

1 **An exploration of young professional football players' perceptions of the**
2 **talent development process in England**

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3 **Abstract**

4 The identification and development of players in English professional football has
5 become an increasingly significant topic of debate given the historical perceived
6 underperformance of the English national team at international tournaments. To enhance
7 understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced by English youth footballers, the
8 authors explore the developmental experiences of English professional football players from
9 different levels of the English football pyramid. Professional players ($N = 11$) from football
10 clubs in the top four professional divisions in England took part in individual semi-structured
11 interviews, which were analysed inductively using thematic analysis. The data revealed three
12 interrelated themes that were perceived to mediate player identification and development
13 pathways at professional clubs. Pathways for young players to progress and experience first-
14 team competitive football differed when the level of the league that the players operated
15 within was considered, with significant issues also raised relating to the suitability of the
16 under 21 league structure, the importance attached to the educational welfare of young
17 players, and variations in the identification of player attributes. This study sheds new light on
18 the priorities and processes of talent development and education provision in English
19 football.

20 *Keywords: Talent identification, talent development, association football, soccer, education.*

1 **1. Introduction**

2 The development of talent in football continues to be a subject of considerable
3 academic scrutiny and popular debate (Pain & Harwood, 2008). In England, criticisms have
4 often been aimed at the talent development system in relation to the low percentage of young
5 players progressing from academies to not only earn professional contracts, but to establish
6 themselves as first team regulars, particularly in the English Premier League (EPL). For
7 some, the creation, development and commercial power of the EPL in addition to competing
8 interests between the EPL, The English Football Association (FA) and professional clubs
9 underpinning the complex governance of the English football system have constrained
10 opportunities to develop players for the national team (Bullough & Jordan, 2017). The
11 formation of the EPL in 1992 has led to unprecedented levels of finance, sponsorship, and
12 television rights deals (Webb, 2017) and increasing trends and opportunities for wealthy
13 owners to purchase EPL clubs (Nauright & Ramfjord, 2010).

14 The change in financial landscape has enabled EPL clubs to continue to attract and
15 purchase some of the world's most proficient football players. Indeed, figures from the
16 2014/15 season show a €3.4bn spend on signing players (Poli, Ravenel, & Besson, 2015).
17 This is despite evidence suggesting quantitative longitudinal match performance
18 characteristics (i.e., performance between UK and non-UK nationals in the EPL) to be similar
19 (Bush, Archer, Barnes, Hogg, & Bradley, 2017), and recent youth successes such as England
20 under 17s winning the World Cup and being finalists in the EUROs, the Under 19s winning
21 the EUROs, and the Under 20 team winning their World Cup, all in 2017. Alongside the
22 increased outlay on player recruitment, there exists a continued decline in the number of EPL
23 starting players eligible to represent England (Bullough & Jordan 2017; Ray, 2014; Rumsby,
24 2016). Indeed, in the 2015-16 season, 66.4% of registered players in the EPL were not
25 eligible to play for the English national team (Poli, Ravenel, & Besson, 2016). Despite

1 regulations by Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) imposing home-grown
2 quotas on clubs to create more opportunities for indigenous talent (i.e., those that have been
3 trained by their club, or another club of the same national association, for at least three years
4 between the age of 15 to 21 years), the migration of overseas footballers has been argued to
5 stifle the development of indigenous talent, taking its place, or marginalizing it (Elliott &
6 Weedon, 2011; see also, Professional Footballers Association, 2007).

7 The need to develop home-grown or domestic players has been recognized both
8 nationally by the FA and on a European level by UEFA (see e.g., Bullough & Mills, 2014;
9 Ford et al, 2012; Howie & Allison, 2016) to support the integrity and meaningfulness of
10 international competition alongside the desire for national success. The talent identification
11 and development approaches adopted in football have considered a range of factors including
12 the quantity and quality of training required to reach top level performance (Côté, Lidor, &
13 Hackfort, 2009) in a time-economic model (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2008)
14 based on early talent identification and early engagement in different forms of football
15 practice and participation. As such, national associations and professional clubs have sought
16 to devise the most efficient and effective ways to create and establish putative optimal
17 environments to identify and develop football talent.

18 In an attempt to maximise engagement within the talent pool available for English
19 football, the FA have launched three initiatives since the turn of the century: The *Football*
20 *Development Strategy* (The FA, 2001), the *National Game Strategy* (The FA, 2011), and the
21 *FA Chairman's England Commission Report* (The FA, 2014). To promote further support
22 for English football players within professional football clubs, the EPL with support from
23 The FA and the English Football League (EFL) have launched the Elite Player Performance
24 Plan (EPPP; The Premier League, 2011). The EPPP encourages increasing isomorphism in
25 the structure and management of English football academies whilst encouraging individual

1 clubs to develop their own unique and bespoke philosophies for player recruitment and
2 development. The EPPP champions a long-term player development model, which focuses on
3 the interface between the technical/tactical, psychological, physical, and social elements of
4 the players' environment (Nesti & Sulley, 2015; The Premier League 2011). The programme
5 follows three developmental stages: (a) the Foundation Phase (under five to under 11); (b) the
6 Youth Development Phase (under 12 to under 16); and (c) the Professional Development
7 Phase (under 17 to under 21). These stages have subsequently been used to classify football
8 academies into four categories:

- 9 • Category 1 – The Optimum Development Model. The academy has to
10 demonstrate the regular graduation of players into the Premier League and the
11 wider professional game, provide typical total access up to 8500 hours of
12 coaching, evidence a performance pathway from under 5 to under 21 players
13 with registration from under 9. Category 1 academies must also provide the
14 Foundation Phase, Youth Development Phase and the Professional
15 Development Phase.
- 16 • Category 2 – The Development Model. The academy has to demonstrate the
17 ability to graduate players into the Premier League from time to time and
18 regularly graduate players into the wider professional game, provide typical
19 total access up to 6,600 hours of coaching, evidence a performance pathway
20 from under 5 to under 21 players with registration from under 9. Category 2
21 academies must also provide the Foundation Phase, Youth Development Phase
22 and Professional Development Phase.
- 23 • Category 3 – The Entry Level Development Model. The academy has to
24 demonstrate the regular graduation of players into the professional game and
25 develop players capable of progression into Category 2 and 1 Academies,

1 provide typical total access up to 3600 hours of coaching, evidence a
2 performance pathway from under 5 to under 21 with registration from under 9.
3 Category 3 academies must also provide a Part Foundation Phase, Youth
4 Development Phase and Professional Development Phase.

- 5 • Category 4 – The Late Development Model. The academy has to demonstrate
6 the ability to graduate players into the professional game, provide typical total
7 access up to 3200 hours of coaching, evidence a performance pathway from
8 under 17 to under 21 with registration from under 17. Category 4 academies
9 must also provide the Professional Development Phase.

10 (The Premier League, 2011, p. 31)

11 A typical category one academy in England has a reported annual spend between £2.3
12 and £4.9million (Larkin & Reeves, 2018). Consequently, there are increasing expectations for
13 a return on investment (Nesti & Sulley, 2015) by identifying and developing youth talent in
14 more efficient and effective ways. Given the changing landscape in the development of
15 young football players in England and the associated implementation of the EPPP, it is
16 important to ascertain how such organisational changes are perceived by professional football
17 players who have encountered and transitioned through these newly established player
18 development environments (i.e., Categories 1 – 4). In the current study, we examine this
19 important issue through the implementation of semi-structured interviews with eleven
20 professional players from football clubs recruited from the top four professional divisions in
21 England.

22 **2 Review of literature and key concepts**

23 To date, much of the general literature on talent development has emphasised the
24 management of talent identification and development systems (see for example, De Bosscher,
25 De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006) and the devising and refinement of rationalistic

1 frameworks and models (Ford et al, 2010; Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2013).
2 Much of this work is underpinned by objective methodologies which propose that the
3 likelihood of successful talent development can be increased if optimal environments are
4 implemented. Many scholars have considered the development of youth football players in
5 England and European football from such perspectives (Bullough & Mills, 2014; Feichtinger
6 & Höner, 2014; Lund & Söderström, 2017; Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012; Taylor
7 & Bruner, 2012). Simultaneous to the recent advances in FA and EPL policy, scholars have
8 explored and examined talent development and progression in professional English football
9 contexts (Ford et al., 2012; Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014; Morris, Tod, & Eubank,
10 2016; Taylor & Bruner, 2012). In one of the first papers to consider the development of
11 English professional adolescent football players, Holt and Dunn (2004) described four major
12 psychosocial competencies held by the players: discipline (i.e., conforming dedication to the
13 sport and a willingness to sacrifice), commitment (i.e., strong motives and career planning
14 goals), resilience (i.e., the ability to use coping strategies to overcome obstacles), and social
15 support (i.e., the ability to use emotional, informational, and tangible support). A number of
16 these competencies have subsequently been substantiated by data collected with expert
17 developmental coaches working with Premier League and Championship clubs in England
18 (see, Mills et al., 2012).

19 Within their study, Mills et al. (2012) identified five overarching personal attributes
20 that were perceived to influence elite player development. Specifically, coaches described
21 how development was positively influenced by players' resilience, goal-directed attributes
22 (e.g., desire/passion), awareness, sport-specific attributes (e.g., coachability), and
23 intelligence. In addition to these personal attributes, Mills et al. (2012) forwarded a number
24 of environmental factors that impacted player development including significant others (e.g.,
25 coaches), culture of game (e.g., turnover of coaches), chance (e.g., getting injured), and

1 provisions (e.g., access to high-quality coaching). Recognizing the role that the environment
2 can have on academy player development, has shifted researchers' focus to the structure and
3 nature of the context surrounding English academy players.

4 Creating a successful football development setting requires consideration of the
5 physical environment, the psychosocial architecture, organizational functioning, and the core
6 operating system (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2013). Within this framework, past
7 scholars have placed particular importance on the role of the head coach. To elaborate, Mills
8 et al. (2013) note that head coaches are responsible for overseeing the operation of an
9 academy and, to effectively fulfil this duty, they require a repertoire of organizational,
10 management, and person liaison skills. These skills are important both during critical
11 transitions, such as when a player is attempting to progress from youth to senior squads
12 (Morris et al., 2016; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2015), and in the ongoing support of players
13 (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2012; Mills et al., 2013). Players' teammates can also act as key
14 social agents in their development within English football academies (Taylor & Bruner,
15 2012), and peer knowledge sharing has also been shown to positively impact player
16 development (Werner & Dickson, 2018). Players are expected to bond together to pursue
17 collective competition goals (e.g., winning matches), yet this objective is juxtaposed with
18 their personal desire to earn limited professional contracts, and the respect and social status of
19 their coach (Cushion & Jones, 2006).

