(SP) CAPTURING SOCIAL SUPPORT: THE REALITY OF DEVELOPING YOUNG PLAYERS IN PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL

David Richardson, David Gilbourne & Martin Littlewood
Liverpool John Moores University, **UK**

Introduction

Preparing young football players for the realities of professional football is the responsibility of the football Academies. Young players are exposed to an array of personal and interpersonal challenges throughout their progression. This paper utilises elements of a longitudinal collaborative action research exercise that explored the role of the Head of Education and Welfare (HoEW) within English football Academies. Intuitively, the provision of social support enhances the well-being of the recipient, and facilitates the production of 'well-rounded' individuals (Richardson, Gilbourne and Littlewood, 2004; Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee, 2004). However, such elite football environments are typically entrenched in traditional ruthless working practices. Some may suggest that such a harsh existence is a pre-requisite in the transition from highly-rated young player to professional player. Such contradictory philosophies suggest a need to better understand the reality of elite player development environments. Specifically, this paper explores the social and cultural complexity of young player development through the lens of the more socially oriented practitioner.

Methods

The data presented in the following paper forms part of a wider collaborative action research canvass (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Initially, HoEWs (n=5) were encouraged to reflect upon ways of introducing new working strategies into their respective Academies. Reflection exercises were utilised to encourage practitioners to critically review their working practice. The present paper draws from an extended period of collaboration with two of the HoEWs. Author one utilised ethnographic principles to shadow two HoEWs within their respective Academy settings. Specifically, such a protocol approximates to 2 days per month for a period of 5 months. In this sense, author one attempted to be 'on the ground' of the Academy, in order to gain a better insight into the reality of the workplace. The researcher was able to experience and share (alongside the HoEW and other staff) specific examples of Academy practice as different aspects of player support were undertaken. Data was collated from a range of sources such as field notes, informal semi-structured interviews and more formalised interview protocols. The range of data sources allowed an in-depth perspective of Academy life to develop. A desire to represent this material in a way that adequately captured the field experience resulted in a series of creative non-fiction narratives (see Sparkes, 2002). Techniques associated with the genre of creative non-fiction were utilised to capture the persona and practice of two HoEWs.

Results

It is apparent that young player development demands an inclusive, appropriate and supportive environment that draws on elements of psychological and social support. The research evidences aspects of both instrumental (or tangible) social support (e.g., financial or physical support) and emotional (or intangible) support (e.g., encouragement, appreciation, praise and understanding). Specifically, a

series of vignettes is presented, which typify critical moments of social support offered by the HoEW throughout the complex pathway of a player's development experience.

Discussion

The results suggest the necessity for socially oriented practitioners to engage in both intuitive and informed decisions. The vignettes offer an understanding of the difficulties faced by socially oriented practitioners in encouraging, facilitating and fostering a more socially supportive environment for young player development within a traditionally entrenched football environment typically beset with a masculine and macho culture. Such a socially supportive aspiration embraces an implicit recognition that may (better) influence the player's on-field performance. More specifically, a player content with himself and his environment may be more able, and better equipped, to maximise their football performance. Implicit within the role of the practitioner is the need to better understand and 'know' each individual player. 'Individual Development Plans' offer an opportunity for practitioners and players to produce tailored development programmes. Social support should be viewed as a dynamic activity that strives to create mutually beneficial relationships. In this sense, social support is something 'you do', something 'you give' and something 'you receive' through active collaboration and shared meaning. This intuitive, more global, understanding of young player development, appears to demand a continual commitment to encourage other significant development stakeholders to understand, recognise and embrace such a working culture.

The utilisation of techniques associated with creative non-fiction enable a better understanding of the personal challenges and dilemmas that face both the player(s) and the practitioner(s) (HoEW), in the provision of appropriate social support. Moreover, the vignettes offer a highly personalised context. The workplace contains people with a particular set of skills, hopes and aspirations that enable them to function. The narrative excerpts allow the reader (audience) to 'get to know' them, and encourage practice to be understood, in a local and cultural context.

References

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E-mail: d.j.richardson@livjm.ac.uk