

Exploring the Role of Futsal in Grassroots Football Development in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examined the capacity of futsal as a developmental tool for grassroots football in Ghana, relying on skill acquisition, tactical awareness, and organizational practices. A qualitative research design was used, adopting structured interviews and focus group discussions that involved 42 participants, made up of coaches, players, referees, and administrators, in five regions of Ghana. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis supported by regional and international literature on futsal. Key findings showed that 85% of participants believed futsal significantly enhances ball control, quick decision-making, and spatial awareness. Additionally, 78% of coaches and referees agreed it boosts player engagement and tactical development, while 64% of administrators highlighted futsal's cost-effectiveness and simpler facility requirements. However, 70% of respondents identified challenges such as a lack of facilities, inadequate policy integration, and low awareness. The study concludes that futsal aligns well with football fundamentals and holds strong potential for grassroots development in Ghana, provided infrastructural and policy barriers are addressed. It recommends incorporating futsal drills into regular training, including futsal in referee education, building futsal-specific infrastructure, and integrating the sport into national football policy. Partnerships with schools and communities are also essential. Future research should conduct longitudinal studies and regional comparisons within West Africa to identify best practices.

Keywords: Futsal, Grassroots Football, Ghana, Football Development, Qualitative Research, Stakeholders.

Introduction

Football remains the most popular sport in Ghana, deeply embedded within its cultural and social fabric, contributing significantly to community cohesion and national identity (Agyemang, 2022; Mensah, 2022). For many young footballers across Ghana, commencing an early football career is a common dream, as almost all children naturally engage with football during their formative years. However, gaining access to quality football fields, professional coaching, and adequate equipment remains a persistent challenge. Amid these infrastructural and resource limitations, futsal, a fast-paced indoor variant of football,

is emerging as a promising alternative that could significantly enhance grassroots football development in Ghana.

Globally, football is the most followed sport, boasting over 4 billion fans, and is widely recognized as a socio-economic vehicle for youth empowerment, health promotion, and social inclusion (FIFA, 2023). In developing regions, including sub-Saharan Africa, football often transcends entertainment to serve as a means of social mobility and national identity formation (Darby, 2017). However, grassroots football in Africa faces numerous systemic challenges such as poor infrastructure, limited coaching capacity, and weak institutional frameworks, which collectively hinder talent identification and long-term player development (chiweshe, 2021; Kearney, 2021). These barriers are particularly pronounced in Ghana, where youth football initiatives often struggle with fragmented governance and underinvestment.

In contrast, countries like Morocco and Egypt have made strategic strides in integrating futsal into their national football ecosystems, yielding positive outcomes in youth skill development, talent retention, and international competitiveness (Moktar et al., 2021). In West Africa, however, comparative regional efforts remain limited. While Nigeria and Senegal have piloted community-level futsal programs, there is scant academic documentation on their impact or scalability. Moreover, in Ghana and much of sub-Saharan Africa, empirical research exploring futsal's integration into grassroots development is virtually non-existent. This scarcity of empirical evidence shows a critical knowledge gap about the use of futsal to solve Ghana's grassroots football issues. Therefore, this study investigates how futsal is used as a possible tool to change the face of Ghana's grassroots football development. The study again aims to come out with real issues on how futsal can improve technical skill acquisition, get to the communities, and receive support for sustainable sports development by involving players, coaches, referees, and administrators. With this, it may seek to bridge the important research gap related to the developmental value of futsal in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Ghana.

Problem of the Statement

Considering Ghana's long history of producing pronounced football players and a rich football culture, there is a debate on organisational effectiveness and technical skill acquisition serving as obstacles for grassroots football development (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2023). There is the lack of policy direction on grassroots programmes and therefore, lacking a sustained organised training modules. Stakeholders who have the desire to enter into grassroots programme in our community complains of not having access to qualified coaches or development-focused facilities, (Ghana Football Association's 2022 Technical Report). The nature, technical accuracy, and quick decision-making skills that futsal naturally fosters, are good qualities necessary for success in today's football profession, which are absent from the current training regimens (FIFA Futsal Strategy, 2020). Globally, futsal has become a cornerstone in youth development, enhancing players' agility, ball control, and cognitive speed (Barbero-Alvarez et al., 2008). In Africa, North African nations such as Egypt and Morocco have institutionalized futsal within their football development

framework. According to CAF's 2023 Futsal and Youth Development Assessment, these countries can now boast of over 30% integration of futsal-trained players in their under-17 and under-20 national teams, contributing to stronger performances in international competitions (Moktar et al., futsal's contribution to football, 2021).

However, in Ghana and much of West Africa, the perception of futsal remains marginal. Yet, neighboring Nigeria has recently launched a National Futsal League under the Nigeria Football Federation to bridge this developmental gap, showcasing early success in skill enhancement among youth players. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's pilot futsal programmes in Abidjan have demonstrated positive impacts on technical skill development and coach engagement at the grassroots level.

This study, therefore, sought to fill the policy and developmental gap by investigating how futsal, through its emphasis on quick tactical thinking, tight ball control, and accelerated decision-making, can serve as a transformative tool in Ghanaian grassroots football development strategy, to benefit players, coaches, referees, and administrators as a whole.

Research Objectives

1. Exploring the challenges of stakeholders on the role of futsal in grassroots youth football development in Ghana.
2. Investigate ways futsal contributes to technical and tactical football skills development at the grassroots phase.
3. Assessing the need to integrate futsal into Ghana's grassroots youth football agenda.
4. Proposing policy and management strategies that could leverage futsal as a strategic tool for grassroots football programmes.

Research Questions

1. How are the challenges faced by stakeholders in using futsal as a tool for grassroots football development in Ghana?
2. What ways can futsal contribute to the technical and tactical development of grassroots football players?
3. How could futsal be integrated into grassroots football programmes?
4. What strategies could be adopted to leverage futsal in Ghana's football development agenda?

