Understanding and Supporting Coach Development in Private Cricket Academies in Pune, India

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ABSTRACT

Private cricket academies are an important part of youth cricket development in India. yet little empirical research has studied how coaches within these environments learn and develop. This study explored coach learning in private cricket academies in Pune, India, with a focus on learning opportunities accessed by coaches across formal, non-formal, and informal modes, the perceived strengths and limitations of these learning experiences, and coaches' views on effective growth. A qualitative, exploratory design was adopted. Data were generated through 20 semi-structured interviews, one focus group with eight coaches, and an online survey completed by 38 coaches. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by triangulation across data sources and ongoing reflexivity given the researcher's insider position as a coach developer. Findings indicated that coach learning was mostly experiential, informal, and socially situated within everyday coaching practice.

Formal coach education was valued but often view as out of reach or misaligned with day-to day coaching realities, while organised non-formal learning opportunities were limited. Reflection emerged as unfamiliar rather than resisted, with engagement shaped by confidence, identity, and organisational culture. Based on these insights, the paper proposes a simple Coach Development Framework designed to support mentoring, peer learning, and reflective practice within resource-constrained private academy environments. This study offers practical ideas based on the local context to help coach developers and organisations support coach learning in ways that go beyond formal courses..

Keywords : Coach learning; informal learning; cricket coaching; private academies; India; coach development

Introduction

Cricket is a very important sport in India and is closely connected to everyday life and culture. People play cricket in many forms, from street gully cricket and school matches to club cricket and, increasingly, private cricket academies. It is estimated that more than 25 million young people between the ages of 8 and 18 play cricket in India (Ormax BCCI, 2024). In cities such as Pune, private cricket academies have grown rapidly over the last two decades, creating a large and competitive coaching environment. These academies range from elite, performance-focused programmes to small, resource-limited setups serving local communities. For many young players, private academies provide their first experience of regular and organised coaching, shaping early learning, skill development, and long-term involvement in the sport.

Within these environments, coaches play a central role. Coaches, behaviours, and professional judgement directly influence not only technical skill development, but also players' confidence, motivation, and continued participation. Despite this importance, there is limited understanding of how coaches working in Indian private cricket academies learn and develop. Much of the existing research on coach learning has been conducted in Western, club-based, or professionally regulated systems, where formal education pathways, organisational support, and stable working conditions are often assumed (Cushion et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2006; Trudel et al., 2013). These assumptions do not always apply to Indian private academies, where coaching roles are often informal and shaped by commercial pressures rather than structured development systems.

Research also shows that many coaches do not enter coaching as a planned career. Instead, they often begin coaching by chance, due to financial need, informal recruitment, or after finishing their playing careers (Cushion et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2006; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). In cricket, playing experience is frequently seen as sufficient preparation for coaching. Within private academies in India, paid coaching roles often do not require formal certification, and appointments are commonly based on reputation, playing background, or availability rather than recognised qualifications.

Although formal coach education pathways exist, access is often limited by cost, time demands, language barriers, and institutional requirements. Many coaches also feel that formal courses do not reflect the realities of private academy coaching, where large groups, limited facilities, and pressure to deliver quick results are common. As a result, coaches rely heavily on learning through experience, observation of other coaches, informal mentoring, and everyday interaction. While these learning

processes are recognised as important, they are often unstructured and unsupported (Werthner & Trudel, 2006; Stodter & Cushion, 2017).

This reliance on informal learning places responsibility on individual coaches to manage their own development while dealing with heavy workloads and performance pressure. At the academy level, the lack of structured coach development can lead to uneven coaching practices, limited sharing of knowledge, and little collective learning. For coach developers and academy leaders, this creates a challenge: how to support coach learning in environments with limited formal systems and constrained resources.

Although research helps explain how coaches learn in general, there is still limited knowledge about how these processes operate within Indian private cricket academies. The scale, diversity, and commercial nature of these academies create conditions that shape how coaches learn and engage with development. Without research in the local context, development approaches borrowed from other countries may not fit well and may be less effective over time.

The purpose of this study was therefore to explore how coaches learn and develop within private cricket academies in Pune, India, and to generate applied insights to support context relevant coach development. The study observed coaches engagement with formal, non formal, and informal learning, identified strengths and constraints within these experiences, and explored coaches' views on effective professional growth. Based on these insights, the study aimed to inform the development of a practical Coach Development Framework suited to resource-constrained and practice-intensive environments.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What learning opportunities (formal, non-formal, and informal) are accessed by cricket coaches in private academies in Pune?

