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Do youth soccer academies provide developmental experiences that prepare players for life beyond soccer? A retrospective account in the United Kingdom.

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Abstract:

The professionalisation of soccer academies has intensified, with youth players exposed to demanding performance focused environments in pursuit of a career in the professional game. Yet, academies are also under increasing pressure to show that they develop players who can function in life beyond soccer. Therefore, this study explored the retrospective views of 13 ex-elite UK youth academy soccer players on whether their time within the academy provided developmental experiences that prepared them for life beyond soccer. We interviewed seven players who successfully progressed into professional contracts and six who did not. Players were recruited from two different academies to explore the developmental outcomes they associated with academy involvement and to unpick how those outcomes were achieved. Our findings showed that, promisingly, time in the academy provided both contracted and non-contracted players with transferable life skills as well as open educational and vocational doors – resulting in the majority of players leaving the environment being ‘(more) ready’ for life. However, these outcomes are not ‘automatic’ and were highly dependent on the interaction between three developmental contextual themes; i) what was demanded by the academy context, ii) what was encouraged within the academy context, and iii) the quality of interpersonal relationships. Beyond this, players’ attitudes, histories and wider socio-contextual influences were important in shaping (future) outcomes. With an eye on providing worthwhile experiences for all youth athletes involved, these findings provide insight into how academy contexts can simultaneously promote performance alongside positive developmental outcomes.

Keywords: elite youth soccer, , Positive Youth Development, life skills, dual career, Talent identification and development system outcomes

Introduction

Sporting organisations are increasingly attempting to systematically identify and develop youth athletic talent into the sporting superstars of tomorrow, often via Talent Identification and Development Systems (TIDS; Rongen et al., 2018). However, TIDS have been critiqued for their limited efficacy (e.g., Güllich, 2014; Güllich & Cobley, 2017), and the limits of how many athletes can attain elite status (Bailey & Collins, 2013). As such, the moral justification and healthiness of entering youths into very intensive training environments has increasingly been questioned (e.g., Bergeron et al., 2015; Sabato et al., 2016). Perhaps as a result, there is a growing call for elite youth sport contexts to promote healthy performance and positive personal development (e.g., Mathorne et al., 2020; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). Indeed, advocating a holistic ecological approach and focusing specifically on athletic talent development environments (ATDEs), Henriksen and Stambulova (2017) pose that successful environments are not only good at nurturing athletes to become successful elite senior athletes, but should also take a whole-person approach and develop athletes' competencies and skills that allow them to meet the challenges they face both in sport and other spheres of their life. Such an approach would also ensure youth athletes have requisite skills to be successful after the inevitable (and for many early) exit from sport (e.g., Bergeron et al., 2015; Grey-Thompson, 2017).

In the UK elite youth academy soccer is one of the most popular TIDS. In 2012, the Premier League and Football leagues introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP; Premier League, 2011), with the aim to increase the number of 'home-grown' players in the league. As part of this initiative the provision and environment of all soccer academies is audited and categorised with a rating of 1 to 4 – 1 referring to the optimal or highest development model. The EPPP focused on enhancing coaching quality and increasing contact time (Tears et al., 2018). At the same time a greater focus on positive, whole-person, holistic development was also explicitly emphasised as soccer academies need to cater for "*all aspects of a player's technical, athletic, educational and social development*" to produce "*fully rounded individuals... with the life skills to be fully integrated and responsible members of society*" (EPPP; Premier League, 2011, p.72). However, recent studies describe UK soccer academy contexts as still heavily performance focused, dominated by a masculine and authoritarian culture (Nesti & Sulley, 2014), offering limited opportunity to negotiate an identity away from soccer (Champ et al., 2020). These

findings question academies' ability to achieve the EPPP aims of developing 'the whole person' and provide players with the skills and competencies to be prepared to deal with life (in) and beyond the game. Yet, to date, limited research has explored players' experiences of soccer academies and the developmental outcomes beyond soccer.

Taking a whole person approach (Wylleman et al, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2013) acknowledges that players not only develop and face challenges within the athletic domain, but also within the psycho-social and educational-vocational domains. As such there are likely a multitude of developmental outcomes that contribute to a players' ability and sense of preparedness to deal with life beyond soccer. There are two particular bodies of literature that are worth reviewing in more detail here. First, in terms of educational development, dual career research, which explores whether and how athletes can combine a pursuit for performance sport with studies/vocational training (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), offers important insights. Those athletes that successfully balance their dual career pursuits have been shown to have better transition experiences out of sport and feel better prepared for life after sport (e.g. Park et al., 2013). Research has highlighted that successful management of a dual career depends on both the individual athletes' attitude towards wanting to make things work (Aquilina, 2013) as well as the support and flexibility offered by the sport/club context, coaches, parents and friends and the academic institution (e.g., Pink et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2015). Yet, in soccer academies some of these conditions may not be present, questioning whether they can effectively support players in their educational development. Indeed, research has shown that despite concurrent engagement in education generally being a given in soccer academy contexts, combining sport and school is perceived as stressful and has been associated with lower examination results, mental breakdown and players dropping out of school (Christensen & Sörensen, 2009). Furthermore, particularly in the UK, many players perceive demonstrating academic interest or ability as threatening their prospects of becoming a professional player (Platts & Smith, 2009), reflect negatively on education (Platts & Smith, 2018) and often side-line their academic abilities in favour of pursuing their soccer dream (McGillivray et al., 2005). As a result, so far research has shown that many feel ill-prepared for the transition away from football (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Champ et al., 2020).

Second, in term of social and life skill development, sport-specific literature has long been

concerned with the question as to whether sport can offer a developmental context that prepares young people for life beyond sport, often via a focus on Positive Youth Development (PYD; Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009). PYD focuses on how organised activities, including sport, can create conditions that foster “*the development of personal skills or assets including cognitive, social, emotional and intellectual qualities necessary for youth to become successfully functioning members of society*” (Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009, p.1). PYD is often framed as an underpinning for life skill development (e.g. Gould & Carson, 2008). The potential of youth sport activities to enable PYD and/or life skill development has been well established (e.g., Camiré et al., 2012; Holt et al., 2017). That said, questions have been raised as to whether the present conditions within soccer academies contexts can be conducive to similar PYD/lifeskills associated benefits (e.g. Cope et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2017). One core reason being, soccer academies may struggle to “*reconcile developmental objectives within progressively professionalized climates where intense competition and privatization are becoming the norm*” (Camiré & Santos, 2019, p. 31).