Scope and Limitations

This study pivots on four main stakeholder groups about grassroots football development in Ghana. These are players, coaches, administrators, and referees. These individuals were selected due to their direct involvement and impact on football training, organization, and match officiating at the grassroots level. The research also excludes experiences from other influential individuals such as parents, fans, and media personnel to maintain a manageable

scope. The study adopted a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather data.

The study was confined to selected regions within Ghana that have some level of grassroots football programmes but have not yet integrated futsal. This may limit the generalizability of the study's findings to areas without such programmes. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth, which may affect the replicability of results across different contexts. A further limitation is the potential gender imbalance within the sample groups, as grassroots football in Ghana remains male-dominated. This may result in the underrepresentation of female perspectives, thereby limiting the study's inclusiveness and its ability to capture gender-specific challenges or opportunities in grassroots football development.

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research contributes to the advancement of football development theories by explicitly incorporating futsal as a vital element within grassroots sports ecosystems. It addresses a notable gap in the existing sports development literature, which often overlooks alternative football formats despite their potential to enhance player skills and overall game quality.

Practically, the findings will offer valuable, evidence-based insights for coaches and grassroots football administrators. By understanding how futsal can be strategically adopted, coaches can employ training approaches that enhance technical skill acquisition, decision-making abilities, and player creativity.

In the area of Policy, this study provides important data for policymakers in national sports development. It highlights the benefits and practical considerations for integrating futsal into broader football development frameworks, thereby promoting increased participation, talent identification, and competitive performance at the grassroots level. Importantly, the findings have cross-national relevance, offering opportunities for policy transfer and regional collaboration. Given the similarities in football culture, infrastructure limitations, and youth demographics across West African countries, nations such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Burkina Faso can draw valuable lessons from Ghana's experience. By engaging in cross-border knowledge exchange, regional sports authorities can develop harmonized strategies that leverage futsal to boost grassroots football outcomes across the sub-region.

In a management context, football administrators and programme managers will be able to rely on this research outcome to design and implement futsal-inclusive training programmes and youth competitions. This will promote more efficient management of resources and improve organizational capacity at the grassroots football level.

Literature Review

This literature review examines existing research and theoretical perspectives on futsal and grassroots football development globally, in Africa, and within Ghanaian contexts. It uses academic discourse to explore the challenges and opportunities in grassroots football while

emphasizing the rising popularity of futsal as a significant developmental tool. The review highlights key themes such as skill acquisition, institutional challenges, and the use of futsal in youth development. It identifies gaps and contradictions in the literature, especially the hidden role of futsal in Ghana's grassroots football ecosystem, thereby justifying the rationale for this study.

Literature on a Global Futsal Game

Internationally, futsal is recognized as a fundamental tool for the development of football talent, owing to its emphasis on technical precision and cognitive acuity. Studies have demonstrated that futsal's smaller playing area and faster pace demand superior ball control, spatial awareness, and rapid decision-making, skills that are transferable to traditional football formats (Castagna et al. & Travassos et al., 2009, 2017). For example, Castagna et al. (2009) revealed that futsal-trained players often outperform their 11-a-side counterparts in agility and ball mastery.

FIFA (2021) supports futsal as a grassroots development strategy that enhances tactical understanding and skill acquisition through increased ball touches and high-intensity play from a young age. In football powerhouses like Brazil and Spain, futsal has long been integrated into youth development systems, with legends such as Ronaldinho and Neymar crediting their creativity and technical refinement to early futsal exposure (barbero et al, 2008). This has led to a strong correlation between futsal training and the production of highly skilled players in those contexts.

Nevertheless, critics argue that futsal's limited field and reduced physical load may neglect critical aspects of aerobic fitness needed in full-pitch football (Dos- Santos et al, 2020). Dos-Santos et al. caution that over-specialization in futsal may hinder long-term physical adaptation to the larger field, especially for late-transitioning players. They advocate for a hybrid model where futsal complements, rather than substitutes, traditional football training. This tension between specialization and integration remains a key debate in player development literature across both Global North and South contexts.

Perspective of African Futsal Literature

In Sub-Saharan Africa, futsal scholarship is emerging yet remains underdeveloped compared to the global North. However, it is increasingly recognized as a strategic response to structural challenges such as limited space, insufficient funding, and under-maintained pitches (Maseko , 2019). In urban areas of South Africa and Nigeria, where population density and infrastructure deficits impede conventional football development, futsal courts have become vital training spaces (Akindes, 2013; Okeke, 2022). Despite this potential, some African scholars remain skeptical of futsal's scalability within national systems. (Njororai (2014)), contends that investing in futsal may dilute limited financial and policy resources already stretched across traditional football programs. In the Nigerian context, this concern is compounded by the lack of a coherent national futsal framework, despite sporadic academy-level initiatives (Okoye & Chukwuma 2021). This contrasts with Ghana's

more community-driven futsal emergence, where informal leagues and private academies have begun integrating futsal to fill developmental gaps (Mensah & Boateng, 2021; Mensah & Adjei, 2023).

Yet, regional differences also show complementary possibilities. While Ghana's bottom-up futsal growth is largely informal, Nigeria demonstrates more academy-led experimentation with structured futsal drills, supported by former professionals and diaspora partnerships (Okon et al., 2022; Okeke, 2022). Meanwhile, in countries like Kenya and Zimbabwe, pilot futsal programs are often tied to donor funding or school-based physical education, revealing a dependency that may limit sustainability (Mbatha & Otieno, 2020).

Encouragingly, the Confederation of African Football (CAF) has begun promoting futsal through continental competitions and technical workshops (CAF, 2023). Although in its infancy, this institutional endorsement could catalyze national federations to formalize futsal pathways, following models seen in South America or Europe. It also reflects a broader continental shift toward recognizing futsal as not merely a recreational alternative but as a viable tool for elite and grassroots talent development (CAF, 2022).