20 Despite the fact that research has highlighted a multitude of social and environmental
21 factors that can impact upon talent development (Mills et al., 2013) and talent identification
22 (Christensen, 2009) in football, questions still remain about how this reflects player
23 perceptions of the talent identification and development process. For instance, Clarke,
24 Cushion and Harwood (2018) explored the perceived self-identity of academy players aged
25 11, and found socialization into academy culture at a young age indicated that effort was seen

1 as virtuous, and was used to judge performance in comparison to peers, which coincided with
2 a potentially problematic view by players of talent development as a linear process. However,
3 further to such beliefs at the outset of the talent development process, there is currently
4 limited understanding of the perceptions of senior professional players who have successfully
5 transitioned through the academy pathway (and are now playing professionally) in relation to
6 their experiences of the development processes and environments. In an attempt to address
7 these gaps in the literature, we seek to reveal the academy developmental experiences of
8 young senior professional footballers who have developed through the EPPP system and to
9 understand how these developmental experiences shaped their progression into professional
10 football. Specifically, the study centred on three research questions: (a) What has been the
11 talent identification and talent development experiences of senior professional players in
12 England; (b) The existence, focus and attention paid to player development through
13 educational provision at English football clubs; and (c) the extent of the first team
14 development opportunities which exist.

15 **3 Method**

16 ***3.1 Research design***

17 A qualitative research methodology was deemed most appropriate for addressing the
18 exploratory purpose of the study as it allows researchers to study things in their natural
19 settings and to interpret phenomena through the meaning people bring to them (Denzin &
20 Lincoln, 2011); that is, it allowed the researchers to understand the developmental process
21 from the perspectives of the professional footballers who have first-hand experience.

22 Participants were invited to share their stories and accounts of the development process in
23 conversations with a researcher, which were elicited through individual semi-structured
24 interviews.

25 ***3.2 Participants***

1 The sample comprised 11 English footballers playing professionally in the English
2 domestic leagues. Players were aged between 18 and 22 years at the time of interview, had
3 made on average 41 first team appearances, and had represented between 1 and 3 clubs.
4 Participants were selected based on their experience of playing at youth level for a club in
5 one of the four professional English leagues. Two of the players had represented youth teams
6 affiliated to clubs currently in the English Premier League, three had played for teams in the
7 English Football League (EFL) Championship, one had played for a team in the EFL League
8 One, and five players had represented youth teams affiliated to teams currently in the EFL
9 League Two. All players had developmental experiences within the context of the EPPP
10 policy. Table 1 outlines the experiences, playing position and current playing level of the
11 participants. Full league titles have been shortened, such as the English Premier League
12 (EPL), Scottish Premier League (SPL), the National League is the league below the four
13 professional leagues in England.

Table 1
Participant experience and background information

Players	Age at time of interview	Academy club level	Current club level	Playing position
Player 1	18	EPL	National League	Midfield
Player 2	21	EPL	SPL	Defence
Player 3	22	Championship	National League	Goalkeeper
Player 4	21	Championship	Championship	Midfield
Player 5	22	Championship	League Two	Defence
Player 6	22	League One	Championship	Midfield
Player 7	18	League Two	League Two	Midfield
Player 8	19	League Two	SPL	Defence
Player 9	18	League Two	National League	Midfield
Player 10	19	League Two	League Two	Defence
Player 11	19	League Two	National League	Midfield

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1 **3.3 Procedure**

2 Following institutional ethical approval, potential participants were identified and
3 contacted by either a gatekeeper known through personal contact, via e-mail, or in-person to
4 inform them about the nature of the study and to invite them to participate in an interview.
5 For those willing to participate, a mutually convenient time was arranged for a telephone
6 interview to take place between the interviewer and participant. Telephone interviews were
7 adopted because of the participants' diverse geographic locations and to allow greater
8 flexibility in interview scheduling given the participants' busy schedules (Holt, 2010; Sparkes
9 & Smith, 2014). However, when conducting interviews over the telephone, some of the
10 subtleties associated with physical interaction are lost (Sparkes & Smith, 2014); therefore, it
11 was important that the interviewer utilized strategies to ensure that the participants'
12 considered their views to be accurately heard and represented. These strategies centered on
13 establishing rapport with each of the participants and involved providing participants with a
14 background to the project and the interviewer's own experiences, and the opportunity to ask
15 any questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Prior to the interview commencing,
16 participants were reminded of appropriate ethical considerations (e.g., anonymity and
17 confidentiality, right of withdrawal) and provided their informed consent. When participants
18 began to recall similar vignettes and no new information was arising from the interviews,
19 data saturation was claimed and no further participants were recruited (cf. Bowen, 2008).

