Mind the gap: Environmental influences on player psychosocial needs and development in an elite youth football academy

Abstract

The Premier League football academy environment plays a significant role in shaping the psychosocial needs and development of youth footballers. The first author conducted a qualitative case study within a category one academy over nine-months using multiple methods (observation, field notes, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis). The holistic ecological approach (HEA) was used as a framework to capture the complexity of academy life. Analysis revealed a disparity between the awareness of the importance of psychosocial skills within the environment and the approach to embedding and prioritising their development. Environmental factors at both a micro and macro level resulted in an intention-action gap which inhibited psychosocial skill development. From the results of this study we suggest that sport psychology practitioners (SPPP) should incorporate environmental level factors in their work to better facilitate players' psychosocial development.

Keywords: psychosocial development, holistic ecological approach, elite youth football, talent development environment

Background: Eye opening exposure

Following a master's degree in sport psychology (SP) I (first author) was afforded an internship opportunity as a mental skills coach at a category one football academy. Like many golden entry level opportunities at elite clubs, compensation was in the form of a foot in the door not money in the bank. A trainee peer and I were given the task to deliver SP to the scholarship phase. I was at the club for one day a week, this included delivering 'mental skills' workshops alongside irregular one to one sessions. In comparison there were full-time staff and departments dedicated to the young players' technical, tactical and physiological development.

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Exposure to an elite academy football was eye opening, and the young boys stepping up to the competitive full-time scholarship programme were subject to a number of psychosocial challenges (e.g. deselection). The impact I could have as a trainee introducing isolated mental skills in workshop format to the young players felt substantially limited given that a number of challenges were at an environmental and organisational level. So, I started my quest and this paper is part of my wider PhD project aimed at gaining an understanding of how players' psychosocial needs and development were impacted by the environment and how psychosocial development was, or could be better, embedded within the academy environment.

Introduction

Elite youth football academy environments present unique psychosocial demands for young players during the inherently challenging scholarship phase (Mills et al., 2012). Players must possess a range of psychological characteristics to cope, but it is increasingly recognised that the environment shapes players' capacity to develop and use these skills (Mills et al., 2014a; 2014b). A seminal body of research examining successful TDE's in Scandinavia (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011) has significantly extended understanding of the talent development environment (TDE) in sport and played a key role in shifting the focus in talent development from the individual athlete to the environment in which talented athletes develop (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018). Research on ecological approaches to talent development have identified the characteristics of successful TDEs. Henriksen et al. (2010a; 2010b; 2011) conducted case studies in three successful TDEs which formed the basis for two working models that together represent the HEA – The Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) model and the Environmental Success Factors Model (ESF).

The ATDE provides a framework to describe the environment and is structured into two main levels; the micro-level where the athletes spend most of their daily life and the macro-level which signifies the social settings which influence but do not fully contain the

athletes, as well as the values of the cultures to which the athletes belong. The ATDE model has been influenced by cross-cultural psychology which depicts culture as a multi-level and complex phenomenon and recognises the impact national culture and national sports systems have on athletes' transitions (Stambulova, Stephan, & Järphag, 2007).

The ESF model allows for a summary of the factors influencing the environment's effectiveness and considers the interactions between preconditions (e.g. human, financial and material resources), processes (e.g. training / competitions), individual development and achievements (including acquisition of psychosocial competencies) and how the organisational culture works to integrate these different elements. Organisational culture is at the centre of the ESF model which consists of three levels: artifacts, values and underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) and draws attention to how values are espoused and/or enacted in talent development. As well as providing a framework to help to understand the role of the environment in athlete development, this work has demonstrated that successful environments possess common features including open communication, promotion of autonomy, support for holistic development and a strong and coherent organisation culture, demonstrated by consistency between levels, so that what people "said they did" and what they "actually did" corresponded (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011).

The ESF model draws from the broader literature on organisational culture, specifically Schein's (1990) integration perspective which emphasises that successful cultures are built on the creation and regulation of shared cultural factors. The view of shared culture taken by the HEA has been challenged (McDougall et al., 2020) as too homogeneous, and at risk of cultural blind spots (Maitland, Hills & Rhind, 2015). Martin (2002) identified an alternative perspective of culture and a distinction between integration (what is shared), differentiation (what is contested), and fragmentation (what is unclear and ambiguous). Within the literature on athlete development, having a shared culture has been linked to

success and this is the approach used within this study, although the complexity of culture is acknowledged. Whilst the HEA work made great empirical progress in the exploration of organisational culture in sport psychology (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, p.38) it must be noted that organisational culture is only one aspect of the broader HEA which limits the amount of attention offered specifically for the conceptualisation and operationalisation of organisational culture as a concept in this approach.

Larsen et al. (2013) used the HEA to examine talent development among male under-17 soccer players in a successful Danish soccer club and found the TDE shared several factors with those examined in earlier HEA research as well as the wider talent development literature (e.g. Martindale et al., 2007). A strong, open and cohesive organisational culture was an important feature that contributed to the success of the football TDE. An open approach was evident in the way the staff worked with the players (e.g. the coaches had an open door policy and caught up with the players every day for informal chats). Larsen et al. (2013) found that the players developed several psychosocial skills that were helpful for both sport and life (self-awareness, self- organisation, goal setting, managing performance and process outcomes, and social skills). While these skills were often underlined as very important for the transition to the professional level, they were only indirectly practiced and talked about and were not taught as part of the training. Mills and colleagues (2014a; 2014b) advanced understanding of the English elite football academy environment from both a coach (Mills et al., 2014a) and player (Mills et al., 2014b) perspective. Like Larsen et al. (2013), findings emphasised the importance of creating strong, dynamic, organisational cultures and having clear communication amongst other factors (Mills et al., 2014a).

