Players' Understanding of Talent Identification in Early Specialisation Youth Football

Abstract

Despite research illustrating the socially constructed and subjective nature of talent identification in football, little research has explored how players make sense of 'being talented' and how this shapes their identity experiences. Five football academy players aged 11 years participated in five focus group interviews. Thematic and interactional qualitative analyses were performed to examine the content and function of participants' talk. Findings described how players constructed being scouted as authentically choosing, or being chosen by, a club, which worked to protect or enhance participants' talented identities and self-worth. Talent was regarded as dynamic, but players' perceived expectation to continuously improve implied a potentially problematic view of development as linear. Evidence of early socialisation into the academy culture indicated that while effort was seen as virtuous, it was used to judge performance in comparison to peers, suggesting that effort had become a rhetorical device that reflected conformity, rather than player motivation.

Key words: academy, coaching, identity, interaction, soccer, scouting, youth sport.

Word count: 7482

Introduction

The ambition to create more and better home-grown players in English professional football1[1] has led to a key change in policy for the youth player talent development system. Players now train more frequently, for longer durations, and often from a younger age[2]. The substantial investment by professional clubs into coaching, competition, education and welfare provision means there is increasing pressure to find the 'right' players to recruit into academy programmes[3]. As a consequence, talent identification – "the process of recognising current participants with the potential to become elite players"[4] – remains a pertinent focus for applied practitioners. This process has potential consequences for those players involved – raised aspirations, strengthened self-belief and increased dedication to the sport[5], however little is known about the impact of being recognised as talented on the development of players' self and identity. To address this, authors have advocated the need for research that seeks to understand key stakeholders' *experiences* of talent identification, including those of gifted players themselves[6].

In football, research to date has predominantly focused on the experiences of full-time academy players, aged 16 to 19 years[7]. During this 'investment stage' of athletic development[8], having 'innate' talent was perceived as not enough – players understood that they were expected at all times to demonstrate the professional ideals espoused by coaches, such as having the "right attitude"[9]. By accepting these values and behaving in a way that conformed to expectations, Cushion and Jones[10] illustrated that players could gain a status among coaches as 'favourites' perceived as more likely to secure a professional playing contract.

Researchers have also begun to explore the impact of involvement in the investment stage of elite football on players' identity. In a quantitative study exploring academy players' levels of athletic identity (the degree to which an individual identifies with the role of being

an athlete[11]), the extent to which playing football established players' self-worth varied between clubs, suggesting that the academy context contributes to the development of identity[12]. Similarly, Mills et al.[13] indicated that players perceived that academy coaches seldom took an interest in their life outside of sport, suggesting that an exclusive footballing identity was reinforced through players' interaction with staff.

In one of the few studies that included the experiences of talented football players who train part-time (and are likely to still be in full-time education), Christensen and Sørensen[14] highlighted how players (aged 15 to 19 years) struggled to balance the competing demands of school and sport. The perceived necessity to dedicate "100 percent" to football meant that players experienced a premature identity closure, in favour of sport. Research has shown that a strong athletic identity is associated with higher commitment and achievement in sport, but can also be problematic when coping with an injury or managing the transition out of sport. For example, Brown and Potrac[15] highlighted how academy players who had prioritised and invested heavily in their football identity from a young age, experienced feelings of loss, uncertainty and failure when rejected from professional football. Jones, Glintmeyer and McKenzie[16] have also recommended that coaches should help to develop athletes with multiple identities. However, currently there is a limited understanding of how players' athletic identities are developed and the associated impact that being labelled as talented may have.

Brown and Potrac's[17] retrospective study with players aged 16 to 19 who had been deselected from academy football at the point at which they would otherwise have been offered a professional playing contract, offers some insight into the development of footballing identities. Reflecting upon their initial academy experiences, players described how they enjoyed and gained self-esteem from being recognised as talented by peers, parents and especially by their coaches. Their early success meant that the importance of football in

their lives increased and they began to believe that they had the ability to become a professional player. However, following deselection, players lacked alternative identities to draw meaning from and struggled with the transition out of football. This research suggests that athletic identity was strengthened following talent identification; however the findings are limited by the retrospective study design. Additional exploration of how younger players make sense of the talent identification process is crucial to understanding if, how and when being labelled as talented shapes their identities. This knowledge may be utilised to identify appropriate points to intervene and provide support for players who are following this highly coveted, but notoriously difficult to achieve career.

