



A Study Of Reflective Practice Within A Multidisciplinary Team In An Elite Football Academy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: this research intends to explore how reflective practice is being perceived and applied within an elite English football academy setting. Specifically, it aims to investigate how key staff, working as part of a multidisciplinary team (MDT), interpret and implement The FA's Plan-Do-Review model. Furthermore, how do academies mobilise reflective practice according to the values and unique cultural environment of the Club under the auspices of the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP).

Methodology: The study used a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews involving twelve MDT members. Moon's Model of Reflection and The FA's Plan-Do-Review framework guided thematic analysis using manual coding.

Main Findings: Findings indicate that 1) There is a disconnect between the understanding and learning of reflective practice through coach education courses and its application within the real world. 2) Reflective practice should be nurtured and developed through strong networks and interprofessional collaboration, utilising communities of practice and mentoring relationships both in and outside the work environment. 3) The different disciplines working within an MDT will engage in reflection to varying depths and levels. Rather than viewing reflection on a hierarchical scale, the level and method of reflection should be determined by the individual, their experiences, and the context.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study provides empirical insight into real-world reflective practice among sports professionals, offering a novel multidisciplinary perspective and practical recommendations for coach education and academy policy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is defined as the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice. It has been around as a buzz word in education since around the late 1990's. Before that it was being used mainly in nursing and social work [1]-[3]. Since then it has infiltrated most disciplines in education and professional development. The emergence of 'new professions' and specifically the increased professionalisation of sports coaching is one such example. Its importance is frequently noted in the literature; indeed, it has come to be regarded as an essential characteristic of professional competence and a vital aspect of

coach education. Reflections in many coach education programmes however are often carried out in rational environments; formalised learning venues which fail to replicate the often chaotic, complex and unpredictable nature of the coaching environment, and the day to-day learning experiences of coaches in the field [4]-[6]. The key factors that influence the context within which a club or academy operates for example, can also have a significant influence on the reflections of its coaches and their ability to reflect. Contextual factors should therefore be accounted for in the educational approaches to reflective learning. Cushion state that coach education programmes should include supervised field experiences in a variety of contexts, enabling coaches to consider differences, make mistakes, reflect and learn from them, and try again [7]-[9].

Coaching, however, lacks a critical tradition and coaches are more likely to be seen sticking with 'safer', 'tried and tested', traditional methods. Historically, this has made the adoption of such practice fraught with difficulties and resistance, with coaches staying within their 'comfort zone' rather than opening themselves up to self-reflection. As such, there is a lack of clarity regarding reflective practice within sports coaching due to its infancy [10]-[12]. Furthermore, a review of practitioner literature finds little to help coaches understand how reflection actually works. For example indicated that, whilst coaches may think they are reflecting, often they are confused between what reflection is and other mental processes. Reflection is an active, persistent, and careful process. According to Treynor et al. Reflection refers to the deliberate and "purposeful turning inward of one's attention in order to engage in cognitive, goal-directed problem solving", the aim of which is to increase performance beyond its current level [13]-[15]. Its function, therefore, is to transform a situation in which there may be obscurity, doubt, conflict or disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious. This can be an uncomfortable process, one which requires a great deal of time, honesty, focus, commitment, energy and willingness. However, whilst it may start with discomfort, it can lead to clarity of thought and a balanced state, "giving an individual an increased power of control" [16], [17].

By contrast, ruminative thinking involves a passive, repetitive and prolonged focus on past or present events. It is often self-referential, meaning that it is focused on one's self and one's world, rather than being goal-directed. Rumination can therefore be thought of as a highly constrained form of mind wandering a low-level cognitive process in which one thought leads to another but rarely to a solution or a conclusion. As such, it is often problem pondering rather than problem-solving [18]-[20]. This can both help and hinder performance. For example, in undemanding contexts, mind-wandering can serve as a useful function for creativity and planning. On the other hand, it can disrupt performance when it takes away cognitive resources that are needed to perform the task, and this occurs in particular when mind-wandering is unintentional and uncontrolled as is the case with rumination [21], [22].