In response to findings demonstrating the importance of psychosocial factors in player development, Larsen et al. (2014) conducted a follow up ecological-inspired intervention which highlighted the benefits of integrating SP into the environment and the pivotal role of

the coach in the intervention success. An awareness of an environment's preconditions and constraints from a HEA are relevant for, and may inform, SP services in professional football (Larsen et al., 2013; 2014). This is important given research has identified a disconnect between the perceived importance of psychosocial factors for successful progression in elite football and their systematic development within the academy scholarship phase (Cook et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2014a), despite efforts by the Football Association (FA) to increase the awareness and application of SP in elite youth football. Research addressing the practical delivery of SP within English academies and the ways that psychosocial development may be integrated into the wider football academy programme is limited. A recent exception is the work of Green and colleagues (2020) which describes and reflects on the work of the 'psych-social team' (PST) at Arsenal academy. The PST had the overarching aim to ensure a 'shared understanding' of the psychosocial strengths and needs of players to support the whole system to work holistically towards maximising player potential. This work provides a valuable insight into applied practice however integrating SP to impact the whole system in this way may not be realistic in many academies given the part-time (Gervis et al., 2020) (and short- term) nature of many SP contracts and the limited attention given to the discipline by many clubs. Barriers which may limit the SP's role and working practices include a lack of understanding of SP and its value, a lack of coach understanding of their role in the psychological development process (Champ et al., 2020) and a continued stigma attached to psychological support (Gervis et al., 2020). Champ (2020) found that despite the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012, the traditional masculine culture of professional football dominated and constraints of the organisational culture within a football academy culture limited the SP's role and working practices, for example the areas in which a SP is granted access, or the time that is assigned for SP sessions. This points to the need for research to deepen understanding of the experiential realities of those embedded in the

environment as well appreciation of broader societal influences in order to understand how the FA's remit for academies to address players' psychosocial development may be better met.

The aim of this paper is to use the in-depth understanding of one football academy, gained through the HEA to examine how environmental factors impact player psychosocial needs and development. Whilst there is growing recognition that psychological development is impacted by organisational factors and that a more ecological approach is needed (Larsen et al., 2014), research explicitly examining how the academy environment interacts with these psychological factors in the talent development process in English football remains limited. The HEA (Henriksen et al, 2010a) offers a valuable framework to assess the complex English football academy environment and examine the central role of the environment in player psychosocial development. To date, all research applying the HEA to sport has been carried out in a Scandinavian context, an in-depth exploration of an English elite youth football environment is necessary given research has identified there are dominant cultural features that are generalizable within an English football context (e.g. Champ et al., 2020; Cushion & Jones, 2006).

The qualitative case study as a research strategy

The research was positioned within a social constructionist, interpretive paradigm. This position is built on foundational beliefs that the complex world is constructed by dynamic and movable processes and does not fit a simple linear model and social processes are viewed as a crucial part of meaning and understanding in human activity. The research methodology aligns with that recommended by the HEA, specifically a single case study approach with data collected from multiple sources. The case is a "paradigmatic case selection", as it was chosen with the aim "to maximise the utility of information from small samples and single case [and] to develop a metaphor or establish a school for the domain that the case concerns"

(Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Qualitative case study methodology offers tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The researcher views talent development as the product of the interaction between the person and their environment and this was deemed an appropriate methodological choice to provide a lens into the players' and staff members' experiences.

The case study approach involves intensive analysis of a phenomenon (unit of analysis) occurring in a bounded context (defined by space and time) (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In the present study, the unit under examination is the academy (the 'space') during one competitive season (time). The length of time spent in the academy is a strength of this project. The present case study has been bound by the academy chosen, the period of data collection and the focus on the academy environment and players' psychosocial development from a HEA. Maaloe's (2004) explorative integration approach to case studies is defined as "a cyclic approach of a continuous dialogue between pre-chosen theories, generated data, the researcher's interpretation, and feedback from informants" (Maaloe, 2004, pp. 8). Using this approach allowed data collection and analysis to be intertwined, as new information was continually received during the data collection. A major strength of this approach is that it allows for unanticipated topics to emerge organically and for the researcher's assumptions to be tested based on actual events as they occur (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This is in line with Nilsen (2012) who claimed that reality is best understood as a (re) construction that occurs in the encounter between the researcher and the subjects of science.

Research methods

For the purposes of the study, the participating English Premier League organisation is represented using the pseudonym 'Holgate FC'. HFC is an English professional association football club founded over 140 years ago which has an established history and takes pride in developing professional players from the academy. The participants were nine first year

(U17) scholarship players (who had been at the academy for at least one season prior to the start of data collection) and related scholarship staff in the academy. This included one trainee SPP, who was at the club 25 hours a week in a role split between the scholarship phase and the Youth Development Phase (U13-16). Ethical approval was obtained from the lead author's University ethics committee.

