turn, notable public policy efforts and investment have been geared towards understanding and enhancing the effectiveness of these programmes. This is reasonable, when considered against the scale and scope of work carried out by sports coaches, and the potential impact on the lives of those with whom they work (UK Coaching 2017a, 2017b).

However, while research in the field of coach education has grown steadily over the last 30 years, it has generally taken up an overly critical stance; typically providing prescriptions and recommendations for practice *or* presenting one-off coach perceptions (Abraham & Collins, 1998, Callary, Wethner & Trudel, 2011, Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2012, Stodter & Cushion, 2014). More nuanced and specific analyses are relatively scarce, particularly those which provide explanatory accounts of coach education programmes. It is these accounts, we argue, which are required to move the field of study forward.

Within this oral presentation, we contend that public policy efforts and investment might be better 'spent' when founded upon a more nuanced understanding of coach education programmes; an understanding which goes beyond suggesting 'what works' but proposes for whom, how and why (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, Pawson, 2006, North, 2016, Pawson, 2013). We posit that realist evaluation, a strand of evaluation with epistemological roots in critical realism, can offer a research philosophy and set of research tools to carry out this specific type of work. While examples do already exist (Duffy, North and Muir, 2013; North 2013, 2016, 2017) they are not commonplace. By presenting two case studies (both from empirical work with the Premier League and English Football Association) which demonstrate how realist evaluation can be used to explain coach education programmes, we intend to showcase the benefits of realist evaluation for researchers and stakeholders alike. Thus, suggesting that there exists significant merit in taking such an approach and sharing recommendations for how to do so.

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