2. What strengths and limitations do coaches perceive in these learning experiences?

3. Which forms of learning do coaches consider most valuable, and why?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to coach development research that views learning as experiential, social, and shaped by local context. It responds to the need for practitioner-informed research that moves beyond prescriptive education models and supports practical approaches aligned with how coaches learn in private academy settings.

Literature Review

1   *Coach Learning Beyond Formal Education*

Research shows that coaches do not learn only through formal courses. Early work in coaching scholarship highlighted that coaches often learn predominantly through experience, informal interaction, and ongoing problem-solving within practice, rather than through formal courses alone (Cushion et al., 2003). Later research has supported this view and shown that learning to coach is not a straight or simple process. Instead, it is influenced by a coach's personal background, the environment they work in, and their interactions with others (Werthner & Trudel, 2006).

Formal coach education programmes are usually designed to provide standard knowledge, technical frameworks, and recognised certification. While these programmes can offer structure and a shared language for coaching, research has often questioned how much they actually influence everyday coaching practice (Cushion et al., 2003; Trudel et al., 2013; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). Coaches often report difficulty transferring formal knowledge into practice, particularly when course content is abstracted from the realities of everyday coaching environments (Nelson et al., 2006). Because of this, formal education is increasingly understood as one part of a broader coach learning system, not the only way coaches develop.

This view is especially important in coaching environments where access to formal education is limited. When coaching courses are difficult to access because of cost, time, language, or institutional rules, many coaches miss out on formal learning even though they are actively coaching. In such situations, coaches continue to learn in other ways, which makes it important to understand how coaches develop outside formal systems.

2   *Formal, Non-Formal, and Informal Learning in Coaching*

A widely used conceptual distinction within coach learning literature differentiates between formal, non-formal, and informal learning (Nelson et al., 2006). Formal learning refers to institutionally recognised programmes leading to certification or accreditation. Informal learning describes unstructured and often implicit learning embedded within everyday coaching practice, such as learning through experience, observation, experimentation, and problem-solving. Non-formal learning occupies a middle ground, referring to organised

and intentional development activities that are not formally accredited, including mentoring, peer learning groups, workshops, and facilitated reflection.

Research consistently indicates that informal learning is the dominant mode of coach development across sports and contexts (Werthner & Trudel, 2006; Trudel et al., 2013). Coaches frequently report learning "on the job," adapting their practice through trial and error and drawing on insights gained from peers. Informal learning is often perceived as highly relevant because it is closely connected to practice. However, its unstructured nature can also limit its developmental impact. Without opportunities for guided reflection or dialogue, informal learning may reinforce existing habits and assumptions rather than promote critical development.

Non-formal learning has been identified as a particularly valuable mechanism for supporting coach development because it offers structure while remaining flexible and context-sensitive (Nelson et al., 2006). Activities such as mentoring and peer discussion can support reflection, confidence, and shared sense-making. Despite this potential, non-formal learning opportunities are frequently underdeveloped or inconsistently supported within many coaching environments. Where such opportunities do exist, access may depend on informal networks rather than deliberate organisational design.

3   *Experiential Learning and Learning Through Practice*

Experiential learning theories provide a useful lens for understanding how coaches develop through practice. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory conceptualises learning as a cyclical process involving experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. In coaching, this learning cycle usually happens as part of daily work, when coaches plan sessions, respond to players' needs, and change their approach based on what happens in practice.

However, research suggests that coaches rarely move through this cycle in a formal or deliberate way. Instead, learning is often fragmented and reactive, shaped by immediate challenges and performance demands (Cushion et al., 2003). This kind of "just-in-time" learning helps coaches deal with immediate problems, but it can limit chances for long-term planning and deeper professional development. This shows why coach development should help coaches understand and reflect on their experiences, not just gain more experience.

Experiential learning theory shows that reflection is important for turning experience into learning (Kolb, 1984; Schon, 1983). However, the way reflection is understood and used in coaching can differ a lot. While formal

coach education often encourages structured reflection tools, these do not always match how reflection actually happens in everyday coaching practice (Knowles et al., 2014).

4   *Reflection and Psychological Safety*

Reflection is often described as an important part of professional learning in coaching and other practical professions (Schon, 1983). Schon explains that professionals usually reflect both during and after their work in natural and informal ways, changing their actions based on what the situation demands. In coaching, reflection can include thinking back on training sessions, discussing problems with other coaches, or making changes to future sessions based on how players respond.