Guba and Lincoln's (1994) judgement criteria helped establish trustworthiness and evaluate the veracity of the claims (Williams & Morrow, 2008). This framework provided an opportunity for reflexive elaboration throughout the research process. Triangulation through a mixture of methods (observation, field notes, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis) and perspectives maximised the range of data to enable a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) enhancing credibility. The interpretations of the data are grounded in contextual understandings of the participants' lifeworld's which deepened during the nine months of data collection increasing understanding of the academy, participant experience, and cultural artifacts such as terminology (as well as the researcher's previous experience in the academy) (Cook et al., 2014). I was cognizant and honest about my own preconceptions, biases, goals and foibles (Tracy, 2011) throughout the process of research, reflected on these in my fieldnotes, and discussed them with my supervisory team regularly whilst remaining open towards their suggestions. This critical self-awareness regarding my influence on the research permitted me to realise my limitations as an explainer (Foley, 2002), to questioned pre-conceived interpretations of the environment, and to reject the idea of absolute truth and objectivity in line with my paradigmatic positioning.

The length of the study and multiple methods used allowed for fluctuations and nuances that would have been overlooked if data had been collected at only one time point. The seven months between the first and second interviews gave the researcher an opportunity

to develop stronger relationships and scholars who were less forthcoming in their first interviews opened up and spoke in greater depth in their second interview as trust had been established. Staff became more comfortable and reflective in interviews and informal discussions as the season progressed.

A vast amount of case study data (e.g. over 257,000 words of raw interview data) was collected from multiple perspectives from within the microenvironment, i.e., coaches, players, support staff, teacher and management in the club. This helped to broaden, thicken and deepen data to enable the development of a holistic understanding (Denzin, 1989) and ensure multiple facets of the phenomenon are revealed and understood (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Observation data was collected across 88 days over the nine months (474 hours). I immersed myself in the day-to-day life of the first year scholars including training, education, gym work and mealtimes in the cafeteria. I took mental notes in the setting which were jotted into a journal as soon as possible and written up to full fieldnotes within 24 hours. Descriptive field notes of observations and informal conversations allowed me to reflect on any further questions and thoughts raised throughout and were used to focus subsequent observations. This process allowed me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the social interactions and patterns, events and actions that were happening within the setting and the meaning they had from the perspective of those being observed (Lofland et al., 2006). A reflective journal was kept throughout the study to supplement the field notes, this allowed for analytic insight by considering whether my own emotional response to a situation was prevalent amongst participants and served as a tool to highlight any biases.

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 interviewees to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' subjective experiences of the environment and player psychosocial development and to explore themes that had arisen through observations.

Ten staff members were interviewed once (analyst, three coaches, head of academy, academy manager, SP, teacher, fitness coach and academy operations manager) and nine scholars were interviewed twice. Interview guides were structured loosely with predetermined areas of interest influenced by the HEA. The interviews ranged from 35 to 104 minutes. Two player focus group interviews were conducted which lasted 40 and 45 minutes respectively. The focus groups offered unique insights into group norms and dynamics around relevant issues and provided an opportunity to observe the spontaneous interaction of focus group members (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Document analysis included the club website, media communications, player profiles, the Life Plan calendar, documents from the FA regarding the EPPP and the academy scholarship phase. Data collected from this process provided additional context on the academy, generated additional questions to be asked in the interviews and offered supplementary data to enrich the study (Bowen, 2009).

Whilst presented separately it is important to note that data collection and data analysis processes were inextricably linked rather than reduced to discrete stages of the research (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). This helped with the process of developing layers of data and enabled the development of initial ideas and analytical hunches which opened up new questions and meanings that were then explored further (Maaloe, 2004). Firstly, a deductive categorization of the initial interview and observation data was conducted; each script was read and reread several times to group the data into major themes (awareness of psychosocial skills, organisational culture etc) that were meaningful in relation to the research question. The two working models offered by the HEA facilitated this process by providing structure for the higher order themes and identifying conceptual links which helped to provide direction for further interviews and observations. The second step was a theoretical reading, used to generate explanatory themes. I worked towards a higher level of interpretation by identifying and grouping these broader descriptive themes into subthemes

and further subthemes most relevant to the objectives of the study, this process continued until theoretical saturation was considered to have been reached (Côté et al., 1993). Once established, categories of data were compared and combined with the themes that emerged from the field notes. This allowed for unique insights from each of the data collection methods to be weaved together to help address the research questions. Following the nine months of data collection I removed myself from the environment to immerse myself in the data, reflect on the research as a whole and fully engage in the analysis and writing process. Using the concepts of the HEA alongside relevant theory and research enabled me to move from description toward explanation to present layers of meaning to capture the complexity of the psychosocial development process.

The focus on a single case poses a limitation with regards to generalisability (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) and potentially the applicability of the work beyond the specific environment studied. Given the paradigmatic positioning of the research it is accepted that it will not provide universal and context-independent rules and guidelines across time and domains. It is hoped, however that the study will evidence some transferability including the need for an awareness of the environmental factors impacting psychosocial development in elite youth sport. Additional case studies from a HEA within other elite English academies are needed to supplement and expand this study.

Results and discussion

This paper presents research on the impact of environmental factors on player psychosocial needs and development. Three key themes emerged in relation to the environmental influences in this context; the organisational culture, a communication gap and lack of shared understanding around psychosocial development. The concept of character is used to demonstrate how these environmental factors impacted player psychosocial needs and development.