To address this gap in the literature, this paper presents the first study to explore young players' understandings of talent identification, in the context of early specialisation stage football. Theoretically, this research is guided by Burkitt's understanding of the self as "created with other people in joint activities and through shared ideas"[18]. Burkitt neither succumbs to psychological individualism nor sociological determinism, instead proposing that identity comes into being through "dialogue as it is practiced by historical agents in their everyday worlds"[19]. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Burkitt's self encapsulates both embodied dispositions and socially-constructed meanings, brought into reality through performed everyday practices. In relation to understanding talent identification in football, it is therefore assumed that players have agency to construct and transform their identities, in accordance with their aims and values, but that this occurs through interaction and activities with others; at particular times, in particular spaces. This aligns with research that has previously highlighted the socially, culturally and historically situated nature of the talent identification process[20]. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen described talent as "a label of approval we place on traits that have a positive value in the particular context in which we live"[21], meaning what counts as a meaningful performance is determined by cultural norms

and evaluated by key social actors, or experts, in the field. In football, Christensen[22]

expanded on this further by illustrating how national team coaches were assigned power to

make judgements about players based on their practical sense or 'feel', acquired through past

experiences of scouting. Moreover, talent was constructed to reflect coaches' subjective

'taste' or preferences for players who demonstrated less measurable qualities, such as

willingness to learn, which functioned to legitimise coaches' selection or rejection decisions;

suggesting that talent identification is contested, subjective and constrained by the social-

cultural context.

Burkitt's approach was deemed to be appropriate for this study, as it aligns with the

axiological position that children are competent social actors and that understanding how

children interpret and make sense of their worlds in their own right is essential – particularly

as the voices of children have historically been marginalised in youth sport, including

football[23]. Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to understand how English youth

academy football players in the early specialisation stage of development interpret 'being

talented' and how this shapes their identity experiences.

Methods

Participants

Five children registered to an English professional football club Category 2[i] academy

took part in this research. Participants were boys, aged 11 years ($M = 11.2$) and were of Black

British African ($n = 1$), White British ($n = 3$) and White British/Black Caribbean ($n = 1$)

ethnicity. The group played together in an under-11 age group squad and knew each other

prior to taking part in the study. Participants had between six months and four years of

experience of playing academy level football ($M = 2.1$). This sample was chosen as players

shared some experience of academy football that they could reflect upon together. In line

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[i] Academies are independently audited and categorised from one to four, with one being the highest rating, based on factors including training facilities, coaching programmes and welfare provision (Elite Player Performance Plan, 2010).

with the foundation phase of the English youth football performance pathway (representing the early specialisation stage[24]), the players were provided with up to eight hours of evening coaching and weekend competitive matches per week. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee. With the permission of the academy director, all parents of players in the under-11 squad were contacted to ask if their son would like to be involved in the research. Parents who expressed an interest on behalf of their child ($n = 6$) then attended a meeting where the purpose of the research, the format of the interviews, and issues of confidentiality and withdrawal were explained. Five participants then attended a meeting to clarify why players' opinions were important, what would happen in the interviews, how confidentiality would be achieved (reinforcing in particular that what they discussed would not be shared with parents or coaches) and how findings would be used. All participants and their parents gave informed consent.

Data Collection

Players participated in five 31 to 47 minute semi-structured focus group interviews ($M = 38$ minutes), held on consecutive weeks following a Saturday morning training session. A focus group interviewing technique was selected as this method can help to address power relations by increasing the ratio of participants to the researcher and encouraging children to discuss topics using their shared language[25]. Focus groups may also be preferred by children who value the sharing and support available from participating alongside their peers, and are appropriate for working with members of a pre-established group[26]. It has been recommended that for young children (aged 6 to 11 years), four to six participants are optimal for focus group research and that in sessions that exceed 45 minutes children's responses may decline[27]. Five sessions were planned as it was agreed by the researcher and academy staff that this was not too onerous a commitment for participants, yet was sufficient time for the facilitator to develop rapport with the group and for players to describe their experiences in

detail. Except for one session missed by two players due to poor weather conditions, all participants attended all interviews.