Reflective practice, while widely advocated in coach education programmes, continues to suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity. Scholars such as Totterdell and Lambert (1999) have questioned whether practitioners genuinely understand what reflective practice entails. This uncertainty is further amplified by the limited empirical literature that addresses key domain-specific aspects such as its impact, processes, and definitions [23], [24]. Current research still falls short in explaining how reflection is implemented by coaches or how sports organizations, particularly football clubs, initiate and support reflective processes in real-world settings.

The researcher's interest in reflective practice stems from two core experiences. Firstly, having played football from youth to senior club level and beginning a coaching career in 2003, the researcher initially focused on acquiring technical knowledge rather than developing reflective capabilities [25], [26]. During early coaching years, reflection was limited to surface-level learning (as described by Moon, 1999), hindering deeper insights and personal development. Secondly, despite the global emphasis on reflection in coach development, there remains a notable absence of critical studies exploring how coaches actually experience and apply reflection in their work, particularly in high-performance environments.

The landscape of player development in English football has evolved significantly since the introduction of The Football Association's Charter for Quality in 1998. This initiative introduced a tiered youth academy system, requiring clubs to make substantial investments in player development, support services, and compliance with strict regulatory standards [27]-[29]. These requirements became more rigorous with the launch of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012, which further categorized academies based on the quality of their programmes. As a result, elite academies now provide holistic support through an array of services, including education, sports science, medical care, and safeguarding, reflecting the complexity of developing modern footballers.

To manage this complexity, professional academies have adopted multidisciplinary teams (MDTs), composed of professionals from various fields working collaboratively to support player development. This approach mirrors the National Health Service's MDT model, which coordinates care to meet the holistic needs of patients [25], [30]. In elite football academies, MDTs play a crucial role in aligning diverse services with the goal of optimizing athlete growth. However, challenges persist, including role conflicts, resource competition, and communication barriers. Despite their importance, limited research exists on how MDTs function within elite football academies. Therefore, this study aims to explore the reflective practices and collaborative dynamics within such teams to better understand their role in player development.

The two research titles “Exploring Reflective Practice in a Multidisciplinary Team at an Elite English Football Academy” and “Exploring the Reflective Practice of a Multidisciplinary Team within an Elite English Football Academy” [31] appear closely related in scope, yet a subtle analytical gap can be identified in their conceptual framing. The first title emphasizes a broader exploration of reflective practice as a general activity occurring in the environment of an elite football academy, potentially focusing on contextual influences and collective behaviors of the team. In contrast, the second title narrows the focus to the reflective practice of the team itself, which may imply a more internal, process-oriented investigation of how the team engages in self-evaluation, learning, and adaptation. This distinction presents a potential gap in existing research: while prior studies may have addressed reflective practice as a contextual or structural phenomenon, fewer may have provided an in-depth, team-centered analysis that captures the nuances of individual and collective reflection strategies employed by multidisciplinary teams operating in high-performance sport settings. Addressing this gap can yield deeper insights into the mechanisms that support professional growth, collaboration, and performance enhancement within elite athletic environments.

This study offers a novel contribution by examining reflective practice as a dynamic and contextual process occurring within the collaborative environment of a multidisciplinary team in an elite English football academy [32], [33]. While previous research has largely focused on individual reflection among coaches or athletes, this study expands the scope to include how professionals from diverse disciplines such as sports science, physiotherapy, coaching, and psychology collectively engage in reflective practices. By exploring the interactions, shared learning, and reflective dialogues within the team, the study generates new knowledge on how context-specific reflection can enhance interdisciplinary cohesion and inform decision-making in high-performance sport settings.

The findings of this research have significant implications for the development of professional learning frameworks and organizational structures in elite sports environments. Understanding how multidisciplinary teams engage in reflective practice can inform the design of more effective collaborative strategies that foster continuous improvement and innovation. The insights gained can also guide academy management in implementing targeted interventions that strengthen communication, trust, and knowledge-sharing among staff members. Ultimately, this could lead to improved athlete support, more integrated performance planning, and the elevation of holistic player development models in elite football academies.