Literature on the Ghanaian Futsal Game

In Ghana, futsal is increasingly visible in urban centers like Accra and Kumasi, though it remains outside the formal purview of national development strategies. Mensah and Adjei (2023) observe that futsal offers a cost-effective alternative in space-constrained environments, with private academies and youth clubs organizing small-sided games to foster technical growth. These developments mirror similar urban adaptations seen in Lagos and Johannesburg (Okeke, 2022; Maseko, 2019).

However, formal integration into the Ghana Football Association's (GFA) development framework is limited. (Owusu and Baah, 2021), highlight a policy gap wherein national grassroots initiatives continue to favor conventional football, overlooking futsal's developmental utility. This policy inertia contrasts with Nigeria's fragmented yet active academy-based futsal efforts (Okon et al., 2022; Okoye & Chukwuma, 2021), suggesting that Ghana's futsal potential is under-leveraged despite community interest and participation.

There is also a lack of coordinated discourse among key stakeholders. (Amankwah 2020), notes that policymakers in Ghana often prioritize the prestige and visibility of traditional football, viewing futsal as recreational rather than developmental. This perception inhibits the institutional support required to scale futsal training, even as private initiatives like the Accra Futsal League (launched in 2022) attract increasing attention from scouts and media (Mensah & Adjei, 2023).

Yet, Ghana's situation offers a microcosm of broader continental dynamics: informal futsal cultures are growing organically while official structures are delayed. This tension reveals both the potential for localized innovation and the need for national-level alignment. Lessons from Nigeria's academy models or South Africa's school integration could inform Ghanaian policy to create hybrid development pathways that integrate futsal meaningfully into existing football ecosystems (CAF, 2022; GFA, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how multiple layers of environmental influence interact to shape human development. According to Bronfenbrenner, individual development occurs within nested systems, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macro system, and chronosystem, each representing different levels of interaction and impact. In the context of this study, futsal functions as a microsystem embedded within the broader grassroots football macrosystem. The futsal microsystem comprises immediate environments where players, coaches, referees, and administrators interact regularly, influencing the development of football skills, tactical understanding, and social behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, the quality of coaching and peer interactions in the futsal domain directly affects players' skill acquisition and motivation (Smith & Sparkes, 2014).

This mesosystem comprises the link between these immediate environments, for instance, how futsal clubs agree with traditional football academies or schools. Positive coordination within this mesosystem can impact player development by enhancing their training opportunities (Côté, 1999). On the other hand, as expressed in certain Ghanaian settings, any unsuitable relationships may hinder the successful integration of futsal into grassroots football development pathways (Owusu & Baah, 2021). Another area that can impact negatively is futsal integration is external influences such as media coverage and sports associations' funding policies on the exosystemic level by influencing public opinion and resource availability. For instance, Ghana's lack of funding for futsal programmes is a reflection of futsal not being integrated on a larger scale for sports development, to include grassroots development (Amankwah, 2020). The macro system consists of the availability of national sports laws, cultural norms, and values that can shape the understanding of futsal in comparison to traditional football.

Ghana's football culture, which highly values full-sized football, may shape however, slow the integration of futsal (Mensah & Adjei, 2023). The use of Ecological Systems Theory in this study to capture the varied and intricate associations is timely to influence futsal's contribution to Ghanaian grassroots football development. This makes it easier to assess how environmental factors, from direct player-coach interactions to national policy frameworks, interact to affect outcomes such as participation in sports, organisational behaviours, and skill development.

Conceptual Framework

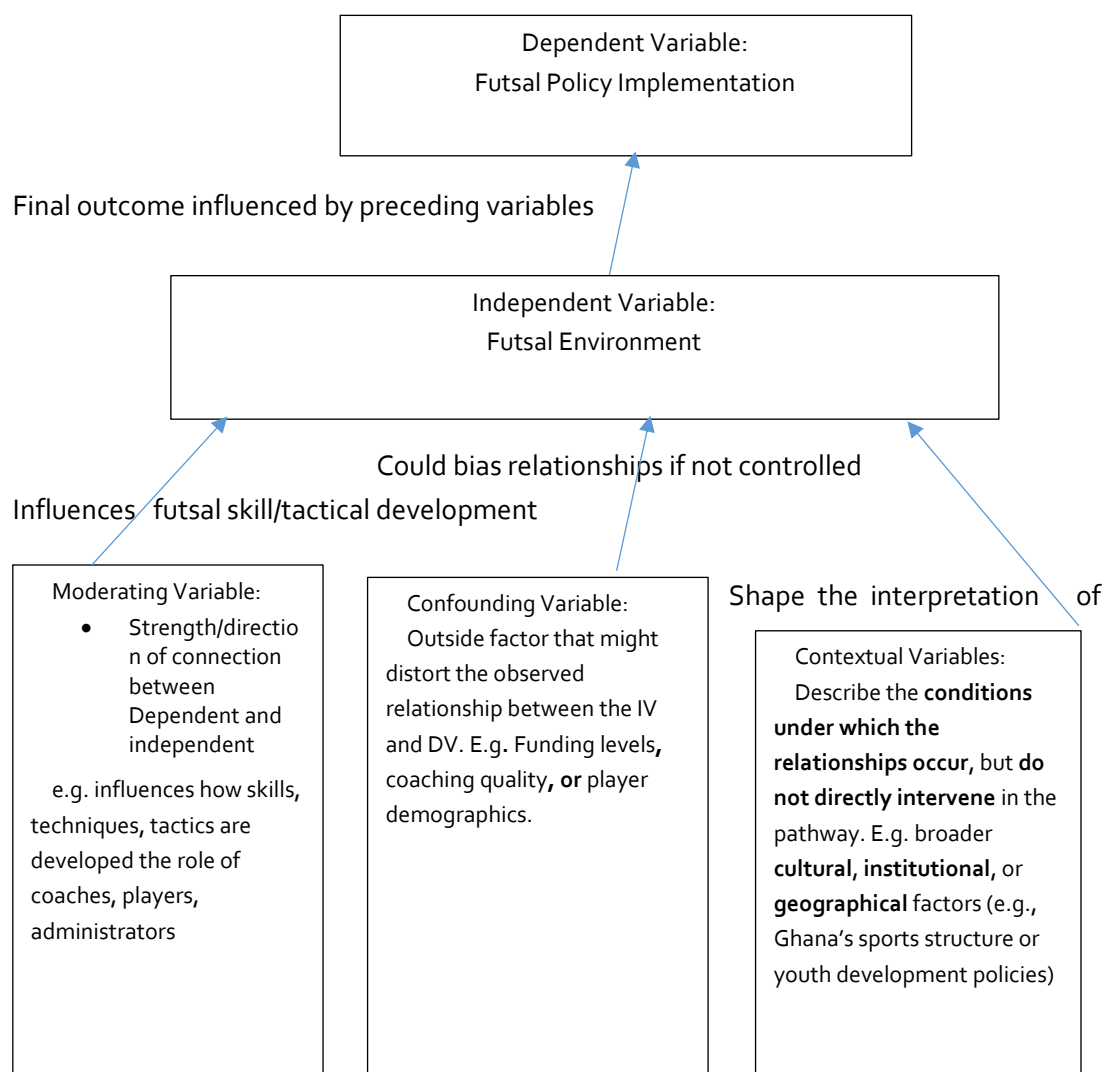
This explains how futsal can contribute to the developmental agenda of grassroots football players in Ghana by using four critical variables. These include the futsal court, Organisational integration, skill and tactical development, and stakeholder understanding. With this in mind, it is therefore point out that futsal may serve as a pivotal point for the larger system of youth football at the grassroots phase. The environment mentioned here consists of training facilities- thus the social setting in which futsal is played, and the