However, even though reflection is strongly supported in theory, coaches do not always find it easy or comfortable to practise. Research shows that reflection can sometimes be linked to judgement, evaluation, or monitoring, especially in performance-focused environments where results are closely watched (Cushion & Nelson, 2013). In such settings, coaches may avoid reflective activities that could expose mistakes, uncertainty, or challenge their professional identity.

Power relationships and organisational culture strongly influence how coaches engage with reflection. Coaches who feel confident, trusted, and respected are more willing to share ideas, discuss challenges, and reflect openly. In contrast, coaches who feel insecure or worried about being judged are more likely to limit reflection (Knowles et al., 2014). This shows that reflection is not just an individual skill, but a social practice shaped by psychological safety and the surrounding culture.

From this view, limited engagement with reflection may be due to unfamiliarity or the coaching environment rather than resistance. Understanding this difference is important for coach developers, as it highlights the need to support reflection in simple, supportive ways rather than through formal or evaluative systems.

5   Social Learning, Communities of Practice, and Mentoring Social learning theories further emphasise learning as embedded within relationships and shared practice. Situated learning theory conceptualises learning as participation within social contexts, where individuals develop competence through interaction with more experienced members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger's (1998) communities of practice framework highlights learning as a collective process involving shared meaning-making, identity development, and mutual engagement.

Within coaching, social learning processes such as observation, informal mentoring, and peer discussion have been identified as central to development (Werthner & Trudel, 2006). Coaches often value opportunities to learn from others facing similar challenges, particularly when these interactions are grounded in shared practice. However, access to social learning opportunities is not guaranteed. Without organisational support, mentoring and peer learning may depend on informal relationships, potentially excluding less confident or less connected coaches.

Mentoring has been identified as a particularly effective non-formal learning mechanism when it is collaborative and context-sensitive rather than hierarchical (Trudel et al., 2013). Such relationships can support reflection, confidence, and professional identity development, but they require time, trust, and recognition to be sustainable.

6   *Context, Culture, and WEIRD Assumptions in Coach Development*

Much of the existing coach learning and coach development literature has been generated within Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) sport systems (Henrich et al., 2010). These contexts often assume stable organisational structures, formalised coach education pathways, and consistent access to development resources. As a result, many coach development models are implicitly designed for environments where coaching roles are regulated, professionally recognised, and supported by governing bodies.

In contrast, private cricket academies in India operate under markedly different cultural, organisational, and economic conditions. Coaching roles are frequently informal, commercially driven, and shaped by local constraints such as financial pressure, limited institutional support, and high participant demand. These conditions influence how coaches learn, reflect, and engage with professional development. The transferability of coach development models derived from WEIRD contexts to such environments therefore warrants careful consideration.

There is increasing recognition of the need for context-sensitive and practitioner-informed research that reflects the diversity of coaching environments (Trudel et al., 2013). Understanding coach learning within private academy systems requires attention to culture, organisation, and lived experience rather than reliance on prescriptive development pathways.

Methodology

1   *Research Design*

This study used a qualitative and exploratory research design to develop a detailed understanding of how coaches learn in private cricket academies in Pune, India. A qualitative approach was chosen because the project focused on coaches' real-life experiences, how they make sense of learning, and the complex nature of learning within everyday coaching practice (Cushion et al., 2003; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). Qualitative research is especially useful for understanding how people interpret their experiences within specific social and organisational settings, rather than testing fixed ideas or measuring outcomes (Tracy, 2010).

An exploratory design was used because there is very limited research on coach learning in Indian private academy systems. Instead of trying to produce findings that apply everywhere, the study aimed to generate context-based insights that could help understand coach development in similar environments. This approach aligns with calls in coaching research for studies that are closely connected to practice and sensitive to local context (Muir & North, 2017).

2   *Participants and Context*

The participants in this study were coaches working in private cricket academies in Pune, a large city with many private coaching setups. Most of these academies work independently and are not closely linked to formal clubs or associations. They differ in size, available resources, and how they are organised. Coaches in these settings often work with players of different age groups and skill levels and usually face commercial pressures and expectations around performance.