Although not soccer specific, promising evidence supporting the potential of TIDS to facilitate PYD and life skill development has been shown in contexts of sprint kayak, canoe and athletics (high level or organisation, high levels of commitment, time/energy management skills and a strong work ethic; Henriksen, 2010); youth tennis (organisation and communication skills; Jones & Lavalee, 2009); talented wrestlers (enhanced confidence, work ethic, a sense of personal empowerment, interpersonal skills; Pierce et al., 2016); high performance youth swimmers and gymnasts (increased confidence, persistence and teamwork; Strachan & Davies, 2015); and youth biathletes (ability to look after and manage oneself, independence, work ethic, ability to perform under pressure; Jørgensen et al. 2020). Furthermore, despite being deselected from the pathway talented cricketers and rugby players also indicated to have gained valuable skills for life (confidence, determination, time management, effective communication and goal setting, social awareness and maturity; Williams & Macnamara, 2020). However, in these prior studies the type and level of PYD and life skill development varied between athletes and contexts; resonating with the notion that positive outcomes are neither generic nor automatic consequences of involvement (Coakley, 2016; Coalter, 2013). Several explanations are offered for this divergence in experiences and outcomes including: (1) the impact of what athletes ‘brought to the table’ (i.e., dispositions, attitudes,

history; Jones & Lavalee, 2009; Pierce et al., 2016); (2) interpersonal factors, such as the availability of caring role models (e.g. Petitpas et al., 2005) and the quality of coach-athlete relationships (Camiré et al., 2019; Storm et al., 2014); and (3) contextual program design features (Strachan & Davies, 2015; Bean & Forneris, 2019), with particular attention being paid to ‘intentionality’ or the extent to which PYD and life skill development is deliberately targeted (Bean et al., 2018).

While existing studies highlight how sport contexts can facilitate both dual career pursuits and PYD and life-skill development, five shortcomings exist in the literature that require attention. A first shortcoming is that few studies have focused on elite academy youth soccer, one of the most popular and intensive forms of athlete development. Second, as developmental outcomes are driven by interactions between the athlete and context (Holt et al., 2017; Rongen et al., 2018), there is a need to explore ‘what the outcomes are outcomes of’ by incorporating a focus on context and program features (e.g., Harris & Witt, 2015; Pink et al., 2015). Third, if outcomes do result from such interactions, it is important to address the role athletes play in their own development (Larson & Tran, 2014; Harris & Witt, 2015; Jørgensen et al., 2020). The voice of players at the centre of soccer academy programmes seems particularly underrepresented (Piggott, 2010; Pritchford et al., 2004). Equally, and relevant given the focus on ‘preparing all athletes for life beyond soccer’, it is necessary to move beyond notions of ‘survivorship in a system’ and explore the voices of players who did not progress to professional status (Williams & MacNamara, 2020). At the same time, players that did progress to professional status should not be excluded, as the aim of successful TID systems would be to provide all athletes with these skills. Finally, human development can only be fully understood when examined over an extended period of time (Bengoeachea & Johnson, 2001) as consequences of early experiences may only become apparent in later life (Elder, 1998). As such, to understand the developmental experiences and outcomes (i.e. in terms of preparedness for life beyond sport) associated with academy involvement requires an ‘over-time’ perspective. On this basis, the purpose of this study was to explore the retrospective views of both ‘successful’ and ‘non-successful’ ex-elite UK youth academy soccer players on whether their time within the academy provided developmental experiences that prepared them for life beyond soccer.

Methods

Methodology and philosophical underpinnings

Working within the Critical Realist paradigm, we adopted a realist ontology with an interpretivist epistemology (Bhaskar, 1998; Easton, 2010). Critical Realism (CR) is particularly suited to establishing causal explanations (McEvoy & Richards, 2003), although reality is seen as less the product of 'cause-effect' patterns as of a complex open system where outcomes are generated (or not) through multiple interacting mechanisms and the context (Benton & Craig, 2010). Critical realists are interested in understanding how particular outcomes are triggered by the interaction between mechanisms and contexts (i.e. context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) configurations: mechanism + context = outcome; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). As youth soccer academies are complex, dynamic, open systems where athletes interact with coaches, program culture and practices, outcomes are likely to vary across individuals, context, and context-individual interactions (Lerner, 2004). While establishing outcomes remains important, outcomes achieved could differ as much as the mechanisms and contexts (i.e., 'the whom, what and where'). As such, this study supplements the focus on understanding outcomes emerging from academy involvement (causal description), with examining how such outcomes are brought about and how context modifies those (i.e., seeking causal explanations - why does something work for whom and when and under what conditions - CMO configurations).

An exploratory qualitative approach (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), utilising individual semi-structured interviews, is compatible with a CR approach as it enables an in-depth, contextualised understanding (Easton, 2010; Wiltshire, 2018) and so was adopted as the methodology. Interviews facilitated exploration of what players perceived to be the outcomes of academy involvement and how and why these outcomes were brought about and differed across individuals, contexts and time (Harrist & Witt, 2015). A focus on explanation also lends itself to in-depth study of a relatively small number of individuals or a few cases (Maxwell, 2012). Different contexts (i.e., cases) can provide meaningful insight into mechanisms as they allow not only looking for similarities but also differences between situations that can offer explanations as to why outcomes emerge (Sayer, 1984). Therefore, this study deliberately focused on two cases to generate both within-case and cross-case comparisons to assist the process of retroductive inference (i.e., establishing how particular mechanisms may be activated (or not) to drive outcomes depending on particular situational circumstances/aspects of the context, see analysis).

Sampling and Participants

The study focused on experiences and retrospective perspectives of both ‘successful’ (i.e., players who progressed to professional status) and ‘unsuccessful’ (i.e., non-professional status) ex-soccer academy players. Following ethical approval and informed consent, participants were purposefully recruited from two soccer academies (A and B), based on inclusion criteria of previous involvement within a soccer academy within the last 10 years for a minimum of three years. Academies (A & B) were selected through contacts of the research team, were from a similar geographical region within the UK, were both classified as Category 1 (deemed to represent the optimum development model; EPPP, 2011) academies and both linked to a Premier League Football Club. In total, the sample comprised 13 male ex-academy players; 11 players had English nationality and two players had Irish nationality who joined the academies towards the end of the youth development phase (U12-U16s). Nine were recruited through members of the two academies (i.e., coaches, education and welfare officers) and the remaining four were recruited through snowball sampling (McNamee, 2012).

Players were grouped as (i) successful ex-academy players from ‘academy A’, (n=4), (ii) unsuccessful ex-academy players from academy A (n=3), (iii) successful ex-academy players from ‘academy B’ (n=3), and (iv) unsuccessful ex-academy players from academy B (n=3). Two players had been in the youth development phase (12-16 years old) within academy B and moved to the academy A during their scholarship years (16-18 years old). Given the focus on how outcomes are produced in particular contexts, under certain sets of circumstances, within two different academy contexts sampling sought to achieve maximum variation regarding circumstances (i.e., years of involvement, degree of eventual success and period of time that had lapsed since involvement). Full details of the sample are outlined in Table 1, all participants were given pseudonyms.

