

**Attitudes Towards Education in a  
Professional Football Academy:  
The Scholars' Perspective**

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By

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Professional Doctorate in Education at the University of Central Lancashire

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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite an array of research focusing on elite sport in the UK, less attention has been afforded towards academy football within these elite environments, particularly in relation to the educational programmes that the players aged 16-18 are required to undertake. Little is known about the perspectives of these players and therefore the aim of this thesis was to explore their attitudes towards education and identify the factors that influenced them. A relativist ontological position was adopted in fitting with the constructivist paradigm in an attempt to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the scholars focusing on one specific Premier League club. A phenomenological case study approach was adopted to understand the shared meanings created by the scholars in relation to their educational programme at the club. After undertaking eight focus groups and a further six in-depth interviews six main themes emerged in relation to the scholars' attitudes and the factors that influenced them. It was clear from this research that the scholars at this club were diverse by way of past educational attainment and levels of engagement, they had mixed views of their educational programme at the club and their attitudes towards education were influenced to varying degrees by parents, peers and experiences with teachers. The scholars were focused more on their football ambitions and their intentions were to pursue careers in elite football with education being perceived as a back-up. Staff changes at the club resulted in a renewed focus on education, yet this was still set against the backdrop of the ambiguous and uncertain world of professional football. Due to the methodological approach that underpins this study, the findings are not expected to be regarded as generalisations across all elite level football clubs. They are intended to serve as a starting point for practitioners in these settings to develop practice accordingly.

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# Chapter One – Introduction

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The aim of the research is to explore the attitudes towards education that players aged 16-18 exhibited at a Premier League football club and the factors that may have influenced these. These players are often referred to as scholars and the term scholar(s) will be mainly used in this thesis to describe these players but the two will be used interchangeably. The aspects that influenced the focus of this research will initially be offered in this chapter. An overview of recent developments in academy football and education in Premier League Football Clubs, along with an indication of the recent changes in Premier League Football Youth Development policy, will then be given. A summary of previous research conducted in relation to academy football and elite student athletes in other settings will be analysed. The research aim and questions will then be presented in full, followed by an overview of the structure of the thesis.

## **1.1 The Origins of the Research**

Within Premier League football, players may be offered a scholarship contract at the age of 16 for a fixed term period of two years, an evolution of the old football apprenticeship scheme. As part of this contract players are expected to study alongside pursuing their footballing ambitions. Discussions with the Head of Education and Welfare at one club revealed several options available to scholars regarding their educational progression at Premier League clubs. He suggested that the Premier League has two main pathways available to their scholars: pathway one and two. Pathway one offers the players a route on to the BTEC in Sport (Performance and Excellence) with each player beginning at subsidiary level and progressing on to the 120-credit diploma and for some the extended diploma. In addition to this, the

scholars complete an NVQ Diploma in Sport (Excellence and Performance). There are no entry-level qualifications to this so a scholar without a GCSE grade C or above in Maths and/or English is asked to complete Level 2 Functional Skills in Maths and/or English. Pathway two is a more flexible route that is based around the needs of the learner. Scholars can complete A Level studies alongside the BTEC in Sport subsidiary level or for international players they may complete an English for speakers of other languages course (ESOL). Pathway two is largely one that is offered by category one clubs, those with the higher budgets in the Premier League and the Championship (Everton, Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal etc.), and they have to fund these options rather than receiving funding from the Learning and Skills Council. The club that is the focus of this study is a category two club due to the budget that it provides for youth football development across its academy (there are four categories of academy with four being the lowest budget clubs, typically in the lowest leagues). Due to the club's standing and the resources available all players at the start of this study were offered the Pathway one route and commenced the BTEC in Sport subsidiary level the September of their first year as scholars. This forms part of the two-year Advanced Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence programme (AASE). According to Pearson Education (n.d.), the Premier League is a fully accredited assessment centre, which was recognised as an outstanding education provider. In 2010 they boasted a completion rate of 93% out of the 200 elite players recruited on to their two-year-programme.

Historically, at some football clubs, the academic performance of some of the scholars has been questioned. According to one Head of Education and Welfare Officer at a Premier League club:

The boys have been passing everything for a number of years but they are not reaching the target grades set, generally due to lack of motivation to do it. The group of boys generally have some intelligent lads in but all they get is passes. They just aren't motivated to do their courses and have a bad attitude towards it (anon, 2011, personal communication).

It was this personal communication that sparked the interest and motivation to explore this field in more depth and to evaluate the attitudes of the scholars towards their educational programme.

Green (2009) suggested that there are approximately 10,000 boys aged between 5-18 playing in professional football academies across any one football season, with less than 1% going on to become a paid professional. Brown and Potrac (2009) suggested that 85% of players aged 16-18 did not continue at professional football clubs after the age of 18. Other research suggests that the vast majority of young people recruited early into talent development programmes, across a wide range of sports, do not become successful elite athletes (Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007; Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009). In Germany for example, a study by Grossmann, Lames, and Stefani (2015) focused on the progression rates of young players in the U17 Bundesliga, the equivalent of the scholars in England. They found that out of the 821, 17 year old, Bundesliga players born in 1993 only 10% had signed a contract for a professional team at 18 years old. Over 45% had stopped playing football before advancing to senior level. Whilst there is no consensus or official body producing public results for progression to professional football in England, the likelihood of success is unfavourable for those involved in these talent development programmes. There are approximately just under three quarters of a million Higher Education graduates each year, with 70-75% entering the job market in

2015 (HESA, 2015). There is a distinct chance that many of the young footballers aged 16-18 if released from their clubs will have to compete in this environment against the annual influx of graduates. For these players to obtain meaningful employment or a place on an undergraduate programme at a university, a commitment to study and high attainment levels within their educational course may well be vital.

## **1.2 Academy Football Development**

In 2011 the Premier League introduced the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in an attempt to modernise youth football development in England and to introduce new rules and regulations that the professional football clubs would adhere to (Premier League, 2011). Several national newspapers claimed that it would create a tiered system that would enable the wealthiest clubs to pick out the best talent for a fraction of their worth (Jordan, 2011; Parish, 2011; Wallace, 2011). The plan was not the only notable development in the last ten years that has focused on youth football development in England. The Football Association (FA) Chairman Greg Dyke produced his England Commission Report in 2014 and suggested, amongst other things, that English born players are being blocked from reaching the elite level due to the influx of greater numbers of foreign players. The FA (2014) stated that 'Only 32% of starts in the Premier League in the 2012-13 were by players who are qualified to play for England. This compares with 69% twenty years ago and the overall trend is still gradually downward' (p.22). After the England national team's poor performance in the 2010 World Cup (not reaching the quarter finals), along with failing to even qualify for the 2008 European Championships, Sir Trevor Brooking the former FA Technical Director claimed that the country was not producing enough talented players. This, it was suggested, was partly due to the win at all cost mentality of the Premier League clubs which results in the clubs purchasing the best talent from abroad (Gibson, 2010).

This one example perhaps partly illustrates the friction and opposing priorities of the governing body and those in the Premier League who are responsible for serving the needs of the elite clubs. The shareholders' priorities at the Premier League clubs are likely more focused on amassing a points tally in the Premier League to meet their demands rather than ensuring players are developed to meet the needs of the England team and the FA. The pattern of poor performances in major competitions from the England senior male team was repeated at the 2014 World Cup and 2016 European Championships.

The claims for improving the quality of English teams have been preceded by others, including the likes of Howard Wilkinson who produced the FA's Charter for Quality for English Football (Wilkinson, 1997). Wilkinson paved the way for professional clubs to reduce the age at which they could sign young players to contracts, reducing it from 14 to 9 years old. He did put in place a restriction on the areas that academies could recruit from based on travel times, something that has been subsequently overturned by the EPPP. Richard Lewis conducted a joint review of young player development in professional football for the Premier League, Football League and the FA (Lewis, 2007). The Players Football Association (PFA) also contributed with their Meltdown report (Taylor, 2007). Both highlighted the lack of opportunities available to English players to play at the elite level in their country with the PFA suggesting that in the 1992-3 Premier League season, 71% of Premier League players were English while in the 2006-7 season that dropped to 38%. The EPPP is guided by the following six fundamental principles, which are described as critical success factors:

- Increase the number and quality of Home Grown Players gaining professional contracts in the clubs and playing first team football at the highest level.

- Create more time for players to play and be coached.
- Improve coaching provision.
- Implement a system of effective measurement and quality assurance.
- Positively influence strategic investment into the Academy System demonstrating value for money.
- Seek to implement significant gains in every aspect of player development.

(Premier League, 2014, p.12).

Less of a priority across all of these reviews, which is illustrated in the EPPP principles above, was a significant focus on the education that young players will receive during their tenure at professional clubs and the impact of being deselected. The nature of the provision on offer for scholars involved in professional football has shifted across the last twenty years. Monk and Olsson (2006) suggested that in the late 1990s scholars were offered the opportunity to undertake two days per week off-the job training of their choice. This was then superseded by a standardised compulsory vocational course that all scholars undertook. Monk (2000) highlighted how the advent of the Football Scholarship was intended to offer scholars a choice based upon their interests and abilities. Platts and Smith (2009) offered a concise and detailed overview of the evolution of the training offered to 16-18-year-old players in professional clubs in England since the 1960s. They explained how responsibility for education across the clubs has been devolved to Premier League Learning (PLL) and League Football Education (LFE). The main offer to scholars within clubs under each of these umbrella organisations is the BTEC in Sport as part of the Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (ASE).

It might be argued that educating young players and helping them to prepare for a life without football, which is the reality for most, is not a priority for the clubs.

The aim of this research is not to grapple with the complexities and the motivations of those involved in the English Football Academy system or to engage in lengthy debates about the merits of the system in producing elite players. However, it is clear that it is more competitive than ever for English players to make their living from the game and educational qualifications, might just support young players' long-term development in a way that extra training on the pitch simply cannot. Therefore, this research aims to enhance the current understanding in the field, particularly in developing a better insight into the attitudes that players within a Premier League club have towards education.

### **1.3 Literature Overview**

#### **1.3.1 Academy Football**

The professional football academy system in England has been the focus of previous research including examining the appropriateness of the player development environment (Holt, 2002; Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014), analysing the attitudes of players towards gay athletes (Magrath, Anderson, & Roberts, 2015) and experiences of migrant footballers in the Premier League (Weedon, 2012). Additionally, and perhaps more relevant to this thesis, Elliot and Weedon (2011) reviewed the impact of foreign players in the Premier League. They pointed to overseas players as 'wanting it more' and after consulting with academy coaches they concluded that overseas players help to create a more professional environment and improve overall standards of performance. Whilst this may be so, it does nothing to dispute the suggestion by the likes of the FA and the PFA that places are becoming limited in the upper echelons of professional football for English players. These claims are supported by other research which shows that system of youth development adopted in the Premier League era appears to have failed, in contrast with France,

Germany, and Spain (Anderson and Miller, 2011). According to Anderson and Miller (2011),

It appears that it is not just at the national level that this has happened. Most of the first-team and squad players in the Premier League are no longer playing for the club that initially trained them as teenagers, and it is not clear that the clubs that have Premier League academies ever recoup their investments in physical and human resources, except perhaps for brief periods of time (p.42).

However, there is limited research that focuses specifically on the education of younger players. Perhaps the work that is most closely related to this study and which provides some foundations is research that centres around de-selection (being released from a club), career transition and career planning. There has been no research conducted that solely focuses on younger players' experiences of their education within professional football in England, and with the exception of a study conducted in Denmark, this has not been a significant focus of any research to date. Christensen and Sørensen (2009) considered the competing demands that young Danish semi-professional footballers faced when attempting to balance football and education. After interviewing 25 footballers they suggested that parents were the main advocates for education and that academic qualifications were both an espoused value and regarded as a basic underlying assumption in Danish Society. They painted a picture of a stereotypical player that might be successful in both achieving success on the field and academically. They suggested that players living close to the ground, having good academic abilities, with regular contact with friends and family were factors that were likely to lead to success on both fronts. Those not afforded these conditions faced emotional instability, stress, lower academic results and drop out. However, the research concluded that the priority for the players was football,

education was something for the future. Whilst we can learn much from this research it must be recognised that these young players were being educated and training as footballers in a very different environment. The financial rewards at the end of their journey were not as lucrative as those facing the scholars taking part in this research within the Premier League.

None of the published work that focuses on academy football in England has specifically focused on the attitudes towards education displayed by players aged 16-18. Research conducted by Parker (2006) did analyse the extent to which academy football reproduced stereotypical gender norms and values. Whilst the research relied upon data collected in the 1990s, it was set amongst developing an understanding of the informal learning practices within elite clubs. Parker concluded that a variety of learning takes place within this professional environment but he did not seek to understand the attitudes of young players towards their formal education programme. Platts and Smith (2009), in their research, did focus more specifically on the education and rights of young people in professional football in England. They found that the provision of general education between clubs varied and that young footballers in professional clubs were willing to sacrifice their educational aspirations for football. This was perpetuated by the prevailing subculture within the clubs, finding that 'the achievement of a career in the game dominates all other concerns' (p, 336). Whilst these studies act as a really useful starting point neither set out to explore in depth the attitudes displayed by scholars towards the provision on offer within their clubs, and therefore, there is a lack of literature with this specific focus. Other areas that do provide context for this study will be considered further in the subsequent sections.

Brown and Potrac (2009) explored the experiences of young former elite footballers whose respective professional careers were prematurely ended as a

consequence of de-selection. They found that players had a strong athletic identity, there was an impact of de-selection on sense of self and adaptations to life outside of professional football became difficult; issues included anxiety, fear, depression, anger and humiliation. Players were critical of the limited support available to aid their transition and displayed feelings of being a failure. When considering school age elite players, they found that because football commitments dominated most weekends and evenings the players had to make social and educational sacrifices. These were deemed worthwhile if they were offered a scholarship. According to the four players questioned in the study, there had been limited focus on educational qualifications and players viewed their course as “a muck about” or “day off training”, attaching little significance to their studies. Players involved in the study suggested that the club attached little value to education, and the club never encouraged them. One player wanted to do A-Levels, but was not supported, so he just took the BTEC in Sport as the club advised him that A Levels would be too much work. They found that it was only upon de-selection that the players began to value the qualification and educational programme that they had been offered at the club, and they felt that the club should have placed greater emphasis on it. Whilst the research is well regarded and often cited in studies focusing on football academies, it must be treated with some caution as the data was collected from just four interviews.

The key points however, somewhat reinforced the findings in a study by McGillivray, Fearn, and McIntosh (2005) who analysed the long-term opportunities for released professional players in Scotland. They highlighted that it was unsurprising that young players had less of a relationship with education than they did with being on the field. Their research involved circulating 600 questionnaires to clubs across the Scottish Premier, First, Second, and Third Divisions; with the exception of Scotland’s

two largest clubs, Celtic and Rangers, who refused to take part in the study. 137 responses were received, 78 of which were from full time players. Whilst the paper was focused solely on Scottish players there is a great deal to learn from such a large sample size. The social and cultural similarities between the two countries allows us to perhaps identify some interesting areas for debate and practices that may exist in the English academy system. They found that there was no credibility or capital afforded to academic qualifications and they were not valued in the game. They went on to suggest that apart from those that maximised career earnings at the very top level most players were ill prepared for a life out of football. This is supported by the work of Brownrigg, Burr, Locke, and Bridger (2012) who conducted 8 interviews with professional players in England who were at the time experiencing the possibility of career transition. They found that players demonstrated a lack of control over their lives, a lack of pre-planning and preparation for retirement. They suggested that this led to heightened states of anxiety and an unexpected sense of rejection. Perhaps more worryingly, McGillivray *et al.* (2005) stated that young players were subjected to an environment that continued to discourage the continuation of formal learning, thereby compromising the post-football opportunities open to the players. They were deceived with optimism about a future career in football and bereft of transferable skills necessary for alternative employment. It must be pointed out though that the financial rewards outside of the top two teams in Scotland would likely not be comparable to a Premier League club in England. However, these findings are similar to some of the conclusions made by Bourke (2003) who found that young Irish players that migrated to England to make football a career would not prioritise or even view acquiring educational qualifications as important or relevant in order to support their

long-term development; or in the case of de-selection, offer them alternative routes into employment or education.

Monk and Olsson (2006) analysed the rationale for youth development in professional clubs and the off-the-job training available for apprentices (apprentices was the term used prior to scholars) in the academies. They suggested that the academies did not necessarily provide a clear and logical message around education and its longer-term benefits to players in the likely event that they did not become professional footballers. They went on to suggest that the vocational training offered in the clubs had poor returns in comparison to traditional academic training (A Levels), and 45% of the boys involved in their study would have been capable of studying at this level based upon their GCSE results. It is worth noting that at the time of this research apprentices studied for lower level qualifications (NVQs) and since then the Premier League has encouraged scholars to study for higher level qualifications at level three, typically a BTEC National Diploma in Sport. The Brown and Potrac (2009) study referred to earlier did not focus in an in-depth way on the players' approach to education. The authors did allude to players being disillusioned by education because the clubs did not prioritise it or treat it with significance, and football success was the priority.

Returning to the work of Monk and Olsson (2006) we can learn several things that are of interest for this research. They concluded that the players that left football were heavily constrained with regards to future employment options, the off-the-job training was largely inappropriate, the qualifications offered to apprentices yielded lesser returns than if they had gone on to study other qualifications and they suggested that scholars might struggle to enter higher status universities. Clearly there is not only a need for these qualifications to be useful in the longer-term, there is

a need for them to be valued by the players. In a study by Morley, Morgan, McKenna, and Nicholls (2014), which focused on the development features in academies, it was found that players and coaches reached a consensus that school was not a priority for developing an elite level football player. It would have been interesting if they had been able to probe deeper into these choices, beyond the polling technique that they used, and to determine the reasons behind them. Contrastingly, McGillivray (2006) found that the introduction of carefully designed interventions in Scottish professional football has successfully aided the development of a lifelong learning culture.