Data were collected from a total of 66 coaches using three methods:
- 20 semi-structured interviews with private academy coaches
- One focus group discussion with 8 coaches
- An online survey completed by 38 coaches

The coaches came from different playing and coaching backgrounds, had varying levels of experience, and differed in their access to formal coach education. Interviews and the focus group were conducted in English, Hindi, or Marathi, depending on what the participants were most comfortable with. This helped coaches express their views more freely and supported a deeper understanding of their experiences within the local context.

3   Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore coaches' learning histories, beliefs, and experiences in depth. This method allowed flexibility to follow participants' narratives while ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interview questions focused on how coaches learned to coach, the sources of knowledge they valued, perceived barriers to development, and their experiences with formal and informal learning opportunities.

Interviews enabled participants to reflect on their coaching journeys and to raise issues that they considered personally meaningful. This approach was particularly valuable given the informal and varied pathways through which many coaches entered the profession.

Focus Group Discussion

A focus group discussion was conducted to explore shared experiences and collective sense making among coaches. Focus groups are well suited to examining social learning processes, as they allow participants to build on each other's perspectives and highlight areas of agreement and difference (Morgan, 1997). The group setting encouraged reflection, dialogue, and the articulation of tacit assumptions that may not emerge in individual interviews.

The focus group also provided insight into how coaches discuss learning within peer contexts, reflecting the social nature of learning highlighted in coaching literature.

Online Survey

An online survey was used to provide broader contextual insight and to explore whether patterns identified in interviews and the focus group resonated across a wider group of coaches. The survey included a combination of closed and open-ended questions related to learning sources, perceived challenges, and development needs.

The survey was not intended to generate statistically generalisable findings. Instead, it supported triangulation by identifying recurring themes and enhancing confidence in the qualitative patterns identified across data sources (Tracy, 2010).

4. *Data Analysis*

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis is well suited to qualitative research that seeks to identify patterned meaning across datasets while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in interpretation. The analysis involved an iterative process of familiarisation with the data, reflexive coding, theme development, and ongoing refinement.

Initial coding focused on coaches' descriptions of learning experiences, sources of knowledge, and perceived challenges. Codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across individual, collective, and contextual perspectives. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to both convergence and divergence within the data, allowing complexity and nuance to be retained.

Reflexivity was a central component of the analytical process. As the researcher was also a coach developer within the cricket system, reflective notes were maintained to examine how prior experience, assumptions, and positionality influenced interpretation. This reflexive engagement enhanced transparency and supported analytical rigour (Finlay, 2002).

5 *Rigour and Trustworthiness*

Rigour was supported through several strategies commonly used in qualitative research. Methodological triangulation was achieved by combining interviews, a focus group, and survey data, allowing patterns to be examined across multiple sources rather than relying on isolated accounts. This strengthened confidence in the credibility of the findings (Tracy, 2010).

Transparency was enhanced through clear documentation of methodological decisions, reflexive note-taking, and alignment between research aims, data collection, analysis, and product design. Rather than seeking objectivity, the study embraced the interpretive nature of qualitative research while striving for coherence and plausibility in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

6 *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and clearly communicating the voluntary nature of participation. Particular attention was given to the researcher's insider position as a coach developer. While this position facilitated access and trust,

it also required sensitivity to power dynamics and the potential influence on participants' responses.

Ethical practice was supported through transparency, reflexivity, and an emphasis on creating a respectful and psychologically safe research environment. These considerations were consistent with ethical guidance for practitioner-researchers working within their own professional contexts (Finlay, 2002).

7   *Methodological Alignment with the Professional Project*

The research approach used in this study fits well with the aims of the Professional Project module, as it supported an applied enquiry into an issue that is important for organisations. Using different qualitative methods helped develop a deep understanding of how coaches learn in private academy settings, while the reflective and exploratory design ensured that the findings stayed closely connected to real coaching practice.

Importantly, the research process did not only help generate knowledge, but also guided the development of the professional product. Insights from interviews, group discussions, and survey responses directly informed the design of the Coach Development Framework, ensuring a clear link between the data, the interpretation, and practical application.

Findings

The findings are organised into four related themes that explain how coaches in private cricket academies in Pune learn, the challenges that affect their development, and the social and emotional factors that influence their learning. Together, these themes show that coach learning mainly happens through experience, interaction with others, and everyday coaching practice, while also highlighting the lack of structured support.