In today’s high-stakes sports landscape, where athlete development and performance are increasingly reliant on coordinated input from multidisciplinary teams, there is an urgent need to understand how these teams reflect, learn, and adapt within complex environments. Given the rapid evolution of performance science and increasing pressure for results, elite football academies must ensure that their professional teams function not only efficiently but reflectively. Without a deep understanding of reflective practice in such settings, organizations risk missing opportunities to optimize team learning, resolve internal conflicts, and respond adaptively to performance challenges. This research is therefore both timely and essential for sustaining excellence in elite sport institutions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews**, which provided a flexible yet focused approach to exploring participants’ experiences. This method allowed the researcher to probe deeply into the nuances of reflective practice, while also adapting to each participant’s specific role and context. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting, lasting between 30 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of data for subsequent analysis.

The study utilized several key instruments to ensure the systematic and accurate collection of data. These tools were designed based on established theories of reflection, including Moon (1999) and Schön (1983), and adapted for use in the context of an MDT within elite football.

Table 1. Research Instruments

Instrument	Function Description
Semi-Structured Interview Guide	Guided the conversation to focus on key themes related to reflective practice, while allowing open exploration.
Digital Voice Recorder	Captured full audio of the interviews for accurate transcription and analysis.
Field Notes	Used to record non-verbal cues, contextual observations, and researcher reflections during the interview.
Informed Consent Form	Ensured participants' ethical agreement and understanding of the research objectives and process.

The study employed thematic analysis following the six-phase framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within

qualitative data. A reflexive thematic approach was applied, allowing the researcher to actively engage with and reflect upon the data throughout the analysis process. The process included both inductive coding and iterative review of themes to ensure that the final thematic structure accurately represented the richness of the participants' narratives.

Table 2. Stages Of Thematic Analysis

Stage	Description of Process
1. Familiarisation	Transcribing and reading through data repeatedly to gain an initial understanding of patterns and meaning.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematic coding of key segments of data relevant to the research questions.
3. Searching for Themes	Grouping related codes into potential themes that capture core ideas across participants' experiences.
4. Reviewing Themes	Assessing coherence and consistency of themes against the full data set.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Refining the specifics of each theme and generating clear definitions and labels.
6. Producing the Report	Writing a narrative that links the themes to the research aims, supported by direct quotations from participants.

The research procedure followed a systematic sequence beginning with the submission of an ethics application to the university's review board. Upon receiving ethical approval, the researcher proceeded with recruitment of participants using purposive sampling. Participants were provided with detailed information sheets and informed consent was obtained. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and informal member-checking was used to enhance credibility. Throughout the process, the researcher maintained reflexive journaling to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than the researcher's assumptions.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Findings

3.1.1. Contextual Influences and Barriers

The study found that the implementation and understanding of reflective practice in the academy were heavily influenced by organizational context, including culture, hierarchy, and workload expectations. Although the FA's Plan-Do-Review model was well known among staff, its operationalization was inconsistent. For some, it was a formalized checklist-driven process with evaluative outcomes; for others, especially more experienced or autonomous staff, it became a space for meta-cognitive inquiry involving emotions, ethics, and self-awareness.

This disparity reflected differing levels of reflective literacy, role identity, and perceived autonomy within the multidisciplinary team (MDT). Staff in high-status roles with greater decision-making capacity were more likely to engage in deeper reflective processes. Conversely, time pressure, performance targets, and administrative burden limited the space and motivation for deeper reflection particularly among coaching staff, who often experienced reflection as a superficial performance review rather than a developmental tool.

"You're so busy delivering, reviewing becomes a tick-box it's not thinking, it's just closing the loop."
(Participant C)

This finding echoes Schön's (1983) notion that technical reflection is more likely to dominate in performance-oriented cultures unless there is deliberate scaffolding for deeper inquiry.