*****insert Table 1 here*****

Data Collection

An interview guide was developed based on existing literature (e.g., Rongen et al., 2014; Holt et al., 2017). The guide, following recommendations for the structured-stage method of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2016), consisted of three discrete sections; 1) building rapport, encouraging participants to discuss the overall topic and to speak openly about themselves (e.g., ‘How did

you get into soccer?’ ‘When/how did you enter the academy system’ ‘Tell me about your journey into and through the academy?’) 2) personal experiences and outcomes associated with academy involvement (e.g., ‘Can you tell me about your experiences at the academy? Can you tell me how you think being involved with the academy has impacted on your development?’). Follow-up questions were used to focus on how such outcomes were brought about (e.g., ‘How did you learn about this? How did this come about?’); 3) ‘cool down’, where participants summarised their views and were invited to add any further information. Throughout interviews, probes and prompts were used to enhance the richness and depth of contributions. These clarified responses, invited elaboration, elicited closer detail, while keeping the conversation on topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Probes (i) inquired about both positive and negative outcomes to ensure a balanced picture, (ii) explored relevancy of outcomes to participants’ lives in and outside of soccer, and (iii) moved beyond ‘generalised phrases’ (e.g., ‘becoming more mature’) to ensure concepts had detail and shared understanding. To ensure preparedness prior to interview, participants received a summary of the key questions. Both in-person interviews (n=5) and telephone or Skype interviews (n=8) were offered as a number of participants no longer lived in England. Skype interviews have been identified as appropriate when participants are geographically dispersed and when interview topics are deemed sensitive (Salmons, 2015). All interviews were digitally recorded and lasted between 50-100 minutes. In-person interviews lasted between 57-85 minutes, one Skype interview lasted 50 minutes and the others ranged between 71-100 minutes. These differences in interview length are likely reflective of both players’ personality and breadth of experiences to reflect upon. At times players seemed more comfortable discussing their experiences in a more anonymous matter over SKYPE.

Data analysis

In line with the study purposes, data-analysis focused on the CR notion of retroduction, a process of moving backward from empirical observations and lived experience to hypothesize about how the interactions between the underlying mechanisms and context can explain observed events (i.e. outcomes) (Wilson & McCormack, 2006). Therefore, five analytical steps outlined by Wynn & Williams (2012) were followed (see Table 2). Further, an abductive approach was undertaken (Easton, 2010; Lusted, 2018). This approach acknowledges that researchers have extensive familiarity with existing theories and have developed their study design and data analysis accordingly, while - simultaneously - remaining

explicitly open to awkward, inconvenient, and novel ideas that may help to inform theories about why things happen (i.e. explanation) (Lusted, 2018). Within CR the researcher is positioned as actively engaging in recursive, iterative, interpretive efforts to make sense and generate explanations. This aligns closely to Braun & Clarke's (2019) description of reflexive thematic analysis, wherein researchers work to generate themes (patterns of shared meaning) to answer the research question. As such, in analysing the data Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016)'s six stages were aligned to Wynn & Williams (2012) five steps for CR.

Data were analysed in two waves; the first wave analysed interviews with players from Academy A. As part of the first stage of thematic analysis, the lead author became immersed in the data by listening to the audio recordings; undertaking verbatim transcription; checking the transcripts against the audio recordings; reading and re-reading final transcripts; and making notes emerging from this process about research aims. In the second stage, initial codes were generated through open coding each interview transcript, whereby descriptive labels were attached to segments of text that were considered relevant to the research aims (i.e., step 1-3 Wynn & Williams, 2012; *explication* and *retroduction*; what are the outcomes associated with academy involvement and how are these brought about, which includes identifying elements of context and structure). Coding of each transcript was repeated twice and both semantic (i.e. descriptive) and latent (i.e., identifying underlying ideas or meanings/interpretive codes).

After two rounds of coding, stage three of thematic analysis consisted of grouping all codes into themes according to similarity and discussing the resulting thematic map among the research team. In line with the ontological and epistemological perspective taken, we focused on identifying contrasting, rather than consensus, patterns. Further, pursuing Wynn & Williams (2012)'s step three (*retroduction*) and five (*triangulation*), the team interrogated proposed explanations for how outcomes were achieved (i.e. context x mechanisms interactions) within Academy A. As such, themes did not emerge from the data, they were shaped by these interpretative efforts (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Stage four of the thematic analysis, aligned to Wynn & Williams's step four (*empirical corroboration*), involved reviewing each interview transcript against the codes, sub-themes and themes (including proposed explanatory themes: i.e. mechanism x context interactions captured in developmental contextual themes), going back between the transcripts and the initial thematic map, ensuring there was adequate support within the raw data for

each theme. This resulted in a ‘version 2’ thematic map.

At this point, a deductive analysis was carried out on the Academy B transcripts, with each of the transcripts mapped against the ‘version 2’ thematic map. While this second wave established similar themes to the first wave, further interpretive flexibility was inbuilt by allowing the generation of new themes as well as the adaptation of existing themes. The second data set, from Academy B, allowed for repeating Wynn & William (2012)’s step four (*the empirical corroboration*) and step 5 (*triangulation*) by ‘checking and challenging’ the explanatory power of the proposed mechanism x context interactions (i.e. the extent to which the proposed mechanisms were able to explain both similarities and differences in players’ experiences and outcomes within and across the two academies contexts). Finally, in stage 5 and 6 of thematic analysis, the final findings were summarised in a ‘version 3’ thematic map and the analytic narrative presented here. During this process, the names of themes and subthemes were identified.

Markers of quality

Given CR underpinnings, we propose the quality (adequacy), plausibility and utility of our explanations as the main criteria to judge the study against (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). Following Ronkainen & Wiltshire’s (2019) recommendations, we draw on Maxwell’s (2012, 2017) typology of validity to establish trust in, as well as the tools to decide on, the quality (i.e. empirical adequacy), plausibility and utility of our understandings.

In terms of utility, we invite the reader to consider how well the research account offers predictions for likely outcomes and can be used to guide practical actions in the real-world. Regarding empirical adequacy, descriptive validity (i.e., how factually accurate is the qualitative research account) was ensured through the recording and verbatim transcription of all interviews, with transcripts thoroughly checked for accuracy against these recordings. Second, to evidence interpretive validity (i.e., the extent to which the account accurately reflects the perceptions and experiences of participants), we foregrounded the voice of the participants and provide evidence of empirical corroboration, we prioritised including quotations throughout, with excerpts used for both illustrative and analytical purposes. With regards to plausibility, to demonstrate theoretical validity (i.e., do we provide coherent explanations of the events in the real-world and participants experiences of them), we position and interpret the findings in light of existing arguments (i.e., theory) having engaged in a comparative evaluation to arrive at a reasoned,

although provisional, judgement about how participants presented the way their academy seemed ‘to work’. We further enhanced the quality of our work by using two cases presenting different circumstances, so that our explanations of how things work could accommodate the role of context and complexity. Furthermore, peer debrief was conducted throughout the study through formal meetings where the research team acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018). As critical friends team members listened to the first author’s initial interpretations and proposed explanations, evolving to a critical dialogue between team members that gave voice to multiple interpretations. Such peer debriefing is not conducted to reach consensus but to increase reflexivity and challenge interpretations (Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019). In this study, these discussions helped explore and reflect on, multiple and alternative explanations, ultimately arriving at the most logically compelling explanation of the observed events within their specific contexts.