1   *Coach Learning as Experiential, Informal, and Embedded in Practice*

Across interviews, the focus group, and survey responses, coaches consistently described learning as something that mainly happened through daily coaching work rather than through planned or structured development activities. Coaches explained that they learned by doing the job, dealing with coaching challenges as they came up, and changing their sessions based on how players responded and what results they saw.

Coaches reported learning through repeated coaching experiences, trial-and-error, and by watching more experienced coaches at work. Informal mentoring relationships developed naturally, often because coaches worked close to each other or had good personal relationships, rather than through any formal mentoring system. Discussions with other coaches about session planning, managing players, and preparing for matches were described as important sources of support and practical learning.

This type of learning was mostly reactive and based on immediate situations, which has been described in research as experiential or "just-in-time" learning (Cushion et al., 2003;

Werthner & Trudel, 2006). While this helped coaches solve short-term problems, it was rarely part of a planned or long-term development approach. As a result, learning depended heavily on individual motivation, access to informal networks, and available opportunities.

Survey findings supported these patterns, with most coaches identifying experience, observation, and interaction with other coaches as their main sources of learning. Together, these findings show that informal learning is not a small part of coach development, but the main way coaches learn within private cricket academy environments.

2   *Absence of Structured Non-Formal Learning Opportunities*

Even though informal learning was common, opportunities for non-formal learning were described as limited, inconsistent, or missing in most private cricket academies. Coaches spoke about the absence of organised mentoring systems, peer learning groups, or planned development activities that could support shared learning among coaches.

Where non-formal learning did take place, it was usually started by individual coaches rather than being part of the academy's normal working practices. Participation often depended on personal relationships or on whether a more experienced coach was willing to provide guidance. Because of this, access to learning support was uneven, and less experienced or less confident coaches were more likely to miss out.

The lack of structured non-formal learning meant that learning was often personalised but fragmented. Coaches appreciated the freedom and flexibility of informal learning, but many were unsure whether they were actually improving as coaches or simply repeating the same practices. This reflects

previous research showing that while informal learning is highly relevant, it can also reinforce existing habits and assumptions if it is not supported through discussion and reflection (Nelson et al., 2006).

Overall, these findings suggest that non-formal learning could play an important role in connecting formal coach education with everyday coaching practice. However, within private cricket academies, such opportunities remain underdeveloped and largely unsupported.

3   *Perceptions of Formal Coach Education: Value, Access, and Legitimacy*

Coaches had mixed views about formal coach education. On the positive side, formal certification was valued because it provided structure, professional recognition, and legitimacy. Having recognised qualifications was seen as important when dealing with parents, academy owners, and other stakeholders.

However, many coaches found it difficult to access formal coach education. Common barriers included high course fees, long time commitments, language challenges, and institutional requirements. Several coaches said it was hard to attend courses alongside heavy coaching workloads, while others felt that private or commercial courses had limited value because they were not recognised by governing bodies such as the BCCI.

Coaches also felt that formal education did not always reflect the realities of private academy coaching. Course content was often described as disconnected from everyday challenges such as large group sizes, limited facilities, and pressure to deliver quick results. As a result, formal learning was sometimes seen as less useful for daily coaching practice, a concern also raised in previous research on coach education and learning transfer (Cushion et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2006).

These experiences influenced coaches' confidence and professional identity. Some coaches felt insecure due to the absence of recognised qualifications, while others placed greater value on practical experience and coaching results. This often-led coaches to rely more on informal, experience-based learning rather than formal education pathways.

4   *Coaching Identity, Confidence, and Emotional Dimensions of Learning*

A strong theme in the findings related to the emotional side of coaching and how coaches saw themselves in their role. Many coaches explained that they entered coaching unexpectedly, often after their playing careers ended, rather

than as a planned profession. This unplanned transition shaped their confidence and sense of professional identity.

Coaches who felt confident, trusted, and respected were more willing to seek learning opportunities, discuss challenges openly, and try new ideas in their coaching. In contrast, coaches who felt insecure described their learning as private and cautious. Fear of being judged or seen as incompetent made some coaches hesitant to ask questions or share difficulties.

Confidence played an important role in how coaches learned. Less confident coaches tended to copy others and rely on familiar routines, while more confident coaches spoke about experimenting, adapting sessions, and reflecting on their practice. These findings align with previous research showing that coaching biography, professional identity, and confidence strongly influence learning engagement (Cushion et al., 2003; Knowles et al., 2014; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006).