20 **3.4 Data collection**

21 All of the participants took part in individual semi structured interviews throughout
22 October 2016, with two members of the research team conducting the interviews. The
23 interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes (average 36 minutes). Using a semi-structured
24 interview format to direct interviews enabled the researcher to ask a set of pre-planned
25 questions derived from the study aims, whilst also allowing the discussion to follow the flow

1 of conversation and for participants to express their opinions and experiences (Sparkes &
2 Smith, 2014). Following a preliminary exchange to elicit rapport between the participant and
3 interviewer, the first set of questions asked participants to reflect on their experiences when
4 they were initially identified as talented (see Gulbin et al., 2013) (e.g., “Please can you
5 explain what happened from the moment you were initially spotted/scouted?”). Specifically,
6 questions attempted to capture when and how they were recruited to join the professional
7 football club.

8 In the next section of the interview, participants were asked questions pertaining to
9 the influence of training on their development (e.g., “Can you explain the training you
10 undertook in an average week?”). Within this section, particular consideration was given to
11 the balance and provision of football alongside education, and any possible consequences that
12 focusing/not focusing on both aspects may have had. Moving the discussion forward from
13 previous experiences to their current standing, participants were then asked about their
14 perceived and actual first-team opportunities (e.g., “Did you feel confident of making it into
15 the first team here?”).

16 Next, participants were asked to compare their experiences to their understanding of
17 those at other clubs (e.g., “When comparing the setup of your current club to the setup of
18 others, is there any difference in facilities, talent, or coaching quality?”). Here, discussions
19 explored the recruitment and presence of foreign players, training facilities, and the perceived
20 quality of other players at the club. Lastly, participants were asked to provide their opinions
21 on the existing talent identification and development system within English football and how
22 this system might function more efficiently. An example question within this section was:
23 “Drawing on your own experiences, do you think that the talent pathway and identification
24 system is helping to bring through talented players?” Before concluding the interview,
25 participants were offered the opportunity to provide any final reflections from their

1 experiences and were thanked for taking part. The interviews were digitally recorded in their
2 entirety and the audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim.

3 ***3.5 Data Analysis***

4 Interviews transcripts were analysed inductively using thematic analysis (Braun,
5 Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Thematic analysis can provide analysis of people's experiences in
6 relation to an issue or the factors and processes that influence phenomena (Braun et al.,
7 2016). In relation to the present study, thematic analysis was therefore deemed appropriate as
8 it enabled players' experiences of the developmental process to be understood and the factors
9 that influence it be identified. To begin, the transcripts were read several times by the first
10 author to allow familiarization and immersion within the data. Next, codes were generated to
11 label key features or interesting aspects of the transcripts. Codes were then clustered into
12 themes, with each theme having a central organizing concept (i.e., unique and important
13 characteristic in the data; Braun et al., 2016). Themes were then reviewed against the coded
14 data and the entire dataset and, where necessary, revised to ensure that the data were correctly
15 represented; this also allowed the author to ensure the story from the data was being told in a
16 compelling and coherent fashion relative to the research questions.

17 At this stage in the analysis, two colleagues independently reviewed the proposed
18 themes to check whether they were plausible and consistent with the data set. Based on these
19 discussions, the themes were then finalised and their names altered to more accurately reflect
20 the content of the theme. The last stage in the analysis involved writing a report of the
21 findings (Braun et al., 2016). During this stage, the existing analytical writing was compiled,
22 developed, and edited into the subsequent Results and Discussion section, to portray the story
23 emerging from the data. To support reader interpretation, the findings are accompanied with
24 illustrative quotes for each of the codes.

25

1 **3.6 Trustworthiness**

2 A number of criteria were used to underpin the quality and rigor of the current piece
3 of qualitative research. First, understanding first-team players' perceptions of the
4 developmental process was considered to be a worth topic of exploration given the high
5 numbers of young players who fail to transition to first-team squads and to successfully
6 obtain professional contracts. Second, to ensure credibility and rich rigor, players were
7 recruited based on their first-hand experience of the developmental process and
8 methodological procedures were reported comprehensively (e.g., inclusion of an interview
9 guide across interviews). Third, linkages were sought between the aims of the research, the
10 researchers' approach to enquiry, the design and procedures used, and the study findings to
11 establish meaningful coherence and methodological integrity (Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz,
12 Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017). Fourth, a member checking process took place where the
13 participants were sent the completed transcripts to verify their authenticity and accuracy
14 through respondent validation (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016; Thomas,
15 2017). No participants questioned the legitimacy of their transcripts and therefore the
16 transcripts were accepted as accurate reflection of the interview process.

17 **4 Results and Discussion**

18 The purpose of the present study was to explore and compare the academy
19 experiences of professional football players from different levels of the English professional
20 football pyramid. In so doing, we add a unique perspective to the growing body of literature
21 on the development of youth professional footballers in England (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Mills
22 et al., 2014; Morris et al., 2016). In light of the recent introduction of the EPPP, participants
23 were asked to reflect on their personal experiences and to offer their opinions on how talent
24 identification and development could be enhanced for the benefit of talented English
25 footballers. Findings offer insight into players' personal development, barriers to that

1 development, and potential solutions to these issues. Specifically, data are considered and
 2 discussed in relation to three substantive themes derived from the data analysis process:
 3 Player Experiences of Talent Identification Criteria, Player Development through Education,
 4 and First Team Development Opportunities. For clarity, the initial themes derived following
 5 the coding process which were finalised into the substantive themes, are documented in Table
 6 2 with accompanying representative quotations. Participants could refer to a theme more than
 7 once during their interview.