Intention-action gap for psychosocial development

Character was the central concept used in the academy to represent a player's 'mentality'; *"the number one quality a player must have is the right mentality stroke character at all times"* (Jimmy interview – coach). Character was viewed by staff as a crucial quality and used to make recruitment, retention and release decisions;

> *Ability gets you in at 16, character sees you through to 35..we've done a study of the last two years, the two main things that people have been released on have been lack of mobility/speed and character.* (Dave interview - coach)

> *Character is the big thing, it's not football ability that gets you through it's character and you have to have the right characters.* (Tony interview – management staff)

Several staff identified that character was required for players to cope with the various challenges they faced in stepping up to the scholarship phase (e.g. de-selection, training with first team) and progress to the professional level. Players echoed key messages from staff emphasising the importance of character, with some discussing how staff reiterated this message; "*They talk to us a lot about character. Like in meetings and team talks they make sure we know how we have to think, what our attitude should be, they make it clear to us….Head down, work hard, always be positive"* (Mikey interview - scholar).

Character was found to represent two explicitly talked about psychosocial characteristics, hard work and resilience:

> *Football is about showing character… you just need to work hard and be resilient because when things don't go your way you just have to stick to it and keep focused and have like a bounce back ability…*(Kieran interview – scholar)

The ability to take responsibility for development and awareness emerged as fundamental facilitators to displaying the right character. In this context responsibility refers to times when players took accountability and ownership of their development and demonstrated volitional

behaviours. Staff narratives emphasised that players needed to be able to take responsibility for driving their own development, for example conducting extra practice, analysing their game in line with their targets and approaching coaches for feedback; *"if they wanna go work on their weaknesses or their skills they've got that time to do it…the ones who are gunna be players do it"* (Roy interview – coach). Awareness was both an antecedent and a product of players taking responsibility and involved a player's capacity to self-monitor and reflect on their developmental experiences and where they were in the development process (self-awareness) as well as understanding what is needed to excel at the top level of the game *"ultimately the people that tend to succeed is when they know what they are. So, you know what you've got, how to use it and when to use it"* (Dave interview – coach).

Paradoxically, although character was felt by some to be the most significant characteristic in terms of progression to professional level it was given the least attention in terms of development from coaches. This highlights an intention-action gap which refers to the disparity between the awareness of the importance of psychosocial development within the environment (in line with the EPPP requirements) and the approach to embedding and prioritising these skills as part of players' training. The three key environmental influences found to impact this gap will be discussed below.

Organisational culture

In line with the HEA, organisational culture served as a foundation for understanding the environment. The need to show the right character was evident in club artifacts (e.g. letters etched in black paint across the wall of the coaches' office) as well as an espoused value in the club. Analysis of the deepest level of organisational culture, revealed that five interconnected basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) formed the core of the organizational culture (*the academy is a business, football is the priority, talent trumps all, adversity is the name of the game and it is a privilege to be involved in professional football*).

Whilst each assumption was complex, they all related to the central aim of the academy, to prepare the boys to be professional footballers. An emphasis on the club's success and practices associated with obtaining this aim took on a decisive role and created a fundamental tension between the individual and academy success. This incongruence in the organisational culture of the academy was a main constraint impacting psychosocial development and the intention action gap within the academy environment.

One way in which competing environmental demands between individual development (e.g. developing character) and the club's core marker of success (to produce players) was evidenced was in relation to the responsibility paradox. Academy resources allowed for top class directive (multiple support staff) and material support (first class facilities, kit ready, meals prepared) which was representative of the level of support received by the first team. This was perceived to help to prepare scholars for a successful progression to life in the first team in line with the club's priority to prepare players;

> *Wonderful facilities…I think everything is here for these players to achieve, got a wonderful new dome, a full size outside astro, the changing room facilities, the showers, the lads don't have any reason to fail.* (Jimmy interview - coach)

> *I think in terms of an environment I think it's fantastic, it's second to none it really is elite, from the training pitches to the gymnasium, to the education, to the psychology bit of football…I think if someone comes in and they don't make it as a professional footballer they can't moan about anything else, other than they're not good enough at the end of the day.* (Roy interview - coach)

Setting the environment up in a way that mirrors the level of excessive support at first team level was perceived to prepare the minority who may progress to professional level and was criticised as reducing players' ability to develop key skills such as autonomy and

responsibility. The level of support given to players conflicted with staff's assertion that they took responsibility for their own development;

> *...in being too supportive you can actually become less supportive because if you're giving them too much material support for example they might be lacking the environment to develop their own individual selves because too much is being given for them.. ... The one guy who may make it in the premier league, you could argue that we are preparing them for that type of life.* (Owen interview – support staff)

> *As Ruth and I stood chatting in the classroom two kit men knocked and greeted us with "alright…we've got the boys kit for tour to bring in" – they preceded to shuttle 15 shiny new kit bags into the classroom. Once they were gone Ruth looked at me and shook her head "this is why they can't do anything for themselves, they get their bags packed for them".* (Observation - classroom)

Staff felt that the boys got treated as professional footballers too early which limited their ability to take responsibility for their development. It was acknowledged this may be across football; "*we don't train any accountability here, we don't train any independence here and this isn't HFC specific, this is probably just across football*" (Gavin interview – support staff). The young players in the English academy system may have it 'too good' in terms of support and resources and were not required to take responsibility for themselves, which diverged with the staff narrative that this was something that players should do. In contrast, the successful Scandinavian environments had limited resources which meant young athletes had to develop autonomy which became integrated into the group culture as a value (Henriksen, 2014). In the present study, the treatment of academy players as professionals was perceived to prepare them for the first team in one way; while also limiting the development of psychosocial skills such as individual responsibility and autonomy which were perceived as part of developing character and deemed crucial for success. Subsequently,

there was a tension between what staff felt was best for individuals (developing responsibility) versus what was best for the club (preparing players for the first team).