Here it is also important to acknowledge the collective role of our autobiographies, values and beliefs in describing, designing and interpreting the findings (Danemark et al., 1997). To acknowledge this, but especially accenting to the role of the interviewer in influencing interview data, we consciously outline them to help appreciate and evaluate the results in nuanced ways (Wynn & Williams, 2012). The first author, FR, collected the data for this study and lead on the analysis and writing up. As a psychologist with clinical training, her applied experience in working with talented student athletes and her experience of having been a dedicated (although not elite) athlete in her youth will have inevitably shaped her preconceptions and may have influenced both the initial framing, design and ultimately analysis of the study. Further, being a white adult female in her early thirties will likely have shaped her interactions with the male adolescent to young adult football players and what they were or were not willing to share. The collective experiences of the remainder of the research team will have contributed to the interpretation of the data and shaping of the results. KT has researched and coached within sporting talent development environments for approximately 15 years. Similarly, SC has conducted multi-disciplinary sport-science research and consultancy across and within multiple sport organisations over the last 15 years. JMcK has extensive expertise, both in research and consultancy, regarding behaviour change within sport, public health and education. He also has a wide range of experience in coaching

across academy settings with a focus on holistically developing players whilst simultaneously pursuing performance outcomes.

Results

Data analysis led to the development of a the final (version 3) thematic map (see Figure 1) consisting of themes describing (1) the developmental outcomes associated with academy involvement, and the (2) components of the developmental context that drove outcomes.

*****insert Figure1 here*****

Developmental outcomes: More versus less prepared for the ‘real’ world

The developmental outcomes players attributed to their time with the academy centred around a ‘*readiness*’ to enter the ‘real’ world. Players from academy A suggested academy involvement had provided them with a sense of ‘being ready’ for real life as their engagement meant they had ‘grown up fast’. Whilst highlighting ‘growing up’ is ultimately inevitable for everyone, their academy involvement taught them how to deal with the – at times harsh - reality of life ahead of their non-soccer academy involved age-group peers, rendering them more equipped. In contrast, only two players from academy B described growing up fast and neither expressed notions of ‘being ahead’, with two others explicitly discussing feeling less ready for the ‘real world’ compared to their age-group peers that were not involved in a soccer academy. The following sections describe ways in which a sense of readiness was related to the development of life skills and feeling either ahead or behind in terms of their (educational) career.

Ready because of life skills to ‘tackle the world’

Reflecting upon their time at the academy, and their lives since, players portrayed the academy as a vehicle for personal development in several areas. Daniel, said “*in soccer there are three different measures in which you learn a lot; about soccer, about yourself and about working with others*”.

Personal skills – Managing myself

All players discussed several ways in which their time at the academy had equipped them with skills to manage themselves effectively. Character development - an ability to cope with pressure, overcoming disappointment and being resilient - was something all players highlighted:

“So your character builds quite quickly and you build a bit of an outer shell. You might get beaten up one day [by losing a game, underperforming, having a bad session] but you then recover, you might get beaten up again and recover again, you kind of do get stronger in that

sense. You learn to deal with it. I think it helped me when I went for job interviews and things like that after, or when I was dealing with difficult people, in soccer and outside of soccer.”
(Craig)

A willingness to reflect on and learn from mistakes, or times when things did not go their way, was also highlighted. *“So in life, now, if I don’t get a job or something I see reasons why and I try and learn from that experience. So it’s helped me study myself and learn from it”* (Andy). The majority of players also reported gained confidence in terms of managing themselves by being disciplined, taking ownership, having a professional work ethic and high standards:

“...really gave us a really good work ethic and the professionalism that can be taken into any aspect of life. You do, you’ve got to be punctual, you’ve got to be on time, you’ve got to be dedicated, and do your job right, like the fact that you had to keep the changing room clean and stuff. I feel that are the basic principles of working life and I certainly still take a lot of things on board from 17, 18 year old in a soccer environment to where I am in my job now.” (James)

A drive to be the best was described as something inherent to being a soccer player, but also as a take-away some players connected to this professional work ethic: *“It makes you incredibly competitive, so when I went to Uni, I was like, it sounds a bit daft, but I wanted to be the best in the class and get the best grades, just like I had always wanted to be the best player”* (Charlie)

Working with others

As a result of academy involvement, all players felt they had developed their social skills. For example, a number of players reported a sense of confidence in meeting new people and making a good first impression both within formal and informal environments.

“It certainly helps you socially, you learn how to be social really so that helps you to develop, meeting new people and you can take that confidence into any walk of life really, when as you get older, it gives you that confidence to approach someone” (Mike)

Equally several players reported developing a greater understanding and respect for individual differences, and developing the ability to co-operate, compromise and work as a team.

“You improve your communication skills and how to deal with conflict as well, because you are used to other people’s opinion and you learn to deal with various people, but to deal with everybody in a different way. Learn to take on someone else’s opinion, analyse it, have your own opinion but not force it down on others” (Daniel).

Building on understanding cooperation, the majority of players spoke about the values of making time for others and *“treating people right and respecting each other”* (Paul). Yet, players also spoke about their ability to stand up for themselves, *“not take bullshit from people”* (Andy) as well as taking away a *“little bit more nastiness, you learn to look after yourself a bit more, look out for yourself and find out what is best for you because ultimately nobody else is going to look after me.”* (Tom)

From soccer skills to life skills

Players' accounts highlighted how skills were often originally acquired as psychological or psychosocial skills deemed useful or necessary as part of 'on-pitch development', and only later became a life skill. Daniel provides an example in relation to working with others:

"So it's like, if we played a different team that played a very different style of soccer, you have to analyse it in the first 10 minutes and then change our structure to match it. And that, that works across life. So where some people try and like, ram a square in a round hole, it doesn't work. They consistently try to do that without taking a step back. When I work in a team, I take a step back and analyse it, and then have an opinion."

All players evidenced that they had transferred what they had learned within the academy to other life areas, describing this process of transfer as *"happening fairly naturally"* (Craig), or *"because you subliminally learn, you know just because you've done it, because you were part of it"* (Nick). While described as effortless, players acknowledged transfer required time, as the value of attitudes, skills and behaviours often only became clear when the acquired skills were required or useful in a new domain.

"That was one of the things [coach] drummed into us that at the time we didn't understand the reasons why, we just thought he was being awkward, just like being on time for things, cleaning things, we'd just thought he was being awkward. And that's what I mean, as you get older and you start to like understand the reasons why, you appreciate it more" (James)

While all participants highlighted forms of personal development as an outcome, the amount of evidence and level of detail provided by academy A players was greater. Academy A players expressed that while they had learned a lot on the pitch, they probably learned even more off it. *"You had to develop as a player and I enjoyed that, but it was mainly off the field that I learned most things"* (Will).

Meanwhile, academy B players described 'off pitch' development as something that 'also' happened, on the side of the main drive for soccer development.