Table 2
Initial themes leading to substantive themes

Initial Themes	Substantive Themes	Representative Quotation
Player technical development Recruitment processes and experiences Quality of coaching available	Player Experiences of Talent Identification Criteria	"...the main categories were your pace, strength, height, and then your technical ability."
Breadth of the provision of courses Educational welfare Preparation for non-progression	Player Development through Education	"education is important but, at the end of the day, it comes down to ability. And if you're a really good player, but not academically [good], then it won't affect your chances of making it."
Available pathways to the first team Differences in opportunity between leagues Quality of competition provided	First Team Development Opportunities	"if you play a lot of games and play well in League 2, then you are going to get picked up by bigger teams and push through the leagues."

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4.1 Player experiences of talent identification criteria

The increasing financial rewards available for footballing success continues to drive a talent identification arms race with clubs racing to devise effective strategies for identifying, securing, and then developing the best talent (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Historically, it has been suggested that young footballers have been identified as talented and recruited to academies based on their physical attributes (for a review, see Unnithan, White, Georgiou, Iga & Drust, 2012). However, alternative perspectives indicate a shift in criteria towards consideration of perceptual-cognitive skills (O'Connor, Larkin & Williams, 2016), technical attributes (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaerts, 2006) and psychological characteristics (Feichtinger, & Höner, 2014) and more recently sociological predictors (Reeves et al, 2018). Differences in talent identification criteria were described by the players in this study. A player from a League 2 academy noted changing preferences with their club aiming to identify players that were comparable to those that were most successful at the highest level of the sport at that moment in time:

When I was very young, they [the coaches and scouts] were looking for fast, powerful players. Then Barcelona started bossing it, so all scouts around the country switched to looking for clever, technical players, and that is what they are looking for now along with game intelligence, mentality and how players react to making mistakes.

The technical and psychological (e.g., ability to deal with failure, willingness to work hard) aspects to sport performance also appear to be important for academy recruitment within the Premier League:

I think especially at [club] they look for hard-work and dedication above it all . . . At the club they take everything into account from education, to the psychology aspect, to strength and conditioning, everything has a big say. Technical is also big because at [club] they want to pass the ball well and if you don't have the ability they aren't going to sign you.

However, in contrast to the more progressive talent identification approach considered above, one participant from a Championship academy suggested that physicality remained

1 the priority at his Club “the main categories were your pace, strength, height, and then your
2 technical ability.” Whereas players with experience of League 1 suggested in their club,
3 emphasis was placed on aggression over other factors, with one player stating that clubs were
4 looking “for an aggressive mentality. It’s not always about pretty football. Yeah [club] need
5 players to be aggressive.” This approach could be due to the level or standard of football, and
6 the perception of the type of league in which the young players are playing. A player from a
7 League 2 academy identified that he liked playing reserve team football against teams from
8 higher leagues, because the focus was on technical ability, rather than the perceived physical
9 aspects of the game in the lower leagues:

10 ... [club] reserves you play against teams who play football. Like playing against
11 [club name removed] for example, as they are an established Championship club,
12 and they want to play football properly. But if you are sent out on loan you will
13 be at team where the standard is lower and more about physicality. And for [club]
14 that is more suitable, because that’s the kind of league it is. It is all about being
15 physical and grinding out to get points.

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17 Talent identification by coaches has also been shown to be influenced by past
18 experiences, interpretations of what elite soccer entails, and the coaching culture within a
19 particular club (Lund & Söderström, 2017). Thus, a coach may be biased by previous
20 characteristics that have underpinned the development of a former youth player that
21 progressed to first-team football, which may favour or hinder current young players.
22 Moreover, there is suggestion that some English professional youth coaches perceive some
23 talent variables, such as psychological characteristics, as being semi-static (Miller, Cronin, &
24 Baker, 2015), implying that coaches may lack an appropriate and demonstrable
25 understanding of the talent development process (see also, Partington & Cushion, 2013).

26 Specific to the broader context of talent development environments in football,
27 emphasis on player well-being as part of the development process appear to be perceived
28 particularly favourably by youth players (Ivansson et al., 2015). However, even following the
29 implementation of research-informed approaches to coach education in football, which draw

1 on evidence to create a more structured, progressive, and integrated approach to youth
2 development (Gulbin et al., 2013; Lloyd et al, 2015a; Lloyd et al, 2015b), findings suggest
3 that there still appear to be gaps in coach knowledge of how to structure training practices
4 most effectively to enhance skill development (O'Connor, Larkin & Williams, 2018). It
5 therefore appears that further work is needed to identify how best to support coaches to
6 appropriately apply evidence-based practices in player development environments.

7 A possible consequence of the lack of exposure to first-team football in clubs higher
8 in the English football pyramid, is that the home-grown players fail to develop towards elite
9 and mastery levels (cf. Gulbin et al., 2013). To elaborate, one aspect of this development will
10 include learning to adapt to professional competition and, if players within these clubs are
11 unable to enrich their development with exposure to these experiences, then their progression
12 on elite and mastery pathways will be compromised. Consequently, Premier League clubs
13 may become further reliant on overseas players that have been developed in their home
14 nations. In contrast, the exposure to first team football within the lower levels, may afford
15 academy players greater developmental possibilities and, ultimately, better support their
16 progression.