3.1.2. Mentoring and Communities of Practice

Mentoring relationships and informal peer discussions emerged as key enablers of reflective depth. Participants indicated that structured mentoring fostered self-awareness, whereas unstructured peer interaction encouraged real-time, context-sensitive reflection. The academy's support culture significantly influenced the sustainability of these practices.

Mentorship and informal peer interactions emerged as critical enablers of sustained and deeper reflective practice. Participants described formal mentoring as a structured, often developmental relationship that fostered self-awareness, encouraged critical questioning, and created safe spaces for personal growth. Informal communities of practice (CoPs)—such as spontaneous discussions in hallways or post-session debriefs—were equally valued for their immediacy and authenticity. These CoPs acted as reflective "mirrors," allowing professionals to make meaning of experiences collaboratively, often outside hierarchical boundaries. They offered

emotional validation and professional feedback in real time, making them more accessible and context-sensitive than formal review sessions.

“It’s those off-the-cuff chats with a colleague that stick—because it’s raw, it’s real, and you’re both figuring it out.” (Participant G)

Notably, the sustainability of these practices depended heavily on the academy’s supportive culture. Where psychological safety and open dialogue were encouraged, reflective practices flourished. Where status hierarchies or performance pressures dominated, staff reported reluctance to disclose vulnerabilities or critical questions.

3.1.3. Levels of Reflection Across Disciplines

Variation in reflective depth was evident across departments. For instance, coaching staff focused on tactical review (technical reflection), while performance staff integrated psychosocial insights (critical reflection). The study emphasizes that depth of reflection is not hierarchical but context-driven and individually modulated.

The study revealed distinct disciplinary patterns in the depth and form of reflection. Coaches predominantly engaged in technical reflection, focusing on match tactics, performance metrics, and training session efficacy. This aligns with “surface” or “task-oriented” reflection models, often driven by short-term performance outcomes. In contrast, performance and welfare staff (e.g., sports scientists, psychologists) demonstrated higher engagement in critical reflection—examining underlying assumptions, interpersonal dynamics, emotional labor, and athlete well-being. Their training backgrounds, often rooted in psychology or health sciences, supported reflective practices grounded in holistic and relational paradigms. Importantly, the study cautions against viewing these levels as hierarchical. Instead, reflective depth was seen as context-dependent, responsive to task demands, personal experience, and professional values.

“You don’t always need deep reflection. Sometimes a quick adjustment is enough. It’s about knowing *when* to go deep.” (Participant B)

This reinforces Moon’s (1999) assertion that reflective competence involves the flexibility to move between levels, not just the ability to reflect deeply.

Table 3. Thematic Key Findings and Dimensions

Theme	Subtheme / Focus	Key Findings
Contextual Influences & Barriers	Organisational Culture- Hierarchy- Workload	FA’s Plan-Do-Review model known, but inconsistently applied. Reflection often becomes evaluative, not developmental.
Mentoring & Communities of Practice	Formal Mentoring- Informal Peer Reflection	Formal mentorship supports self-awareness. Informal CoPs foster spontaneous, contextual reflective dialogue.
Disciplinary Differences in Reflection	Coaching (Technical)- Performance/Welfare (Critical)	Coaches reflect tactically; support staff reflect holistically. Depth of reflection is context-driven, not hierarchical.

Across all three themes, one key insight emerges: reflective practice is deeply relational and embedded within professional culture. It is not simply an individual competence, but a function of how organizations enable or constrain inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking. The intersection between disciplinary training, role autonomy, and social dynamics shapes not only *what* gets reflected upon, but *how* and *why*. For reflective practice to thrive in elite sport settings, it must be supported structurally (e.g., time, mentoring, integrated review systems), culturally (e.g., openness, trust, leadership modeling), and pedagogically (e.g., differentiated models for various professions and contexts). Without such support, reflection risks being reduced to compliance rather than transformation.