Primarily, it appears that there is a body of literature that highlights the lack of focus afforded to education within professional football academies and this runs through to the senior teams. This is perhaps unsurprising given the nature of elite level football and the rewards available to those that are successful. However, for the majority that are not successful in forging a career within football, or for those that are retiring from the game and need another challenge or income, it appears that they are left ill-prepared for life beyond the game; leading to identity issues, anxiety and uncertainty.

In stark contrast to this, Aquilina (2013) in her research addresses the relationship between sporting and academic success in the UK from the point of view of elite athletes that are studying alongside performing in other sports. She found a strong correlation between the desire to compete at elite level sport and their commitment to succeed in education. However, this particular study focused upon athletes and sports that are significantly less well paid in comparison to premier league footballers and in sports that are not typically expected to be viewed as a long-term career option. Further research that specifically looks at the dual track approach, that being those competing as an athlete whilst studying for a formal high school, college or

a university qualification, is available and identifies similar challenges for those attempting to be successful on the two fronts. The role of the student athlete is more recognised in the USA Collegiate system and research that has been conducted in this setting is more established. A brief insight into some of the research that has been undertaken in North America will be considered in the next section, followed by other research from Australia/New Zealand and Europe to provide further context regarding the attitudes displayed by aspiring elite professionals towards education.

### **1.3.2 Dual Track – Elite Sports Performer v Academic Student**

#### ***USA and Canada***

The role of the student athlete has been given greatest attention in North America. In a seminal study conducted in the 1980s by Adler and Adler (1989), which focused on college athletes and their changes in selves, it was found that players competing at the highest level in the US collegiate system in American Football (playing in front of tens of thousands of spectators and attracting national media coverage) underwent vast transformational changes to self. Their identities shifted to the point of creating new selves that mirrored those that the media and the public afforded them. Their original selves were lost to the new public persona that had been created within a world of celebrity and glory (being idolised by spectators and fellow students) and their focus centred on their sporting achievements as opposed to academic attainment. The study was conducted over a five-year period and was during a time when colleges were accused of many discrepancies towards students to encourage them to play football (inflating grades and paying students to play). Whilst the research was conducted over 25 years ago it does allow us to gain an insight into the complexities of student athletes. The NFL recruits less than 2% of college football athletes each year (NCAA, 2015), a figure that is matched by the Premier League when

recruiting players from their academies. Clearly this provides further justification for the need to ensure that there is a concerted effort by aspiring professionals to think more about their long-term futures beyond their sport. More recently, Miller and Kerr (2002) conducted in-depth interviews with eight college athletes in a large Canadian University. They found that the lives of the students centred around three spheres: athletic, social and academic. The relationship between these was competitive and students had to make a number of compromises in favour of one or another. The balance of this shifted throughout the degree programme, with the college athletes prioritising sport in the earlier stages of their degree and then focusing more on their academic studies towards the final year. The authors pointed out that whilst many authors including Adler and Adler (1989) cite a lack of focus towards education in the US, their research attempts to dispel this myth, especially as athletes progress through their course. However, the perceived financial and personal gains for the US Collegiate athletes that could potentially progress to the professional leagues, and the scholars progressing in the Premier League, perhaps far outweigh those that the majority of Canadian student – athletes could gain. Miller and Kerr (2002) compare the Canadian collegiate system as being parallel with the lower levels in the US system, based upon finances and levels of competition. They do state though that it is comparable in relation to the physical and time-related demands. It is quite possible that the greater rewards in the US system and those within the Premier League keep young people ‘hanging on’ and less likely to adjust their focus from sport to education as they progress through their courses.

Kimball and Freysinger (2003) found that collegiate sport is a source of stress for student-athletes, with college athletes entering college for sports reasons but then recognising that sport was getting in the way of their academic aspirations. They

concluded that athletes' existence was so intertwined with sport that they were not prepared for a life outside of sport once they realised that they were not going to become professional athletes. Others in the USA and Canada have reached similar conclusions and highlighted the growing number of students at college being unprepared emotionally and professionally for life outside of college sport (Purdy, Eitzen, & Hufnagel, 1982). It is difficult not to recognise the challenges for these young aspiring sports professionals, especially when considering that the statistics point to an unsuccessful outcome in professional sport progression; it has been their ambition and focus for many years and they exist in the pool of talent that will only see some selected.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

The work of Cosh and Tully (2014; 2015) supplements the work of Kimball and Fresysinger (2003) in North America as they acknowledged that elite sport participation combined with education can be stressful and can result in sacrificed educational attainment. In their studies they recognised parents and coaches as key figures in alleviating the stresses of lack of time, financial pressures and scheduled clashes. They also suggested that athletes had a primary academic goal to just pass and achieving academically was desirable but not possible in practice. However, this is in stark contrast to other work that showed that student-athletes in Australia performed at similar levels to, or better than, their peers (Georgakis, Evans, & Warwick, 2014). Georgakis *et al.* (2014) sought to dispel the idea of a 'dumb-jock' and made the case for the value of elite sportspeople combining their sporting activities with education. This is supported by the work of Fraser and Fogarty (2011) who found that only a small percentage of athletes considered being a professional sportsperson their only future career option. The Athlete Career and Education (ACE) programme in

Australia has received positive appraisal and Fraser, Fogarty and Albion (2010) suggested that aspiring professional athletes that were part of this education programme were aided in their sports performance. The case for sport complementing education is not strengthened by O'Neill, Allen, and Calder (2013) who concluded in a study of Australian high performance school age athletes that talented athletes struggled to balance their lives in sport and school and they faced social, psychological and emotional issues. They go on to recognise the importance of coaches and parents in supporting their progress. Clearly the circumstances and nuances of the individual were not recognised here and in all of these settings there will have been those managing the competing demands and those that will not have been. It does appear though that there is more of a case being presented in the literature arguing that attempting to become an elite level athlete does not complement studying for an educational qualification. Perhaps it could even be argued that both tracks are being compromised due to the presence of the other.

Returning to professional sport in Australia allows us to draw similar conclusions. In a study focusing on professional identities of Australian Rules football players it was stated that early career players put football above all else and education and training, long term career planning and professional development did not feature in players' priorities (Hickey & Kelly, 2005). They went on to discuss the two conflicting discourses that early career players face: should they sacrifice all else for the possibility of sporting success or display a certain prudence for their future, and show concern for their education? This was supported by the work of Ryan (2015) who found that 17 athletes in New Zealand were restricted when it came to their ability to develop a career away from sport and they were actively discouraged from doing so by their coaches.

### ***Europe (Germany, Spain, Belgium)***

The issues that have been highlighted in the previous sections appear to be consistent with findings from research from across Europe. Parental support and coach support were perceived to be the most important factors for those successful in combining sport and education in Belgium (Wylleman & De Knop, 1996). It was also suggested it was not possible to successfully combine the two (De Knop, Wylleman, Van Houcke, & Bollaert, 1999). Baron-Thiene and Alfermann (2015) attempted to identify the characteristics that predict drop out versus continuation of student-athletes in Germany. As with the work of O'Neill *et al.* (2013) in Australia they focused on high school students and they too found that focusing on a career in sport can be an exhausting and time consuming task. In a study of 572 elite athletes in Spain the issue of time management surfaced as the most significant barrier restricting those trying to combine the demands of sport and education (Lopez de Subijana, Barriopedro, & Conde, 2015). The athletes participating in this study were Olympic level athletes demonstrating that the same issues surface from high school to adulthood.

It is worth noting that out of the 700 scholarships awarded by the Australian Institute of Sport in 2012 to high performance athletes in 26 sports, 473 were awarded to school-age athletes (ASC, 2012 cited in O'Neill, 2013). Perhaps unsurprisingly O'Neill *et al.* (2013) suggested that motivation was a significant factor in continuing to progress in sport. They also suggested that young athletes should receive psychological training to support them with this. This appears to be somewhat misplaced considering the findings made earlier which stated that the majority of student-athletes will not progress as professionals in their chosen sport. Perhaps their recommendations should be more focused on developing young people's

psychological skills to refocus on educational attainment or to manage the competing demands. With young people being prepared to risk their health and aggravating injuries in order to pursue their sporting dreams (Schnell, Mayer, Diehl, Zipfel, and Thiel, 2014) this might prove to be a challenge. Clearly sport features significantly in the lives of these young people and adults. It becomes a part of their identity on various levels with some more than others living the part of the athlete (Carless & Douglas, 2013). As with the examples in the USA and Australia Stephan (2003) found that Olympic level French athletes that were due to retire needed to focus more on developing transferable skills during their sports career to aid their transition. This point would not be lost within all of the research settings given the stark reality that success is unlikely if it is judged by forging a career as a paid professional sports person.

To conclude, there is a dearth of literature that points to the challenges that student-athletes and professional sportspeople face in relation to their long-term development outside of sport. Within elite level football it appears that young players will sacrifice their education in the pursuit of becoming a successful footballer, with football being the dominant discourse in the environments that they are working in. Scholars appear not to value the qualifications that they have been offered and in some instances education was actively discouraged by the people around them. It has been found that there is some research that suggests that the competing demands were being managed in Danish football and in other sports in the UK, but the right conditions needed to be in place such as proximity of location to home and support from friends and family. In North America, elite sport participation at college level was found to lead to a heightened sense of self, which resulted in student athletes failing to prepare sufficiently for a life outside of sport. There was evidence that student athletes face similar challenges to elite level young footballers in England, time and

finance can act as a barrier and has been shown to lead to anxiety and stress. Research from both Europe and Australia has revealed similar results. It appears that these issues are conveyable across high school, college/university sport and to the professional level; and undertaking a qualification has been compromised significantly due to sporting commitments across these distinct phases of development. However, and as previously stated, there is no research that focuses exclusively on the attitudes towards education at the academies in elite football in England and this study will hopefully help with understanding this area of interest better.

#### **1.4 Research Focus**

The research that has been undertaken for the thesis element of my Professional Doctorate in Education is significant as it is grounded in the need to develop a better understanding of the attitudes towards education and the factors that influence the attitudes of these elite 16-18 year old players. It is intended that this information will serve as an instrument to inform educational policy and practice employed by the club involved in the research and perhaps be disseminated further to other clubs in the Premier League. It will add to the range of literature that exists that focuses on the conflicts faced by elite level athletes in sport when attempting to acquire qualifications alongside attempting to fulfil their ambitions of becoming professional sportspeople. This will be the first piece of research of its type that specifically focuses on the attitudes towards education and learning within the academies within Premier League football.

There is a wide range of discourse focusing upon factors that influence students' performance in and beyond the classroom. Hattie (2009) in a meta-analysis of achievement in learning discussed prior achievement, socio-economic status and the influence of peers. Bandura (1977) in his well-recited social learning theory

highlighted the influence that teachers and parents can have upon a young person's approach to education. These factors can all play a part in shaping an individual's attitude towards learning in a positive or detrimental way. Myers (2009) defined attitude as a favourable or unfavourable reaction to something or someone; these reactions can be influenced by predispositions and the society in which we live. Kind, Jones, and Barmby (2007) defined attitudes as the feelings that someone has about something based upon their knowledge and belief. Both definitions are underpinned by the ABC model (Ellis, 1962), which suggests that there are three components of attitude: affective, behavioural, and cognitive. For the purpose of this research the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of the players will be considered. This thesis seeks to analyse the accounts of players towards their previous education in high school and their perceptions of their current educational course. This will offer the club a better insight into whether or not what they are delivering is valued by the players and regarded as something that will support their development in the longer term in and out of football. In order to expand upon these discussions and to fill the obvious gaps in the literature the following aim and research questions have been developed:

### **1.5 Research Aim**

The aim of this research project is to explore the attitudes towards education that scholars aged 16-18 display in a Premier League football club. The research will also aim to develop an understanding of the factors that help shape their attitudes towards education.

### **1.6 Research Questions**

Due to the methodological foundations that underpin this research, research questions have been formulated rather than the proposal of a specific hypothesis. The

potential of the research will be achieved through the consideration of the following questions.

- 1) What are the scholars' perceptions of their experience of education at school?
- 2) What attitudes do the scholars display towards their current educational course?
- 3) What has influenced their attitude towards their educational programmes?
- 4) How might the findings from the research inform practice?

### **1.7 Research Overview**

The basis of this research has been influenced by a relativist ontological position and a subjectivist epistemological stance which is associated with the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This has enabled me to explore the feelings, experiences and emotions of the players under investigation and explore how they construct the world around them (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The questions outlined earlier have been subject to review and challenged throughout the research process (Agee, 2009). The ethical dimensions related to this research have been considered from the view of the main stakeholders – the scholars. Piper and Simons (2005) suggested that when considering the ethical issues in our research we should ensure that the methodology, methods, analysis and subsequent discussions balance the responsibility of generating public knowledge with respecting the rights of the research participants. This is considered further, along with a fuller overview of the research approach and foundations in Chapter Two.

### **1.8 Overview of the Thesis**

Chapter One of the thesis has attempted to provide an overview of the origins of the research and to offer an insight into the factors that motivated this study. An overview of recent developments in youth policy and education within Premier League

football clubs has been presented. An overview of relevant literature has been summarised to provide context in order to provide a rationale for an in-depth study of this nature. In particular, the chapter highlights some of the challenges faced by young elite professional footballers whilst studying alongside their football ambitions (Brownrigg *et al.*, 2012; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005; Monk & Olsson, 2006). The chapter showed that these are evident in other sports and countries when the dual role of the student athlete is considered (Kimball & Freysinger, 2003; Miller & Kerr, 2002; Purdy *et al.*, 1982). The chapter concludes with a clear account of the research aim and questions.

Chapter Two outlines the research approach that has been adopted for this study. The ontological position and epistemological perspective that have influenced the decisions on methodology are reviewed. A phenomenological case study approach is discussed, as this is evident within the research. The reflexive practices that have been embedded into the study are outlined, followed by an overview of the focus group and interview methods. The latter part of the chapter presents a detailed account of the analytical techniques used to make sense of the data from the methods employed. The final part of the chapter outlines the ethical considerations and tensions that were considered during the research.

Chapter Three presents an overview of the key themes that have emerged from the gathering and analysis of data. It is split into six main parts, each representing the umbrella themes that transpired from the analysis of the data. Section one provides an overview of the scholars' attitudes towards education at school and reveals the diversity of their school experiences in both levels of engagement and attainment. It was evident that some of the scholars obtained high GCSE results and enjoyed school whilst others experienced expulsion due to bad

behaviour and left with few qualifications. Section two analyses the scholars' perceptions of the relevance of the subjects that they studied at school and then considers their views related to the relevance of their BTEC course at the club. It was found that the majority of the scholars questioned the value of the course that they were studying, they viewed it as easy and therefore put less effort into the course than they could have. It was also found that there was no evidence of accelerated learning and other options outside of the BTEC were typically not supported. Section three, which discusses the impact on educational practices at the club as a consequence of football being the dominant culture, discovered that education was not a priority for the scholars with some viewing it as a break from football or a contingency. Others suggested that they would leave the course if they had the option. The section also highlights the scholars' perception that the football staff did not value education and explains how they as scholars had devoted time and effort since their school days prioritising football over education. Section four offers an overview of the influence of significant others on the scholars including peers, family members and teachers. Unsurprisingly, the accounts varied with some scholars receiving what they viewed as positive support and other discussing significant others less favourably. Section five reviews the impact of several staff changes that occurred during this research, most notably the appointment of a new Academy Manager and a new Head of Education and Welfare. The changes to the learning environment brought about by these two appointments included what is described as a renewed focus on education across the club. Section six then highlights the uncertainty that the scholars faced during their tenure at the club and emphasises the ambiguous environment that they operate in, with fear of release hanging over them. This section concludes with an insight into the alternative options that they are considering if they were to be released.

In Chapter Four, attempts are made to conceptualise the findings with a view to making some initial recommendations for practice. Due to the nature of the doctorate for which this thesis is presented (Professional Doctorate in Education) it has been determined that these recommendations are to act as a starting point for further discussions within the field of education at the Premier League club in question. It is not presumed that they can act as some sort of magic wand that will address all of the issues that practitioners in this field face and it by no means tries to trivialise the complexities of their work. They are offered in good faith and clearly would form part of a wider strategic plan to developing education within the club. The limitations of this research and an overview of potential research that might follow this thesis are then offered.

# Chapter Two: Research Foundations and Approach

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The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research approach that has been adopted for this study. The ontological position and the epistemological stance that underpin the research approach will be evaluated and presented, followed by an overview of the suitability of adopting a phenomenological case study approach. The reflexive practices that have been embedded into the research will be shared to provide the reader with an insight into how these have influenced my research position. An analysis of the appropriateness of the research methods that have been employed, with an insight into the way in which the data has been gathered and analysed, will be offered. Finally, the ethical considerations and tensions related to the research will be considered.

## **2.1 Ontological Position and Epistemological Stance**

Attitudes towards a particular phenomenon are arguably in a state of flux, with people viewing the same issues differently depending on the circumstances (Millon, Lerner, & Weiner, 2003). The historical view that attitudes are rigid or fixed entities has been disputed and regarded as dated (Barnett & Boster, 1997; Bartram, 2010; Zaller, 1991). Historical accounts that aimed to establish the attitudes that individuals displayed towards a particular phenomenon have relied upon attitudinal surveys and they attempted to identify cause and effect (Baker, 1992; Devos, 2008; Sammons, Davis, Day, & Gu, 2014). The view that attitudes are ever changing concepts that are shaped by factors within society and measured by dialogue (Crano & Prislin, 2011;

Patton, 2002) opposes the alternative position that relies upon traditional quantitative research approaches. The latter stance relies upon the assumption that there is a fixed reality waiting to be observed (Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2013; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Silverman (2006) points to research that relies purely on quantitative measures as perhaps neglecting the social and cultural variables and cited Kirk and Miller (1986) who argue that attitudes do not simply attach inside people's heads and that researching them relies upon making a series of analytical judgements in an interpretive manner. This research attempts to engage in a process of re-describing or reconstructing the interpretation of the scholars' views towards education at two given points in time (a retrospective view of school and present experiences at the club) and offers a perspective of their world (Scott & Morrison, 2007).