Academy life is regimented around a set schedule as players spend the majority of their time at the club – eating, training, doing their education and other developmental activities. Again, this was seen as a positive as it made it easy for players to focus on football however, it was also perceived to inhibit the development of autonomy and responsibility;

> *I just turn up and I'm told where to go.* (Smithy interview - scholar)

> *When I say everything is done for them, they come in the morning, their kit is given to them, they're told to be up at breakfast at 9, they're then told to be in the classroom at 10, they're then told to be in the physio room at 10.20, they're then told to be on the pitch at 10.30...they're then told to have lunch at 12.* (Roy interview – coach)

> *I think we've become that rigid in our programme that they know what we're doing every day.* (Dave interview - coach)

The controlled schedule in the academy also resulted in a disconnection between how coaches and staff wanted players to develop responsibility to drive their own development and the opportunities players were given to do so. In fact, developing the capacity to withstand repetition and routine was viewed a crucial feature of life in professional football. Staff spoke about how repetition is part of the process of becoming an elite player and a reflection of life in the first team;

> *You've got to be able to deal with boredom... cause a footballers life ultimately sucks, academy lifestyle is similarly monotonous and planned out and we're scared to tell them you will have your life planned out so you come in at 8.15 for breakfast, you go to the gym at 8.40, you go and you will have media from 9.30 til 10 you'll go and train from 10.30 til 12 you'll then go home.... and you're doing that monotonous*

lifestyle for 15 years when you're meant to have the most fun. (Gavin interview –

support staff)

This repetition was identified as an important challenge for the players moving onto the

scholarship phase and the young players themselves needed to be able to deal with the

boredom. Players varied in their ability to adapt to this; however, many recognised that

repetition was part of elite football and could help them to improve so needed to be accepted

"*You just gotta get on with it so, cause training at the end of the day it makes you better, even*

if you're doing the same stuff it still makes you better" (Tazly interview - scholar). Players

discussed how the general day-to-day monotony increased as the season progressed, as

exemplified in the following focus group discussion with scholars;

> *I could have told you at the start of the year like what we're doing today, it's just like*
>
> *the same thing over and over again* (Tazly)
>
> *Yeah, I feel like I need a new challenge* (Tom)
>
> *A bit of variety* (Alex)
>
> *And...knowing that we have the same thing next year.* (Smithy)

This led to players experiencing frustration and boredom which impacted engagement levels

in training. Together the excessive support and regimented scholarship schedule demonstrate

that whilst staff acknowledged it was important that players took responsibility for their own

development, paradoxically many aspects of day-to-day life in the academy limited

opportunities for the players to do this.

There was a consensus amongst staff that the academy needed to provide more

opportunities for the players to take ownership and accountability for their development; "*I*

think we could be better on ownership....that's something I'm looking at because I do believe

that if you think you own something you do it a lot better, you look after it more" (Dave

interview - coach) and "*I think maybe we need to give them a little bit more ownership but in*

ways where... they can think for themselves" (Matty interview – support staff). Whilst it was known amongst staff that more needed to be done, there appeared to be some uncertainty on how this may happen in an environment where excessive support was provided to prepare players for the first team football. This has implications for a SP who could advise staff and work at a system level to balance ownership with support, for example the creation of opportunities for players to make decisions in training / competitions followed by supportive reflection.

This section has demonstrated that artefacts and espoused values allow for some surface level insight into the academy culture (the importance of players taking responsibility as an element of displaying the right character), however a deeper look into the core of the organisational culture, the basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) was needed to establish what was "really going on" (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018) (prioritising football and preparing players for the first team). In line with the HEA the organisational culture was critical in integrating the interactions between the environment's preconditions and processes and limited the extent to which favourable material and financial resources were able to support individual player development.

Communication gap

Communication was a key factor shaping players' experiences within the academy. Communication practices relating to players' progress were often unclear, and players and coaches did not necessarily share understandings about players' development. A number of players acknowledged that they would like more one-to-one conversations with coaches away from the pitch; *"There's not enough like meetings with the coaches like one to one or you and a few coaches. I'd like more support in my development off the pitch, talking about your development is quite scarce, how you improve…in that respect"* (Tom interview - scholar).

One of the challenges for players was gaining understanding of how well they were doing and what this meant for their future. This meant that players relied on interpreting messages and activities at the club which often could be ambiguous or inconsistent. One source of information that players used to ascertain their progress was selection for training with higher level teams. The academy shared facilities with the U23s and first team which allowed players to experience training up with groups at a higher level; *"I think there's been fantastic opportunities for them over the last 2 years because there's been managers in place where they've had opportunities to train (with 1ˢᵗ team)"* (Dave interview - coach). Players often perceived that being invited to train up indicated that they were perceived to be performing well; *"You'll be doing well in the 18s then they'll call you over"* (Alex interview - scholar). Player selection however was based on a number of factors which included that they were training well but also that a spare player was required for a specific position, or because they were not selected for the 18s team and not needed in preparation for an upcoming game; *"Often it's spur of the moment like all of a sudden someone will get injured from the 1st team and they'll be like oh we need a midfielder and you go like whoever's there, you go. I think we need to be smarter as a group to say look who do you think should go up?"* (Roy interview - coach). Subsequently, being selected to play with a higher squad did not necessarily mean that a player was performing well.