17 ***4.2 Player development through education***

18 Football progression statistics suggest that only 0.5% of players registered in the
19 under nine age-group teams at Premier League and Championship clubs will make it into the
20 senior first team (Wilson, 2015). Given these figures, growing emphasis is required on young
21 players' non-footballing development, with particular attention needed on educational
22 provision to ensure alternative career pathways are in place (see, Platts & Smith, 2018).
23 Within the current study, some participants described how academies supported their non-
24 footballing development, with the following extract from an interview with a player from
25 Premier League academy highlighting the need for an alternative path of development:

1 Obviously, there are some doubts [about progressing to the first team], because such
2 a small percentage of players make it, so it is going to be hard ... I think it's
3 definitely important to have a back-up plan. At [club] we do Business and
4 Technology Education Council (BTEC) Sport awards, there is also a thing called
5 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) which we have been filling out recently to
6 try and find a back-up plan.

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8 These views were echoed by a player from a League 2 academy who, in the extract
9 below, describes how the importance of education was emphasized to his team by the club:

10 Before we even signed our scholarship all of us, about 30/40 lads, went through the
11 college system and what the education [offered] is ... there was a lot of emphasis that
12 'it is not just going to be football, there's a lot of work to do off the pitch as well'.
13

14 However, this support in terms of provision was not matched by the priorities
15 afforded to the, by clubs and players themselves. Resonating with Platts and Smith (2018),
16 for example, one player from a Championship club academy suggested that little emphasis
17 was placed on educational qualifications:

18 [There was] not really much focus [on education], no. There is always something like
19 'when you are a scholar you do your BTEC' or whatever. There is always some sort
20 of emphasis on the school, but . . . it is always football first. Education second.
21

22 The perceived secondary importance of education when compared to football, was
23 also described by another footballer who had come through a Championship academy. When
24 describing the factors that were important for being successful in football, he stated that
25 "education is important but, at the end of the day, it comes down to ability. And if you're a
26 really good player, but not academically [good], then it won't affect your chances of making
27 it."

28 The lower value placed on education by some young footballers and the perceived
29 mixed messages emerging from some academies is a challenge for football authorities as
30 educational support represents a central facet of player welfare (Platts & Smith, 2018). To
31 elaborate, achieving academic qualifications offers an alternative path for personal
32 development and safeguards routes to employment outside of football in the future. This is
33 particularly important for players who are not retained by a club (Pitchford, 2007) or when

1 they retire from sport (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Kuettel, Boyle, & Schmid,
2 2017). Supplementary or simultaneous education can offer these individuals an additional
3 skill set to enable them to embark on a new career (e.g., greater professional knowledge)
4 and/or provide them with an alternative social identity to that entwined in their sporting
5 persona. In addition, achieving educational attainment may also be important for the
6 development and success of retained players, with non-sporting holistic development
7 suggested to characterise thriving in elite sport performers (Brown, Arnold, Reid, & Roberts,
8 2017).

9 ***4.3 First team developmental opportunities***

10 Clubs within the Premier League receive substantial financial rewards for their on-
11 pitch success, which can be used to invest in the procurement of talented players (e.g., in
12 wages, signing-on fees) and in the development of other aspects of the Club, including
13 academy facilities (e.g., employment of highly qualified coaches, access to all-weather/indoor
14 training pitches; Mills et al., 2012). Within the present study, it was apparent that, if players
15 were given the opportunity to decide which club academy to join, participants selected
16 Premier League club academies based on these aspects; for example, one player from a
17 Premier League academy stated that “at the big clubs you have the best coaches, the best
18 facilities, and the best education. Therefore, it gives you a much better opportunity of making
19 it ... it was my best opportunity to progress.” However, the financial rewards associated with
20 success in the Premier League, were also considered to inhibit the development of young
21 players, with clubs suggested to be reluctant to develop young players to elite and mastery
22 levels through first-team opportunities at the risk of comprising team success and prize
23 money; as the following extract from a League 2 academy player illustrates:

24 I think at that level [the Premier League] there is a lot of pressure because fans want
25 trophies, so I think it is harder for them to put a player in and give them a run of 10
26 games, because there is so much more money and importance at that level.
27

1 It was apparent that development practices, specific to opportunities to transition into
2 the first team, created frustrations for players, with one player for a Championship academy
3 arguing that “the way they do it [development] in England isn’t good enough . . . As a young
4 pro, you think you’re getting close, but then the club bring someone in . . . and you’re
5 completely out of it again.” These frustrations may be exacerbated by the inconsistency in
6 the rhetoric of clubs and the reality of their player development pathways; as the following
7 extract from a player from a Premier League academy illustrates:

8 I think that they [clubs] always say that home-grown talent is what they strive to bring
9 through but, in recent years, more and more foreign players have been coming in . . .
10 They [the clubs] think foreign players can give more to the team, but I think it would
11 look better for the club if more home-grown players were coming through.
12

13 Although a lack of first-team opportunities was apparent from the experiences of
14 participants in Premier League and Championship academies, players in the lower
15 professional leagues believed that the development pathways for young, home-grown players
16 were relatively clear. For example, one player from a League 1 academy suggested that “the
17 club is very good at giving young players a chance . . . there is no player from the youth team
18 that hasn’t played in the first team this year. A high percentage of first team players came
19 through the academy.”