tangible assets (courts, equipment). How well futsal can be used as a developmental tool for young players is directly impacted by these elements of this environment (Castagna et al., 2009; Mensah & Adjei, 2023).

The effectiveness of futsal as a developmental tool is influenced by the opinions of stakeholders, including players, coaches, administrators, and legislators. For futsal to be accepted and incorporated into official football development programs, these groups must have positive attitudes and actively participate (Owusu & Baah, 2021; Amankwah, 2020). For instance, futsal's access to resources and official recognition may be restricted due to opposition from traditional football administrators. According to the framework, these elements have an impact on the main outcomes of interest, which are skill and tactical development. Players' technical skills and decision-making abilities are enhanced by futsal's distinctive features, which include a smaller playing area, a faster pace, and an emphasis on ball mastery (Travassos et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2020).

The nature of organisational integration ultimately demonstrates how futsal is incorporated into the current football management regimes, development plans, and competition rules. The most effective approach to inclusion necessitates a balance between national football policies and grassroots initiatives, which can impact future developments and policy advancements (GFA, 2022; CAF, 2023). By showing the interactions between the micro-level futsal environment and larger organisational and cultural systems, this conceptual model is consistent with Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While organisational integration reflects microsystem influences like national policies and cultural attitudes, stakeholder engagement represents the mesosystem that connects individual and organisational factors.

The nature and quality of this environment directly affect how effectively futsal can serve as a development avenue for young players (Castagna et al., 2009; Mensah & Adjei, 2023). Stakeholder perceptions are crucial for futsal's acceptance (Owusu & Baah, 2021; Amankwah, 2020), foster improved technical skills and decision-making abilities among players (Travassos et al., 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2020).



Methodology

This study investigated the role of futsal in grassroots football development in Ghana, focusing on how environmental and organizational factors influence skill acquisition and policy integration. Futsal, as a variant of football, is played on small courts, but has gained international attention as one effective tool for developing technical skills, spatial awareness, and decision-making among young players (Castagna et al., 2009; Travassos et al., 2017). Globally, organizations such as FIFA advocate for futsal's inclusion in grassroots football programs as part of holistic talent development strategies (FIFA, 2021). However, in Ghana and much of Africa, futsal remains an under-researched and under-utilized component of football development (Owusu & Baah, 2021; Mensah & Adjei, 2023). The Ghana Football Association (GFA) currently prioritizes traditional football development, neglecting the formal integration of futsal within national sports policies and programmes (GFA, 2022). This gap is critical because Ghana's infrastructural constraints and limited football facilities pose huge challenges for wider football participation, especially in urban areas where youth engagement in sport is essential for social

development (Amankwah, 2020; Maseko, 2019). This lack of official recognition and clear policy frameworks limits the game's great impact. This is because futsal uses a small playing area and fewer resources, which is a relatively important variable to nurture football talent at the grassroots level. Given the difficult association between environmental, social, and organisational sectors that influence grassroots football development, a qualitative research approach for this study is deemed suitable for an in-depth examination of stakeholder perspectives and experiences. This approach made it possible to examine how futsal's role in Ghana's football community is understood and accepted by players, coaches, administrators, and legislators (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

More so, qualitative approaches offer an easier way to examine systemic barriers and contextual dynamics that may be missed by quantitative surveys or experimental designs (Bryman, 2016).

To be able to bridge the current knowledge gap, the study offers evidence-based insights and guides the creation of strategic policies for incorporating futsal into Ghana's grassroots football agenda, making this research necessary and timely. It is worth noting that accepting futsal's developmental advantages and bringing local football practices in line with current global best practices suggested by organisations such as FIFA and the Confederation of African Football (CAF) requires a better insight into these dynamics (CAF, 2023; FIFA, 2021).

Research Philosophy

The study is based on a constructivist epistemology, which believes that knowledge is socially constructed through human activities and experiences rather than an objective reality that is just waiting to be discovered (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Constructivism has it that individuals create varied realities rather than a single truth by interpreting and making sense of the world in light of their cultural, social, and historical contexts (Crotty, 1998).