Interviews were held in a staff room at the academy ground, which had comfortable chairs that could be arranged in a circle to encourage sharing and interaction. The room was accessible to coaches but conversations could not be overheard. Holding interviews at the academy ground meant that players were in a familiar setting and in a space that they had more ownership over than the researcher, helping to reduce the power imbalance within the interviews[28]. The facilitator was experienced in interviewing and working with young people in roles which required respecting, communicating with, listening to and understanding young people; skills that have been identified as useful for encouraging open and interactive dialogue with children[29].

During interviews a combination of open questions and interactive activities were used to prompt discussion. For example, individual free writing/drawing (see Morgan et al.'s pen and paper exercise technique[30]) was used to explore participants' likes and dislikes about being an academy player. As a group, players ranked a list of reasons for playing football (e.g., to play a sport I enjoy, to become a professional footballer) from the most to least important (diamond ranking exercise[31]). A balance was struck between individual and group tasks to explore both personal experiences and co-constructed meanings. The role of the facilitator was to ask questions to prompt further description (such as what players thought or how they felt), to check meaning or to encourage others to share their experiences. Interviews focused upon exploring what it was like to play football at an academy, what a typical week for players entailed and the meaning players attached to their football experiences. It was emphasised throughout that there were no right or wrong answers to questions and that participants were the experts on the research topic.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and all verbal talk transcribed. Pseudonyms were chosen for each participant and for any person or organisation referred to by name in the interviews to provide anonymity. A two-stage analysis was performed to explore the content of the interviews alongside the action orientated nature of participants' talk. Firstly, transcripts were analysed thematically, using Burkitt's understanding of the self as an interpretive frame[32]. After listening several times to the audio recordings, and re-reading the transcripts, sections of text that were relevant to players' understandings of talent and their identity experiences were coded. Similar codes were collated to produce initial themes (see Appendix A for an example analysis extract). Secondly, the interaction between participants was examined to understand how players co-constructed meaning and made sense of their experience of academy football together. A focus on the function and performativity of talk (how things were said, rather than what were said), allowed how the influence of the group context on the production of the data to be explored. Interactional features, such as how accounts were corroborated, challenged, emphasised or downplayed were noted[33], and their functions interpreted by comparing their use across transcripts and considering the specific instance at which they occurred.

Analyses were undertaken sequentially, moving from the personal to the social[34], to foreground an empathetic understanding of the content of players' experiential accounts. In this sense, ontologically it was assumed that players' identities were shaped, but not constituted by language, and epistemologically, that a richer understanding of participants' meaning and experience could be achieved by using more than one analytical frame[35]. Interpretations from the interactional analysis were used to define and refine the initial themes[36] and findings then constructed as an integrated synthesis. Interview extracts were selected to encapsulate key themes, which illustrated personal accounts, group interaction, or

both where appropriate.

Findings and Discussion

Three key findings pertaining to players' understanding of the talent identification process in football are described and discussed. The findings presented are not claimed to represent a true version of reality and it is acknowledged that other readings of the data are possible and may offer alternative interpretations of participants' experiences.

Being Scouted as an Authentic Choice

At different times during the interviews, players described either having choice, or lacking agency, in the talent identification process. Being scouted and joining an academy was constructed as a personal choice based on players' experience of being at the club and their interaction with coaches and peers. Furthermore, having more than one academy to choose from was used to establish players' decision as authentic.

Alex: I had nine academies to choose from

Seb: Same here I had-

Alex: I had a lot to choose from

Seb: Newtown, United,

Alex: Coz me dad had been taking me to a couple and I picked Southfield

Seb: Westville, I didn't like Westville coz none of them were like interactive with you, didn't want to be your friend

Alex: I know that Noah told me that he went to Greenside and they didn't pass to him, they didn't involve him, they left him out and then he went back to his Sunday league team and got scouted by Southfield

Seb: No he didn't, he had the choice of Southfield before he went to Greenside, he chose Greenside and then after he chose Southfield

In this extract, Seb worked to align with Alex's account of having multiple clubs to

choose from (most probably exaggerated to strengthen his claim[37]), suggesting that this was the players' preferred narrative of the talent identification process. Seb elaborated his claim that he chose which club to play for by outlining his experience of being excluded at another academy. However, when Alex built upon this by describing how Noah (who was absent from this session) was not scouted following a similar negative experience, Seb challenged this, by emphasising Noah's agency in his decision. This acted to further support his own account of deciding not to join an academy where he did not feel welcomed. Constructing being scouted as a personal choice enabled players to position themselves as possessing an ability that was recognised and valued by multiple experts. As Alex remarked; "you wouldn't be here if you're not really talented".