20 An additional factor thought to detrimentally affect the amount of first-team playing
21 time afforded to young players, is the lack of time managers perceive that they have to
22 achieve success (Flint, Plumley & Wilson, 2016; Thelwell, Wagstaff, Chapman & Kenttä,
23 2017; Wagstaff, Gilmore & Thelwell, 2016). This factor was recognized by one of the players
24 from a Championship academy, who stated that, “managers’ jobs are short term. If they have
25 three French lads who are more experienced than the English boys then they’ll pick them. If
26 managers lose two games in a row now, their jobs become immediately under pressure.” The
27 magnitude of this pressure and its detrimental impact on young players’ development
28 opportunities, was considered by participants to increase as a team progressed up the football

1 pyramid; as the following extract from an interview with a player from a Premier League
2 academy illustrates:

3 I don't think they [the club] offer the same opportunities as they might of [sic] used to.
4 If they were in League 1, like they were a few years back, they would give youngsters
5 more of an opportunity because it would be easier for them to do well. Now, because
6 they are competing for Europe, they have to be sure that the players are ready when
7 they are 17, 18, 19 years old, so there isn't much of a chance now really.

8
9 To overcome the lack of first team opportunities and to increase the amount of
10 competitive match-time available to their young players, clubs can choose to register a team
11 in the FA Under 21 (U21)¹ league system or they can send their players out on loan
12 arrangements to other clubs. Of these two options, some of the participants from the League
13 2 academies perceived going out on loan to be more beneficial than playing in the U21
14 League, because of the different development opportunities presented in the respective
15 pathways. For example, in the extract below, one player states how the U21 League does not
16 provide sufficient exposure to the pressures associated with first team football:

17 If you look at the U21 League, it doesn't compare to League 1 or League 2 first team
18 football. There's a lot of players who play in the U21s who, if they get released [from
19 their Premier League academy], will go on trial at League 1 and 2 clubs, but they will
20 keep dropping [down the leagues] ... I like the idea of being young, getting a lot of
21 first team professional matches under your belt early, playing in front of big crowds. I
22 was fighting relegation from the Football League on the last day of the season when I
23 was 19 and that's serious pressure which you wouldn't get in the U21 League.

24
25 The recognition that competitive football environments, even in the lower leagues,
26 provide development opportunities for players to adapt to the pressures associated with a
27 professional football career resonates with contemporary research perspectives, which
28 propose the need for learners to experience emotion-laden practice environments to optimize
29 skill development (Headrick, Renshaw, Davids, Pinder & Araújo, 2015). Indeed, playing
30 competitive football in one of the lower leagues of the football pyramid was considered by

¹ Interviews were conducted as the age limit for the former under 21 league was raised to an under 23 age limit. The league is now known as Premier League 2, which is an under-23 competition.

1 some participants to be a more beneficial pathway for progressing their footballing career.
2 For example, one player from an academy of a Championship side stated that “if you play a
3 lot of games and play well in League 2, then you are going to get picked up by bigger teams
4 and push through the leagues.” However, other participants still thought that there were some
5 benefits to be in a Premier League academy team and therefore play for the youth (U21)
6 team, as there was the belief that this would increase the chances of being offered a contract
7 from another club, should they be released. To illustrate, one player from a Premier League
8 academy suggested that “a lot of clubs will be attracted to players from an academy such as
9 my club, because it is a good Premier League academy, so you’re more likely to get offered
10 something somewhere else if you get released.”

11 **5 Conclusion**

12 The purpose of the present study was to explore and compare the academy
13 experiences of professional football players from different levels of the English professional
14 football pyramid. Results revealed three main themes encapsulating talent identification
15 criteria, player development through education, and first team development opportunities.
16 The opportunities for young players to progress to the first-team differed depending on the
17 level of the league that the players operated within, with significant issues also raised relating
18 to the suitability of the under 21 league structures.

19 Importantly, we highlighted that participants perceived that the decline in the number
20 of EPL players eligible to represent England (Ray, 2014) could be attributable to the
21 constraints limiting first-team experiences (e.g., the precarious nature of manager
22 employment), with the experiences themselves perceived as being an essential component of
23 the talent development process. That is, not only is the quality and quantity of practice
24 important in the development of expertise (Côté et al., 2009), but the current findings suggest
25 that the initial first-team opportunities should be recognized as part of the talent development

1 process and therefore integrated as part of a structured pathway and not simply seen as the
2 culmination of such a pathway. It follows that there was an over-arching recognition of
3 participants on the perceived importance of being exposed to competitive football
4 environments – on loan in a relatively lower league or with their own club – as this was
5 perceived to help players adapt to the pressures associated with a professional football career.
6 As such, this finding further highlights past research on the need for psychosocial
7 competencies such as resilience (Mills et al., 2012) and resonates with contemporary
8 perspectives, which propose the need for learners to experience emotion-laden environments
9 to optimize skill development (Headrick et al., 2015).