The exploratory nature of the study, which aims to understand how different stakeholders, such as players, coaches, administrators, and policymakers, use futsal in the area of Ghana's football community, is aligned with this philosophical position. The role of Futsal in the grassroots football development, organisational methods, and policy formation is affected by straight jacket thinking and meanings that stakeholders hold about the sport.

The study's ability to use constructivism offers varied viewpoints a critical priority, so as to find deep, crucial insights that quantitative methods might miss (Charmaz, 2006). The adoption of the constructivism encouraged the use of qualitative approaches that promote an open, adaptable inquiry process, which enabled the perspectives of participants and the surrounding context to affect the knowledge generated (Schwandt, 2000). In the Ghanaian environment, where futsal is new and not yet widely accepted by stakeholders who continuously negotiate the meanings and practices surrounding its development makes this philosophical foundation is essential.

Research Design

The study adopted an interpretive qualitative research design to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of participants toward futsal's role in grassroots football development in Ghana. This interpretive research highlights the understanding of subjective meanings and social realities made by individuals within a specified context as compared to positivist approaches that seek objective, generalizable truths (Schwandt, 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This design becomes suitable for investigating critical social situations such as sports development, where varied stakeholders interact within a complex environment influenced by cultural, organizational, and policy factors. While dealing with participants' experiences, the interpretive approach permits the researcher to unveil how futsal's environment, such as playing conditions, coaching styles, community support, and organizational structures, such as administrative structures and policy frameworks, shape skill acquisition and its integration into the larger football system. The use of this interpretive design agrees with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which conceptualizes human development as influenced by nested environmental systems interacting at different phases. This theoretical grounding emphasises that individual experiences cannot be understood separately, but can be investigated within their larger social and organizational domains. This means that the interpretive qualitative design provides the flexibility and the depth required to capture these levels that can have any influence on futsal development in Ghana.

Research Strategy

The study used Semi-structured interviews and focus groups as a method to gather rich, in-depth information about the operations of futsal in Ghana's grassroots football development. These techniques were adopted for the purposes of striking a balance between structure and flexibility, to enable participants to easily share their opinions, experiences, and perceptions while keeping the discussions in line with the objectives of the study (Kallio et al., 2016; Morgan, 1997). It is important to note that the important stakeholders, such as futsal coaches, players, football administrators, and legislators, could personally be engaged in semi-structured interviews. This approach gave me the energy to holistically examine each participant's viewpoint, ask clarifying and elaborating questions, and to unearth subtle insights regarding the futsal environment, skill development methods, and organisational changes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For administrators and policymakers, who might have strategic or delicate opinions that are difficult to express in a group context, individual interviews were used. The focus groups with groups of stakeholders, such as young players and coaches organised concurrently to get insight of the social interactions, shared experiences, and attitudes within the futsal domains. This group brought lively discussions that brought to light participants' similarities and differences, illuminating the ways that social and cultural elements impact futsal development and its participation (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The group environment

also made it possible to observe how pressure, peer and conversational patterns affect attitudes and actions. In the attempt to capture the various viewpoints and data types, the bringing together of these two techniques, which is sometimes referred to as methodological triangulation, helped improve the validity and richness of the data (Flick, 2018). The approach also allows for a thorough grasp of futsal's important role in Ghanaian grassroots football, which is in line with the interpretive qualitative design that supports the study.

Instrument

The study adopted a semi-structured interview guide to gather rich and pertinent data that was in line with the objective of the study. With a particular focus on the futsal environment, stakeholder perceptions, skill and tactical development, and organisational integration within Ghanaian grassroots football, the guide's open-ended questions were intended to examine important components of the conceptual framework. The purpose of the open-ended questions was to encourage participants to give thorough, nuanced answers and to let new themes naturally emerge during conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2016).

The interview guide used some prompts such as:

- How would you characterise the futsal playing environment in your community right now?
- How do you think futsal contributes to the development of football skills?
- Could you explain any difficulties integrating futsal into official football programs?
- In what ways do organisational structures or policies facilitate or impede the growth of futsal?

The futsal coach and a young player were selected from the target population to participate in a pilot study of the interview guide before the primary data collection. Through pilot testing, the questions' flow, relevance, and clarity were checked to make sure they were suitable for the participants' culture. Little alterations were made as a result of pilot feedback, e.g., simplifying some questions and including probes to get more thorough answers (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). A focus group discussion protocol was created in addition to the interview guide to ease participatory dialogues between coaches and players. To encourage conversation about common experiences, difficulties, and opportunities in futsal participation, the study's protocol included general questions and follow-up prompts. A greater understanding of social dynamics in futsal environments was made possible by the use of the group setting to observe consensus and a variety of perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In the end, the tools were essential for gathering detailed qualitative data that captures the complexity of futsal's contribution to Ghana's grassroots football development.

Population

The study's population was made up of the key players directly involved in or influencing the growth of grassroots football and futsal in Ghana. Among them were young futsal players between the ages of 7 and 23, who serve as the main recipients of grassroots futsal

initiatives and important contributors to skill development (Mensah & Adjei, 2023). Coaches of futsal and traditional football were essential in helping young players develop their skills and strategies through training, coaching, and support (Castagna et al., 2009). Administrators of football clubs are in charge of overseeing team operations, allocating resources, and implementing programs at the local level (Owusu & Baah, 2021). Officials from the Ghana Football Association (GFA) and other associated sports organisations, who oversee organisational structures, funding, and policy that affect the development of football and futsal integration (GFA, 2022). All these organisations allow for a thorough investigation of the organisational and environmental elements influencing futsal's growth because they represent varied viewpoints on the sports in the Ghanaian football community.

Sampling Procedure and Method

The study specifically adopted a purposive sampling technique in selecting participants with rich knowledge, expertise, and insight into futsal's role in the development of football. a purposive sampling technique. This was done because the objective of qualitative research is to obtain a deeper understanding of cases with a wealth of information rather than statistical generalisability (Patton, 2015). This approach made sure that people who were directly involved in and knowledgeable about grassroots football and futsal were included. Snowball sampling was added to the process to improve recruitment and get richer voices. The original participants directed me to other informed people in their networks to gain access to such stakeholders who might otherwise be difficult to locate or contact (Noy, 2008).