Ahead versus behind in terms of a career

Although six players initially progressed to a professional contract in soccer, only two players were still in the professional game at the time of the interview. Thus highlighting the importance of educational and vocational progression to ensure players are 'ready' for life after soccer. Compared to their non-soccer involved age group peers, players from both academies acknowledged a risk of 'being behind' in this area, but academy A player' accounts were interpreted as 'not really behind' or even 'ahead', whereas a number of academy B players discussed feeling 'behind'.

'I'm not really behind'

While their educational journey had taken longer compared to their ‘non academy’ peers, all academy A and some academy B players, were satisfied with their current careers. Their narratives were characterised by a notion of ‘keeping doors open’ and focused on how their academy involvement had either provided them with a career in soccer or had not hindered – and had often eased – the transition from life as a soccer player to ‘normal’ life.

“Obviously doing a college course when I was there helped. That meant that I could go, not straight into university, but straight onto a foundation degree. If I hadn’t done the college course, then I would have needed to do a BTEC (BTECs combine practical learning with subject and theory content, just like A-levels (Advanced level qualifications) these offer an entry route to further and higher education) initially when I left at 19. Which would have put us even further behind, given that I was already sort of a year behind all my mates, like when they were finishing university, I still had a year left.” (James)

In particular academy A players described how their time at the academy opened doors that otherwise might have remained closed. Three players gained university scholarships, with soccer paying for their further education, two in the United Kingdom and one in the United States. Daniel goes as far as saying that *“without soccer I wouldn’t have gotten an education, soccer offered an outlet, I had the opportunity to get a scholarship for the United Kingdom, where my grades didn’t have to be as good to get on the same course”*. Reinforcing the earlier notion of soccer skills transferring to life skills, for others the impact was less direct as the academy provided them with the confidence and skills to consider going to and to do well at university.

“The education, it didn’t really hinder or help being at club, but the things that I learned at [club] and how hard you have to work, you know that has set me up and that is helping me in what I am doing now. So, I definitely think the club has had a positive benefit on my education” (Chris)

A number of players described their academy involvement had also opened career doors, either through it being something people look up to, having an interesting CV or it providing them a network and credibility for particularly soccer related jobs.

“I got this job through my experience, my background, as opposed to my performance analysis skills. I’d never really done any of it if I am honest, I’ve done a degree and I’ve done bits, but the main thing that got me the job is my knowledge of soccer, my knowledge of academy soccer, I came across well in the interview, the two interviews, and that’s why I got the job..” (Charlie)
‘I’m behind’

Some players, all from academy B, highlighted how they felt behind. These players felt ill-prepared when things did not work out in terms of soccer; *“it doesn’t prepare you for dealing with real things, didn’t prepare you for the real world [of work or life outside soccer], it took us a long time to get used to that”* (Andy). Some emphasised how they had prioritised soccer over education at younger ages, and that

this had limited their future options. Tom knew he had a scholarship and “*didn’t take the exams as seriously, so I didn’t get as good grades as I could have, that I guess has left me less of a chance of gaining qualifications in different environments*”. Harry highlighted how he had remained focused on soccer for the first few years after his release, and described engaging in several jobs that he didn’t value:

“There have been times when I’ve been unemployed, but I’ve always, it’s always been a month or less, so I’ve always been able to get work. Never like high paying work but I am happy with it. It was a bit of a shock though, I worked at the shop and had to do things that I felt were pointless.” Only now at 23 after a period of ‘soul-searching’, he was just about to start an 18-month graduate traineeship to gain the right qualifications.

Components of the developmental context that drove outcomes

This section aims to unpick how the different developmental outcomes were brought about by the developmental contexts that players were involved with. Four key themes were identified, three of which focused on the academy context itself: i) because the academy context demands it, ii) because it is encouraged through daily practices and actions, ii) quality of interpersonal relationships, and one acknowledged the impact of iv) other active agents (e.g., players, parents, peers). Each of these is further explained in the sections below.

Because the academy context demands it

A number of factors inherent to the academy context were identified as demanding players to develop particular skills and/or attitudes. For example, the academy context was described as challenging, characterised by a strong performance focus and continual assessment “*You can never escape, there is no hiding, you’re always, always, constantly being watched and assessed.*” (Tom). On pitch performance was seen as the yardstick, “*there was always the pressure to do well, because you know that at the end of the day it’s [club]’s decision whether you are still there in a years’ time or six months’ time or whatever*” (Steve). Yet, players acknowledged performance was not stable nor fully in their control. Consequently, daily life in the academy was described as “*a mad rollercoaster ride where you are up and down all the time*” (Andy). Whilst admitting this could be a struggle, players reported that the inevitable “*highs and lows*” (Charlie), contributed to them building character, resilience and an ability to handle pressure.

Similarly, other values and life skills were developed because the intensified nature of academy involvement demanded it. The requirement to live away from home and go on trips abroad from a young

age, the busy schedule and focus on soccer required players to manage themselves effectively, become better at managing multiple demands as well as be disciplined.

“It’s difficult, you’ve got to train, and at the training ground life was structured, but then you’ve got to manage like your homework and things like that, you need to make sure that you are performing, so that you are in the right state physically and mentally to perform in training and games. So you have to make sure you have early nights, eat and drink the right things at the right times, prepare properly, get on the bus on time, have your kit ready” (Mike)

Social skill development was attributed to having to work with team members from a range of

backgrounds, adapt to many different social situations as well as interact with ‘intimidating’ adults from a young age. For example, Paul describes:

“because with soccer you [as a player] start young meeting new people, everyone is from different backgrounds so you have to come out your shell a bit, talk to different people. So at U12s whatever you see the academy manager, you’re scared of him [the academy manager], because he’s got the decision on you, but as you get older, you get used talking to him, even though he is in a high position, the same with other coaches, but you will talk to them. And you [as a player] can apply that to other aspects of life where like adults or people who are older than you and you are a bit nervous of or intimidated by because of the position they hold but then you do become confident and talk to them and they are no different. Whether that’s still in soccer or whether you leave soccer for other jobs, university, you can take that with you.”

In contrast to some of the positive attitudes the nature of academy involvement was seen to

promote, the privileged nature of academy involvement was also seen to pose a risk. With its trips abroad, free kit, incredible facilities, the academy context provided a taster of life as a professional soccer player.

This ‘all needs met’ environment combined with the strong performance focus can be seen to implicitly demand single-minded commitment to soccer posing a risk of players ‘naively’ buying into the soccer dream at the expense of education and other pursuits. James reflects:

“They [the club] do everything for the players, players are spoiled to the 8th degree, and I don’t think that stands them [the players] in very good stead because they think they’ve made it. I certainly thought I’m going to be a professional soccer player here! A lot of the lads just kind of sack it [education/alternatives] off because they think oh I’m going to be a professional soccer player”

Because it is encouraged through daily practices and actions

Beyond outcomes being brought about because the features that are inherent to the nature of and involvement with academies demanding them, personal development and career readiness were achieved because they were actively encouraged, either through i) direct soccer related practices that allowed players to practice key skills, ii) members of staff as role models, and iii) support structures aligned to values (i.e. practicing what they preach). Particularly in academy A personal development also took place because it was encouraged through interaction with the daily soccer environment that was actively

structured by the staff. First, typical practices aligned to soccer development were used to practice key skills. For example, captaining the team to develop leadership skills, being social secretary to develop money management, as well as engaging with daily chores to develop ownership and an appreciation of high standards.