These alternative approaches might be viewed as ontologically and epistemologically biased based upon one's view of what constitutes knowledge and truth. These beliefs lead to a particular research paradigm being embraced. The research approach adopted for this thesis is borne out of my own ontological position and epistemological stance. It supports the view that knowledge, one's beliefs and our views evolve in association with our environment over time (Schraw, 2006; Schraw & Olafson, 2007); it is in fitting with the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994 – SEE FIGURE 2.1). In relation to investigating attitudes, a researcher that adopts practices associated with the positivist paradigm would likely use attitudinal surveys whilst a constructivist would perhaps place more value in gaining and in-depth insight into an individual's thoughts and feelings through interviews. Researchers might even adopt these practices inadvertently, as that is the way things have always been done in their field, or it is just what they know, rather than adopting a clear ontological position and epistemological stance.

Social ontology (what is there to know about reality) is concerned with the nature of social reality and whether there is a fixed objective world, independent of the people that occupy it (Blaikie, 2009) (known as realism and within the positivism paradigm), or whether or not reality is constructed from the perceptions and actions of social actors – people (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) (known as relativism and related to the constructivist paradigm). These opposing paradigms might best be described as sitting on the opposite ends of an ontological spectrum (Diviacco, 2014; Rudd & Johnson, 2010). The ontological position underpinning this research is in line with a relativist ontological approach which would assume that there are multiple, competing realities that can evolve and are subject to negotiation (Lederman & Abell, 2014; Shipway, 2010). This is in keeping with the constructivist paradigm and rejects the positivist view that social reality is something that can be observed and accounted for regardless of one's interpretation of it (Adams, Collair, Oswald, & Perold, 2004; Neuman, 2006). Research that relies upon a constructivist approach and assumes a relativist ontological position influences one's epistemological stance (how we go about establishing what there is to know about reality), leading to a subjectivist epistemological stance (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, it is the perceptions of the scholars in this Premier League club that are of interest to this research. It is the subjective views of the scholars and their perceptions of their shared experiences that are to be explored further throughout this research.

This neat categorisation might be regarded as too simplistic and to navigate the full terrain is perhaps beyond the remit of this thesis. However, McAlpine (2012) suggested that students studying for a Professional Doctorate in the social sciences appear to devote a significant proportion of time to reading in order to find epistemological links to underpin their work, therefore justifying further consideration

of this topic. It would seem sensible to be able to locate the approach utilised in relation to the wider discussions taking place about the nature of knowledge and the research approaches available (Creswell, 2003; Grix, 2012). It would also be sensible to recognise that beyond these contrasting research paradigms (positivism – constructivism) others have written at length about other paradigms that exist - critical theory, critical realism, participatory, social constructionism, critical theory, non-positivism (Aliyu, Bello, Kasim, & Martin, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1996; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013).

All too often it appears that these categorisations are confusing and in some instances the descriptions do not share a common language, even using the same terminology to describe different ideas. This is illustrated by comparing the work of Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2010) and Adams *et al.* (2004); their use of social constructionism offers entirely different meanings. This is further illustrated by the work of Mkansi and Acheampong (2012) who provide an in-depth overview of these confusing and contested terms; they go on to suggest that this confusion is becoming toxic and call for a consensus within the field. It might be argued that this is a naïve assumption considering the historical roots and the embedded use of these terms across a range of different disciplines. Gilgun (1999) supports the view that the terminology related to qualitative research is confusing and in a chaotic state. Gilgun goes on to suggest that ‘this flock of terms possibly could be rounded up and organised under relatively few rubrics’ (p.240).

This ongoing confusion presents challenges for academics when attempting to describe their position in relation to knowledge and how it can be acquired. To present definitive, universally recognised terms is likely to be impossible, or at worst futile, leading to a confusing and unsettling debate. According to Kvale (1992), this

does not mean that these concepts are unusable, and therefore it has been necessary to define the framework that has been used to locate the research in this thesis. FIGURE 2.1 provides an overview of the various research paradigms outlined. This terminology has been utilised to describe the approach adopted for this research as the work of Guba and Lincoln (1994) is universally acknowledged in the field of educational research (Cohen *et al.*, 2013; Creswell, 2003; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014).

FIGURE 2.1: GUBA AND LINCOLN (1994): BASIC BELIEFS (METAPHYSICS) OF ALTERNATIVE INQUIRY PARADIGMS.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Positivism</i>	<i>Postpositivism</i>	<i>Critical Theory et al.</i>	<i>Constructivism</i>
Ontology	naive realism— "real" reality but apprehendable	critical realism— "real" reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable	historical realism— virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallized over time	relativism—local and specific constructed realities
Epistemology	dualist/objectivist; findings true	modified dualist/ objectivist; critical tradition/community; findings probably true	transactional/ subjectivist; value- mediated findings	transactional/ subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	experimental/ manipulative; verification of hypotheses; chiefly quantitative methods	modified experi- mental/manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses; may include qualitative methods	dialogic/dialectical	hermeneutical/dialectical

The constructivist paradigm recognises the active role of the researcher in the knowledge production process and does not attempt to resist their involvement. It might be argued though that the approach does not offer the truly objective, value-free and independent account of the phenomena (Wellington, 2000) that is supposedly offered to us by the positivist researcher. However, this does take into account and recognises the important role of the researcher in the research process and as part of the knowledge production process (Flick, 1998). It is highly unlikely that any research in the social sciences can be truly value-free (Bryman, 2012) and it is not something that I am striving for. I am striving for trustworthiness and credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1996; Pitney & Parker, 2009) which can be reinforced by identifying an appropriate methodology in relation to the ontological position and epistemological stance (Flick, 2014). In fitting with the constructivist paradigm a phenomenological case study methodology has enabled me to explore the feelings, experiences and emotions of the individuals who shape their society and develop their own meanings and interpretation of the social world (Creswell, 2003).

## **2.2 Methodology: A Phenomenological Case Study**

The purpose of this study has been to explore the attitudes towards education displayed by 16-18 year old scholars within an elite football environment. The intention was to develop a greater understanding of their lived experience and to allow new meanings to emerge (Stebbins, 2001). As outlined in the introduction, others have considered the lived experiences of academy footballers in relation to the appropriateness of the clubs as suitable player development environments (Holt, 2002; Mills *et al.*, 2014) and the experiences that players have after being released from their clubs (Anderson & Miller, 2011; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Brownrigg *et al.*, 2012; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005). The research that I have undertaken has similarities

with the approach taken by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) who advocated Schutz's social phenomenological approach. They suggested that social phenomenology takes the view that people living in the world of daily life are able to ascribe meaning to a situation and then make judgments. This approach has allowed me to explore the phenomena of education at the club and the attitudes that the scholars displayed towards their educational pathway. In this study the scholars' views of their experiences at the club are allowed to surface through the eight focus groups and six in-depth interviews. Creswell (2006) suggested that 'a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon' (p.58). This differs to other approaches that have evolved from phenomenology such as phenomenography. Phenomenography is also in fitting with a constructivist approach, yet focuses on the uniqueness and various ways in which individuals experience the same phenomena and the meaning that they afford it (Tight, 2015). A phenomenological methodology aims to collect data from a group of people that have shared the same experience and to develop a common understanding of their descriptions (Schutz, 1962). Schutz's work builds upon the work of Edmund Husserl and relates Husserl's early attempts at classifying phenomenology to the social world (Barber, 2014).

In this study the intention has been to establish the shared connections and views of the scholars towards education in a particular Premier League Club, therefore, it is being described as a phenomenological case study approach with the focus on a single site. This features as a methodological tool in a range of research within the field of education and beyond (Grant, 2008; Henry, Casserly, Coady, & Marshall, 2008; Nielsen, 2006; Sumsion, 2002; West, 2013). Focusing on a single site provided me with

an opportunity to gain a detailed insight into the educational practices at this specific club from the viewpoint of the scholars. It offers an insight into their time on the programme, their interactions with one another, with teachers and with their programme of study. Case studies in research are examples of empirical enquiry that seek to understand a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context (Yin, 2013). There appears not to be a universally agreed definition of what constitutes a case study and there is less of an agreement about the number of units that need to be considered within research projects (Farquhar, 2012). This particular site was chosen after discussions with the Head of Education and Welfare at the club and access was granted. Starman (2013) suggests that often case study research is undertaken with the focus being on a singular site with the knowledge obtained being used to analyse future cases. The findings in this research could be developed through subsequent research at other clubs in professional football. Yin (2011) identified three types of case study: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. There is evidence in this research of elements that are in fitting with all three components when the scholars' views of their time at school and being educated at the club are considered.

Returning to phenomenology, Sparkes and Smith (2013) suggested that there are 18 schools of phenomenology, but what they all have in common is that they reject the view that there is an objective reality and each one enables the exploration of participants' subjectivity. They go on to cite Allen-Collinson (2009) who states that this is by no means exclusive to phenomenology but a general goal of much qualitative research in general. Patton (2002) perhaps offers a clearer distinction and suggests that phenomenology is focused on descriptions of what and how people experience what they do, focusing on the essences of the shared experience. The essences of the experience are the central underlying meanings related to the experience (Creswell,

1998) and put simply they might infer the factors or characteristics that can be identified to create the phenomena. In the case of love, a phenomenological approach might seek to understand the meaning of love from the perspective of married couples. It would seek to determine the essences that make up this phenomenon and interpret their shared experiences. It could be that they relate an intimate sexual relationship or the ability to care for one another as characteristics (essences) of their love. Clearly, these essences would shift if the focus were the love between a mother and a son. Within this research the intention was to identify the essences related to the scholars' shared experience of their educational programme. Within the field of education, when asked about their views of education or a particular course, students are likely to discuss the role of the teacher, the work that they undertake and perhaps the physical environment; they may well discuss their relationships with fellow students and how relevant they find their course curriculum.

According to Merriam (2009), phenomenological research is well suited for anyone studying affective, emotional and often intense human experiences. Creswell (2006) highlights his use of the work by Moustakas (1994) and explained how those following a phenomenological methodology should ask the participants two broad general questions related to i) their experience of the phenomenon and ii) what contexts or situations have influenced or affected the experience of the phenomenon? My study is clearly in fitting with this description and the research questions seek to understand the scholars' views of education, but a deeper understanding is sought; the factors (essences) that influence their perceptions and attitudes is one of the four main research questions.

Phenomenology as a research discipline is largely attributed to the work of Husserl in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and evolved through the work of significant

others such as Heidegger (Stanford University, 2013:online). Husserl's view of Phenomenology (1913/1931) included the need to 'bracket' one's own past experiences; a form of recognising and suspending one's own prejudices and judgements to avoid their influence over the research phenomenon and to see things as they are. Some of his contemporaries and descendants (Heidegger, Findley & Marias) rejected this notion and even questioned the ability of an individual to be able to do so; outlining that the researcher is an integral part of the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The central question here is whether or not we are able to see things for what they are without prejudice. Husserl would argue the need to put our preconceptions aside and bracketing is the means to enable us to do this, but it is interesting that he points to the need to bring these to the forefront in order to recognise that they exist and to eliminate their influence. Perhaps the idea of heightening a sense of awareness of significant preconceptions merely serves as a tool to increase their significance and influence.

Ahern (1999) suggested that engaging in a reflexive journey allows us to recognise our biases and their influence rather than simply trying to eliminate them. This assumes that by not recognising them they exist subconsciously and are able to influence the research process. Husserl's phenomenological approach is not necessarily in fitting with the ontological assumptions and epistemological perspective that underpins this research due to the relationship that it has with positivist research and the assumption that the researcher can be detached from the process (Ross, 2012). Therefore, an approach more in fitting with Heidegger's (1927/1962) view of phenomenology has been adopted; reflexivity has been embraced not to reduce or suspend my own values, beliefs or prejudices, but to recognise and understand them

and where appropriate identify their impact on the findings and subsequent analysis (Koch, 1995).

### **2.3 Reflexivity and Positionality**

The value of reflexivity in social research is becoming increasingly more important and has been recognised as a vital instrument in the research process (Johns, 2000; Kingdon, 2005; Rhodes, 1997; Savin-Baden, 2004). In recent years, emerging evidence has come to light of greater numbers of researchers recognising the value of embedding reflexivity into their practices (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004; Shohov, 2004). This has gathered significant pace since the 1980s with postmodern views and has raised awareness of and recognised the important role of the researcher in the creation of knowledge (Bryman, 2012). However, there does not appear to be an agreed approach to what might be seen by some as a complicated and onerous additional task. Finlay (2002) considered reflexivity to be 'full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails as researchers negotiate the swamp of interminable deconstructions, self-analysis and self-disclosure' (p.209). Jones (2001) in a conference paper suggested that it can enhance the research process as a legitimate strategy and provide further perspectives. She states:

It is further argued that such a wider, open-ended approach is particularly appropriate in cross-cultural, educational studies in that it can accommodate elements of unpredictability, individuality and subjectivity, including the researcher's biographical data, experiences and biases (para 2).

Savin-Baden and Major (2010) described reflexivity as 'seeking to continually challenge our biases and examining our stances, perspectives and views as researchers' (p.177). They suggested that it is more than just a process of positioning oneself based upon class, gender, race, but rather, it is a process in order to interpret data demands so as

to engage with critical questions. Reflexivity allows the researcher to open up new questions and new issues may emerge from the research as the researcher adopts a reflexive approach (Somekh & Lewin, 2011). I no longer seek to minimise my role in the research and I have come to recognise my being as an important part in the generation of knowledge in my study. Through adopting a reflexive approach I have recognised how researchers can account for their decisions and explain how they have reached certain outcomes. Whilst positivist research may rely upon ensuring reliability and validity, research being undertaken like mine relies upon 'the researcher as the instrument' (Patton, 2002, p.14) with reflexivity not attempting to ensure reliability or validity, but credibility and trustworthiness as I alluded to earlier. It is essential that I adopt a reflexive approach, firstly to ensure that any prejudice and bias is being recognised, secondly to enable new meanings important to future practice to emerge, and finally, to offer another perspective, that being mine as the researcher. Additionally, my personal journey within life to this point may shed some light on my motivations for choosing to research in this particular area.

According to Chase (2005), creating a narrative involves assigning retrospective meaning to events through reflection to help us to develop a better understanding of our motivations and intentions. By offering a brief personal narrative it is intended that the reader gains an insight into some of my background which perhaps brings to the forefront some of the additional reasons behind my interest in this research area. These were previously unaccounted for or even recognised by myself in the earlier phases. Considering one's own feelings and beliefs at the beginning of a research project can enable us to generate synergy between the phenomena being considered and our own experiences. It can enhance the research process; a postmodern strategy that sees subjectivity being assumed and appreciated (Russell & Kelly, 2002).

*Personal Narrative - Clint Godfrey: Once an aspiring footballer and now a University Lecturer – Where did it all go so wrong? Or did it?*

*Within a school setting I could probably be described as fitting in, rarely excelling in the classroom and certainly never being one to stand out due to any anti-social behaviour. I was popular amongst peers and had no problem socialising. This was all set against quite a complicated family upbringing after my parents split up when I was around the age of 6, my father committed suicide when I was 8 years old and then I lived with a step-father who was an alcoholic from the age of 11 onwards. My stepfather had limited involvement in my upbringing. I would complete schoolwork on my own at home as my mother had a limited understanding of schoolwork having left education at 15 with no qualifications. I was the first person in my immediate and surrounding family to progress into higher education and the only person that I knew in the area that I lived, which was a working class community. I was encouraged from a young age to 'stand up for myself' by my mother and often that led to representing and speaking up for other people in childhood and adulthood – sometimes getting myself into trouble along the way as a boy growing up!*

*After graduating from university I was employed as a Sports Development Manager for various local authorities and prior to becoming a University Lecturer in 2007 I was employed as a National Development Manager for Sport England for four years. I am married with two children (Abigail and Cameron). I volunteer at a local bereavement charity and I help to run the local football club where my children play. I have played football since a young age and I am a season ticket holder with my son at a Premier League football club. Football has featured in my life from being a young boy as either*

*a player, spectator and now a coach. As a child I loved to play and I often wonder what level I could have achieved if I had perhaps had more support, particularly paternal support. I was a promising cricket player and single figure handicap golfer regularly competing at a local golf club.*

*Whilst this snapshot by no means does a life of 40 years justice it does offer the reader a glimpse into some of my experiences and interests.*

Reflecting on this initial brief narrative there is an argument to be made that my research interest was not by coincidence and that I chose to research within professional sport, football for that matter, perhaps due to a love of the game and never having been able to be involved at the highest level; this research gave me a way in. I was fascinated by the prospect of finding out about the inner-workings of professional football within the education setting. However, my approach, as I progressed through my study, changed significantly from researching the participants (consultancy type approach) to using the research to represent the participants' voices and opinions (perhaps in fitting with the lessons learned by a mother growing up).

In addition to this personal narrative my own prejudices and biases were recognised in my reflexive research diary. I chose to utilise a research diary after reading a paper by Nadin and Cassell (2006), it offers more of a practical guide about how to actually be reflexive. They suggest that this approach fits with the constructivist approach that I have adopted for my research. Much has been written about why we should be reflexive and the benefits of doing so, but there appears to be less of a focus on how to and the development of specific frameworks. Nadin and Cassell (2006) suggest that a diary creates space to be reflexive in order to recognise any bias and to make improved methodological decisions. My actual approach is slightly different to the one that they adopted in their paper. They wrote in their diary

immediately after they left the research setting in order to ensure that they did not miss anything. They then recorded their observations later using a recording device. I opted to take field notes whilst conducting my focus groups and immediately after they had finished I added anything that I felt I had missed. I then used the rest of the day to consider the experience and then I returned to my notes at the end of the day. By that point I had a suitable period to actually reflect and to consider what had unfolded. At this point I wrote in my research diary and used the categories suggested by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) as a framework (observational note, theoretical note, methodological note). See below for a brief overview of each of the categories. I also added a fourth category as I did not feel that these categories allowed me to sufficiently explore my own feelings in any depth and to identify any subsequent bias or prejudice that I felt was displayed on my part. This fourth category has been titled Personal Note.