Five geographically and culturally diverse regions of Ghana were covered by the study, which took place between May and November 2024: Wasa Akropong in the Western Region, Sunyani in the Bono Region, Accra in the Greater Accra Region, Kumasi in the Ashanti Region, and Techiman in the Bono East Region. These locations were chosen with care to represent different degrees of football culture, infrastructure, and futsal awareness. In total, the study conducted 30 individual semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, ranging from players, coaches, administrators, and officials. In addition, three focus group discussions were held, each made up of 6–8 participants, primarily youth players and coaches. This sample size aligns with qualitative research norms for achieving data saturation and thematic richness in exploratory studies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Eventually, all interviews were done in English, which made transcription, translation, and thematic analysis much simpler. Potential obstacles were removed, and the possibility of meaning distortion during data processing was decreased for the language's consistency.

Trustworthiness

The study's ability to produce rich and trustworthy results from qualitative research requires that I ensure the study's credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I tried to

improve the study's validity, reliability, and transferability by using several techniques that are in line with accepted qualitative research standards. The study's triangulation ability was accomplished due to my effort to gather information from varied sources, including focus groups, individual interviews, and pertinent organisational documents. Again, an attempt to confirm the study's results from various forms of evidence helped methodological triangulation to limit the chances of bias and improved the depth and scope of knowledge (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018). Participants were involved, where transcripts of interviews and initial thematic interpretations were shared with participants as part of the member checking methods. Participants were also allowed to verify the correctness of their answers and provide clarifications or new information (Birt et al., 2016). To give comprehensive contextual information about the Ghanaian futsal environment, participant experiences, and organisational settings, and clear description was used. The study improves transferability by carefully outlining the study's background and participant viewpoints, enabling readers to assess how well the findings apply to other comparable settings. (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All research activities, including data collection, coding choices, thematic development, and reflexive notes, were recorded in an audit trail. By enabling external reviewers or future researchers to track and assess the study's rigour, keeping an open record of methodological decisions promotes the reliability and confirmability of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When combined, these tactics offered a thorough framework to guarantee the reliability and integrity of the study's qualitative investigation into futsal's contribution to Ghana's grassroots football development.

Discussions on Data Analysis and Findings

This study adopted a well-known qualitative technique for finding, examining, and summarising patterns or themes in data, thus thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method also works especially well for exploratory research aiming to understand important, context-dependent social situations, such as the development of grassroots football through futsal. Four main themes that supported the study's conceptual framework were found by the thematic analysis: The Physical and Social Environment of Futsal and its impact on Skill Development. The Participants emphasised how futsal promoted speedy decision-making, technical skill, and teamwork because of its smaller playing area, quicker tempo, and social interactions. The particular demands of the game that help in the development of agility and spatial awareness were highlighted by the coaches (Castagna et al., 2009; Travassos et al., 2017).

Stakeholder Perceptions and Attitudes toward Futsal

Stakeholders expressed mixed views, with youth players and coaches generally positive about futsal's benefits, while some administrators questioned its legitimacy relative to traditional football. Attitudinal differences influenced support and resource allocation for futsal programs.

Challenges in Integrating Futsal within Ghana's Football Structures
Organizational barriers such as limited funding, infrastructural deficits, and policy neglect hindered the formal incorporation of futsal into national football development pathways. Participants reported fragmented coordination between futsal initiatives and established football bodies (Owusu & Baah, 2021). Policy Gaps and Opportunities for Organizational Support

Findings revealed the absence of clear futsal development policies and strategies within the Ghana Football Association and related bodies. However, respondents identified opportunities for policy reform, stakeholder collaboration, and capacity building to better integrate futsal as a grassroots development tool.

Data Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process:

This data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, which includes: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and focus group notes to immerse in the content and gain a holistic understanding. Generating initial codes manually by labeling meaningful data segments relevant to the research questions and conceptual framework components. Searching for themes by collating codes into potential themes that capture significant patterns across the dataset. Reviewing themes to refine and ensure coherence within themes and distinctness between themes. Defining and naming themes to clarify the scope and focus of each theme and how it relates to the research objectives. Producing the report by weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts to present a compelling account of the findings.

To enhance rigour and efficiency, initial manual coding was complemented by the use of NVivo 13 software. NVivo supported systematic data organization, retrieval, and comparison of coded segments across interviews and focus groups (Welsh, 2010). The software's capabilities facilitated cross-case analysis and pattern recognition while maintaining transparency and auditability of coding decisions (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

Findings

Discussion of the Analysis

The findings of this study emphasize the growing significance of futsal as a developmental tool in Ghana's football community, especially at the grassroots level. 85% of participants acknowledged that futsal could play a crucial role in improving ball control, quick decision-making, and spatial awareness, basic skills that are fundamental in today's football skill acquisition. These elements place futsal as an efficient environment for unearthing young talent, particularly in facility-constrained environments.

Analysing coaching and officiating point of view, 78% of coaches and referees recognized futsal's tool to boost player cognitive ability and tactical development. This discourse aligns with a global study that sees futsal as a significant and intensive activity that encourages many touches, creativity, and structured team play, characteristics that can be transferred easily to the 11-a-side game. Moreover, 64% of administrators cited futsal's cost-

effectiveness and simpler facility requirements as practical advantages, particularly in urban or semi-urban communities where space and infrastructure are limited.

Apart from these positive signals, the study also uncovered critical barriers. Almost 70% of respondents mentioned constraints such as a lack of dedicated futsal facilities, limited policy integration, and low public awareness of futsal's developmental potential. These institutional and systemic gaps hinder the formalization and mainstreaming of futsal within Ghana's broader grassroots sports development framework.

Overall, the analysis reveals a dual narrative.

