

Creative Experiences in Children's Football

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This project aimed to generate new and practical knowledge on the usefulness of creativity-nurturing coaching principles in children's football. To achieve this, the study explored players' and coaches' engagement with, and experiences of, a creativity-nurturing training program, *The Idea Academy*.

The Idea Academy was implemented by voluntary coaches from U9 teams from five clubs located in the North Jutland Region, Denmark. Spanning eight sessions, the program comprised five novel types of exercises. While similar patterns of meaning were identified across the different types of exercise, the results showed that each type was particularly useful in fertilizing specific potentials of creativity related to promoting enjoyment, participation, and development within in a mastery-oriented climate.

- 1) *The Dream World* created a safe space for play and inventiveness, where players enjoyed using their imagination to conjure diverse moves and tricks based on various thematic cues.
- 2) *The Idea Factory* fostered special sense of community, participation and inclusion, by prioritizing mutual ideational inspiration and exploration over football prowess.
- 3) *The Play Workshop* promoted engagement and enjoyment by involving and empowering players to creatively take charge of generating and attempting unpredictable tactical plans.
- 4) *The Challenge* promoted player development by encouraging players to break habits, step outside comfort zones, and embrace the unexpected when faced with novel task constraints.
- 5) *Role Play* liberated the constraining focus on results by replacing competitive elements with collaborative immersion in exploring novel rules, roles and materials.

Besides these potentials, issues were found regarding the implementation of the program. Addressing these issues is likely to increase the usefulness, effectiveness and scalability of the program, enabling others to fully realize the potentials of creativity training. To help coaches digest the novel exercises, there is a need to reshape the training manuals, with a more concise, clearer and accessible description of the novel exercises, making it easier for coaches to quickly grasp key elements. Moreover, there is a need to develop educational initiatives to enhance coaches' capacity to implement and orchestrate creativity training in terms of designing, facilitating and adapting exercises such as those in The Idea Academy. Such coach education could be informed by results in this study. Among more, the results outlined key insights regarding efficient facilitation of the creativity-nurturing exercises.

- 1) **Join the fun:** When coaches actively participate in and model imaginative play, it boosts engagement, lowers resistance, and helps players embrace creativity through example.
- 2) **Dare to lose control:** By letting go of rigid control and embracing unpredictability and novelty, coaches create a safe and brave space where unusual, risky and playful ideas thrive.
- 3) **Ensure creative success:** Supervising the creative process, adapting task and opposition, and providing time to prepare were key to helping all players experience creative success.
- 4) **Leverage teachable moments:** Using teachable moments to highlight how new approaches and solutions could transfer to match situations help players step outside comfort zones.
- 5) **Be patient and trust the process:** Creativity takes time. Patience and persistence unlock new possibilities as players and coaches grow familiar and confident with the new practices.