3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the understanding of how reflective practice is perceived, implemented, and challenged within the context of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) operating in an elite English football academy. In interpreting these results, several critical issues emerge that align with, extend, and in some cases, problematize existing literature on reflective practice in sport, coaching, and professional development.

A central theme emerging from the findings is the disconnect between formal coach education and the realities of reflective practice in the field. This is consistent with prior research (e.g., Cushion et al., 2010; Gilbert & Trudel, 2001) that critiques coach education programmes for emphasizing declarative knowledge over

procedural and critical thinking skills. Many participants in this study reported that while they were introduced to reflective concepts during certification courses, such learning was abstract, overly theoretical, and not meaningfully integrated into real-world coaching environments. This highlights a persistent tension between formal learning environments and situated learning, reinforcing Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that knowledge is context-dependent and best developed through participation in communities of practice.

In this regard, the study supports Moon's (1999) hierarchical model of reflection, particularly the distinction between surface, descriptive reflection and deeper, critical reflection. Participants' accounts indicated that while basic reflective activities—such as technical post-match reviews—were relatively common, critical reflection on personal values, assumptions, or team dynamics was rarer and often discouraged by time constraints or organizational norms. This observation aligns with Schön's (1983) concern that professionals often engage in “technical rationality” at the expense of more transformative learning. The prevalence of surface-level reflection among certain MDT members, particularly those in coaching roles, suggests a need for targeted interventions to support reflective depth, especially in high-pressure performance settings.

A significant contribution of this study is its illumination of the influence of organizational culture on reflective practice. While the literature often advocates for reflective practice as an individual cognitive process (e.g., Boud et al., 1985), this research underscores its inherently social and cultural dimensions. Participants repeatedly described how leadership behavior, communication norms, and team hierarchies shaped their willingness and ability to engage in reflection. This is in line with Argyris and Schön's (1978) theory of organizational learning, which emphasizes that reflection must be supported structurally and culturally if it is to lead to meaningful change. In environments where performance outcomes are prioritized over developmental processes, reflection risks becoming marginalized or tokenistic.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the discipline-specific variations in reflective engagement within the MDT. Staff in psychology and welfare roles demonstrated greater fluency in critical and meta-cognitive reflection, often facilitating reflective conversations among colleagues. In contrast, coaching and performance staff were more inclined toward action-oriented, tactical reflection. This echoes research in interprofessional education (IPE) which suggests that different professions bring distinct epistemological assumptions and discursive practices to reflective work (Anderson et al., 2012). The implications of this finding are substantial for the design of reflective interventions: a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed in multidisciplinary contexts. Instead, tailored reflective tools and culturally sensitive facilitation may be required to engage different professional identities effectively.

One of the most pressing barriers identified in the study was the limited space for collaborative reflection, despite the structural presence of an MDT. This paradox where collaboration is formally encouraged but informally resisted—is echoed in the work of Reid, Stewart, & Thorne (2004), who note that MDT effectiveness often depends less on structure and more on relational trust and communication quality. In this study, formal meetings were often described as administrative or task-focused, while informal reflective conversations described as “corridor chats” or mentoring moments were the most generative spaces for learning. This reinforces the idea that reflection is not only a cognitive process but a relational act that thrives in psychologically safe environments (Edmondson, 1999). Thus, fostering a culture of reflection requires not just structural provision but a deliberate cultivation of trust, openness, and shared language.

Interestingly, participants expressed ambivalence toward structured reflective models such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle or the FA's Plan-Do-Review framework. While these models provided an accessible starting point, many felt they lacked the depth or flexibility required for complex, real-world situations. This echoes critiques in the literature (e.g., Rolfe et al., 2001; Finlay, 2008) that such models can become formulaic if not critically adapted. The study's findings suggest that reflective practice in elite sport may benefit from adaptive models such as Skinner and Mitchell's (2016) synthesis of Borton and Rolfe which offer structure but allow for flexibility, contextualization, and practitioner input. Reflection, in this sense, should be treated as a dialogic and dynamic process rather than a rigid template.