“Looking after yourself in every-day life. You [player] need to look after your belongings. You are in charge of everything, in charge of your kit, in charge of your boots, you’re in charge of your water bottles and you get put on duties, you get put on changing room duties. He [coach] would instil that within the sport. So he is constantly teaching you life lessons, stuff that will always come in handy later down the line” (Steve)

Indeed, staff were seen to ‘teach’ players about these elements by not only structuring the environment in a way that allowed skills to be practiced, but also through modelling them and endorsing their importance. These key values and philosophies, through practicing them sufficiently to become habitual, became integrated into the players’ identity. As Paul described:

“I lived in digs [club organised accommodation], so if I wanted to go home, you weren’t just allowed to go home. You had to ask permission, to [coach] or someone; can I go home for the weekend? And if you asked on the day, he’d say you cannot come to me on the day that you want to go home and just ask me on a whim. No if you want to go, you’ve got to ask me plenty of time before and you’ve got to give me a clear reason. So that became the norm. So now if I, let’s say with coaching, if I have to say to my coach “on Wednesday because I have to coach after I have to leave the training session maybe 5 minutes early, is that ok?” I would never do that on the day.”

Similarly, Chris outlined how he valued the academy coaches having grown up conversations with him, and how he now uses this when he coaches to foster a sense of being taken seriously:

“That’s exactly the same type of conversation that [coach] or [manager] used to have with me... would come in and ask what have you done today? What have you learned? Or [education and welfare officer] even he would always take an interest in you. So I try and do the same with my kids now, I don’t try to dumb myself down or just be daft because they are. I try make them feel like I take them seriously.”

In terms of actively encouraging education, within academy A this was clearly valued and endorsed. Indeed, these values were actively put into practice within a support program which allowed players to make the most of their education and that included home-work support, quality dedicated teaching staff, tailored programs, and explicitly discussing back-up plans with players.

“I suppose the support network at the club was great, they had all the support in place if you wanted to pursue it, or if you wanted to take your education seriously you could. They had great lecturers there. I thought good kind of teaching practice. And then when I wanted to go and do extra, no-one at the soccer club prevented me from going to pursue part-time education and I know other guys, older and younger, that have been able to do similar things” (Will)

The enacting of values was further evidenced through not ‘pulling their hands off’ upon releasing players and supporting them in the transition elsewhere. Chris underscored the value the academy was seen to

place on education “*the club has massively supported me. The owner has a project where he pays the shortfall for my university fees and I keep in touch to update them about my experiences*”.

In contrast, some players from Academy B described education as an espoused value, something that the club said was important but not something that was put into practice as the educational support predominantly geared toward soccer and sport, and not there if you wanted to do anything else.

“It was a BTEC in sport science. To be honest it was not worth a lot the course we did. I felt like we got pushed through it. I think we could only do what they told us to do, you didn’t have any opportunity to do something else.” (Harry)

Despite being told the club valued education, Mike suggested that doing well academically had worked against him in terms of gaining a professional contract “*the head of the academy used to say ‘go to America’ you can achieve so much more doing that route. Which I think kind of went against me, slightly, because I did do well academically.*”

Quality of interpersonal relationships

The quality of the interpersonal climate and the relationships between staff and players was identified as a key factor that facilitated ‘readying’ players for life. Overall players described both academies as providing a professional, elite, high quality, learning environment that “*you wouldn’t get anywhere else at a lower level*” (Steve). Yet the accounts about academy A were distinctive in that this environment was “*welcoming and accommodating,*” (Craig) and players reported they felt at home, “*the homely environment, you know it was a bit more personable and that’s what I felt, that’s how I felt why it was right*” (Daniel). Academy A was characterised by a warm and caring climate which was further evidenced through players describing close and high-quality relationships with coaches and program staff. In this context, close relationships did not mean coaches were never strict or authoritarian; particularly on the pitch, several players described how these coaches could be “*micromanagers*” (Will) and real “*disciplinarians, it was his way of the highway*” (Chris). Off the pitch these same coaches were perceived as genuinely caring and empathic mentors and role-models.

“They [coaches] are both firm men but completely different on the pitch to what they are off the pitch. They’d be shouting, I presume because they want the best from you, they want the ability. But off the pitch completely different, always there for you, always teaching you lessons. [Coach] is probably one of the best coaches that I’ve ever worked with. Not because of what he’s done on the pitch, but because of what’s done off it” (Will)

It was the relationships with these specific members of staff that were seen to enrich the players’ experience and enabled personal development, through being (seen as) approachable and trustworthy

sources of support and advice, both on and off the pitch. Staff were portrayed as always making time for players and as clearly interested in players' holistic development and lives away from soccer. Chris provides an example:

“If you ever had any troubles, [coach] was always there to talk to. When I was younger, I felt that I was under quite a lot of pressure from my dad. And [coach] was the same when he was young, so he would give us a lot of advice. It used to get me down quite a lot and [coach] gave us a good bit of advice, it helped. And he's done that on quite a few occasions. When I felt unsettled, he's come out to talk to my parents, to my house and talked things through, nurtured me through”

In contrast, the accounts of academy B contained no mention of the caring, warm climate nor of coaches or other staff functioning as role models or trusted mentors. These connections did not only affect players' perceptions of the environment's quality, but also impacted players' enjoyment and soccer performance. Nick, who was able to provide a directly comparison based on his experiences in both academies, highlighted how both were good academies, but that academy B *“was not on par with [academy A]”* as

“I think sometimes if they are guilty, academies, for one thing, it's that lack of personal touch. That's probably why [academy A] were the best because they had that personal touch. [name] picking me up and taking me to a game, talking to my parents, they would go the extra mile for you and just like little things that made you feel a little bit more valued. I've got a lot of time for the people at [Academy A], if I was to compare my experiences, my year there felt the most productive and I felt their academy system made you feel comfortable and confident in the way you were approaching things and I really enjoyed my time there”

Other active agents

Throughout the accounts, it was evident that players were not ‘passive recipients’ of the academy experience. The skills, attitudes and values with which players arrived as well as other contexts with which they engaged simultaneously (e.g., family and school), shaped the outcomes associated with academy involvement. First, in terms of personal development, players described the academy served as a fertile breeding ground for some of their already existing attributes to flourish.