At the microsystem level, the physical and social environment of futsal creates conditions highly conducive to developing technical and tactical football skills. One youth coach said:

"Yes, futsal forces players to think fast, control the ball in tight spaces, and make quick decisions. These skills are transferable to the bigger fields." (Coach, Accra)

This supports prior studies emphasizing futsal's role in improving spatial awareness and rapid decision-making (Castagna et al., 2009; Travassos et al., 2017). The enclosed, limited futsal court demands frequent interaction to foster teamwork, as noted by a young player, who said:

"In fact, you have less space, so you learn to pass and move quickly. This helps me to stay sharp." (Youth player, Kumasi)

These findings align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory by illustrating how the microsystem, the immediate futsal environment, directly influences player development outcomes.

However, at the mesosystem and exosystem levels, the study reveals tensions and disconnects between various stakeholders, coaches, administrators, and policymakers that hinder futsal's broader operationalization. An administrator commented:

"As a matter of fact, futsal is still considered as 'just a game for fun' by many decision-makers. Funding and policy support go mostly to traditional football." (Football club administrator, Accra)

Such attitudes reflect a hierarchical bias favouring traditional football, which leads to resource allocation favoring full-pitch programs despite futsal's proven developmental benefits. This institutional struggle thwarts the efforts to integrate futsal within formal football structures, confirming concerns raised by (Owusu and Baah (2021).

From the macrosystem perspective, the absence of coherent policies or strategic frameworks within the Ghana Football Association to promote futsal further undermines its potential. One GFA official said:

"We recognize futsal's benefits, but it's not yet integrated into our official development plans. We need clear guidelines and partnerships to move forward." (GFA official, Accra).

Main Themes and Sub-Themes Summary

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes / Evidence
Technical Skill Development	- Improved decision-making - Close control & spatial awareness	"Futsal forces players to think fast, control the ball in tight spaces, and make quick decisions." (Coach, Accra)
Teamwork and Tactical Growth	- Increased communication - Rapid transitions	"You have less space, so you learn to pass and move quickly." (Youth player, Kumasi)
Stakeholder Attitudes & Perceptions	- Futsal seen as recreational - Lack of formal recognition	"Futsal is still considered 'just a game for fun' by many decision-makers." (Administrator, Accra)
Institutional Gaps and Policy Absence	- No GFA framework for futsal - Poor funding and integration	"We recognize futsal's benefits, but it's not yet integrated into our official development plans." (GFA official, Accra)
Ecological Systems Influence	- Microsystem: environment enhances skill - Mesosystem: stakeholder disconnects	Findings show development depends on alignment between the immediate play environment and broader support structures.
Call for Policy Reform	- Strategic inclusion of futsal - Multi-level coordination required	Emphasis on formal structures, funding, and partnerships to harness futsal's grassroots potential.

Regional Comparative Perspective

When compared to neighbouring countries such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal, Ghana's experience reflects similar systemic gaps, but also unique opportunities. In Nigeria, for instance, futsal has gained modest traction through university leagues and private academies, but in Ghana, it is yet to be formally embedded in national football strategy (Ossai, 2025). Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal have shown sporadic but promising efforts at using futsal in urban football development zones, especially in Abidjan and Dakar, often supported by international NGOs and private sponsors.

However, unlike Ghana, these countries benefit from urban pilot programs or international collaborations that partly compensate for weak institutional support. Ghana's comparative advantage lies in its strong grassroots football culture, which, if aligned with a coordinated futsal policy, could serve as a regional model for inclusive, skill-based football development (Okon, etal 2022).

Gender and Age Group Considerations

Although the majority of respondents and participants in this study were male youth players aged between 14 and 19, there were notable variations in perception across age groups. Younger players (14–16) showed greater enthusiasm for futsal's fun and fast-paced style, while older players (17–19) appreciated its strategic value for career development. Some youth coaches also noted that younger age groups adapted more quickly to futsal's demands, suggesting developmental advantages when introduced early.

Gender representation, however, remained limited, with very few female players involved in the selected study sites. This reflects broader gender disparities in access to organized sports in Ghana. Nonetheless, where female participation did occur (notably in Accra and Sunyani), futsal was seen as a safer, more accessible environment for skill development due to its enclosed and less physically confrontational setting. This suggests untapped potential for gender-inclusive futsal programs, especially in urban centers and schools.

This policy gap represents a critical barrier pushing futsal's full contribution to football grassroots development at the national level. These critical interactions between environmental conditions, stakeholder perceptions, and organizational contexts indicate the difficulty in futsal's development pathways in Ghana. The study challenges the prevailing paradigm that prioritizes traditional football exclusively, and instead of championing the integration of a diverse approach that can see futsal as a supportive and strategic grassroots intervention for Ghanaian football players. In sum, the study provides compelling evidence that futsal can serve as a strategic asset for grassroots football development in Ghana. However, realizing this potential requires multi-level alignment, from microsystem engagement to macrosystem policy. Comparatively, Ghana mirrors many of the challenges faced across West Africa, but also holds potential leadership in pioneering futsal inclusion through community-based innovation and gender-sensitive programming. A concerted policy shift by the GFA and allied bodies could transform futsal from a peripheral activity into a cornerstone of national football development.

Comparative Analysis among Ghana, Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt

The findings from Ghana resonate with several trends observed in Nigeria, Morocco, and Egypt, three countries referenced in CAF policy documents and regional futsal literature. Comparing Nigeria and Ghana, Nigeria faces institutional neglect of futsal, with limited policy support and infrastructure. However, private academies and university leagues have begun integrating futsal into training routines. An interaction coach in a study by (Homsombat, 2025) cited futsal's impact on tactical intelligence and speed of play, findings that align closely with those in Ghana. Yet, Nigeria shows more grassroots-level experimentation than formal federation integration. On the other hand, Morocco presents a structured and strategic futsal model, supported by the Royal Moroccan Football Federation. The country has invested in dedicated futsal facilities, coaching development, and national league structures. According to CAF reports (CAF, 2022), this has translated into international competitiveness and a pipeline for talent development. Ghana, by comparison, lacks the institutional infrastructure and policy coherence that underpin

Morocco's success. Comparing Egypt, to Morocco, has recognized futsal as a complementary development tool within its national football strategy. There is more robust federation support, integration with youth academies, and participation in CAF-sanctioned futsal tournaments. Egyptian officials have acknowledged futsal's role in fostering "tight-space intelligence" in players, corroborating the findings in Ghana, but with more macro-level policy backing and tournament exposure.