Organisational culture also shaped these experiences. In academies where performance and results were prioritised over learning, opportunities for open discussion and shared reflection were limited. As a result, learning often took a back seat to daily delivery demands, leading to development that was individual, reactive, and short-term.

5   *Reflection as Unfamiliar Rather Than Resisted*

Reflection emerged as a particularly significant theme. Coaches frequently described thinking about sessions, mentally revisiting coaching decisions, and discussing challenges with peers. However, these activities were rarely identified as "reflection" in a formal sense. Instead, reflection was embedded informally within practice and conversation.

Many coaches reported limited exposure to structured reflective practices and expressed uncertainty about how to reflect in a "correct" or formal way. Reflection was sometimes associated with evaluation, judgement, or criticism, particularly within performance-oriented environments. This association reduced willingness to engage openly, especially among less confident coaches.

Importantly, the data indicated that coaches were not resistant to reflection, but rather unfamiliar with it as an explicit learning process. When reflective activity was framed as supportive dialogue rather than assessment, coaches reported greater comfort and engagement. This finding supports existing research suggesting that reflective learning in coaching often occurs informally

and may be constrained by power relations and performance pressures rather than active resistance (Schon, 1983; Cushion & Nelson, 2013; Trudel et al., 2013).

At a broader cultural level, hierarchical relationships and time pressures limited opportunities for reflective dialogue. Coaches described few spaces within academy environments to pause, discuss experiences, and collectively make sense of practice.

6 Summary

Overall, the findings show that coaches in private cricket academies in Pune mainly learn through experience, informal interaction, and social relationships. While coaches are motivated to improve, their learning is shaped by confidence, professional identity, academy culture, and limited access to organised development support. Informal learning is widespread but largely unsupported, non-formal opportunities are scarce, and formal education is valued but often hard to access or not closely linked to daily coaching practice.

Reflection was commonly part of coaching, but it was rarely recognised as "reflection" by coaches. Engagement with reflective learning was influenced by confidence, power relationships, and performance pressure. These findings highlight the need for coach development approaches that support how coaches already learn, while providing light structure to build confidence, legitimacy, and sustainable learning.

Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to make sense of the findings by linking them to existing research on coach learning and to consider what they mean for coach development in private cricket academies. The findings show that coach learning in this setting is mainly based on experience, informal interaction, and social relationships. Learning is strongly influenced by organisational constraints, professional identity, and confidence. These insights support existing research but also highlight the importance of understanding learning within specific local contexts.

1 Coach Learning as Context-Based Practice

The findings confirm that coaches in private cricket academies mainly learn through their everyday coaching work, rather than through planned or structured development systems. Coaches described learning by trying things out, making mistakes, observing other coaches, and having informal discussions. This

matches earlier research showing that experiential and informal learning are central to how coaches develop (Cushion et al., 2003; Werthner & Trudel, 2006).

However, this study adds to existing research by showing how these learning processes operate within private, commercially run academies. In these environments, coaches face strong performance pressure and limited resources. Unlike club-based or association-led systems often studied in Western contexts, private academies in India work with little formal oversight and very limited development support. As a result, learning is driven by immediate needs and day-to-day challenges rather than long-term planning.

While learning through experience helps coaches respond quickly to situations, the findings suggest that this learning is often reactive. Coaches adjust to problems as they arise but rarely have opportunities to step back, reflect deeply, or build learning over time. This supports the idea that experience alone does not automatically lead to development and needs to be supported through reflection and social learning to encourage professional growth (Kolb, 1984; Cushion et al., 2003).

2   *The Missing Middle: Non-Formal Learning as a Gap*

One of the key contributions of this study is identifying the lack of structured non-formal learning in private cricket academies. While informal learning was widespread and formal education was valued but difficult to access, opportunities such as organised mentoring, peer learning groups, or guided reflection were mostly missing.

This supports earlier work by Nelson et al. (2006), who describe non-formal learning as an important link between formal education and informal practice. Without these opportunities, learning remained individual and uneven. Coaches' development depended heavily on personal confidence, experience, and informal networks rather than on organisational support.

The absence of non-formal learning also helps explain why many coaches felt unsure about their professional progress, even after years of experience. Without shared spaces to discuss, reflect, and make sense of practice together, learning risks becoming repetitive rather than developmental. These findings suggest that coach development in private academies may be most effective when it focuses on strengthening simple, flexible non-formal learning structures that fit naturally within everyday coaching work.