In contrast, earlier in the interview Seb described his route into the academy as having been 'sent' from one training environment to another, implying that his agency in the process was limited.

Seb: This Southfield scout come along and said (to my dad) I'd like to see your lad at Southfield development centre and I was dead dead happy, even though my dad had told me to say that I was really really happy

Alex: Development centre?

Seb: What?

Alex: You said development centre

Seb: Yeah they sent me to the development centre first

Author: Hmm I think quite a lot of players do that

Alex: No I got sent straight here

By repeating the part of Seb's story that he had been invited to attend a development centre, Alex prompted Seb to explain his route to the academy. Upon confirming that he had attended a development centre prior to joining the academy, the interview facilitator aligned

with Seb by generalising that "quite a lot of players do that", which normalised the development centre as a typical experience for players. However, Alex's subsequent disagreement alluded to an implicit hierarchy between development centres and academies. In both accounts, players worked to downplay their agency in the decision. For Seb, this provided a rationale for why he played at a development centre first, whereas for Alex, being "sent straight" to the academy functioned to position himself as a recognisable talent – a commodity even – based on other's perception of his ability, rather than a personal choice.

This finding suggests that being scouted was constructed by players as authentically choosing, or being chosen by, a club, which worked to protect or bolster participants' identities as potentially talented players. Grove, Fish and Eklund[38] have previously indicated that in adolescent team sport players, athletic identity can be fluid depending on the outcome of team selection, in order to protect or enhance self-worth. The present study extends this finding by showing how for younger players, footballing identities were presented in relation to a position on a team or programme. Players at this young age were already demonstrating an acknowledgement of a hierarchy within the youth football development system and shared understanding of talent as the public recognition of ability by experts; reflecting Burkitt's assertion that identity is formed within a particular social and historical context[39]. In addition, players' awareness that they embodied something of value to clubs through their football ability, suggests that the seeds of the professionalization and commodification of youth football[40] were entwined in their understanding of the talent identification process, and in how they negotiated their identity in the interviews.

Also notable in this extract was Seb's account that his father had told him "to be really really happy" upon learning that he was invited to attend a development centre. This implies that being selected to play at an academy was reinforced as desirable by his parent, but that there was a need to interact with scouts in the right way during the talent

identification process. This alludes to the performative nature of 'scouting' and 'being scouted' – following Goffman's notion of impression management[41] – and warrants further study.

"Feeling Special": Developing a Footballing Identity

Upon joining an academy, players began to develop an identity not just as footballers but as footballers with the potential to be successful. When asked to think about what football means to them, players described their experiences of football as "being part of an elite team", "being talented" and "feeling special":

Author:	Tell me about that James, what do you mean by being special?
Alex:	You're different to everyone else
James:	Umm well, being special means that you're doing something that not every kid can do I mean-
Alex:	Once in a lifetime opportunity
James:	We're- yeah once in a lifetime opportunity because not a lot of people play for Southfield, well a lot of people do, but I mean not every kid can play for Southfield and they don't get to travel around the world like we do so we should be fortunate of what we're doing.

This extract illustrates how players co-constructed their academy experience as important and unique, by drawing comparisons to peers outside of the system. The collaborative sequence[42], where Alex and James completed and built upon each other's sentences (e.g., "once in a lifetime opportunity"), indicates a shared understanding of the experience of feeling special. The status of the academy in relation to grassroots football was often referred to during interviews, as the players positioned themselves as more skilled and with more knowledge of football in comparison to their non-academy playing school friends. The difference between the levels of football was emphasised, with non-academy football

generalised as "rubbish", and where "you win 10 nil but learn nothing". James' account that "we *should* be fortunate" also implies that he understands that others, most likely his parents and/or coaches, expect him to view playing at the academy as a privilege. Social comparison – where individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their ability in the absence of objective measures[43] – can provide a source of competence information. In this context, non-academy peers provided a target for downward social comparison, which helped to construct players' identities as competent footballers. This aligns with research from the educational domain which has indicated that pupils aged 9 to 11 years feel more academically competent when they contrast themselves to peers perceived as less successful, even when cognitive ability is controlled for[44].