“I can say that I've developed more confidence and more belief in myself in terms of like performing and being confident towards people and them things. But I don't think that's solely down to the soccer club, you're only there not even half your time, a massive amount of that comes from your parents. But obviously the soccer club does help.” (Craig)

Second, in relation to ‘staying grounded’ and continuing with their education, players highlight how this was also *“down to their attitude* (Harry) *towards and valuing of education. Some players took deliberate action to safeguard their education by either being “quite dedicated, like homework and things I have always done”* (Mike), or by even opting out of day-release *“I was one of the only lads who said no, I'm not doing that. It was my last year at school, there was no way I was sacrificing one day a week when*

I've got exams and GCSE's [General Certificate of Secondary Education]" (Nick). Others admitted that they would not have done any better without the academy. "Let's be honest, I just didn't work very hard. So even if I hadn't gone to the [academy], I don't think I would have done very well in the [national] curriculum myself to be honest" (Steve). Notably, this attitude to education was seen to be shaped by how 'academically bright' they perceived themselves to be and how much they had bought in to the soccer dream, and how much their parents reinforced the need for a back-up plan.

"I've always enjoyed school and I was always pretty academically gifted so I stuck in with my work. I was always under the impression that if I want to go onto university, if things don't work out, then I need this.. And I think that came from my mom and dad as well." (Will)

Although parents were largely described as helping keeping players grounded, some players emphasised how peers outside of soccer would fuel the notion of 'having made it already': *"Back in school I was the guy who went to be a professional soccer player. That came with a great kind of pride and status and having the cool factor like 'he is our superstar'" (Craig). Players also admitted that their own immaturity and inability to foresee the future meant they were at higher risk of prematurely buying into the 'soccer dream'. In particular, they struggled to take on board the messages the academy did portray around the importance of a back-up plan and how difficult it may be to make it as a professional soccer player. Paul reflects:*

"You can obviously go and tell them to like still stick in at school and always have a back-up plan but they probably told me that when I was that age but you never like, when you are that age you don't think like ah, you just think ah I'm not going to listen to him because I want to be a soccer player."

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the under-examined perspectives of ex-elite youth academy soccer players, including both those that progressed successfully into professional soccer and those that did not on whether their time in a soccer academy offered developmental experiences that prepared them for life beyond soccer. Most players reported academy involvement had readied them for life beyond soccer by developing numerous intra- and interpersonal skills. Further, of those that did not progress to the professional game, few associated time in the academy with negative educational/vocational development. Instead, for some the academy experience had opened educational and vocational doors not

available to non-academy counterparts. Yet, these outcomes were highly dependent on the interaction between three developmental contextual themes; i) what was demanded by the academy context, ii) what was encouraged within the academy context, and iii) the quality of interpersonal relationships. Beyond this, players' attitudes, histories and wider socio-contextual influences were important in shaping (future) outcomes.

A wide variety of personal and life skills were attributed to academy involvement, especially: a strong work ethic, discipline, resilience, self-regulation, determination, a willingness to reflect, interpersonal skills and team work, (social) confidence, good manners and a respectful attitude. These findings add to the existing evidence that TIDS can be conducive towards positive development (e.g., Henriksen, 2010; Jones & Lavalley, 2009; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Strachan & Davies, 2015; Williams & MacNamara, 2020). However, as recent studies (e.g. Cope et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2017) had questioned how well academies simultaneously pursued personal development alongside sporting performance, our findings are novel and promising in regards to soccer TIDS.

PYD and life skills development were facilitated through the experiential learning that immersion in the context offered and demanded, supporting the notion of PYD / life skills being 'caught' (e.g., Jones & Lavalley, 2009; Jørgensen et al., 2020). Further, these findings endorse the suggestion that challenging experiences (e.g., conflict, pressure, set-backs) provide opportunities for learning that can have long-term developmental benefits (e.g., Collins & MacNamara, 2012; Turnnidge et al. 2014). While in the long-term these negative experiences did result in positive development, short-term experiences signalled a pressurised and scrutinising soccer environment which has been associated with increased anxiety, unstable self-confidence and negative coping strategies (Reeves et al., 2009; Sagar et al., 2010). As such, program staff face the challenge of carefully introducing adversity while providing appropriate adaptive resources (Collins & MacNamara, 2012). Indeed, within the academy that evidenced the greatest degree of life skill development this experiential learning was not left to chance (i.e. the demands of elite sport), but it was deliberately organised and scaffolded by program staff.

As all players demonstrated transferring the values, attitudes and skills they acquired in the academy to life outside sport, these findings are also insightful in relation to how life-skill transfer can be ensured (Pierce et al., 2017, Bean et al., 2018). Our findings support recent arguments (Pierce et al., 2016;

Williams & MacNamara, 2020), proposing that day-to-day academy life does not emphasise differences between acquiring performance skills and life skills; what is acquired in the performance context is often repeated to become a life skill. However, the current findings argue that transfer relies on sufficient practice (Bean et al., 2018) for the skill or attitude to become habitual or internalised as part of the athlete's value system (Pierce et al., 2017; Storm et al., 2014). Further, because transfer takes time (Turnidge et al., 2014) its occurrence may only be evident in a new context (Jones & Lavallee, 2009).

So far, few studies have explored the dual-career pursuits and educational/vocational outcomes for youth soccer players, particularly over time. Congruent with previous research (e.g., Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Champ et al., 2020; Platts & Smith, 2018) almost all players admitted the academy context posed the risk of demanding a 'sole commitment' and 'buy-in' to the soccer dream at the expense of their academic progress. However, in contrast to a previously highlighted lack of career readiness (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Champ et al., 2020) a substantial number of players stated their longer term educational/vocational outcomes were not hindered by their time in the academy. Indeed, a unique contribution of this study is that for a number of players their time with the academy opened doors that otherwise might have remained closed, either literally (i.e. opportunities to gain scholarships for universities in the United Kingdom or abroad, get a job interview based on their experience) or more metaphorically (i.e., through gaining confidence in and having the skillset to thrive in further education). While it is not clear from our findings how recent policy changes have influenced these experiences, the more positive outcomes reflect the thrust of recent policy initiatives, like EPPP, placing more emphasis on opportunities for a successful dual-career in soccer. Equally, particularly the opportunities to gain scholarships (both in the UK and abroad) may be a more recent phenomenon that has supported this trend. However, the less positive accounts from Academy B may indicate that this is not the case in every soccer academy.

Reflecting on how academy A produced more positive outcomes, the academy aligning its daily practices to enact its values was identified as key. Historically soccer academies have been described as not valuing education (Brown & Potrac, 2009) or to say they do but in reality require players to prioritise soccer over school (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). More recently two case studies provided a more promising view by describing a context where education was not only valued but also endorsed and

supported (Larsen et al., 2013; Pink et al., 2015). Yet, neither gathered data on longer term educational outcomes. Our findings extend theirs by underscoring that those contexts that both value and provide tangible and ‘emotional’ support for education likely produce better immediate and long-term outcomes. Previous research already emphasised the benefits of integrating or establishing good working relationships between TIDSs and schools to offer flexibility and support (e.g., Larsen et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2015). Our findings further advocate the need for an ‘in-house’ educational support structure that is adequately resourced (i.e., qualified tutors) flexibility in terms of the subject areas players choose to pursue (i.e. individualisation of support; Pink et al., 2015). In addition, players valued academy staff who demonstrated care for education and who willingly and genuinely discussed career ambitions and queries with them. Finally, academy A was seen to ‘practice what they preach’ by supporting players – including financially - upon transitioning from soccer into education.