3   *Formal Education, Legitimacy, and Transferability*

The findings show a mixed relationship between coaches and formal coach education. Coaches valued formal certification because it gave them recognition and legitimacy, especially when dealing with parents, academy owners, and other stakeholders. Having a certificate helped coaches feel more professional and credible. However, many coaches felt that formal education did not always help them improve their day-to-day coaching.

Access to formal coach education was limited due to cost, time, language, and course availability. Even when courses were completed, coaches felt that the content often did not match the realities of private academy coaching. Large group sizes, limited facilities, and pressure to deliver quick results made it difficult to apply what was taught. This reflects earlier research showing that formal coach education does not always transfer well into different coaching contexts (Cushion et al., 2003; Nelson et al., 2006).

The findings also show that legitimacy and confidence are closely linked. Coaches without recognised certification often felt insecure and less confident, which influenced how openly they engaged in learning and reflection. At the same time, many coaches relied on experience rather than qualifications to build credibility. These findings highlight the need for coach development approaches that support confidence and legitimacy without relying only on formal courses, especially in settings where access to accredited education is limited.

4   *Identity, Confidence, and Psychological Safety in Coach Learning*

An important contribution of this study is its focus on the emotional and identity-related side of coach learning. Many coaches shared that they did not plan to become coaches and entered the role unexpectedly, often after finishing their playing careers. This influenced how they saw themselves as coaches and affected their confidence. This supports earlier research showing that coaching is closely linked to personal background and professional identity (Cushion et al., 2003; Trudel & Gilbert, 2006).

Confidence played a major role in how coaches engaged with learning. Coaches who felt confident, trusted, and respected were more open to asking questions, discussing problems, and trying new ideas in their coaching. In contrast, coaches who felt unsure or insecure tended to rely on fixed routines and copying others, rather than experimenting or reflecting. This reflects research showing that

people learn more effectively when they feel psychologically safe (Knowles et al., 2014; Edmondson, 1999).

The culture of the organisation also strongly influenced these patterns. In environments where performance and results were prioritised over learning, coaches felt less comfortable sharing doubts or reflecting openly. As a result, learning often became private and cautious. These findings show that coach development is closely connected to organisational leadership and culture. Supporting coach learning requires attention to trust, relationships, and power dynamics, not just providing courses or resources.

5   *Reflection as Practice*

The findings challenge the idea that coaches resist reflection. Coaches often described reflective actions, such as thinking back on training sessions or talking with other coaches about problems, even though they did not label these activities as "reflection." This supports the view that reflection usually happens as part of action and experience, rather than as a formal step or process (Schon, 1983).

Reflection became difficult when it was linked to judgement or evaluation, especially in performance-focused environments. In such settings, coaches were less comfortable reflecting openly because they feared being assessed or criticised. This supports earlier research showing that reflection can lose its value when it is treated as a formal requirement rather than a learning tool (Cushion & Nelson, 2013). The findings suggest that coaches' engagement with reflection depends less on personal motivation and more on how reflection is introduced and supported.

Overall, these findings highlight the need for reflective approaches that are simple, supportive, and based on dialogue rather than formal assessment. Reflection that happens through everyday conversations, mentoring, and shared problem-solving is likely to be more meaningful and practical for coaches working in resource-limited and performance-driven environments.

6   *Implications for Coach Development and the Framework*

Taken together, the findings support the need for a context-specific Coach Development Framework that focuses on mentoring, learning from peers, and simple ways to reflect on practice. The framework developed through this project is intentionally simple and closely linked to everyday coaching work. It is based on a learning cycle where coaches learn through their own experience,

talk with other coaches or mentors, reflect on what happens in practice, and then try new ideas in their next sessions. This cycle reflects how coaches already learn in private academies and avoids forcing a fixed curriculum or formal assessment system.

The framework is strongly connected to the organisational context of the academy. While the learning cycle shows what coaches do, how effective it depends on the environment created by the academy. Factors such as leadership support, time availability, expectations, and psychological safety all influence whether coaches feel able to learn. In private academies, management plays an important role by valuing learning alongside performance, encouraging discussion and mentoring, and allowing space for reflection during daily coaching work. Without this support, learning remains individual and reactive; with it, learning becomes more shared, purposeful, and sustainable.

Rather than introducing new systems or programmes, the framework recognises and supports how coaches already learn in practice. It adds only light structure to help improve confidence, professional legitimacy, and long-term development, without placing extra pressure on limited resources.