The sense of feeling special was also reflected in players' view of academies as places for learning how to become a professional footballer. Players all shared the aspiration to follow a career in football and interpreted that the academy coaches would help them to achieve their goal.

Seb: At the academy right now they're teaching you what they're basically near enough teaching you on the actual pitch for the actual Southfield game. As they're teaching you, you're knowing what the Southfield players are doing so you're learning what they're doing. And you're getting better and better and in the end you could get better than some of them coz you've already learnt what they're still learning now.

This view of academies was contributing to players' developing identities as mini-footballers and players who were in preparation for the adult game. The upward social comparison to full-time professional players constructed players' identities not just as competent footballers, but as players with the potential to develop further. Sharing the same kit and training space as the first team may also have facilitated the academy players' comparisons. This finding

suggests that a strong athletic identity is being developed in the early specialising stage of football, which supports the work of Brown and Potrac[45] and is a new finding as there has been little research with younger player populations before.

Moreover, players' footballing identity appeared to be shaped through their interaction with important others; in particular; their coaches (through teaching them how to become professionals) and their parents. The significance of these social relationships was reflected in players' descriptions of the academy as feeling "like home" or "like a big family". Players described that they felt able to make their parents feel proud of them through football, when they played well, or if they scored a goal; increasing the importance of success in football to their relationship with their parents: "you want to try more and more to be a better player because you know you're making your mum and dad proud" (Seb). This supports Clarke, Harwood and Cushion's[46] finding that a shared experience of academy football can enhance the sense of closeness in parent-child relationships, although the present study suggests that players' performance on the pitch may influence this outcome.

Fragile Self: Talent is unfixed but you have to improve to stay here

Although players were developing strong footballing identities, their status as *talented* footballers - good enough to be in the academy - was fragile. They recognised that their place in the academy squad was not secure and was contingent on them continually meeting expected performance standards that were judged by coaches. As Alex acknowledged, "you need to develop through your ages and you need to get better and better". As Burkitt noted, the self is "constituted by the activities it performs"[47]; in this case, demonstrating improvement was required to maintain players' identity as talented. Individualised targets were set by coaches which players understood had to be met within a timeframe, or else their academy status would be at risk:

Noah: We have these tasks at Southfield and you have to try and reach em in

a certain amount of time or umm- or then you- if you can't do it in an

amount of time then they might release you.

To avoid the potentially negative experience of being released (or deselected), and a likely

loss of athletic identity, players understood that they had to practice and "put the effort in" to

improve.

Seb: You have to be committed to be actually a footballer and like- don't be

               like any others just playing on your Xbox or PS3 or anything like that

James: Yeah

Seb: Get up early, be committed, get ready for ya, for-

Noah: Practice

Seb: a for a hard day's training, practice like Noah says and-

James: Get back then you can rest, for like a day

In this collaborative sequence, players co-constructed that it was their individual

responsibility to improve by adopting the work ethic expected of a footballer; the reference to

"a hard day's training" mirroring that of full-time professional players. Players with the right

'attitude', 'character' 'determination' or 'commitment' or 'work ethic' have consistently been

identified by coaches as those most likely to succeed in football[48]. Full-time academy players

themselves have reported an emphasis on taking responsibility and dedication as a strength of

academy environments[49]. However, Cushion and Jones[50] have illustrated how academy

players were socialised into embodying the values and expectations of their club through

legitimised, disciplinary practices such as repetition of the daily training routine and

activities. In the present study, the players' presentation of their commitment to hard work

and practice suggests that they were becoming socialised into the academy culture at a much

younger age, and before players attended an academy on a full-time basis.

In this sense, players' accounts of the importance of self-regulation, effort and

practice to developing their talent indicated that the academy fostered players' incremental beliefs about ability beyond potentially maladaptive ideas of talent as fixed and unchangeable[51]. However, rather than signifying a positive, task-involving motivational climate[52], players' reports reflected a disciplinary, reproductive culture – as the ultimate punishment for not improving was deselection.

Seb: You know it's important to put the effort in so you always do it

Alex: Coz like my dad always says, you never know who's watching

The players experienced what Foucault termed *examination[53]*, where academy life was characterised by continual assessment and where players were expected to meet performance targets in given timeframes. In reality, these activities served as a surveillance technique to promote self-regulatory behaviours in players that would improve their productivity on the pitch[54]: the quote above indicating that this practice was reinforced by parents too. Progression to the next age group squad (following the annual appraisal meeting where a decision was made regarding whether players would be retained or released) was consequently viewed as evidence that players had improved:

Author: How are you feeling about the prospect of moving up next year?