**Observational Note** - This is a descriptive note of an event gathered through watching and listening. They contain as little interpretation as possible and are as reliable as an observer can construct them.

**Theoretical Note** - It is here that the observer attempts to make meaning from one or several of the observation notes.

**Methodological Note** - This is the place where you reflect on the methodological process and oneself as the researcher. A critique of one's own tactics.

**Personal Note** - This is where I wrote about how the research experience made me feel, I wrote about my emotions and try to highlight any bias or prejudice towards the research participants. I try to explore and explain why I felt or acted in a particular way.

Due to the personal and sensitive nature of the research diary I have chosen not to include it as an appendix. However, the following two observational notes taken from the diary from two separate visits to the club help generate a sense of being in the setting and detail some of my first impressions of the participants and the environment.

**Observational Note – June 2012: Initial meeting to brief participants about the research:**

*My overall perception of the facility was of surprise. For some reason I had expected it to be state of the art and perhaps closer in location to the club's training ground, it is on a separate site. The local area is one that you would describe as being deprived; the facility sits next to a High School at the side of a local council estate. I have been to other Premier League Academies before, wealthier clubs, and they are very different. Obviously not being at the training ground makes a difference to how it appears and feels. You don't feel as though you are visiting a football club.*

*The education staff at the club call it the college, but to me it felt anything but. It was quite small and what I would describe as a small-scale training centre or a really small primary school on one level. The car park would fit in around 30 cars and there is a small reception area as you enter. From there you can head one way to a small canteen and there are classrooms that apparently host other training programmes that have nothing to do with the club. It turns out that the club just rent space in this facility from an independent training provider along with their staff from their community foundation. There is a small office for the Head of Education and two classrooms for the players. I'm surprised to find a small gym type area with*

*basketball hoops; apparently the scholars do not use this. The staff from the community foundation sometimes use it with children from the local area. The classrooms are quite small and laid out with some tables set together in the middle (in a rectangle shape with about 10-12 chairs around). Packed tightly in around the perimeter are tables with computers facing the wall and windows.*

*Pete (Head of Education and Welfare) introduces me to the other two staff members; it's a bit of a surprise as one is also an ex-student of mine who came to UCLan to complete his degree. I'm pleased that he is working in sport and it's nice to see him. He explains that he works full-time at the community foundation at the club and is bought out by Pete to undertake some teaching two afternoons a week. The other member of staff is really nice and she works as an hourly paid teacher, she is completing her teaching qualification as a student and seems quite young. The staff are fairly inexperienced in comparison to perhaps more established colleges but they all seem motivated and enthusiastic about their roles. After meeting the staff I got to meet some of the players on an informal basis before I do the official briefing and overview of the research; Pete introduces me to them. My first impressions were that some of them appear extremely confident, bordering on arrogant, whilst others were quite shy and lacking confidence. I suppose this is typical of a group of 16-18 year old boys, we will see!!!*

*After meeting with them I felt more at ease. Collectively they seem like a good bunch and it was great that they were so willing to be involved. There are definitely one or two in each group that are perhaps over-confident and the staff did say as much before I met with them. Overall though, they listened and I'm really excited to get going. They did seem to have a really good relationship*

*with one another and it seemed as though the lads get on well with the staff members.*

**Observational Note – October 2012: Lunch and a break from the Focus Groups:**

*I went to lunch today with Pete after I had finished the first round of focus groups. We went to the canteen. It was quite busy as the majority of the scholars were in there in one corner and then there was other staff and some students (approx. aged 16-21) from the other courses that run out of the facility. We go to the counter and order what we want, apparently the lads all do the same and there is no need to pay. The food is quite basic and they serve sandwiches, chips and jacket potatoes. Pete and the ladies behind the counter seem to have a good relationship. Pete and I chat briefly about the focus groups and how they went. I was cautious not to give away too much and at the back of my mind is the confidentiality issue and the promise I made to the lads about not disclosing their information. It was a really informal chat and I tell him that the lads were responsive and very helpful. I didn't go into detail but I did say that it is obvious even at this early point that there are some big characters and that they have had very different experiences in school. I was still thinking about some of the stories that they players had told me about during their time at school. I hadn't even thought to ask the staff about their backgrounds or Pete when we met the other week. It's quite obvious even at this early stage that some of the players are very different, the Head Boy and the player expelled are at extreme ends of the scale.*

*The lads all seem to get along. They sat in their corner seemingly happy in the canteen. They laughed and joked with one another and occasionally one of them came over to Pete for a quick chat. These chats were usually instigated*

*by the players with questions about their work or playing at the weekend. It strikes me that Pete has a wider role to play as he is also responsible for their welfare. Pete seems to have an excellent relationship with the players that he speaks to and I comment upon this. He suggests that the majority of them are really good lads but points out the few players that he perceives to be problematic. The majority of them were in the first focus group and two of them had told me about being suspended and expelled from school. I couldn't believe that they had few GCSE's, but the more I think about it, they are there for their footballing ability and not what they did at school. I'm not sure how that fits though as they have to do the BTEC and it will be interesting in the next round of focus groups to hear about how they perceive their course at the club.*

It was whilst writing the additional personal notes within my diary that I identified that I had been frustrated by the lack of engagement shown on the educational course by the players in the early stages of my research. This was largely shaped by my own identity and views towards education as a University Lecturer. This will be discussed further in the results and analysis section, but at this point highlighted my own bias towards education. As someone that engages within education and values it I was frustrated in the research setting and it led to me seeing myself as very distant from the participants. Once I recognised my own prejudice I began to show more empathy and think of my research as a chance to give the scholars a voice. I wanted to understand their situation better and to give them the chance to air their frustrations and for me to represent their views. This has been quite enlightening and has transformed the way in which I now view my research. In the very early phases I felt a complete separation between the participants and myself and viewed myself as the outsider.

As the research progressed I began to recognise that I was showing more empathy towards the scholars. It might be argued that my research evolved to adopt elements that are consistent with the advocacy – liberatory framework by Freire (1970). It became more in fitting with characteristics that can be viewed from my personal narrative in relation to standing up for others. The football element of the research became less important to me and the opportunity to contribute towards improving the practices at the club took over.

The research diary is a valuable tool that has allowed me to identify and explore how my own judgments and observations have influenced subsequent choices made in relation to the analysis and discussion. Others have used their reflexive field notes in an attempt to reflect and interpret their own personal influence upon subsequent choices in their research and they have attempted to illustrate this through the use of commentary (Hughes & Palmer, 2010; Pryle & Palmer, 2013). These provide greater transparency within the process and throughout the remaining parts of my thesis commentary boxes have been added to highlight where the research and my personal story overlap.

## **2.4 But that isn't the Complete Story...**

Despite this seemingly logical and fluid approach, it was only later on in the research process that I began to grapple with the complexities of my research philosophy, the challenges of understanding my ontological position, my epistemological stance and the value of reflexivity. This was mainly carried out through the work that we had to consider and write as part of the modules within the EdD programme and after I had decided to conduct focus groups and interviews. It is important to point out that this was an extremely messy and challenging process and understanding the importance of these decisions came after I settled on my research

methods, which I now recognise to be the wrong way around. There is an argument that leads me to the conclusion that it might be more prudent to leave writing this retrospective account. Perhaps I am taking a risk by presenting this chapter in this way, it would be much easier to stick with presenting this section in a way that shows how my ontological position and epistemological stance shaped the preferred methods in a coherent approach. However, it was not the case, five years of my own development would be lost or ignored as though I am ashamed of my starting point; perhaps more can be learned by this honesty. The method and form of data analysis are in fitting with the philosophical approach that underpins this research and if it had been developed in a linear manner it would appear to be logical. However, in an attempt to be transparent and to demonstrate how research can be messy, ambiguous and can evolve, often in line with the evolution of the researcher, the following section will show the research journey and how it came to be.

## **2.5 A Complex Journey Often Untold...**

When the proposal for this research was developed and constructed for the various research committees that needed to approve it, it was done so with an emphasis on it being an exploratory study. The early parts of this doctoral process led me to believe that my research relied upon an exploratory approach, one that was described by Stebbins (2001) as allowing for new meanings to emerge. At this point in the process (Jan-Feb 2012) my understanding of wider qualitative approaches such as grounded theory and phenomenology was limited. I had undertaken previous research for my undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and simply listed them as inductive qualitative studies. My research training and therefore understanding of more complex issues such as how one's ontological position and epistemological stance should inform the research approach was not something that I had grappled

with and understood fully. Figure 2.2 from my reflexive research journal sheds some light on this.

FIGURE 2.2: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, FEBRUARY 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Personal/Methodological Note:**

It's clear to me now that the EdD is designed to develop our understanding of the research process in education but as was to be expected it is assumed that there is a prior level of understanding from the staff delivering the course. After listening to some of my peers on the 'taught' components, I can't help but think that I am quite a bit behind. I am worried now that I have taken on too much. The area I worry about most is the methodology element. I don't understand a lot of the language.

Within the exploratory approach offered by Stebbins (2001) there is no fixed framework for gathering data or analysing it, but he does stress the need to remove the straightjacket of traditional research approaches and suggests that we are natural explorers and although many frontiers have been conquered we still need to strive to develop new understandings in research. After reading his text, entitled "Exploratory Research in Social Sciences", I felt somewhat liberated. I had found something that I could hang my research hat on, it was exploratory. His work alleviated any concerns about being a novice in this field and my interpretation of his work led me to believe that this might even be to my advantage. I would come to develop a more in-depth understanding of other approaches. Fellow EdD students that I studied alongside appeared to have a much greater insight into the various qualitative approaches available and most seemed comfortable with their choices: grounded theory, phenomenology and hermeneutics. I was pleased that I had something to call my own. It may have just been convenient when faced with the apparent complexities of these other research approaches.

It is quite clear to me now that when I began the process of applying for a place on the EdD at UCLan I was unprepared for the challenges that lay ahead. I had not considered the nature of knowledge and the various ways in which knowledge is constructed. My previous research training had been heavily focused upon research methods and data collection. As I alluded to earlier, McAlpine (2012) suggests that students studying for a Professional Doctorate in the social sciences appear to devote a significant proportion of time to reading in order to find epistemological links to underpin their work. Not surprisingly, this has been a feature of my EdD. The EdD programme offers students the opportunity to come together, to share work and to collaborate in developing a shared understanding of the research process. In my second year on the programme the six EdD students in my cohort were asked to pair up and to challenge each other's research approaches. I was paired with someone that was generally seen as one of the most confident people within the group. She had opted to adopt a grounded theory approach and seemed to be extremely confident in communicating the merits of it within our classes. I decided to invest time and effort into developing enough of an understanding of grounded theory so that I could appear competent in raising a few questions and perhaps even highlighting issues with the approach in our discussion. Surprisingly, I was struck by the similarities with the exploratory approach that I had opted for and began to wonder if I was able to claim that my research was indeed grounded. No-one seemed to recognise exploratory as an accepted approach and I felt the need to latch on to something more universally recognised. It became apparent to me that whilst my research was not truly a grounded theory approach, in so much as it does not follow the original framework developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), there are some similarities with the various approaches that fall under the grounded theory heading (Charmaz, 2000;

Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I was alerted to how both my peer's approach and my exploratory approach relied upon us suspending any sort of in-depth literature review, with both approaches being led by the initial data collection and analysis.

I made the deliberate decision not to undertake an extensive literature review so as not to jeopardise the exploratory approach advocated by Stebbins and to ensure I did not gather my data or indeed analyse it in a way that was predetermined. According to Stebbins (2001), 'The requirement that a literature review be undertaken prior to conducting a social science research project is one of the shibboleths of modern times' (p.42). His suggestion is that exhaustive literature reviews have a place in textbooks, review articles and confirmatory type research. The same could be said for doctoral research unless specifically and purposefully avoided as with grounded theory approaches. In contrast, literature reviews in exploratory research are much more concise and in many instances deemed to be not needed at all. Critics have argued that the notion that data can be collected without any prior theoretical baggage is flawed (Clarke, 2005; Dunne, 2011) and the formal research process does not afford us that luxury (Thornberg, 2012). Indeed, and as I have already alluded to, the EdD relies upon this with a compulsory requirement being the submission of a research proposal to the School of Education and Social Sciences research committee and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) Ethics committee. Within the UCLan proposal an overview of relevant literature must be offered. Certainly at the time of writing I was not in a position to consider challenging this and it was just one step that I would take with limited regard for the alternatives. However, I must point out that within my research proposal the literature review consisted of two very brief paragraphs that provided more of an overview of previous work that had been

conducted when measuring attitudes towards a phenomenon. Several authors point out that we cannot unlearn what we already know, we have to face up to our theoretical understandings and we must devote time to what has already been learned (Bruce, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Schreiber, 2001). At this early point though, I was still in awe of the work by Stebbins (2001), a little blue book that had become quite a focus and resonated on a level that excited me. I wanted to be an explorer, I wanted to break new ground and rid myself of the shackles of the traditional research approach. This supported my lack of experience in this research field. I began to resent the two 'forced paragraphs' (literature review) that I had been made to write by the research committee. Grounded theory began to feel too prescriptive and the on-going debates about the variations were getting in the way of my newfound creative approach. I was an explorer, I just wanted to get on with it and I did. In fitting with the phenomenological approach outlined in the earlier section of this chapter, the decision to not to undertake a literature review was upheld and appropriately selected literature has been drawn upon throughout the findings and analysis chapters to tell the players' stories (Wolcott, 1990). Within the introductory chapter the literature overview was undertaken retrospectively to provide context for the reader.

## **2.6 Reflections on the Methodological Journey**

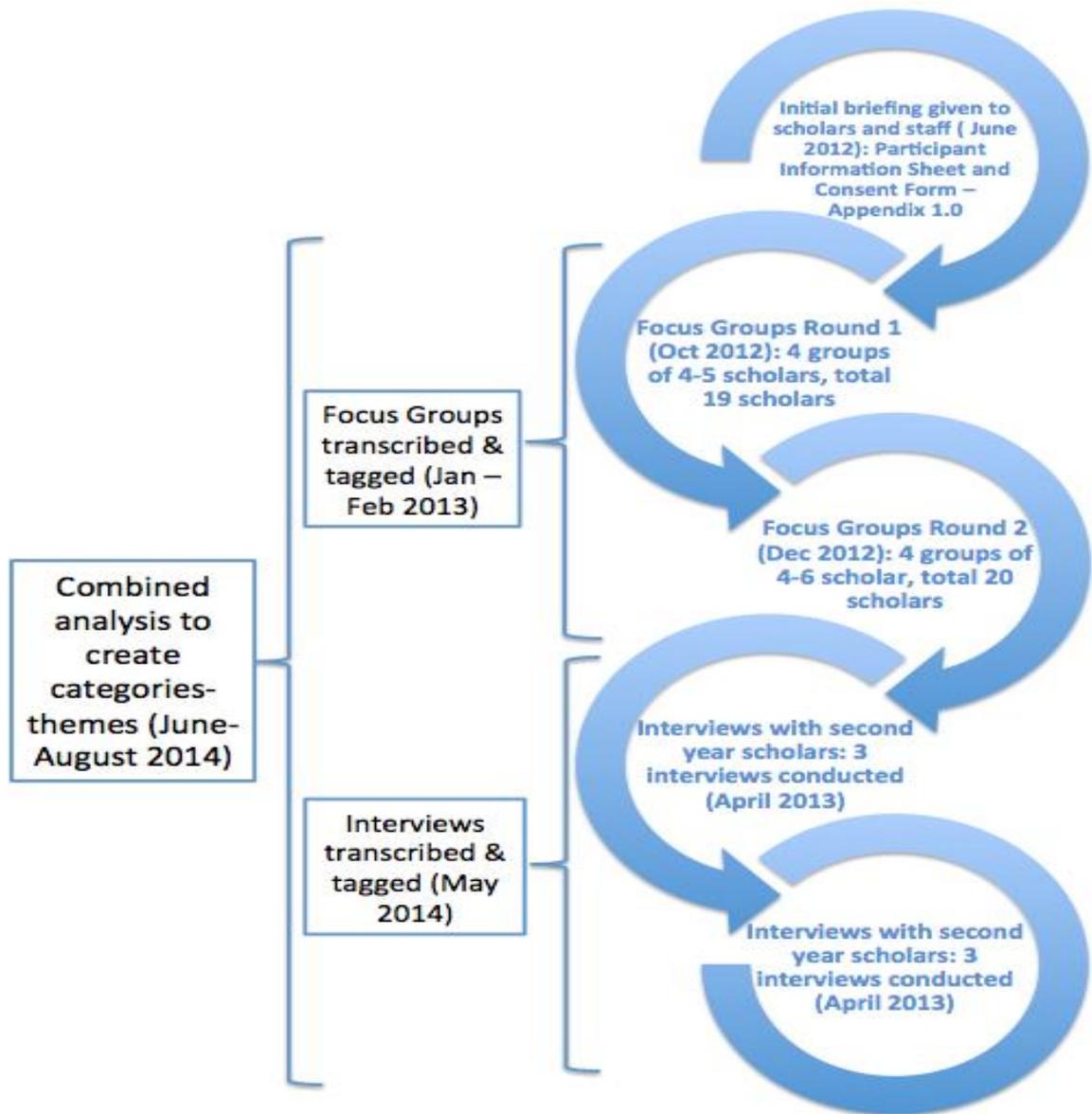
Becoming a researcher is not a linear or straightforward process, with the complexities obvious. Perhaps methodological certainty is an ambition that one can only partway achieve throughout the doctoral process. My initial ambitions when commencing the Professional Doctorate in Education were largely centred on getting out into the field; I wanted to make a difference. I also wanted to be seen as credible by my peers and so I plumped for an approach that seemed right in the early stages. It was all I knew. It became apparent in my interactions with my peers and the staff

within the School of Education and Social Sciences at UCLan that there was a whole new range of 'ologies' and 'isms' that I was unfamiliar with. This takes me to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) in relation to communities of practice. Their suggestion being that communities of practice exist everywhere, some we enjoy as core members and others we exist on the periphery. My research journey reflects my transition from periphery to core member within the community of scholars that I now work alongside. This notion of learning is clearly in fitting with the constructivist paradigm that underpins this research.