The findings and cross-country comparisons suggest several implications for broader West African football strategies, such as Policy Integration. Countries such as Ghana and Nigeria must formalize futsal within national football development frameworks, learning from Morocco and Egypt's policy-led approaches. This includes creating national futsal leagues, which Ghana has started on a pilot basis, certification programmes for futsal coaches, and structured pathways from school to professional level. Again, investment in infrastructure and training. West African leaders should prioritize affordable, small-sided futsal courts in communities and integrate futsal into schools and communities. This would lower entry barriers and improve player access. More so, a regional knowledge exchange, where there is value in cross-national learning. Ghana and Nigeria, for instance, could benefit from technical partnerships or benchmarking visits to Morocco and Egypt to observe best practices in futsal development. Furthermore, consider gender-inclusive strategies. Futsal's controlled environment makes it ideal for increasing female participation in football. West African sports associations can use futsal to strategically address gender disparities in sports access, especially in schools. Finally, using CAF as a coordinating body. The Confederation of African Football (CAF) should actively promote futsal through regional programmes, grants, and competitions, creating incentives for national associations to invest in this format.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study concludes that futsal represents a promising yet underutilized avenue for advancing grassroots football development in Ghana. The findings demonstrate that futsal's unique physical and social environment offers significant benefits for developing critical technical and tactical skills among youth players, benefits that align with global evidence and experiences in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, and Nigeria.

However, the realization of this potential is currently constrained by limited institutional recognition, fragmented organizational support, and mixed stakeholder perceptions. These factors continue to marginalize futsal within national football development agendas. To unlock futsal's full developmental value, there must be strong alignment between grassroots practices and formal organizational policies, particularly within the Ghana Football Association and allied bodies.

This alignment requires more than token recognition; it demands strategic integration of futsal into national football frameworks, sustained stakeholder engagement, adequate

funding, and the creation of formal pathways that link futsal participation with higher levels of football training and competition.

Initially, this study was subject to certain limitations. The sample was geographically concentrated in five regions of Ghana (Accra, Kumasi, Sunyani, Techiman, and Wasa Akropong), which may limit the national representativeness of the findings. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the study, while offering rich insights, means that the conclusions are not statistically generalizable across all regions or player populations. Future research would benefit from mixed-methods approaches and broader regional samples to enhance empirical robustness.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a timely and important contribution to the discourse on grassroots football development in West Africa. Employing Ecological Systems Theory highlights the multi-level interactions, ranging from microsystem environments to macro-level policy gaps that shape futsal's role in player development.

For regional sports policymakers and organizations such as the Confederation of African Football (CAF), these findings underscore the urgency of mainstreaming futsal into continental football strategies. CAF's support in promoting futsal competitions, technical development programs, and funding initiatives could serve as a catalyst for national associations like the GFA to take more decisive action.

In the end, creating an atmosphere where futsal is encouraged and developed alongside traditional football can improve Ghana's and West Africa's ability to produce players who are technically skilled and tactically astute. Such a tactical change has the potential to improve regional competitiveness in international football as well as increase grassroots involvement.

Recommendations

Practical Recommendations

As a grassroots development tool, futsal matches should be actively incorporated into Ghanaian school sports, grassroots clubs, and community sports programs in addition to traditional football training. In order to improve Ghanaian youth's ball control, quick decision-making, and spatial awareness, all of which are essential for modern football, this integrated approach can incorporate the high-quality skills of futsal (Castagna et al., 2009; Travassos et al., 2017).

It is imperative that futsal-specific coaching clinics and certification programs be established nationwide in order to provide coaches with specialised knowledge and instructional strategies related to the particular requirements of futsal. Enhancing coaching quality will maximise player outcomes and improve technical instruction (Ribeiro et al., 2020).

To support cross-national futsal development frameworks, there should also be strategic engagement with the West African Football Union (WAFU) and the Confederation of African Football (CAF). To promote uniformity in development standards among nations, such partnerships might involve co-hosting regional futsal workshops, coaching exchanges, and youth competitions.

Managerial Recommendations

The Ghana Football Association (GFA), in collaboration with local sports authorities, community stakeholders, and schools, should adopt futsal into the football development plan. This could serve as a modern replacement for the Colts' football regime. Furthermore, GFA should extend the piloted futsal leagues and competitions being played only in Greater Accra to all the regions with clear developmental pathways. To enhance national relevance, collaborative research or pilot development projects could be launched jointly with the Nigerian Football Federation or the Ivorian Football Federation, both of which have experience in alternative football formats. This approach can help benchmark Ghana's futsal system within the broader sub-Saharan football context. Another critical requirement is reliable funding sources to support the construction and maintenance of futsal courts and equipment provision. Local governments, corporate sponsors, and regional funding agencies such as ECOWAS Sports Fund or West African Development Bank should be encouraged to back infrastructure and programme development. Such support will be crucial to addressing present infrastructural deficits and enabling inclusive participation across the country (Owusu & Baah, 2021).

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future studies should be conducted to evaluate the sustained effects of futsal as a grassroots football development tool on player skill development, psychological resilience, and career trajectories within Ghana. This research would provide vital evidence to inform policy and practice.
2. Comparative research across West African countries should be conducted to assess Ghana's futsal development progress relative to trends in countries like Nigeria or Côte d'Ivoire. This would help identify best practices and promote cross-national learning for regional integration and policy alignment.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the conduct and reporting of this research.

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