Tim: It's gonna feel good, coz like at least you'll know- because ya still gonna be here, you'll know that ya getting better-

James: And improving

Tim: -because you're still in the academy

Therefore, although players agreed that their talent was dynamic and could be improved through effort (reflecting an incremental view of ability), the ever present possibility of release meant that their identity as a talented player was at risk and constantly (re)evaluated by coaches. This mirrors Sæther & Mehus'[55] finding that male Norwegian football players aged 14-16 tended to perceive talent as innate, but also as something that

could be lost if their rate of development slowed. The authors suggested that this may be in part due to competition for resources that players experienced. Developing this further, the competition for places within the academy squad and the pressure to continually improve meant that players in this study also used effort as a measure to compare themselves to others. This *normalising judgement*[56] established what was deemed as exemplary behaviour; for example, players criticised teammates who did not attend the additional *optional* training:

Alex:	It's like today's a fine example. We've all travelled a long way and it's snow. Then there's people who live on the doorstep who ain't turned up
Seb:	People that live in like Southfield that haven't turned up at all and we've-
Alex:	You've got to have the will to do it.
Seb:	And we've all travelled and if you look outside there's not that much snow here anyway so they could have come here easily but they just can't be bothered and just wanna stay in bed all day. But instead I did actually come, to make the effort, to actually try to get better at football.

In this extract, 'effort' and 'will' were constructed as semi-static qualities that players either possessed or lacked, that could be measured through attendance at training, and which offered a normative competency reference that enabled participants to position themselves as model academy players who were willing to make extra effort to improve. Strikingly, this finding is similar to Miller et al.'s[57] research with academy coaches regarding the role of psychological skills in the talent identification process. Although these participants viewed talent as unstable and trainable, psychological characteristics were constructed as semi-permanent and deterministic of a player's likelihood of becoming a professional player.

Summary

Using Burkitt's interpretation of the self as constituted though activities with others within a particular social and historical context[58], this research suggests that in the early specialising stage of football development, young players' identities were already being shaped by the professionalised and objectifying culture of elite football. In various ways, players positioned themselves as possessing something of value to clubs and the personal characteristics of model players, at times reproducing the expectations of full-time professional players. Recognising how the self is performed through everyday practices[59], players' identities as talented were presented via social comparisons to first team players and peers, both in and outside of the academy, and by demonstrating the effort and commitment seen as necessary to improve, through exemplary behaviours such as attending optional training. Reflecting players' agency in constructing their identities[60], at different occasions during the interviews, players positioned talent as a static or dynamic quality. Being scouted was viewed retrospectively as confirmation of players' ability, recognised by experts, whereas talent was seen as unfixed when players orientated to the future. These findings illustrate how talent is fluid and contextually dependent[61].

Constructing talent as dynamic meant that players understood that they could improve through effort, a perspective that is widely accepted to be associated with positive motivational outcomes[62]. However, the expectation to improve in accordance with arbitrary timescales (linked to the league administrative deadlines for player registration), reinforced a view of development as linear and relatively unproblematic – potentially undermining the understanding of talent as trainable. Players may therefore lack resources to make sense of non-linear progression or development 'slumps' they may encounter.

Moreover, the threat of release meant that to safeguard their identity as footballers with the potential to be successful, players understood that they needed to demonstrate effort

in order to continually improve and meet increasingly higher performance standards. While effort was seen as necessary for progression (indicative of a task-orientated motivational climate[63]), it was also something players used to compare themselves to their peers and to judge their performance (aligned more to a peer-created ego-orientated climate[64]) – suggesting that 'effort' had instead become a rhetorical device. Importantly, this finding offers an alternative interpretation of previous studies that have demonstrated that elite youth football players report to invest more effort into tasks than non-elite players[65], as effort may represent conformity, rather than motivation.

In considering youth development more broadly, these findings suggest that selection to an academy programme may be considered a 'crystallising experience'[66], in which young athletes are able to connect meaning to their entry into the talent field that is then powerful in shaping the development of their future selves. However, the early socialisation into the academy culture questions the extent to which young players are able to challenge cultural expectations for self-regulated behaviour, or develop non-football identities; both of which may protect against the possible negative outcomes associated with identity foreclosure[67].