## **2.7 Phenomenological Methods**

This research relied upon initial focus groups followed by in-depth interviews. This section will explain how the research participants were selected, outline why focus groups and interviews were the preferred choice for collecting the data, and will provide an overview of the techniques utilised for analysing the data. The main steps are summarised in Figure 2.3 and explained in more detail in this next section.

## 2.3: RESEARCH ACTIVITY OVERVIEW



### 2.7.1 Research Participants

Sparkes and Smith (2013) point to the selection of a field site or case, followed by sampling within the field site as two important sampling issues in qualitative research. There is an expectation that pre-formulated research questions dictate the sample that is selected within qualitative studies (Bryman, 2012; Robson & McCartan, 2016). This might be perceived as too simplistic if the research field and those within it are what sparked the initial research interest. Clearly, work would need to be

undertaken to shape the research questions after the initial interest, but it might be better regarded in this instance as an iterative process that was shaped by collaboration between myself as the researcher and the Head of Education and Welfare at the club. Decisions about which scholars would be involved in the study were not pre-determined, but it must be recognised that the intention was to involve as many scholars as possible within the research to ascertain a wide range of views about the educational programme. The research questions were formulated after the field site had been selected. This approach might be regarded as a form of convenience sampling, described by some as not being appropriate for generalising findings (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2013; Lodico *et al*, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2010;). Upon first glance, this appears to be problematic, but seeking generalisations that can be applied to other settings would in itself be an oxymoron when the methodological foundations of this research are reconsidered.

The focus group interviews were constructed using what might best be described as a criterion based sampling approach with homogenous characteristics being considered (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013). The scholars were split by year group and by general educational ability levels with the exception of one focus group that contained scholars from across the two year groups. The scholars had met with me at their in-house education facility prior to the focus groups as I had conducted the research briefing. I had been introduced to most of the players at some point individually. At this point they were given the participant information sheet and research consent form (see Appendix 1.0) and asked to return the consent form the week after. It was made clear that they could opt out without any fear of prejudice. The Head of Education and Welfare reiterated this message and encouragingly they all agreed to

take part. The following research diary extract explains the process and how all of the scholars agreed to take part without hesitation.

FIGURE 2.4: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, JUNE 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Methodological Note:**

I spoke with them in their year groups and after Pete introduced me I told them a bit about my background (I focused quite a bit on my experiences in football - especially South Africa) and then I told them about the research and their potential involvement. I explained to them that they did not need to feel obliged, it was not compulsory but I did explain that it would obviously be a big help to me personally and in evaluating the work at the club. I made it very clear that what they discussed would not impact upon their development at the club. I took them through the participant information sheet and consent form. I stressed the anonymity element and hopefully made it clear that their personal information would not be disclosed. Surprisingly, they all signed it straight away and did not seem to be fazed at all about the research and what I had asked of them. One or two did say that they wouldn't do interviews on their own, it was as though they were nervous about them – the staff had suggested as much.

During their time at the club the scholars had mostly mixed by year group and academic ability level more so than any other combination, even football ability according to the staff. The exception to this was the scholars across the two-year groups that had perceived behavioural issues, they tended to mix together more closely, but this may have been because the majority originated from the same geographical area. The first round of focus group interviews probed into the players' experiences and attitudes towards their time at school and took place in October 2012. The second round that focused on the players' attitudes towards education at the club took place in December 2012. For each phase there were four focus groups in

total with 19 players taking part in round one and 20 players engaging in round two. Each focus group in round one had between four to five players in attendance and four to five in round two. The additional player in round two was absent during round one due to playing football for the club's reserve team. Each focus group was between 35 minutes to one hour in length.

Heterogeneous sampling was considered when the selection of the scholars was made for the interview phase of the research. This was described by Hays and Singh (2011) as seeking 'to have maximum variation of characteristics within a sample' (p.106). In this instance three scholars from each of the year groups were selected for interview by the club staff based upon their perceived levels of engagement within education at the club leading to a total of six interviews. The interviews were between 30 to 40 minutes in length. One player from each year group was selected who was regarded as being engaged with his educational programme, one that was indifferent, and the third scholar perceived as lacking motivation and having low levels of engagement. It was felt that this would give a rounded view of the phenomenon. Two scholars refused to take part in the interviews as they did not feel comfortable talking one on one.

### **2.7.2 Focus Group Interviews**

According to Creswell (2003), phenomenological studies often rely upon data that has been gathered from in-depth interviews and although it has been recognised that focus groups are not common when undertaking phenomenological enquiry (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & Fadden, 2010) they can be used to generate a shared lived experience within phenomenological research (Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook, & Irvine, 2009; Palmer *et al.*, 2010). Bradbury-Jones *et al.* (2009) discuss the need to recognise that studies that are in fitting with Heidegger's view of phenomenology are best

placed to utilise focus groups in their phenomenological approaches and that they enhance rather than compromise the quality of this type of research. This view is shared by Priest (2003) who outlined that the most usual data source in phenomenological research was transcripts of interviews, group discussions, written accounts and diaries. Focus groups and interviews have been commonly employed in qualitative studies since the 1980s (Bryman, 2012) and offer a means to illicit shared information from a group of people. Krueger and Casey (2014) suggested that focus groups work when participants feel comfortable, respected and are given the opportunity to offer their opinions free of judgement. The staff at the club felt that the focus groups would be a useful mechanism for me to get to know the players in order to conduct more in-depth interviews later on. The education staff at the club suggested that this type of approach would naturally lead to the scholars disclosing their views. They warned against interviews in the initial stages, their perception being that the scholars would not open up on their own with someone that they did not know so well. It was also suggested by the club staff that the scholars would be more likely to share their experiences amongst their closest peers. The homogenous nature of the focus groups encouraged the scholars to reveal personal and sensitive information (Sugarman & Sulmasy, 2010), in this case their views about education at school and the club. One scholar was open enough to disclose something that could have been quite difficult to announce in front of his peers but which he was comfortable sharing. He explained how: 'I was put into a special unit', another scholar spoke freely about his admiration for his older brother: 'My older brother, he was a mess and I ended up copying him. I just wanted to be like him, you have got to meet him to understand how funny he is.' This was also apparent in my research diary and is evidenced in the extract below.

FIGURE 2.5: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Methodological Note:**

The first focus groups took place today and I was really surprised how candid and open the players were. They spoke about their times at school, they discussed a range of topics and some of what they disclosed surprised me due to the severity of some of the issues that they had experienced. Two of the scholars spoke about what I would describe as severe behavioural issues (fighting etc.) and one even told a story about a teacher allegedly having sex with another pupil.

The initial introduction that I gave the scholars in June also appeared to help build a rapport between them and myself and this seemed to help in creating an environment that encouraged open discussion. This was recognised in my research diary after the first round of focus groups, the following short extract from Figure 2.6 explains my apprehension prior to conducting the first round:

FIGURE 2.6: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Methodological Note:**

I was surprisingly nervous about the focus groups today. I'm still unsure if that was perhaps down to it being for something that is personally really important to me (my Doctorate) or perhaps there was some trepidation about entering this new setting and hoping that it all goes well. My fears were alleviated, as the players were really good lads and that made it easier to get the conversation going. I think the initial introduction back in June helped a lot.

The focus group approach helped the scholars to explore their views and generate discussion in ways that they would have potentially found more difficult in face-to-face interviews (Kitzinger, 1996). The focus groups served as a means to

extract shared information and meanings from the scholars that otherwise might have remained unexplored (Babbie, 2007). Clearly this is in fitting with the aim of a phenomenological study and perhaps provides further justification of the merits in this type of approach. This claim is strengthened further by Gerrish and Lathlean (2015) who indicated that focus groups were advantageous over other methods as 'In the early stages of a study, the discussion and data generated by a focus group can identify complex problems and areas that need further exploration and clarification' (p.409). They are also a useful tool to obtain general background information about a topic of interest, to stimulate new ideas and creative concepts, and to learn about how participants talk about a particular phenomenon (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). The focus groups concentrated on identifying general themes related to the players' attitudes towards education whilst at school and in their current setting at the club. The focus groups were unstructured enabling the players to interact with each other and myself as the 'moderator'. The informal group dynamics helped to stimulate discussion, gain fresh insights and generate ideas in order to pursue the phenomenon in greater depth (Bowling, 1997). The focus groups also enabled me to speak with the majority of players. Due to time constraints at the club it would not have been possible to interview them all individually; this was communicated directly to me by the educational staff.

Useful guidance for a researcher that is about to embark upon focus group interviews can be found across a range of literature (Litosseliti, 2003; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). The role of the moderator is of particular interest as is the guidance offered for developing and asking questions. I felt that it was important to create an environment for the players to be able to speak openly and to feel as though they had someone that was not a threat to their progression at the club. Within this

study the scholars were all offered an overview of the research at the beginning of the discussions, and the main points outlined in the participant information sheet and consent forms were reinforced. It was again made clear that the discussions would not prejudice them in any way or jeopardise their standing at the club. I spent the first 3-4 minutes before each one introducing myself again. I explained my relationship with the Head of Education and Welfare (as his former Lecturer) and I told them about my interest in football and that the discussions would help with my EdD and would also inform any potential changes at the club. The focus groups were facilitated in what might be described as an intimate nondirective fashion. This is borrowed from the work of Stewart and Shamdasani (2015) who suggested that a nondirective approach encourages more group interaction and greater opportunity for the individuals' views to emerge; in relation to intimacy, their view was that the more intimate the approach then the more likely that group discussion will be stimulated. Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, and Robson (2001) suggested that focus groups are a useful tool either as the main method or in pilot studies that explore ideas that will be investigated further using a different approach. The subsequent interviews are to be viewed as complementary and whilst they were utilised to explore some of the findings from the focus groups they were also a mechanism for new meanings and ideas to emerge.

### **2.7.3 Interviews**

Individual interviews are described by Kvale (1996) as an attempt to understand the world from the research participants' point of view. They are sometimes utilised in research to follow up on issues that are raised within focus groups (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) and to determine differences in responses between situations (Hesse-Biber & Johnson, 2015). Open-ended interviews offer maximum

flexibility in exploring topics in depth and are extremely useful to identify new domains or to explain existing domains (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Hatch (2002) provides justification for using follow up interviews in his study with his suggestion that 'preliminary focus group work would more often lead to helping qualitative researchers develop individual open-ended interviews or shape plans for observation' (p.103). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested that interviewers are like travellers on a journey that return with stories to be told with interviewing being described as a craft where two or more people make connections and construct knowledge about themselves in the social world. Three interviews were carried out in April 2013 with three second-year scholars who were coming to the end of their scholarship and who were awaiting a decision about whether or not they would be offered a professional contract at the club. Three further interviews with players were conducted at the same stage the year after in April 2014 with three of the progressing first-year scholars that had participated in the focus groups and were coming to the end of their two-year tenure. They too were awaiting final decisions about full time playing contracts. The players interviewed were selected by year group and by those willing to volunteer. Some of the players did not want to be interviewed individually providing further justification for the focus group approach, although the interviewees that did take part in the research were predominantly forthcoming with their views about education at the club. The diary extract below, seen as Figure 2.7 points to this being the case.

FIGURE 2.7: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2013. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Methodological Note:**

Interview Day. I carried out three. I was really struck again by how chatty the lads were. One was less talkative in this environment than the focus group, but the other two were even more willing to share their experiences and thoughts. It made me think that the combination of focus groups and interviews is beneficial as it allows people to discuss topics either one to one or in a group,

Only one of the players deemed as having behavioural issues was willing to participate in the interview stage and one had been playing in the reserves on the day that they had been scheduled. The interview process was undertaken to help me to get a fuller picture of the players' views of education at the club and I chose to undertake these at the end of their course so that they could reflect upon their tenure at the club in its entirety.

The focus groups and interviews were semi-structured and it could be argued that they were towards the open ended/unstructured end of the interviewing continuum. Due to the exploratory nature of the research an attempt was made to limit the input of predetermined questions and some general areas of discussion were followed during each method which helped to elicit the participants' stories. This allowed for their understanding of reality and for unanticipated ideas and phenomena to emerge (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The focus groups and interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim.

#### **2.7.4 Data Analysis**

Some phenomenologists are reluctant to outline the specific steps that have been used to analyse their data so as to avoid comparisons with positivist type research, but most do follow a systematic procedure (Priest, 2003). Various ways in which to analyse data within phenomenological studies exist (Hycner, 1985; Moustakas, 1990; Priest, 2003), some are utilised across a range of qualitative approaches to research and are not necessarily exclusive to phenomenological studies. Fraenkel *et al.* (2014) discuss the benefits of content analysis in their book about evaluating research in education, others approaches exist such as template analysis and thematic analysis. At first glance and at times, even after closer scrutiny, it appears that there are obvious similarities between the different approaches to

analysing data with most often relying upon some form of coding and grouping together of ideas. After careful consideration I opted in my research to use open coding in an attempt to analyse my data thematically.

Thematic Analysis (TA) is described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (p.79). TA does not feature in certain textbooks on research methods, but does in others, most notably the fourth edition of Alan Bryman's (2012) 'Social Research Methods'. Both Bryman (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2006) allude to TA as being void of any clear identifiable heritage but suggest that it is commonly referred to in qualitative research studies. However, Bryman (2012) does point out that although researchers suggest that they have carried out TA, it is not an identifiable approach. This leads to further confusion and uncertainty as the approach is absent of any clear standardised guidelines. Revisiting the work of Stebbins (2001) and Priest (2003) though would suggest that guidelines in a standard form would simply represent part of the straightjacket and therefore it would be better to provide a loose framework for researchers to interpret and utilise as appropriate. This is in fitting with the interpretive phenomenological stance adopted by Heidegger (1927/1962). In essence, TA involves the identification of patterns in the data and unlike other analytical techniques such as template analysis, but like grounded theory, it is not bound by theory and is inductive by nature to allow new meanings to emerge. The work of Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell (1993) and Braun and Clarke (2006) was utilised to sort the data and to develop overarching themes.

The starting point for this analysis was to listen to the recordings and then transcribe the interviews and focus groups. I then read and familiarised myself with the data and checked the transcripts back against the recordings for accuracy, this

provided a starting point for the initial stages of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The transcriptions of the focus groups were then read again with initial areas of interest being labeled as tags (Côté *et al.*, 1993) referred to by Braun and Clarke (2006) as initial codes. This was repeated for the six interviews after they were conducted. According to Dick and Frazier (2006), some researchers will undertake focus groups then use interviews to verify the findings from the focus groups. In this study the intention was to explore some of the issues that surfaced in the focus groups further in the interviews. However, they had a dual purpose and served as a means to unearth new information related to the phenomenon. Figure 2.8 and 2.9 provide an example of this initial process from the focus groups and interviews. The examples clearly show the dialogue and the corresponding tags highlighted in blue. This is for illustrative purposes only and to view the tags fully please see the full transcripts of each focus group and interview which can be found in the supplementary documentation file (headed as Transcripts: Focus Groups and Interviews).

FIGURE 2.8: EXTRACT FROM FOCUS GROUP 1

36 3 – They tell you what you are predicted.

37 1 – Which did you prefer?

38 3 – Weren't bothered.

39 Direct question to 1 – Did you just stop altogether in the final year?

40 1 – I just stopped, I just hated work. I used to just go and do my own thing. If I could be paid to go

41 back to school I'd go back, I loved it. I would pay a grand to go back now.

42 3 – That's just a laugh that though in it

43 People laugh

44 1 – I would. I would I miss school me.

45 2 – First school lad, nothing beating it.

46 1 – What did you enjoy?

47 1 – I used to go and play footie on the pitch when the classes were going on. I got kicked out in the

48 last year though. I was in and out in year 10 and the teachers used to just let me go and play

49 football when the lesson was going on. Sometimes, if we got kicked out though, then we would rob

50 a ball from PE. I just didn't care. It sounds bad saying it now, but I just didn't care about nothing

51 other than footie.

52 5 – I only failed one GCSE. That was like some arts thing.

53 3 – I had a special tutor to stop me disrupting others in the class.

54 People laugh

55 3 – I skipped school once and went to KFC drive through on the docks.

56 4 – He's lying in he?