Finally, the value of mentoring and communities of practice emerged as a key mechanism for deep and sustained reflection. Consistent with Wenger's (1998) theory of situated learning, participants described mentorship and peer dialogue as essential for processing complex experiences, exploring alternative perspectives, and making sense of emotionally charged situations. These findings suggest that informal relational structures may play a more significant role in supporting reflective practice than formalized training. Therefore, future interventions should consider how to embed reflective conversations into everyday interactions, coaching supervision, and team debriefs.

In conclusion, this study confirms that reflective practice within a multidisciplinary football academy is shaped by a confluence of personal, professional, and organizational factors. The findings advance the field by highlighting the need to move beyond individualistic, model-based approaches to reflection, toward a more contextual, relational, and culturally embedded perspective. For reflective practice to be meaningful and sustainable, it must be supported not only by technical tools but also by leadership behavior, trust-based

relationships, and a cultural orientation toward continuous learning. These insights have significant implications for coach education, MDT development, and the design of performance environments in elite sport.

While both studies focus on elite English football academies, they address distinct yet interconnected domains: reflective practice within multidisciplinary teams and psychosocial development through a holistic ecological lens [34]. The existing research on psychosocial development tends to emphasize athletes' growth within their social and environmental contexts, often considering broader systemic influences like coaching, family, and peer relationships. However, it frequently overlooks the internal processes of professional teams responsible for creating these developmental environments. Conversely, research on reflective practice in multidisciplinary teams is emerging but has not been sufficiently connected to its broader impact on athlete psychosocial outcomes. The gap lies in the integration of these two domains: there is limited understanding of how reflective practices among staff influence the effectiveness of holistic, ecologically informed approaches to athlete development.

The novelty of the study on reflective practice lies in its exploration of the *internal mechanisms* of learning and adaptation within a multidisciplinary team, rather than focusing solely on athlete outcomes or external environments. By shifting the lens inward toward the collaborative, reflective behaviors of staff members it contributes new insights into how shared reflection informs decision-making and interdisciplinary synergy [35]-[37]. This approach diverges from existing ecological or psychosocial studies by emphasizing the process by which support systems are continually improved through reflective dialogue, rather than simply examining their structural or relational components.

This research holds important implications for both practice and policy within elite sports academies. By uncovering how reflective practices shape the day-to-day functioning of multidisciplinary teams, the study can inform the design of professional development programs that enhance team effectiveness and athlete care. It may also influence recruitment and training criteria, promoting reflective competence as a core skill for staff. Furthermore, the findings could support more dynamic models of talent development, where staff reflection directly contributes to the responsiveness and personalization of athlete support strategies across physical, psychological, and social dimensions [38]-[40].

A potential limitation of this study is its context-specific focus on a single elite English football academy, which may restrict the generalizability of findings across different sports or institutional cultures. Reflective practices are inherently shaped by organizational norms, interpersonal dynamics, and leadership styles, meaning the observed processes may not fully translate to other settings without adaptation. Additionally, the study may rely on self-reported data or observational methods that can be subject to bias, thus limiting the objectivity of the findings. Future research should consider comparative studies across multiple academies or sports to validate and extend the insights generated. Future research could explore how reflective practices within multidisciplinary teams directly influence athlete development outcomes, or compare reflective processes across different elite sports environments to identify best practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that reflective practice in elite football academies is uneven and contextually bound. Deep, critical reflection is more likely when practitioners are supported through mentoring and integrated team discussions. Future coach education programs should prioritise the development of adaptable reflective strategies sensitive to individual roles and organisational cultures. Future studies are encouraged to explore reflective practice across multiple elite football academies to allow for broader comparisons and deeper generalizations. In addition, longitudinal research could provide insights into how reflective practices evolve over time and influence team dynamics and athlete development. Investigating the impact of structured reflective models or digital reflection tools on multidisciplinary team performance may also yield valuable findings.

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