Limitations

The data presented offers some insight into how players experienced and co-constructed playing at an elite youth football academy. However, there are limitations to this study which should be considered when interpreting the findings. Despite strategies to maximise contributions from all participants in the interviews, including asking players sometimes to share their ideas in turn (with the option to pass) and asking quieter participants questions directly, the conversations were at times still dominated by certain voices, indicating the presence of power relations between players. As participants were recruited to the research as academy players, and the interviews took place within the academy setting, this may have privileged the voices of those who had attended the academy the longest and

reinforced institutional talk as the dominant narrative[68]. Although all players in the under-11 squad were invited to take part, only five volunteered, suggesting that the self-selected sample may overly represent players keen to comply with coach requests. Players' accounts may therefore have reproduced academy norms and practices more so than if participants had been interviewed in a different location, or had included different squad members. Players' talk was also guided by their interaction with the interviewer. For example, the extract in which the facilitator aligns with one player's account of attending a development centre, legitimised this as a route into the academy and prompted another player to position himself as talented *enough* to move straight to an academy. This illustrates how a focus on the action-orientation of talk can also be used to provide a more critical view of data produced in interview settings[69].

Conclusions and Applied Implications

This research has presented elite specialisation stage players' understandings of talent identification in football, which to the authors' knowledge is the first study of its kind. Importantly, this study adds to the talent identification in football literature by describing how players aged 11 years constructed their identity as footballers with the potential to be successful, through interaction with others and comparisons to peers. Players described authentically choosing, or being chosen by, a club, which worked to protect or bolster participants' identities as recognisably talented players. Understanding academies as places for learning how to become a professional footballer meant that players felt "special" and were committed to the goal of following a career in football. However, the perceived expectation to continually develop and improve - with a potential loss of their *talented* identity if they failed to do so - meant that players' sense of self was fragile; contingent on demonstrating increasing higher performance standards as judged by coaches.

The findings of this exploratory study raise some questions that may be worthy of

further research and possible consideration by those working in football talent identification programmes:

1. Could the potential vulnerability to players' identity if talent is viewed as dynamic, but development is held to be linear, be mitigated by separating players' individual targets and feedback from the deadlines for player registration?

2. Despite coaches' efforts to create positive motivational environments by setting personalised targets and providing feedback, strategies to limit normative peer comparisons may be necessary. Could coaches help players to unpick what effort means to stop it from becoming rhetorical or used as means of comparison?

3. To what extent may young players struggle to maintain their footballing identity if deselected? The hierarchy between grassroots and academy football meant players were limiting the alternatives spaces where they could still feel competent and enjoy playing. Support and encouragement to find appropriate exit routes may be required to ensure players do not withdraw from the sport entirely.

4. The findings support Jones et al.'s recommendation that coaches should help athletes to develop multiple identities[70]. However, does the perceived expectation to demonstrate commitment and effort indicate that players' ability to construct multiple, equally valued identities may be incommensurate with the cultural norms of academies?

Notes

1. Allison, "FA's Coach Education Programme", 2.
[2]. Premier League, "Elite Player Performance Plan".
[3]. Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382.

[4]. Williams and Reilly, "Talent Identification in Soccer" 658.

[5]. Brown and Potrac, "Identity Disruption in Football", 143-159; and Christensen and Sørensen, "Sport or School?", 1-18.

[6]. Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382; Miller, Cronin and Baker, "Talent Identification Practices", 642-662; and Tranckle and Cushion, "Rethinking Giftedness and Talent", 265-282.

[7]. E.g., Brown and Potrac, "Identity Disruption in Football", 143-159; Cushion and Jones, "Symbolic Violence in Youth Soccer", 142-161; Cushion and Jones, "Socialisation in Professional Football", 276-298; Mills et al., "Development of Academy Players", 1593-1604; and Mitchell et al., "Athletic Identity in Youth Football", 1294-1299.

[8]. Côté, "Influence of the Family", 395-417.

[9]. Cushion and Jones, "Symbolic Violence in Youth Soccer", 155.

[10]. See note 9 above.

[11]. Brewer, Van Raalte and Linder, "Athletic Identity", 237-254.

[12]. Mitchell et al., "Athletic Identity in Youth Football", 1294-1299.