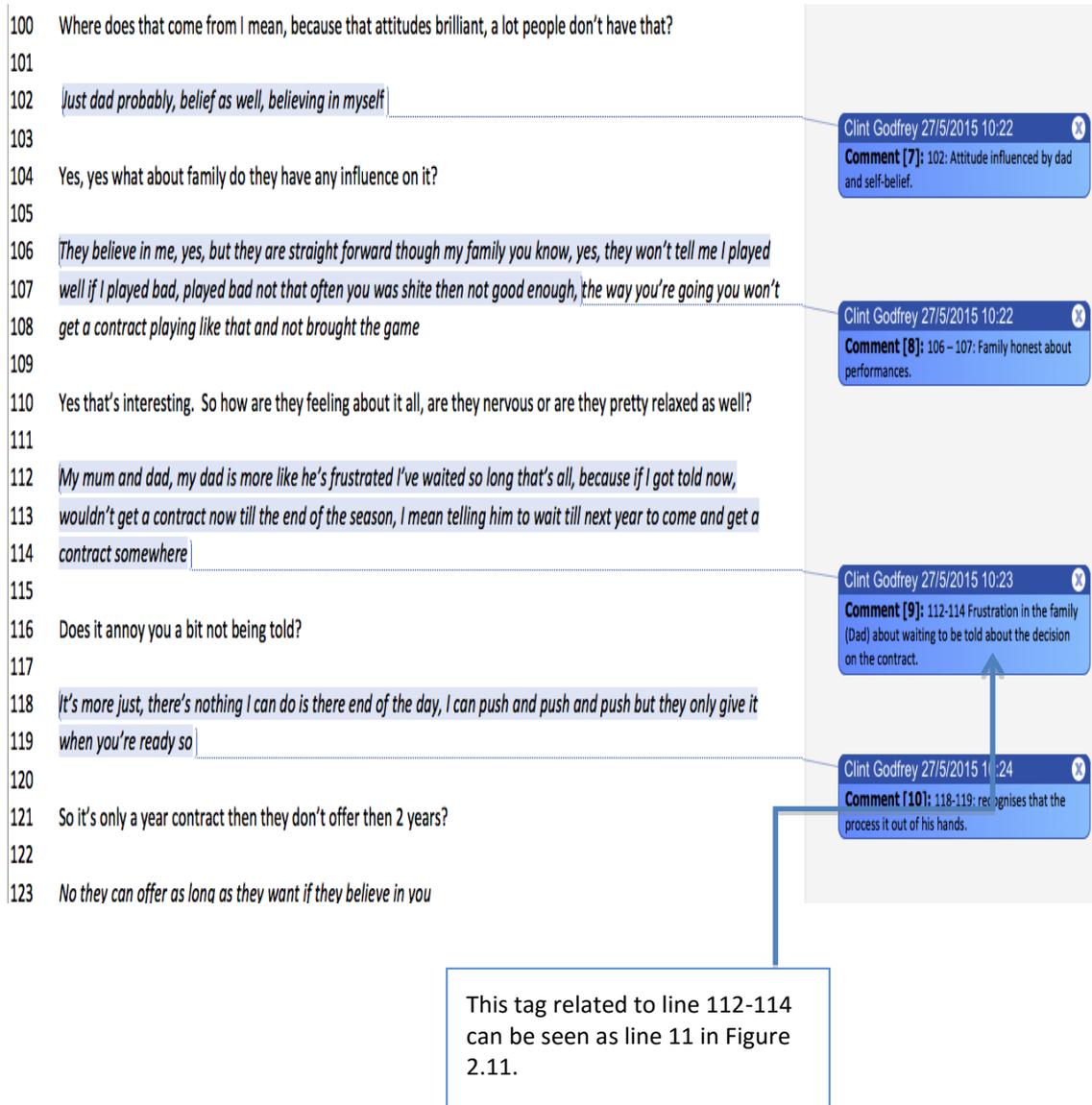
57 3 – No, they all think I lie about everything by the way. No, we had half a day at school and like,

58 there was one lesson left and we just thought we would go, there was like 4 or 5 of us, and then we

Comments:

- Comment [8]: Apathy towards school
- Comment [9]: Machismo
- Comment [10]: Extreme dislike of school work
- Comment [11]: Contradictory - Nostalgia
- Comment [12]: Contradictory - Nostalgia
- Comment [13]: Disengagement
- Comment [14]: Nostalgic / Machismo
- Comment [15]: Poor behaviour / issues
- Comment [16]: Limited understanding of qualifications taken in school.
- Comment [17]: Special Support
- Comment [18]: Truanting

FIGURE 2.9: EXTRACT FROM INTERVIEW 3



The tags for each focus group and then the interviews were then copied and pasted into two separate Microsoft Excel documents. For the focus groups the quotation column was hidden to make the subsequent sorting exercise more manageable. For the interviews the quotations were overlaid after the sorting exercise. The full lists can be found in the supplementary documentation folder (headed as Tags List: Focus Groups and Interviews). Figures 2.10 and 2.11 show an example of this initial phase.

FIGURE 2.10: FOCUS GROUPS TAGS LISTED IN MICROSOFT EXCEL

	A	B	D	E
1	Focus Group	Tags	Line	Participant
2		1 Relaxed attitude to additional day	12	5
3		1 Not wanting to do qualification / no interest	17	1
4		1 Limited effort or desire to complete B-Tec – requirement and nothing else.	20	5
5		1 Low achievers still expect to pass with minimum effort.	24	4
6		1 Low achievers still expect to pass with minimum effort.	25	2
7		1 No interest in education – football the priority.	30	5
8		1 Parents focused on football outcomes and not education	32	4
9		1 No understanding of how the course may help beyond a career in professional football	41	4
10		1 Very Low expectations from football	42	2
11		1 Mixed feeling about educational staff.	52	5
12		1 Treated like children	60	All
13		1 Victims of poor treatment – coaches and club in general.	67	4
14		1 Victims of poor treatment – coaches and club in general.	70	5
15		1 Limited induction / do not appear to grasp the value and meaning of the qualification	85	4
16		1 Food is an issue	95	4
17		1 Feeling of being in special college – physical environment / surroundings	102	2
18		1 Feeling of being in special college – physical environment / surroundings	105	4
19		1 No interest in education – football the priority.	115	2
20		1 Lack of course relevance	119	2
21		1 Surface learning - prescribed learning.	129	5
22		1 Surface learning - prescribed learning.	130	4
23		1 Surface learning - prescribed learning.	131	2
24		1 Surface learning - prescribed learning.	134	5
25		1 No perceived value in doing the B-Tec	136	5
26		1 Players believe football staff don't value it – playing a role.	153	4
27		1 Players believe football staff don't value it – playing a role.	156	2
28		1 Players believe football staff don't value it – playing a role.	157	5
29		1 Wanting to attend college to socialize with others	191	2
30		1 Relaxed attitude to additional day	10-11	2
31		1	106/108	5
32		1 Feeling of being in special college – physical environment / surroundings		
32		1 No understanding of the course and what they are doing.	122 & 124	4
		1	123 & 125/6	2
33		No understanding of the course and what they are doing.		
		1	143-147	2
34		Treated like kids – football identity – feeling of being superior		
		1	161-163	2
35		1		
		1 Players believe football staff don't value it – playing a role.		
		1	167-168	2 & 5

FIGURE 2.11: INTERVIEW TAGS LISTED IN MICROSOFT EXCEL

The screenshot shows the Microsoft Excel interface with a spreadsheet titled "Interview tags.xlsx". The ribbon is set to the "Home" tab, and the font is Calibri (Body) size 12. The spreadsheet contains a list of interview tags in column A, starting from row 1. The tags are numbered 1 through 37. A blue arrow originates from a text box at the bottom of the image and points to the tag "237-238: Sees trying harder in education as offering more chance of being finished early than having extra work now." in row 24.

Row	Tag
1	Interviewee 3
2	
3	5 - Recovering from injury
4	63: Positive about trying to make the team / relishing the challenge.
5	67: Relaxed about the decisions coming up.
6	71-72: Would not consider short term contract, prefer to drop down for more security.
7	93-94: Not worried about the decision, not worth it.
8	98: Recognises other do and play with worry.
9	102: Attitude influenced by dad and self-belief.
10	106 – 107: Family honest about performances.
11	112-114 Frustration in the family (Dad) about waiting to be told about the decision on the contract.
12	118-119: recognises that the process it out of his hands.
13	132: recognises they have 2 years to form a judgement.
14	150: Perceives himself to be close with 1 <sup>st</sup> Team Manager
15	Excellent relationship with coaches in 1 <sup>st</sup> team.
16	Working with agents – removed one and employing another.
17	184-185: Required to do extra work for BTec.
18	180: Not enjoying/happy about doing more BTec work (Shit).
19	201: Resisting doing the work.
20	205: Perception that other players are annoyed at having to do more work on the BTec.
21	Having to reflect on what the units have offered – feeling of a process / having to.
22	228-229: Reflecting on messing about in year 1, regretful.
23	233: Wish he had tried harder in year 1.
24	237-238: Sees trying harder in education as offering more chance of being finished early than having extra work now.
25	253: Family does not talk about education.
26	257 – 259: Does not talk to family about education (BTec).
27	258-259: Football is the priority and education won't get the contract.
28	264: Football the priority for the family.
29	272: Dad in special school (Kids school jail).
30	273: Mum was not in to education, does traditional female activities (washing).
31	282: Parents pleased with GCSE results.
32	286: Personal satisfaction with 12 GCSEs.
33	288-289: Family priorities shifted from education to football.
34	293-294: Family focussed on football not education.
35	298-299: Football seen as a life changer education a fall back.
36	303: Career in football set for life.
37	307: Family see football as an opportunity for a better life.

Tag from Interview 3 in tags list.

Following on from this basic step the tags were grouped by association and labeled into initial sub-categories. This sorting process was undertaken for the focus groups and interviews separately. The exercise for the focus groups was split into round one and round two and involved working with the tags within an Excel spreadsheet and finding the commonalities. Figure 2.12 shows an example of this with the full spreadsheet found in the supplementary documentation folder (headed as Sub Categories: Focus Groups).

FIGURE 2.12: FOCUS GROUPS SUB-CATEGORIES FORMULATION

Participant	Line	Quote	Tags	Sub - Categories		
1	5	64-65	er, done me work like. I wouldn't say I enjoyed it. but I done it, and like got alright results out of it as well, some teachers were decent and you would listen to them and do the work.	Good results	Varied Attainment Levels	
	2	18	I done alright, I got 12 GCSE' s.	Good results		
	1	11	quite well yeh, I was head boy at my school. I had it boxed off.	High ability levels		
	4	1	12	I didn't do well		Mixed achievement levels
	5	1	17	I didn't do no GCSEs or nothing. Well I think I took two .		Extremely low attainment levels
	6	1	53	I had a special tutor to stop me disrupting others in the class.		Special support
	7	2	156-161	My uncle hit him with a stool and got kicked out la. He fucking hated me. I was put into a special unit with a load of fucking monges. Serious, one of them had down syndrome, I walked into class lad and they were just all fucking, this is like year ten in the start of the new school. I was misbehaving and getting put down in classes when I was getting kicked out of them and I walked into the new class and they were all monges lah. Actual down syndromes and that (he laughs) and I just thought, no way.		Special support
11	3	105-107	I reckon it's if you want to do it, if you want to do something you will do it to how good you want to do it. So, if you playing football and you want to do well in it then you will try hard, but if you put someone in lesson and they don't really like it then they are not going to try hard.	Need to see relevance in subject to make an effort	Relevance of Curriculum	
	5	130-132	but with teachers, if you get the RE teacher shouting at you, you aren't really arsed about that, say art teachers are horrible to you because you can't be bothered with art. If it was coaches you love football.	Lack of subject relevance and impact on engagement levels		
	5	83/84	Yeh, like cooking and sowing and that. I was just like, not that interested. But when it got to years 9,10,11 or whatever, when you chose the subjects, I was actually interested.	Lack of relevance with certain subjects - frustration		
	2	24	No, the teacher done it for me, and a GCSE in health and social care. That's that fucking bird one in it? What you do with the fucking baby and that, I didn't do that	Limited understanding of qualifications taken in school		
	5	52	I only failed one GCSE. That was like some arts thing.	Limited understanding of qualifications taken in school		
1	2	16	I missed year 11.	Exclusion from school	Varied Behaviour	
	1	66	Yeh, Tony used to do that to me and take me out.	Excluded from class		
	1	35-36	did many people get expelled or suspended? Errm,not many,just a few, no not really	Limited behaviour issues		
	5	49	I used to get told for talking and having a laugh, but nothing serious	Limited behaviour issues		
	5	58-60	I never had any arguments with teachers, I had a few scraps at dinner times or whatever, over footy or something like that, but I never had like no problems with any teachers ever. So that's why I tended to get away with little things .	Fighting		
	3	55	I skipped school once and went to KFC drive through on the docks.	Truanting		
	2	133-134	with some of the people that we had, we didn't give them	Student control in lessons		

A similar exercise was undertaken with the interview data except the grouping of tags into sub-categories was initially carried out for each interview separately. The sub-categories for each of the interviews were then cross referenced to identify shared meanings in fitting with a phenomenological approach. Figures 2.13 and 2.14 show excerpts from these two steps.

FIGURE 2.13: INTERVIEW SUB-CATEGORIES FORMULATION

	A
1	Interviewee 1
2	<b>Uncertainty about future</b>
3	28 - Lacking confidence about being kept on
4	30-32 Uncertain about progression in football
5	40 - Seen lots of peers been released
6	36 - Challenging awaiting final decision on the contract - uncertainty / tough times.
7	41 - thought about being released and what it would be like.
8	42 - Uncertainty about the process for release/contract.
9	57 - Wanting to look at options away from football - but not yet pursuing them as awaiting decision (University)
10	64- Threat of players from higher clubs taking position.
11	Competition from other premier league club players that may be released - trickle down yet.
12	71 - 72 Uncertain about long term future in football. Recognising constant uncertainty in football.
13	164-169 - Education more of a certainty with an outcome.
14	263 - recognising uncertain environment in sport.
15	264 - Scared of being released.
16	267 - trying to come to terms with potentially being released
17	74 - Recognising the need to be realistic
18	
19	<b>Fear of failure</b>
20	266 - Not wanting to be released or expecting it to happen.
21	154-158 Fear of being seen as a failure - trying to avoid that label.
22	272 - Fear of failure - being in a job with no meaning
23	
24	<b>Other priorities out of football</b>
25	224-229 Football not the only thing in life - music etc..
26	101 - football as a profession - playing for money
27	231 - 233 Not devoted to football, just happen to be good at it.
28	
29	<b>Other options if released</b>
30	61 - Can see opportunities for scholarships in the USA.
31	60 - 61 - Still sees oneself as young and USA being a huge undertaking - away from family
32	67 - considering options
33	68 - 69: Considering playing for lower league clubs
34	101-104 Considering dropping to a lower level and combining it with education.
35	106 - 109 Considering A levels to get to University / not seeing value in B Tec perhaps.
36	136 - P.E Teacher as an opportunity
37	142 - does not see himself as a coach.
38	151 - 152 Sees other opportunities out of football
39	235 - 237 Looking for a career in sport if released but not football.
40	

FIGURE 2.14: CROSS REFERENCING OF INTERVIEW SUB-CATEGORIES

	A	B	C
1	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3
2	Education in the future / perception of the value (3)		
3	Staff issues (8)	Education staff (5)	Education staff (1)
4			Relationship with football staff (2)
5	Uncertainty about future (14)	Uncertainty about future (2) / Waiting on a decision (1)	Uncertainty waiting for decision (1)
6	B-tec issues (7)	B-tec (2)	B-Tec (8)
7	Fear of failure (3)		
8	Education in the club (6)	Education in the club / structure (17)	Education at club (3)
9	Other priorities out of football (3)		
10		Football as a priority (1)	Football the priority (2)
11	Optimistic about life after football (1)		
12	Other options if released (10)	Other options (1)	Other options out of football (4)
13	Other football options (1)	Other football as an option (2)	Other football options if released (1)
14	Parental Influence (8)	Family Influence (3)	Family influence 2) / No family focus on educat
15	Peer influence (3)	Friendships (1)	
16		Joined from a higher league club - experienced release (3)	
17		Education as a fall back (3)	Education as a fall back (2)
18			
19		Football staff (3) / Other club staff/players (1)	
20	Self Confidence (7)		
21	Self Identity (7)		
22			Injury preventing football progression (1)
23			
24		External College (12)	
25		452: Got an agent	Agents (1)
26			Critical self reflection (3)
27			Focussed on challenge of making the team (1)
28		Decision out of his hands (3)	Not worried about upcoming decision (6)
29			More traditional job a negative (1)
30			Attachment to the club (1)
31			
32			
33			

The sub-categories for the interviews were then listed in an Excel spreadsheet with the corresponding quotation and line numbers being added. Figure 2.15 shows this process. The full spreadsheets from Figure 2.13-2.15 can be found in the supplementary documentation folder (headed as Sub Categories: Interviews).