Management acknowledged the potential danger of mixed messages from training up and how this was currently being talked about amongst staff; *"lots of boys are getting an opportunity to train [with the first team] but the mixed messaging that can come out of that is damaging… it's something we're talking about more, how best to manage that"* (Paul interview – management staff). Providing young players with an opportunity to step up to compete in a higher level age group under pressure has the potential to facilitate the transition to the first team (Christensen et al., 2011) and has a number of benefits for psychosocial

development including an opportunity to develop resilience if this process is purposeful. Fundamental to this process is a subsequent review and support from coaches to help to ensure positive development and progression from such experiences. There was an awareness from staff that more needed to be done in terms of communication and managing expectations of how players are performing;

> *I think we've got to deliver the messages so people understand, you know, so that anybody who is with 23s preseason…we'll say "listen, you're there by default, cause 6 of the players are with the first team on the tour, so don't think you're an u23 player and don't start sulking when you're playing in the 18s for us again this season, cause when the 6 come back, they're better than you at the minute… I think it is managing the expectation, it's communicating more.* (Dave interview – coach)

Coaches feared that if players knew that they might not advance, they might lose their motivation; "*you don't want to dampen their dreams or impact their motivation, what I think we could do more is just be honest about the realities that not everyone will play in our first team*" (Paul interview – management). This again illustrates tension between what might be good for an individual and what is good for the club and resulted in uncertainty arising from the mixed messages which conflicted with staff's assertion that players knew where they were in the development process (self-awareness).Valuable preconditions (sharing facilities with the first team) and processes (opportunities to train with the first team) which can benefit player development were limited due to the communication practices in the club.

Staff were well aware that most players would not make a professional career in the game. The academy experience included a Life Plan curriculum, a key aim of which was to illuminate and educate players around the risks and short-term nature of a career in professional football.

> *[Tony began] In life you need people who tell it like it is; it is going to be a difficult journey here – if you're really lucky some of you may have a career until you're 34. For some of you it will end at 18, most of you it will end at 18, you need to be prepared for life after, you can't be constantly looking back and holding onto the glory days.* (Observation – Life Plan)

Some players were able to reiterate these messages; *"[Life Plan's] useful for a footballer cause anything could go wrong at any point"* (Mikey interview - scholar), however these messages appeared to be overlooked by some;

> *They probably say like one of us to our faces to scare us init but deep down they know that all of us are very good players so yeah I think...they wouldn't admit it, you'll never hear it from them but most of us will make it at the top.* (Aaron interview – scholar)

> *Some of us are probably better than some of the first team players but just cause they're 24, we're 17, it's looked at different.* (Mikey interview – scholar)

Although provided with advice about the low odds of becoming a first team player, most if not all of the boys were certain that they would succeed. The messages provided by the life plan were limited by the inconsistent communication practices relating to players' individual progress discussed above. This led to uncertainty and confusion for some players around where they were in their career and for some, impacted self-awareness (a key facilitator of character) as well as motivation.

Communication was available for those players who took the initiative however, the majority of players did not have the personal agency to approach the coaches resulting in limited opportunities for players to discuss their progress. Only one player in his interviews said he felt he could initiate communication with coaches;

They'll like me to go up and talk to them individually because it shows that I wanna

get better and it just proves a point that I've got the character to go and do it. Even if

people think they can't......I think cause our coaches are quite intimidating, if you

actually go and talk to them they're alright, it's just on the pitch they seem

scary...like...the first time I went to speak to them I was probably nervous....but my

Dad actually said go and talk to them even though I know you don't want to go and

do it cause I know it's the right thing to do. (Smithy interview - scholar)

Here Smithy acknowledges that not many players approached the coaches like he did as they could be intimidating, however when they did the coaches were willing to help. Larsen et al. (2013) found that an open organisational culture was an important feature that contributed to the success of the football TDE in Denmark. At HFC, the coaching office was an intimidating place for players and some support staff. Smithy was able to realise and take personal responsibility for driving his own development by pushing himself out of his comfort zone and speaking to the coaches. Nesti (2010) suggested that players may show a reluctance to speak to a coach due to their capacity to make influential decisions regarding their future. This was recognised by Matty "*They feel they definitely can't talk to the coaches cause they're scared that they will disagree with what they're saying, then not pick them for the team*" (Matty interview – support staff). Mikey spoke about impression management in front of coaches; "*You gotta know when to act how you act, at the end of the day they're making the decision*" (Mikey interview – scholar). This player normalised the lack of explanation around selection, accepting it was their responsibility to know why themselves. Mikey explained "*Na, they don't need to tell you why. If it's because I've not played good then I know*" (Mikey - scholar informal catch up). Data highlighted that the majority of players were reluctant to approach and speak directly with the coaches "*I feel like if you question them it's the wrong thing…They don't like being questioned*" (Kieran - scholar focus group). This

again is contrary to the open organisational culture and strong two-way communication between coach and athletes which are key features of successful TDEs from a HEA.