10 In support of previous findings in youth football, which suggested that social and
11 environmental factors that can impact upon talent development (Mills et al., 2013), the
12 current study revealed that participants perceived that there was variation between the talent
13 identification and development processes in professional football clubs. Some clubs,
14 particularly those in the lower-leagues, tended to emphasize physicality and aggression,
15 whereas other clubs placed importance on a variety of talent variables including
16 psychological (e.g., resilience) and perceptual-motor (e.g., technical and game intelligence)
17 aspects of performance. The latter emphasis on psychological and perceptual-motor
18 characteristics were highlighted as contemporary facets of talent in football, and as such,
19 future research would benefit from the identification of methods that measure and develop
20 processes such as psychological skills (Brown & Fletcher, 2017) and decision-making
21 (Pocock et al., 2017). The current study also revealed differences between clubs in the
22 perceived importance placed on player education. Talent development aimed at supporting
23 non-sporting holistic development has been found to support thriving in elite sport performers
24 (Brown et al., 2017) and as such, given that past studies suggest that educational support
25 represents a central facet of player welfare (Platts & Smith, 2018), future research would

1 benefit from identifying the programs to guide the implementation of education as part of
2 talent development programs.

3 Beyond research implications, the current findings may have significant practical
4 applications for coaches and sport teams, and implications for football governing bodies.
5 Specifically, to ensure that talented players achieve the pinnacle of their football
6 development, they need to be nurtured beyond the transition from academy to senior squads
7 (cf. Gulbin et al., 2013), by being exposed to the emotional and perceptual-motor demands of
8 professional competition. Based on the accounts provided by participants in this study, this
9 exposure may be best achieved through loan arrangements to clubs in lower professional
10 leagues. Although some participants stated that they preferred to play in the under 21 system,
11 others argued that the opportunities which arise through this system are not as prevalent as
12 those that exist from playing in the first team at lower league level. Players argued that
13 playing for a Premier League club would give them options if they are released or transferred.
14 Although this might be correct, clubs in the lower leagues offer competitive football
15 environments, providing the opportunity for players to be exposed to and experience
16 environments which can optimize skill development under pressure (Headrick et al., 2015).

17 A further issue associated to the requirement for competitive action is the short-
18 termism of a managers' career, given the demand for success. Participants identified that a
19 manager's career can be short, and in a bigger club, such as those in the Premier League or
20 the Championship, managers are less likely to "trust" a young player (Thelwell et al., 2017;
21 Wagstaff et al., 2016). In order to resolve this, further guidance should be disseminated by
22 the Premier League and also UEFA, in terms of increasing the number of indigenous young
23 players in a match day squad and team. However, it is recognized that a wider cultural change
24 in football, in terms of the inextricable relationship between professional teams and the

1 money derived from sponsorship and television deals is much more complex and difficult to
2 achieve.

3 A third implication emerging from the results, is the need for greater clarity in the
4 benefits of education alongside football development. Although education is recognized to be
5 important for player welfare within legislation (Platts & Smith, 2018), there is inconsistency
6 in the value placed on non-football skill learning across professional football settings,
7 suggesting greater efforts are required to inform and support this development. Given that
8 research has evidenced the importance of education for the wellbeing and welfare of players
9 (Platts & Smith, 2018), and that educational qualifications provide alternative career
10 opportunities outside football should they be released or retire from their club (Kuettel,
11 Boyle, & Schmid, 2017; Pitchford, 2007), a renewed focus and strategy directed towards the
12 importance of education for young players is required. Therefore, the EPPP should be
13 revisited, and the guidelines provided to clubs revised in order to provide increased impetus
14 and importance to the provision of education in the academy system.

15 Finally, there are divergent talent identification methods being implemented between
16 clubs, and participants' believed that this was dependent on the level and quality of the
17 particular league, and due to the increasing demands for a return on investment in the
18 academy system (Nesti & Sulley, 2015). Participants identified some progressive talent
19 identification approaches, whereas other participants believed that their experiences
20 suggested that physicality and aggression remained priorities at their club. The FA, Premier
21 League and EFL have attempted to move away from intensive and explicit focus on these
22 attributes, through the standardised structure and management of academies as part of the
23 EPPP, focusing on the technical/tactical, psychological, physical and social aspects of a
24 player's development and environment (Nesti & Sulley, 2015; The Premier League 2011).
25 This results in differences in the identification, training and development of players, and

1 potentially creates players who are not technically prepared for football at higher levels,
2 given the differences in approach between Premier League, Championship, League One and
3 League Two academies.

4 Notwithstanding the unique insights provided in the current study and the potential
5 implications of these initial findings, there are opportunities for future research to further
6 understanding in this area. First, the study was restricted to the experiences of footballers
7 within the English professional football pyramid, which limits the generalizability of the
8 findings to the experiences of footballers in professional academies in other countries and to
9 sportsmen and women in other professional sports (e.g., rugby union, cricket). In the future,
10 researchers may look to compare and contrast the experiences of players within professional
11 football academies in England with those in other countries or across sports. Second, this
12 study utilized retrospective interviews as the form of data collection. Retrospective data
13 collection might be influenced by recall bias (see, Prince, 2012), so future studies could
14 extend these findings by longitudinally monitoring the experiences of young players as they
15 progress through professional academies. This may enable reactive responses to players'
16 ongoing experiences and which may, ultimately, help maximise the development and success
17 of these young sport performers.

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