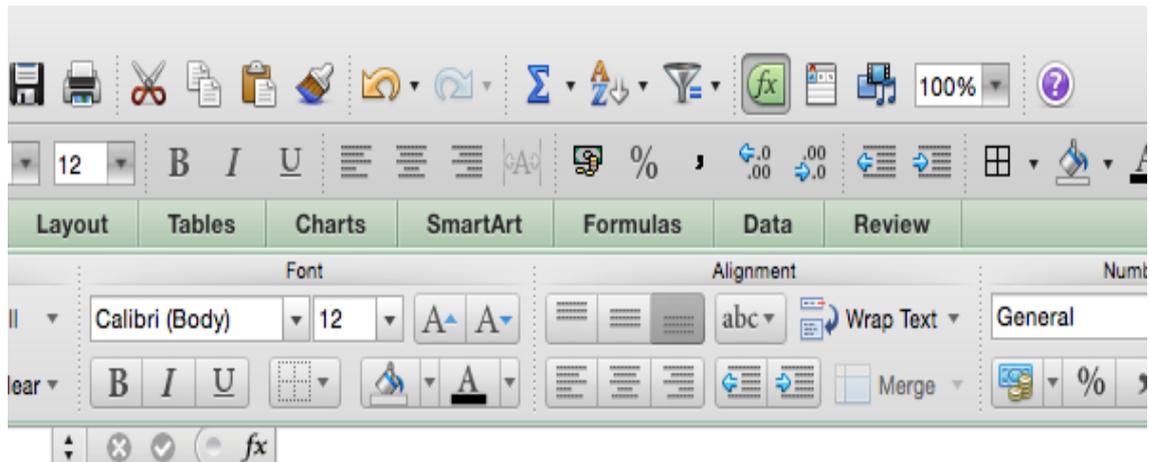
FIGURE 2.15: ARRANGING OF INTERVIEW TAGS INTO SUB-CATEGORIES

Interview Line	Quote	Tag	Initial Sub-categories
73	1 And I think a few other people well maybe you might have said they'd have got one maybe aren't sure now so I think maybe I think I've got a good chance its 50/50 still	30-32 Uncertain about progression in football	Uncertainty about future (contract decisions)
74	1 40 I've seen so many people go	40 - Seen lots of peers been released	
75	1 36 It's a tough time, one of the toughest times.	36 - Challenging awaiting final decision on the contract - uncertainty / tough times.	
76	1 41 I've always imagined what it would be like	41 - thought about being released and what it would be like.	
77	1 42 I imagine they just get you in an office and just tell you and that's the end of it really.	42 - Uncertainty about the process for release/contract.	
78	1 57 In life really because (yes yes) even I haven't applied to no universities	57 - Wanting to look at options away from football - but not yet pursuing them as awaiting decision (University)	
79	1 So the problem is and I mean and the clubs as well, if all the other premier league clubs so there is only us and another club I don't know who it is I haven't found out, then there are going to be quality kids from other clubs going taking potential places from you, do you know what I mean,	64 - Threat of players from higher clubs taking position.	
80	1 64-67 And then I get released after 2 years and I'm in my early twenties then where am I and I'm just further down the line in exactly the same position. It's a tough one.	71 - 72 Uncertain about long term future in football. Recognising constant uncertainty in football.	
81	1 So I mean at least, at least I might not know what I'm going to do at the end of it but at least I'm doing something at the time, but that's the problem with a scholarship really as a footballer you're not like getting anything really in the background I mean the Btec is good don't get me wrong (yes yes) you can be cast off (yes) and at 18 nearly 19 you're like (don't want to do that) where am I now I mean I've had a great experience and a cracking 2 years and I'd do it again	164-169 - Education more of a certainty with an outcome.	
82	1 263 In sport you know so I at the moment I really don't know and that's the problem	263 - recognising uncertain environment in sport.	
83	1 264 to be honest with you Clint because getting released is frightening	264 - Scared of being released.	
84	1 267 I've got to realise that it's not the end of the world	267 - trying to come to terms with potentially being released	
85	1 74 It is because you have got to chase your dreams, but you've got to be realistic	74 - Recognising the need to be realistic	
86	1 623 No I wouldn't be one of them I'd go up me	623 - determined to be successful if released.	
87	4 106 I don't know because they could just say no couldn't they, you know what I mean so, I'll more on that 50/50	106 - Uncertain about future contract	
88	4 110 Hopefully I'll get on	110 - Hopeful of being offered a contract	
89	4 525 They don't want many to do that do they...	525 - Recognising not many make professional	
90	4 409-411 They had another full back coming in, but they didn't give me a reason (right) on a... they had a meeting but, they brought another right back in my age so, (right) that was after I'd gone as well (was it) yes so, that's obviously the reason isn't it	409-411 Released at 16 without a reason	
91	4 I always got told like not many make it knowing it's at primary school you're always told what do you want to do when you are older, everyone said football (yes yes) and no one were going to make it in the school (yes) I don't know it's, some make it some don't.	532 - 534 Realises that not many make it.	
92	4 532-534 I don't know, I don't know, I'd be gutted yes if you would wouldn't it	611 - would be upset if released.	
93	3 112-114 My mum and dad, my dad is more like he's frustrated I've waited so long that's all, because if I got told now, wouldn't get a contract now till the end of the season, I mean telling him to wait till next year to come and get a contract somewhere	112-114 Frustration in the family (Dad) about waiting to be told about the decision on the contract.	
94	5 28-29 well it's just getting a bit nerve racking now, with it coming to a decision and you don't really know what they are thinking but yes it's been a good year.	28-29: nervous waiting for a decision on contract. Year 1- 2.	
95			

The tag is now shown within its sub category with the corresponding quotation, interview and line number.

The focus group and interview sub-categories were then cross-referenced and merged leading to the organisation of the final categories.

FIGURE 2.16: SUB – CATEGORIES TO CATEGORIES



Tag	Sub - Categories	Categories
Extreme dislike of school	Negative view of school	Mixed views of school
Dislike school		
Apathy towards school		
Mixed feelings toward school	Indifferent towards school	
Strong positive opinions about school.	Positive towards school	
Enjoyed school		
Good results	High achievers	Variation in attainment levels
High ability levels		
Extremely low GCSEs	Low achievers	
No GCSEs		
Special support	Critical self reflection	
Embarrassment of special support		
Negative self perceptions		
Recognising poor behaviour and regretful		
Regretful actions (from poor performers - wanted to undo)	Negative behaviour	Mixed behaviour at school
Exclusion from school		
Excluded from class		
Fighting at school		
Truancing		
Poor behaviour		
Disrespecting discipline/authority		
Disengagement		
Mocking other pupils (fat people/disabled)		
Behaviour Management - special measures in place	Positive behaviour	
Limited behaviour issues		
Good behaviour at school		
High level of engagement (Head Boy / Deputy Head)		

An overall attempt to make meaning and identify relationships between the categories to form the overall themes was then carried out. The final result of this sorting exercise for the first and second round of focus groups and the interviews are included in the supplementary documentation submitted with this thesis (headed as Tags to Themes). This was an iterative process and led to some of the initial sub-categories becoming categories in the later stages with their own sub-categories forming retrospectively. An example of this final sorting exercise can be seen in Figure 2.17 with the tag from previous figures having been reworded slightly.

FIGURE 2.17: SORTING EXERCISE - TAGS TO THEMES

TAGS	SUB-CATEGORIES	CATEGORIES	THEMES
Lacking confidence about being kept on	Uncertainty of being released	Ambiguous Environment	Uncertainty about the future
Uncertain about progression in football			
Seen lots of peers been released			
Challenging awaiting final decision on the contract - uncertainty / tough times.			
Thought about being released and what it would be like.			
Uncertainty about the process for release/contract.			
Wanting to look at options away from football - but not yet pursuing them as awaiting decision (University)			
Threat of players from higher clubs taking position.			
Competition from other premier league club players that may be released - trickle down yet.			
Uncertain about long-term future in football. Recognising constant uncertainty in football.			
Education more of a certainty with an outcome.			
Recognising uncertain environment in sport.			
Scared of being released.			
Trying to come to terms with potentially being released			
Recognising the need to be realistic			
Nervous waiting for a decision on contract. Year 1- 2.			
Uncertainty - wanting to sort it.			
No idea what the decision will be.			
Uncertain about contract and if it will be extended.			
<b>Frustration from family awaiting contract decisions (parents)</b>			
Some reassurances about a contract extension but nothing settled /vague.			
Realises that other players have had extension to contracts due to injury.			
Would take time to come to terms with it			
Ill feeling about being released before			
Released from championship town (hone town club) before being picked for a Premier League club			
Disappointed about being released at 16			

The categories were organised into six themes that will be discussed in the following chapter:

- Diversity of School Experiences
- Perceptions of the Curriculum
- Football Dominant Culture
- Influence of Significant Others
- Impact of Staff Changes in the Club
- Uncertainty About the Future

Thematic analysis appears on the whole to fit with the foundations that this research is built upon. Despite there being no agreed standardised framework for its implementation and regardless of the debates about its inception, it would appear to be a popular and well recognised form of data analysis. It allows for new themes to be identified.

## **2.8 Ethical Considerations and Tensions**

At the core of this research is what Gibbs (2008) identifies as gratitude in workplace research. The key underlying principles in this approach are gratitude and respect. The information (data) provided by each participants is seen as a gift, is treated with respect and the researcher is thankful for the contribution. Piper and Simons (2005) suggested the need for researchers to develop clear ethical procedures within research and this was taken into account in my research information pack. Each participant was asked to read over a participant information sheet and asked to sign a consent form (found in Appendix 1.0) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. This ensured that the information that was offered by the scholars was treated with respect and handled carefully. However, during the research it became apparent that some of the information that the scholars disclosed was of a sensitive nature and

issues of disclosure needed to be considered in more depth due to the age of the participants. The NSPCC (n.d.) suggest that if a person is under the age of 16 then they cannot legally give consent and parental permission is needed. Despite a child in the UK being classified as an individual under the age of 18, persons above the age of 16 and in some instances below 16 are able to give consent on their own behalf (Cornock, 2007). However, The British Educational Research Association (2011) in their ethical guidelines for educational research state that confidentiality and anonymity may not be able to be maintained if non-disclosure is likely to lead to the continuation of illegal behaviour and that researchers should carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. One scholar offered the following account, which needed to be considered in such a way:

We had Mr Arnold who was a paedophile (people laugh), he was out and er, in town, what happened, I seen him a few months ago as well with his bird. He was out, our 6<sup>th</sup> formers won, say a cup game and they all went out after it, because they are all 18 and that, an they all went out, blah blah and girls from next door went out because they know us and Mr Beech has been talking to this 18 year old, she was oh, Joanne, dirty girl and I think he banged her, him and Paul. But Paul was getting some other bird, they both got banned and Mr Arnold was in the paper and he looked like a pigeon. It was funny, type it in on Google, comical, Joanne was fit though, you couldn't say no to her. He wasn't a paedo though. He was proper sound, he was boss. (Alex/FG1/Line 230-240)

Whilst there were other accounts that potentially displayed the scholars in a way that showed them to be offering derogatory views, this was the only instance when an account had potential legal implications. I made the decision to search the name of the teacher (anonymised here) given by the player on the internet and it was

apparent that the matter had been reported and dealt with at the time by the appropriate legal authorities. The teacher was investigated and action was taken; I felt that there was no need to take it any further. If there had been legal implications then I would have spoken with the Head of Education and Welfare at the club and discussed the next steps, along with informing the appropriate authorities. In hindsight, the scholars could have been informed at the research introduction meeting that anything that they raised that had legal implications would be communicated directly to the appropriate authorities. These practices all adhere to the guidance laid out in the ethical guidelines produced by the Social Research Association (2003) and The British Educational Research Association (2011).

My research practices also brought to the forefront broader ethical concerns that surfaced throughout the course of the data collection and analysis phase. Whilst there was no evidence of views or practices that were illegal, machismo views or socially obtuse attitudes were displayed on a small number of occasions in the focus groups. The British Educational Research Association (2011) suggests that:

If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. At all times the decision to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation (p.8).

I felt that these views and their utterances, whilst not necessarily favourable, were not of great concern or typical within the group. To breach their confidentiality and to raise them with the staff at the club would have been contradictory to my stance that workplace research should be conducted with the researcher displaying gratitude towards the research participants (Gibbs, 2008). By this, Gibbs placed the researcher as a moral being, accepting the research participants as autonomous to the

organisation and recognising their independence. This has been another significant shift in my thinking towards my research. It perhaps shows me in a negative light, but as I have alluded to earlier in this thesis the truth is that I originally saw my research participants just as people that I obtained data from to help me with my research and to further my own interests. I now recognise my responsibility as a researcher and I would like to think I have adopted a more responsible approach. This is very important considering that the findings of this research will be utilised in practice and some of the research participants will continue to work in this sector.

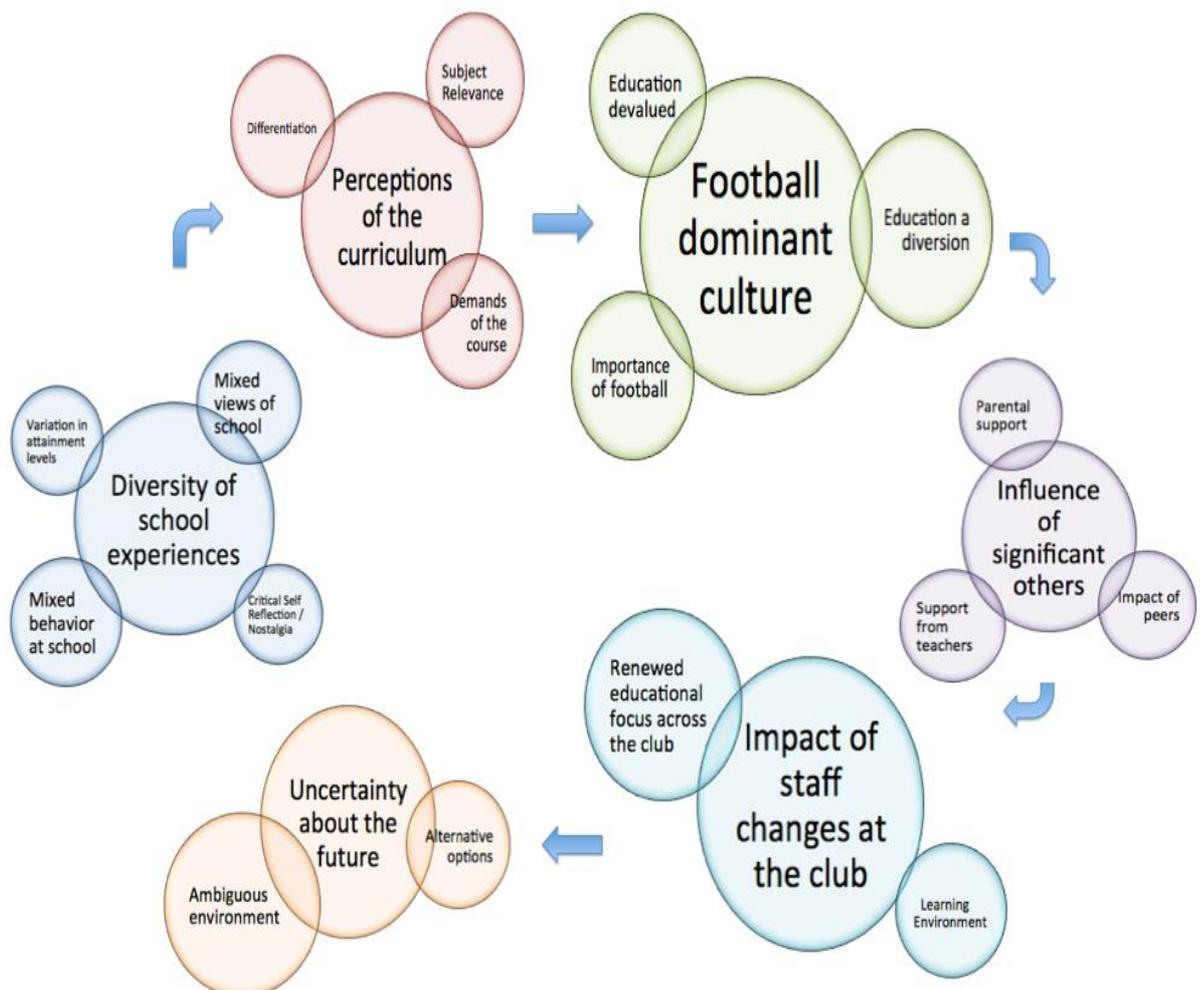
It is important to me that the research communicates a message from the research participants. One of the significant ethical challenges that any researcher in a work place setting faces, and one which features within my research, is the way in which the findings are utilised and presented. I am seeking to produce a piece of work that is credible and has the potential to inform practice and perhaps contribute to meaningful change in this particular educational setting. There is an on-going debate currently taking place about the value of Professional Doctorates and the potential of this work to have a meaningful influence upon practice. Some, when analysing the value of Professional Doctorates discuss their growth in the UK as an alternative to the traditional PhD (Fulton, Kuit, Sanders, & Smith, 2010; Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004). They also suggest that the traditional PhD trains people for a career in research with consideration being given to a specific discipline, whereas the Professional Doctorate is concerned with the development of professional practice using a multi-disciplinary approach. This could be viewed as too simplistic a definition and Fulton *et al.* (2010) do recognise this later in their paper, acknowledging the reality as more complex, especially when the discipline or the institution is taken into consideration. Fenge (2009) suggests that the Professional Doctorate is ideally placed to develop

knowledge that could be viewed as tradable knowledge. It is hoped that the subsequent findings, discussion and recommendations can contribute in a meaningful way. The results of the research will be presented honestly and in a summarised form to the management team at the club. The full study will also be made available to them.

# Chapter Three: Findings and Discussion

The six themes that form the basis of this chapter are presented as Figure 3.1 below and can be seen in more detail as Appendix 2.0. It offers a visual representation that enables the reader to clearly see the final themes and associated categories. Each theme is headed to form a separate section of this findings and discussion chapter and the categories are listed as subheadings. The first theme to be considered is Diversity of School Experiences. Each subsequent theme and the applicable categories will then be discussed from Figure 3.1 in a clockwise direction.

FIGURE 3.1: THEMATIC OVERVIEW WITH CATEGORIES



### **3.1 Diversity of School Experiences**

During the first phase of the research the scholars at the club were specifically asked about their prior educational experiences at school. A number of categories emerged which will be discussed and analysed under this theme. It was apparent that the scholars' experiences were varied and they had very different views about school, they had achieved a diverse range of results, behaved at school very differently and it could be argued that some engaged in a form of critical self-reflection and showed signs of becoming nostalgic.

#### **3.1.1 Mixed Views of School and Variation in Attainment Levels**

In the first round of focus groups the scholars were asked about their general views of school. As will become a feature of the results across the first two themes of this study their views were mixed. A sample of their various responses included: 'Weren't bothered' (James/FG1/Line 38); 'It was alright' (Jack/FG2/Line 8); 'Crap, I hated it me' (Sean/FG4/Line 7); 'I just stopped, just hated work' (Alex/FG1/Line 40); 'I liked mine, good school. Same thing every day' (Greg/FG4/Line 9) and Steve (FG2/Line 49) said 'I used to like school.' It was apparent from these initial responses that they had very different perceptions of school prior to joining the club. Their self-reported attainment levels illustrated their wide-ranging ability levels before they started on their BTEC in Sport at the club. Some of the scholars reported excellent GCSE results and levels of engagement at school with Greg reporting that he had 12 GCSEs and Owen (FG3/Line 11) stating that he did: 'Quite well yeh, I was Head Boy at my school. I had it boxed off.' Owen also obtained 10 GCSEs, all of which were grades A-B. Another scholar obtained nine GCSEs and received eight at grade A and one at grade B. A third had gained nine GCSEs all grade A-C.

A core group of players reported more modest attainment levels from their time at school and this statement perhaps illustrates this from the second focus group:

‘er, done me work like. I wouldn’t say I enjoyed it, but I done it, and like....got alright results out of it as well.’ (Steve/FG2/Line 64).