Including two different contexts allowed us to explore both similarities and differences in outcomes as well as unpick how such outcomes may be achieved. Outcomes were the result of the helpful-unhelpful, positive-negative and well-/ill-timed interactions between the context, its structure, activities and coaching behaviours, and the player. As such being part of a TIDS does not produce outcomes in itself, and positive outcomes are not an ‘automatic’ or guaranteed result of involvement (Coakley, 2016; Coalter, 2013). Indeed, different contexts (within the same sport) produce different outcomes. Nonetheless, our accounts show that positive outcomes are not only a possibility, but plausible when linked to specific adaptive contexts. As such, certain contexts are more conducive to such outcomes than others.

Three contextual elements were identified as particularly conducive to positive development and readying players for life; (i) staff acting as mentors and role-models that always had time for athletes regarding on and off pitch issues, (ii) values being clearly aligned, endorsed and supported in daily practices, and (iii) the context being experienced as warm, caring and homely. These features align closely to the majority of the eight programme setting features of a good quality PYD program (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); in particular with physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, support for efficacy and mattering and positive prosocial norms. Equally, having accessible, caring adults as role-models and mentors has been identified as a key factor in PYD and life

skill development (Petitpas et al., 2005) with high performance athletes citing learning by observing how their coaches (Storm et al., 2014) and other athletes (Jørgensen et al., 2020) approached situations. In relation to the talent development environment (TDE) literature, three elements that have been previously identified as key to effective TDEs (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017) and that have been linked to better holistic (in particular player wellbeing) outcomes (Ivarsson et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2020) were also present identified in the more effective academy. Our findings specifically support the importance of perceiving the environment as supportive with an emphasis on holistically understanding and developing athletes, as well as being characterised by a set of coherent espoused and enacted values. Further, caring relationships have recently been proposed as key in ensuring high performance sport is sustainable and allowing personal, educational and performance development to be pursued simultaneously (e.g., Fisher et al., 2019; Lindgren & Barker-Ruchti, 2017). While these features show clear overlap with previous research, this study is the first to also evidence links to positive personal and educational developmental outcomes within the context of elite youth soccer. Together, these findings suggest that similar features may be conducive to effectively producing performance as well as personal and educational development outcomes, particularly emphasising the importance of the interpersonal climate in performance settings.

Our findings also highlight the importance of acknowledging the ‘person’ within the ‘person x context’ interaction (Larson & Tran, 2014). Similar to previous research (Jones & Lavalley, 2009; Pierce et al., 2016) the academy context served as a catalyst for strengthening already existing attitudes and characteristics. As such, the full span of academy outcomes are highly individualised. Equally, educational/vocational impact was very much dependant on players pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Previous research already identified valuing doing well educationally (Aquilina, 2013) or deeming oneself quite academic (Platts & Smith, 2018) as driving forces behind preventing negative educational impact. Similar to other research, players were able to find ways to make it work (Aquilina, 2013) and displayed a sense of being in control of balancing educational and sport demands (Cosh & Tully, 2014). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that development does not happen in a vacuum; players’ pre-existing values, attitudes, characteristics and skills were shaped by (on an ongoing basis) their interactions with a variety of non-sports contexts (e.g., family, peers and school). Future research would benefit from

exploring how developmental outcomes are shaped by interactions between these various contexts (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2020).

Strengths and Limitations

Methodologically, the current study offers a number of important contributions. Including representatives with different subsequent trajectories represents an extension to the knowledge base. It has shifted from relying on ‘survivor bias’ accounts of positive take-aways. By including two cases, this study was able to identify ‘unique and distinctive’ elements linked to the ‘production’ of more positive player development outcomes. Relying on retrospective accounts is often critiqued for introducing the risk of recall bias. However, in this study, recruiting players who had been in the academy system between 1-10 years ago fits the idea of outcomes being ‘emergent’. By focusing on this ‘over-time’ perspective it is likely that their academy context had since changed, especially in light of recent policy initiatives in youth soccer. As this study highlighted, as contexts change so too will outcomes. This limitation was partly addressed by recruiting players who engaged over many academy iterations. Nonetheless ongoing research is necessary to explore current academy contexts and their impact on the youth athletes involved.

There are also important limitations. Our recruitment approaches risk sampling bias. However, asking delivery staff from academy A to provide a ‘balanced’ sample (i.e., not just the ones they keep in touch with), supplementing recommendations with snowball sampling and having the comparative accounts of two players that attended both academies, provided confidence that the differences in accounts do represent differences in academy contexts. For any sample, findings might be vulnerable to social desirability and particularly cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Given that all players invested a large part of their teenage years with the academy, it is also possible their accounts reflect ‘internal consistency’ where they justify making these investments. Furthermore, we asked players to reflect on the impact of their entire time within the academy context. For most of the players their involvement spanned many years, and some periods or moments may have been more memorable (perhaps based on intensity or recency) compared to others. As literature has identified the talent development journey is characterised by both typical stages and transitions (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014), as well as that the environment is likely to be in constant development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), future research

would benefit from exploring how developmental experiences and associated outcomes may differ for across key stages and transitions. The findings also reflect experiences from a male-only sample of players in two soccer academies, which questions their representativeness within the United Kingdom, for TIDS in other sports, or for mixed or female only samples. Yet, establishing ‘generalisable laws’ was not the purpose of this CR-oriented study. Instead, the work aimed to provide a contextualised understanding of TIDS’ impact in terms of developmental outcomes and to generate initial ideas as to how these outcomes are produced to provide a basis for future ‘theory’ testing within different contexts. As such we advocate for a focus on naturalistic and transferable generalisability (Smith, 2018). Rather than uncritically generalising findings to other contexts, through engaging with the accounts provided we ask researchers or practitioners to consider to what extent the findings resonate with them and their experiences (i.e. naturalistic generalisability). Further, we encourage them to draw parallels between the characteristics of their own TIDS and the academies described in this research (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This would allow them to perhaps deduct ‘lessons learned’ and test these emerging theories by exploring if similar outcomes are produced in their own contexts (transferable generalisability, Smith, 2018).

Conclusion

The intensification of the soccer academy experience is unlikely to change in the near future. Even though these systems are also under increasing pressure to evidence a more holistic developmental approach (EPPP; 2011; Grey-Thompson, 2017; Mathorne et al., 2020), public media have recently described them as largely ‘falling short’ (Calvin, 2018). Promisingly, the current study showed that, regardless of post-academy soccer trajectories, players acquire valuable long-term take-aways from their academy experiences. Indeed, beyond providing a high quality sporting environment, these academies can develop valuable transferable life skills and open educational and vocational doors. However, these outcomes are not ‘automatic’; they depend on how well the context is designed and delivered. The best outcomes derive from academies with staff focused on being deliberately developmental, driven by caring coherent, athlete-centred values.

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