As well as reluctance for players to speak to coaches directly, some support staff felt they were unable to fully express their opinions to those in positions of power, for example a number of support staff highlighted ways in which they felt players psychosocial development could be better addressed, however they felt were not in a position within the academy to influence this;

> *You'd have to overhaul so much that actually it becomes really easy in this environment just to slot yourself in, come in, collect your wage, help those that you can, but also just accept that you can't change something too much, and just fall into line with that.* (Gavin interview – support staff)

English professional football is traditionally known for a hierarchical structure (Champ at al., 2020) and the power hierarchy observed in the academy posed challenges to open communication which impacted the psychosocial development (e.g. self-awareness) of academy players. The SP could help to create a psychologically safe space that encourages everyone to speak up (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

Lack of shared understanding

A third key element that impacted the intention-action gap was a lack of shared understanding as to how psychosocial development may be achieved and implemented within the academy. A lack of shared understanding was evidenced in a number of ways but due to the scope of this paper will be discussed in relation to the resilience aspect of character. The underlying assumption that *adversity is the name of the game,* was found to be consistent across all levels of culture, it was related to artifacts that *character is key*, the espoused value of *showing the right character* as well as the wider football culture at the macrolevel. Players and staff alike recognised and accepted that adversity is part of elite football; "*It's like a*

rollercoaster, Tony says it a lot, you have ups you have downs" (Alex interview - scholar).

Coach narratives often focused on football as a tough and unforgiving industry that players themselves need to find a way of dealing with through personal qualities; *"that's football and they gotta deal with that…you've just gotta find a way of dealing with it, just find a way, find a way"* (Roy interview - coach). Resilience was often characterized by staff as personal qualities, something that players needed to have or to acquire through experiences and the onus was found to be on the players to work through challenges;

> *It's how you deal with not being picked every week, more likely to be injured cause the intensity is greater…and I think some of them find that very difficult.* (Dave interview – coach).

> *All of a sudden two players walk in who they never even heard of who they acquired from somewhere else abroad and you know it's deal with it, you know, it don't matter where you start it's where you finish.* (Tony interview – management staff)

An emphasis on how players themselves react and deal with the challenges that academy life brings is problematic given that literature (e.g. Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) has demonstrated the need to move away from the traditional view of resilience as internal, personal characteristics to consider the environment which cultivates resilience. Sarkar and Page (2020) emphasised the importance for definitional clarity around resilience to aid the development of individual resilience. "Rather than being a fixed trait that individuals either have or don't have (which puts the individual at the heart of resilience development), resilience is a context-specific capacity that can be developed and trained over time (which recognises the role of the environment in developing resilience)" (Sarkar & Page, 2020, p.4). In the academy under study, the narrative around resilience as a personal trait hampered the development of resilience. There was no active teaching of resilience in the academy, players had to simply learn to cope and keep up the hard work. Staff expressed the need for players to show

positive coping strategies and associated confidence and staying positive with being able to handle challenges;

>*It's dealing with not being selected and keeping that confidence in your own ability that is difficult. Sometimes those players strive to be better players, but most of them just fall off.* (Matty interview – support staff)

>*[If deselected the coaches]...would be expecting the player to control their emotions, to continue to demonstrate the same training load levels...to show that they're ready if and when called upon.* (Harry interview – management staff)

Some players echoed the importance of positive coping strategies and gave examples of the need to get themselves through challenges by staying positive, believing in themselves and working hard to prove themselves.

>*I wasn't really playing...I just had to get through that period, it's hard but you gotta, your whole career will be like that, just keep telling yourself that it will come and believe in yourself and your ability....I just gotta keep training to my maximum.* (Alex interview - scholar)

Coaches recognised that resilience could be developed because the environment 'demands' it and whilst the importance of pushing players out of their comfort zone was recognised, there was limited attention given to how players could be supported to recover from stressors effectively; "*You gotta challenge them…stretch them where they're a bit uncomfortable, throw different things at them and see how they react, get them out of that comfort zone….we've dropped off on that*" (Dave interview - coach). It was observed that the academy had a haphazard approach to supporting players with the challenges they were facing and management conceded it was disorganised;

>*We have a scattergun approach to the ability to actually engage with those individuals [who can't cope] and to whether either explain the decision making*

process or to identify the challenges they may be facing and to actually have in place some kind of action plan for them to be able to cope. (Harry interview - management staff)

Subsequently, while players recognized the importance of resilience, they were less able to identify how the coaches and academy environment clearly helped in their efforts to deal with setbacks. Some struggled to articulate how they coped or suggested they were not always equipped to deal with the different challenges they faced in the academy; "*I didn't really cope with it well I just sort of got through it*" (Smithy interview - scholar). Some of the boys felt alone when they faced challenges, others felt that support was there if needed it but data suggested that many didn't use this support.

Staff believed players needed to experience challenges in the academy to prepare them for the harsh realities of the professional game, they felt demands could help players develop their resilience but they were not consistently aware about how this may best be implemented and the role that support played in this process. Within the academy there is a need for a more collaborative approach to understanding and developing resilience and clearer communication is central to this process. The academy would benefit from a multidisciplinary team (MDT) of staff meeting regularly to ensure a shared understanding amongst staff on the resilience of each player and agreeing actions that need to be taken at system level (Green et al., 2020). First resilience must be operationalised within the academy to ensure definitional clarity and a shared understanding that it is a process that develops over time (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Definitional clarity would enable a "common language" and better communication around resilience throughout the academy, which would allow for a more accurate and consistent approach to resilience development (Sakar & Page, 2020).