[13]. Mills et al., "Development of Academy Players", 1593-1604.

[14]. Christensen and Sørensen, "Sport or School?", 11.

[15]. Brown and Potrac, "Identity Disruption in Football", 143-159.

[16]. Jones, Glintmeyer and McKenzie, "Slim Bodies, Eating Disorders", 377-391.

[17]. See note 15 above.

[18]. Burkitt, *Social Selves,* 4.

[19]. Burkitt, *Social Selves,* 192.

[20]. E.g., Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382; and Miller, Cronin and Baker, "Talent Identification Practices", 642-662.

[21]. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen, *Talented Teenagers,* 23.

[22]. Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382.

[23]. Piggott, "Listening to Young People", 415-433; and Pitchford et al., "Children in Football", 43-60.

[24]. See note 8 above.

[25]. Eder and Fingerson, "Interviewing Children and Adolescents", 181-202.

[26]. Hill, "Children's Voices", 69-89.

[27]. Gibson, "Focus Groups with Children", 473-483; and Morgan et al., "Hearing Children's Voices", 5-20.

[28]. Ryba, "Researching Children in Sport", 334-348.

[29]. Gibson, "Focus Groups with Children", 473-483.

[30]. Morgan et al., "Hearing Children's Voices", 5-20.

[31]. O'Kane, "Developing Participatory Techniques", 136-159.

[32]. Burkitt, *Social Selves.*

[33]. Wilkinson, "Focus Groups Health Research", 329-348; and Wilkinson, "Analysing Interaction", 50-62.

[34]. Clarke, Caddick and Frost, "Pluralistic Data Analysis", 368-381.

[35]. Clarke et al., "Analytical Pluralism", 182-201.

[36]. Braun and Clarke, "Thematic Analysis", 77-101.

[37]. Drew, "Exaggeration in Interaction", 917-938.

[38]. Grove, Fish and Eklund, "Changes in Athletic Identity", 75-81.

[39]. See note 32 above.

[40]. Roderick, *A Labour of Love?*

[41]. Goffman, *Presentation of Self.*

[42]. Lerner, "Collaborative Turn Sequences", 225-256.

[43]. Festinger, "Social Comparison Processes", 117-140.

[44]. Boissicat et al., "Perceived Scholastic Competence", 603-614.

[45]. See note 15 above.

[46]. Clarke, Harwood and Cushion, "Parent-child Relationship", 125-143.

[47]. Burkitt, *Social Selves,* 54.

[48]. Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382; Christensen and Sørensen, "Sport or School?", 1-18; Cushion and Jones, "Symbolic Violence in Youth Soccer", 142-161; Cushion and Jones,

"Socialisation in Professional Football"; Miller, Cronin and Baker, "Talent Identification Practices", 642-662; and Mills et al., "Development of Academy Players", 1593-1604.

[49]. See note 13 above.

[50]. Cushion and Jones, "Symbolic Violence in Youth Soccer", 142-161; and Cushion and Jones, "Socialisation in Professional Football".

[51]. Dweck, *Mindset.*

[52]. Ames, "Achievement Goals", 161-176.

[53]. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.*

[54]. cf. Manley, Palmer & Roderick, 2012

[55]. Sæther and Mehus, "Not Born With Talent", 1-8.

[56]. See note 53 above.

[57]. Miller, Cronin and Baker, "Talent Identification Practices", 642-662.

[58]. See note 32 above.

[59]. Burkitt, *Social Selves*; see also Goffman, *Presentation of Self.*

[60]. See note 32 above.

[61]. cf. Christensen, "An Eye for Talent", 365-382; and Miller, Cronin and Baker, "Talent Identification Practices", 642-662.

[62]. E.g., Dweck, *Mindset*.

[63]. Ames, "Achievement Goals", 161-176; and Nicholls, *The Competitive Ethos*.

[64]. Vazou, Ntoumanis and Duda, "Peer Motivational Climate", 497-516.

[65]. E.g., Toering et al., "Self-regulation and Performance", 1509-1517.

[66]. Tranckle and Cushion, "Rethinking Giftedness and Talent", 265-282.

[67]. See note 15 above.

[68]. Maybin, *Children's Voices.*

[69]. Potter and Hepburn, "Qualitative Interviews in Psychology", 281-307.

[70]. See note 16 above.

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