The framework also recognises the influence of organisational leadership in shaping learning environments. Decisions made by academy leaders about time, priorities, and expectations directly affect whether coach learning is supported or pushed aside. By fitting development activities into everyday coaching routines, the framework offers a practical approach that matches the realities of private academies.

This approach responds to calls for research that is closely connected to practice and sensitive to local context, especially in non-WEIRD coaching environments. Instead of copying fixed models from elsewhere, the framework offers a flexible and locally grounded way to support coach development.

7   *Summary*

This discussion shows that coach learning in private cricket academies is shaped by experience, relationships, professional identity, and organisational culture. Informal learning is widespread but not well supported, non-formal learning opportunities are limited, and formal education is valued but difficult to access or apply in practice. Reflection happens regularly in coaching work, but it is not always recognised as a formal learning process and is influenced by confidence and psychological safety.

These findings highlight the need for coach development approaches that are flexible, sensitive to local context, and closely linked to everyday coaching practice. The Coach Development Framework developed through this project directly responds to these needs by offering practical support for coach developers and academy leaders working in private academy settings.

Conclusion

This professional project aimed to understand how coaches working in private cricket academies in Pune, India learn and develop, and to generate knowledge that is useful for coach developers and organisations. Using interviews, a focus group, and a survey, the study explored coaches' learning experiences, the challenges they face, and how they engage with formal, non-formal, and informal development opportunities.

The findings show that coach learning in private cricket academies is largely experiencebased, informal, and social. Coaches learn mainly through daily coaching work, observing other coaches, informal mentoring, and discussions around practical problems. While these learning processes are central to development, they are often unplanned and unsupported, meaning much of the responsibility for learning rests with individual coaches. Formal coach education remains the most visible and recognised pathway, but barriers such as cost, time, language, and limited relevance to practice reduce its impact in private academy settings.

A key contribution of this project is identifying the gap between formal education and informal learning. Opportunities for non-formal learning, such as organised mentoring, peer learning groups, and supported reflection, were largely absent or inconsistent. As a result, learning often occurred in response to immediate challenges rather than through planned or sustained support. Professional growth depended heavily on confidence, personal networks, and opportunity, rather than structured organisational systems.

The project also highlights the emotional and identity-related aspects of coach learning. Many coaches entered coaching unexpectedly, often after the end of their playing careers, which influenced their confidence and professional identity. Coaches who felt trusted, respected, and confident were more willing to learn, discuss challenges, and reflect on their practice. In contrast, coaches who felt insecure or worried about judgement tended to be more cautious. Reflection was commonly part of coaching practice, but it was not always recognised as "reflection" by coaches themselves. Limited engagement with reflection was shaped more by performance pressure, power relationships, and fear of judgement than by resistance.

In response to these findings, the project developed a context-specific Coach Development Framework that supports how coaches already learn in practice. The framework is intentionally simple and flexible. It is not designed as a fixed curriculum, formal qualification pathway, or assessment system. Instead, it offers light structure through mentoring, peer learning, and simple reflective tools that can be integrated into everyday coaching work. By connecting informal learning with organised support, the framework supports confidence, clarity, and longer-term development without adding pressure to limited resources. Importantly, the framework recognises that coach learning does not happen in isolation. Learning is shaped by organisational and leadership conditions within private academies, including how time, priorities, and learning are valued. Decisions made by academy owners and leaders strongly influence whether coaches are able to talk, reflect, and learn together. Where learning is supported, even informally, coaches are more likely to engage in shared problem-solving. Where performance pressures dominate, learning is often left to individual effort. While formal coach education in India is largely governed by state associations and the BCCI, private academies operate with considerable independence, placing greater responsibility on local leadership to create learning-supportive environments.

From a methodological perspective, this project demonstrates the value of applied qualitative research for understanding coach development in complex and under-researched contexts. Although the findings are not intended to be statistically generalised, they offer insights that may be useful in similar private and resource-constrained environments. The researcher's insider position supported access and trust, while reflexive practice and transparency helped manage potential bias.

Overall, this professional project shows how research and development can work together. By grounding the Coach Development Framework in coaches lived experiences and organisational realities, the project produces applied knowledge with clear practical value for coach developers and academy leaders. The findings reinforce the need for flexible, contextsensitive approaches to coach development that move beyond formal education alone and focus on recognising, supporting, and strengthening how coaches learn in practice.

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