Analysis revealed that at the level of the macroenvironment, the wider English youth football culture contributed to the lack of shared understanding around resilience (and wider

psychosocial development) within the academy. There was a lack of clear guidance from the FA and the EPPP in relation to the implementation of SP, including the importance of it being embedded at an environmental level. Academy management recognised that whilst they felt like they needed a full time SP they were still trying to work out what this looked like for the academy as they were aware there were different experts in different fields and they were still trying to determine what may be best for the academy;

> *I think we do need someone in full time….with all the mental health stuff...working out the relationship between performance and wellbeing and being aware there are different experts in different fields such as neuroscience, clinical etc it is trying to decide what it looks like for the academy* (Paul informal interview – management staff).

> *It (SP) is still very much in its infancy here which is weird because we've had some form of psychological support here for at least 10 years… things like the EPPP mean you have to have a psychologist on board* (Gavin interview – support staff).

The uncertainty around various experts in different fields was identified as a constraint for implementing SP in the academy, this is unsurprising given there are currently several fragmented approaches to SP delivery and many people engaged in practice are not registered, chartered or licensed psychologists (Anderson, 2005). There is a need for more specific guidelines in relation to the delivery of sports psychology within the EPPP framework.

Exploring player psychosocial development through the HEA has established new understandings which extend prior research in a number of ways. In line with the HEA, the organisational culture served as a foundation for understanding the environment. Work from a HEA to date (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; Larsen et al., 2013) has found that a strong and coherent organisational culture, demonstrated by consistency between the

artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions is a central factor in explaining the success of a TDE. Whilst there was coherence between some levels of culture at HFC, analysis of the deepest level of organisational culture, the basic underlying assumptions (Schein, 1990) revealed competing environmental demands between individual holistic development and the club's core marker of success (to produce players) and thus incongruence in the organisational culture of the academy. This was associated with a lack of consistent expectations and lived behaviours which had a number of consequences for player development including uncertainty and confusion. In this way despite HFC being considered successful in terms of bringing players through the academy, the organisational culture was found to be a constraint of the microenvironment that impacted psychosocial development within the academy. Studies from a HEA approach to date have defined successful TDEs as those teams or clubs that manage to effectively develop their young athletes to make a successful transition to the senior elite level. Whilst HFC was deemed successful in terms of bringing players through the academy, there were several constraints involved in players' psychosocial development and some factors which were perceived to contribute to the success for the club (producing players) were not always in line with success for individual players. This suggests that categorising the effectiveness of the environment in binary terms as successful or unsuccessful may be oversimplified in this case and addressing the constraints involved in psychosocial development could further contribute to sporting success (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2014; Larsen et al., 2013).

Applied implications

In emphasising the impact of environmental factors influencing the intention action gap for psychosocial development, this study highlights a need for SP practitioners to work at an environmental level, to increase shared understanding around the environmental factors impacting psychosocial development and how psychosocial development may be better

implemented within the academy environment. We recommend that SP delivery within an elite academy environment includes an initial period of observation (Champ et al., 2020) to assess the environment and understand what is needed to optimise it for psychosocial development. The HEA can provide SPPP and researchers within an English football academy context with a valuable framework to obtain this understanding.

A paradox emerged in the data analysis; whilst there is a need for SPs to work at an environmental level to shape cultural change and embed psychosocial development into an academy's environment constraints within the organisational culture (and wider football culture) can limit the SPs role and working practices and prevent impact at the environmental level. The SPPP recognised challenges to his role at the scholarship level, for example there were no clear agreed outcomes of the role and it predominantly involved individual acute support. The effectiveness of psychosocial development depends on the breadth and depth of commitment from all stakeholders (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016) at both a micro and macro level (including the FA and the Premier League). SP as a discipline needs to take more responsibility to educate the Premier League / the FA as to what best SP practice looks like within an academy including the need for delivery at an environmental level, this can then be communicated to the clubs to help to create psychologically informed environments that support the development of psychosocial skills (Green et al., 2020). Alongside this, professional SP training and education routes must provide a focus on working at an environmental level (including an understanding of organisational culture) to enable SP practitioners to be aware of delivering support at this level. The use of MST by novice practitioners is too simple to apply in complex ATDEs.

Conclusion

This study examined how an in-depth understanding of one environment, HFC academy, gained through the HEA, may help to clarify the interplay between the TDE and player

psychosocial development. An intention-action gap between the awareness of the importance of players developing and displaying psychosocial skills and the academy approach to embedding and prioritising this was identified. Although the espoused value to show the right character was felt by some to be the most significant characteristic in terms of progression to professional level, paradoxically, it was given the least attention in terms of development. This supports prior research in elite football which has shown that psychosocial skills were inadequately addressed relative to other aspects of performance despite their perceived importance (e.g. Mills et al., 2012). This study extends the literature base by critically analysing the ways in which the environment contributed to the intention action gap. Three key ways in which the environment impacted players psychosocial skills and development in this context were identified and evaluated; the organisational culture, a communication gap and lack of shared understanding around psychosocial development. The complexity of HFC as an ATDE **evidences** the need for complexity in the analysis of talent development and psychosocial development. This is in line with the HEA assumption that the complex world does not fit a simple linear model, rather constituent parts interact to form a whole system which is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts. This work was the first to apply the HEA to an English TDE, this provided a valuable framework to assess the academy and emphasise the central role of the environment in player psychosocial development.

In this study players' psychosocial development is limited by the environmental constraints of elite football. Whilst there is hope that this work will make a real impact on how the industry supports players' psychosocial development it cannot be overlooked that the English football culture is known to be reluctant to change (Champ et al., 2020). If the holistic psychosocial development of young people is paramount, English football must be transformed.

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