Of the 20 scholars that took part in this research, 12 had at least five GCSE’s grades A\*-C. At the opposite end of the spectrum one of the scholars Euan had attended a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Mainwaring and Hallam (2010) in their research concluded that pupils in PRUs have fragile positive selves and highlight how only 1% of 15 year olds in PRUs achieve five GCSE results at grade A\*-C. Euan (FG1/Line 156) described being referred to the Unit as being ‘put into a special unit with a load of fucking mongos.’ The term mongos can be used to describe another person in a negative way. In this context it could be viewed as the scholar labelling his formers peers in a derogatory way in an attempt to distance himself from them and to preserve his own identity in his current setting. Berzonsky (2006) explained how individuals will conserve their existing notion of self by avoiding or distancing themselves from events or situations in the past, in this case the scholar’s peers – he is different and not one of them. Brygoła (2011) explained how our structure of identity is not stable, it is in a constant state of flux and threatening experiences may lead to a modification of self-image. The derogatory comments made by Euan may have been as a consequence of him disclosing information about the past that he viewed as potentially damaging to his status at the club. He left school with 2 GCSEs, achieving a D and F.

After reflecting upon the first focus group I recognised that I had been slightly frustrated with the apparent apathy towards education displayed by some of the scholars. This was perhaps a consequence of my own positive experiences of

education, my current position working in a university and as someone who values education. Figure 3.2 is an extract from my research diary and illustrates this point:

FIGURE 3.2: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Personal / Theoretical Note:**

I was also really surprised and somewhat annoyed by their apathy towards school. In my mind this is probably more important than the football as most of them will not be making it. The stats confirm this. I need to look at the progression rates in more detail. I wonder if the players know about the success rates and whether or not the club informs them.

Several other players finished school with little by way of recognised qualifications with Alex (FG1/Line 13) explaining how he didn't do any GCSEs: 'I didn't do well, I didn't do no GCSEs or nothing. Well I think I took two', Euan (FG1/Line 16) claimed that: "I missed year 11'. These two scholars had collectively gained six GCSEs between them with one of the scholars obtaining four of these with results ranging between D-F. Neither of the two scholars obtained a C or above in any of their GCSE examinations. Those with higher GCSE grades were the scholars that either reacted positively to school or held indifferent views. Those that left school with few or no GCSEs offered negative views initially. It is uncertain if these views help to explain the attainment levels of the scholars at school or it could be argued that it was these levels of achievement that contributed to their opposing views of school. This is quite significant in itself, as the club did not display any practice that suggested that prior educational experience was considered in relation to the learning environment. What is clear from the responses is that the attainment levels of the scholars at school varied significantly and it was evident that the composition of the scholars based on prior educational experience and achievement was diverse. This was a theme that I

recognised quite early on in the research process and prior to any in-depth analysis of the data. Figure 3.3 is an extract from my research diary and reflects this statement.

FIGURE 3.3: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

I was struck by the differences between some of the scholars. In contrast to the two individuals that I spoke with about fighting and expulsion, I met players with excellent GCSE results, one who had been the Head Boy at his school. I had not really considered this gap before and surprisingly it never came up when I was speaking with the staff at the club.

Diversity in the classroom has been considered in other learning environments on the basis of prior achievement (Burns & Mason, 2002; Harker & Tymms, 2004; Tomlinson, 2003). The aforementioned studies found that it is a significant factor that influences future performance and attitudes towards education; those that have past experiences of high achievement levels in a prior learning environment being more likely to reach higher levels of attainment compared to those that have past experiences of low achievement. However, prior educational achievement is often considered in relation to ability-based classes within primary school settings and the transition that those from lower and higher ability classes make when moving from primary school to high school (Bearne, 2006; Grobler, Moloi, Loock, Bisschoff, & Mestry, 2006; Oswald & Engelbrecht, 2013). There is limited research that specifically focuses on the wide variation of prior achievement of students when transitioning from a high school learning environment to further education and beyond (i.e. school to college, college to university). This might be as a result of the different learning environments in further or higher education typically being formed on the basis that students meet the minimum entry requirements for the course. It is probable that

prior achievement is more standardised in these settings as students are likely to have reached similar attainment levels (typically A Level entry will rely upon a set number of GCSEs, University entry for a particular course will be dependent on a set number of UCAS points). In the case of this club, entry to the BTEC in Sport was available to all of the scholars, regardless of their prior academic achievements.

Returning to the composition of the scholars and moving beyond their views of school and attainment levels, the study did not collect detailed demographic data from the scholars as this data was unavailable from the club as a consequence of data protection concerns. Whilst the demographic information was not readily available for the players in this study it did become apparent that they were all 16-18 years of age, all of the players were white with the exception of one black player and all of them were from England, with the majority being from the North West. This suggests that experiences at school and their attainment levels were more significant than demographical information when the diversity of the composition of the scholars was considered; they could be perceived as a fairly homogenous group when their past experiences and attainment levels were discounted. This is significantly different to the mixed composition of the students mentioned in other studies where there was evidence of a wide variation on the basis of ethnicity (Chang, 1999; Packard, 2013; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001; Van Geel & Vedder, 2010), gender (Kissen, 2002; Maher & Tetreault, 2001), social class (Walker, 1993) and nationality (Lowenstein & Christian, 2011). All are seen as significant in influencing levels of engagement and attainment in different educational settings.

Gutman and Vorhaus (2012) suggested that 'As children move through the school system, emotional and behavioural wellbeing become more important in explaining school engagement, while demographic and other characteristics become

less important' (p.4). This is potentially too simplistic a statement when it is likely that an individual's behavioural and emotional wellbeing are influenced by socio-cultural factors; we do not just exist in a vacuum able to shut off from the external world around us. However, it does point to the experiences that the players had at school being just as important as detailed demographical information in explaining how different they were when it came to their attitudes towards education at the club.

Within the environment of the club the scholars enter their programme of study based upon footballing ability rather than prior educational achievement. Perhaps there is an argument to be made that the diversity of the scholars' views of school and prior achievement may result in a multi-faceted and complex learning environment. The scholars were likely to possess a range of learning preferences and competencies, motivational differences, existing knowledge and skills, and perhaps experiential and behavioural differences, that could adversely affect each one's progression in their programme of study. These differences were illustrated further by the stories that some of the players recounted about their behaviour at school.

### **3.1.2 Disruptive Behaviour at School**

The participants in the first focus group were grouped by the education staff at the club who perceived them to be of lower academic ability and having some form of mild to in some cases severe behavioural problems. Two of the players were in their first year as scholars with the other three in year two. Three of the participants in the focus group had significant behavioural issues as pupils at school and they had faced suspension and expulsion from school on many occasions.

A brief biography for the three has been provided:

*Alex:* was in his second year as a scholar at the club. He had obtained 2 GCSEs at school grades D-F and was regularly suspended from school for behavioural

problems. He had moved to the club after being released from what would be regarded as a higher ranked team.

*Euan:* was in the first year of his time at the club and had obtained 4 GCSEs at school grades D-F. He also had disciplinary problems at school and was expelled from two schools before reaching the club. He had joined the club after being released by another club for behavioural issues.

*James:* had obtained 5 GCSEs grades at school. He was regularly in trouble at school, suspended twice and had a Special Support Tutor to help with his behavioural issues. He had joined the club at 16. He was a first year at the club.

Here they recall some of their experiences at school:

‘We were going in for a test, for our, our first GCSE, English GCSE. And, er, we were outside, started arguing and then my mate started to fight. One of the other lads jumped in, so I did and everyone got involved.... and then the teachers come and got me and I was like, what’s up with ya? They went and checked the cameras, seen us fighting, called me a taxi and sent me home and said don’t come back.’ (Euan/FG1/Line 102)

‘I had a special tutor to stop me disrupting others in the class... we had a teacher, I don’t know, people used to take me out of lessons all the time and that, because of my behaviour.’ (James/FG1/Line 53)

‘I used to go and play footie on the pitch when the classes were going on. I got kicked out in the last year though. I was in and out in year 10 and the teachers used to just let me go and play football when the lesson was going on. Sometimes, if me and my mates got kicked out though, then we would rob a ball from PE, I just didn’t care.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 46)

Behavioural issues have been considered extensively as a research topic (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Kearney, 2008; Maskey, Warnell, Parr, Le Couteur, & McConachie, 2013), often with views about how best to respond to these issues in a high school setting. During the focus group with these players I realised that I had not expected their admissions regarding their previous behavioural problems, the

following diary extract highlights my initial views the evening after the focus groups were conducted.

FIGURE 3.4: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

I honestly could not believe some of the stories that I had heard from a couple of the players. They were quite upfront with their accounts and seemed to revel in telling stories about fighting and getting into trouble at school. It saddens me in a way that these lads appear proud of this - why? I need to look at this further and the differences between the players in the school days (results, engagement levels) needs to be looked at further. This surely has an impact.

In a study of secondary school teachers by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (2013) teachers reported that behavioural problems in secondary school settings had increased considerably over a period of two years pointing to increased behavioural problems being a common issue across the education sector. According to staff at the club all of the scholars in this first focus group had appeared to show signs of disengaging from their course at the club. It would seem likely that the majority of pupils that disengage in mainstream education and exit with limited qualifications after being excluded or suspended would have had an unfavourable view of their school experience. However, this was not the case for all of the scholars and Alex, Euan and James all reflected on some of their time at school in a positive way showing symptoms associated with nostalgia.

### **3.1.3 Nostalgia**

On several occasions Alex, Euan and James reflected upon their time at school fondly.

'If I could pay to go back to school I'd go back, I loved it. I would pay a grand to go back now...that school, I don't know, it was just the best school ever. I would go back, I miss school me... schools are the best time of your life though, I think.' (Alex/FG/Line 41)

'But like, the teachers used to proper like me. First school lad, nothing beating it.' (Euan/FG/Line 45)

'Schools just a laugh that though in it.....all PE teachers were sound. I'd just do what I did and go back to school because it was funny.'  
(James/FG1/Line 221)

What became apparent was that these three participants, who seemingly did not engage in schoolwork in a positive way, had behavioural problems and experienced conflict with teachers, and they reflected upon their time at school positively and enthusiastically. It was difficult to determine if these accounts accurately reflected the truth, their 'true' feelings even, or were perhaps a form of nostalgia.

The term nostalgia was historically viewed as being a medical condition related to sickness from a longing for home and it was specific to Swiss mercenaries far from their homeland (Hoffer, 1688/1934) cited in Batcho (2013). More recently it has been recognised as a psychological concept and explained by Kaplan (1987) as a reaction to an unfamiliar present or a significant lifestyle change in the form of longing for the past. It might be seen as a coping strategy that is employed to deal with the uncertainty of a situation. Batcho (2013) cites Hall (1904) who argued that adolescents are particularly susceptible to nostalgia. Perhaps the scholars became anxious as a result of being embedded in the notoriously uncertain and ambiguous environment of professional football where contracts in the early stages are often offered on a short-term basis. This fits with the work of Cavanaugh (1989) who suggested that nostalgia is a cognitive attempt to recall a past when things were better and more secure. Routledge *et al.* (2011) argued that waxing nostalgic about past events that are personally significant act as a way to give one's life a sense of meaning during difficult

times. The failure rate in progression from academies to professional football is high, it is a precarious setting and players have to try and cope with the risk of failure; nostalgia might have been used as a coping strategy by these players

#### **3.1.4 Critical Self-Reflection**

When reflecting upon their time at school both Alex and Euan were critical of their previous behaviour.

‘I was just a dickhead...I wanna take my GCSEs you know.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 124-128)

‘It's stages that you go through in it...Misbehaving and then like realising and just being arsed.’ (Euan/FG1/Line 125-127)

‘I felt like a twat, I was ashamed.’ (Euan/FG1/Line 169)

Both appeared to be reflecting upon their experiences in education in a remorseful way, which does not quite align with the positive way that they recalled some of their disruptive exploits at school. Their previous accounts relating to fighting and disruptive behaviour might be perceived as the two of them attempting to form a shared identity incorporating exaggerated machismo tendencies. Mirande (1997) stated that machismo is nothing more than an attempt to mask a sense of powerlessness, weakness and inferiority. According to Penn State (2008), team sports in the USA encourage machismo behaviour off the field, reinforcing the notion of dominating an opponent. This is supported by Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey (2008) who suggested that traditional machismo is related to aggression and antisocial behaviour. Interestingly, they also suggest that traditional machismo was also associated with those who had spent less time in educational settings. There is very little evidence of this tendency being displayed by others who achieved higher GCSE results than Alex, Euan and James.

The players worked at the club together on a daily basis in a male dominated environment. Perhaps there is evidence here of them living up to stereotypes in their industry or developing attitudes that they felt would allow them to fit in. Here Euan notes an experience from his time at school:

‘Then, like it was the end of year 9 and I started get a bit badder, fighting and that. Like, outside of school and that. I got, I moved school in year 9 and in the start of year 10 I was in a different school and then, like, the school I went to were all lads that I used to fight with. So me and my mates used to fight with them and I got kicked out half way through. Four of us.’ (FG1/Line 96)

Brown and Humphreys (2002) cited a range of literature (Davis, 1979; Gabriel, 1993; Wilson, 1999), which illustrated the link between nostalgia and identity. In their research of Turkish faculty staff in a college of vocational education they observed staff drawing upon memories in their efforts to create and re-create a shared sense of community; nostalgia was also seen as a tool that they used to develop a shared heritage of identity based upon their values and beliefs. The research participants in this study seemed to almost delight at reliving some of their experiences at school, experiences that could have been viewed as challenging and detrimental to their development. Perhaps, as also noted by Brown and Humphreys (2002), this was a ‘means of maintaining a collective sense of socio-historic continuity, a source of resistance to hegemonic influence and a defence against anxiety’ (p.142). This might have manifested itself as the players were faced with external scrutiny, or certainly perceived themselves to be under immense scrutiny, from the academy coaches on a daily basis with the offer of a full time professional contract acting as an incentive. Van Tilburg, Igou, and Sedikides (2013) suggested that nostalgia is something that individuals might do when they are bored, they do go on to distinguish that this is not a ‘default strategy’ but is evident when participants are probed to retrieve a memory. It could well have been that Alex, Euan and James were bored and not motivated in

the educational setting at the club and when asked to consider their time at school they were more positive.

The role of nostalgia upon first glance might be perceived as being somewhat negative and in some instances only used when something negative is occurring. However, it might also be seen as a useful tool to boost social relationships, individual self-esteem and meaningfulness in a community (Van Tilburg *et al.*, 2013). Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, and Juhl (2013) agreed with this and argued that perceiving one's life as meaningful and with purpose is directly related to psychological well-being. However, this must be treated with a certain degree of caution. The issues that these participants were facing were not necessarily going to be addressed by simply developing a shared identity and staring fondly in to the past. The reality was much more complex and uncertain, and they would inevitably have to develop their own strategies for overcoming any disappointment that they may subsequently face at the club. Clearly the research participants were working and being educated in an environment of uncertainty, which brought with it a great deal of pressure and anxiety. This may help us to understand why these stories were being told and retold. We might even point to the individuals utilising the focus group as a means to form a shared identity based upon their past experiences. The research participants faced an uncertain future and it was likely that the majority would be released from the club and not make football their profession, an area that will be explored in greater detail in section 3.6. However, what is important at this stage of the research is to reinforce the diversity of the experiences that the scholars had within their previous educational settings.

Their views of school, behaviour at school and attainment levels were anything but consistent, with clear evidence showing that the group composition differed

greatly when it came to these three factors. According to Gutman and Vorhaus (2012), children with greater emotional and behavioural stability at school have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school and in education in later years. Indeed, Hattie (2009) suggested that prior achievement is a powerful predictor of a person's ability to successfully meet the demands of a course and this is evident across all parts of education and in the workplace. The diversity of the scholars' behaviour and their prior achievement may well have served as a predictor for the club staff about the likelihood of them being engaged in or being successful in their BTEC in Sport.

Given the nature of these findings it would seem reasonable to suggest that the club develops a system for understanding and incorporating the diverse learning backgrounds of the students. Tomlinson (2003) suggests that student variance is not considered in a meaningful way across a range of educational settings and that student readiness, interests and their individual learning profiles need to be considered on a consistent basis. Tomlinson makes numerous suggestions in relation to how these three areas can be progressed at different rates or in different ways in relation to the diversity of the student body. Students bring with them a range of prior experiences and experiences that will have inevitably shaped their view of formal education. They bring with them existing knowledge, skills and competencies from their prior study that will have influenced their level of motivation towards a course or programme of study. It could be argued that it is imperative for an educator to develop a greater sense of understanding of their students in relation to these areas and to be able to gain an appreciation of the way in which they view their world (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013).

At present the club requests that all scholars complete a Visual-Auditory-Kinaesthetic (VAK) test during their first week at the club to explore the learning preferences. It was difficult to determine what, if at all anything, was then adjusted following on from this. This type of assessment appears to have been accepted and embedded within many educational institutions. Although, they are not without critics and there are those that recognise the lack of rigour and the simplicity of these types of surveys when considering the learning needs and preferences of any given individual (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004; Sharp, Byrne, & Bowker, 2008). This is not dissimilar to the critiques of personality type questionnaires such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Garrety, 2007; Michael, 2003). Again, they are seen as lacking rigour and for providing too simplistic an explanation of the individual mind and failing to take into account complex social factors that shape an individual in a variety of contexts. It is difficult to offer a prescriptive step-by-step guide for an educator in order to 'get to know your students', but as Fishman (2014) explained, it is imperative that teachers develop an understanding of where their students are at with their learning and development. Clearly it is unrealistic to expect educators to undertake research such as this; however, it is not unrealistic to expect staff to gain an understanding of their students' prior experiences of school in order for them to become more aware of their students' prior experiences and attitudes towards education. There would need to be an open and honest dialogue between the scholars and the educators at the club, the scholars would need to feel as though they could open up with their views and tell their stories as they did for this research. Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011) explain how getting to know a student is difficult and challenging and often teachers do not forge personal connections with students. Along with the VAK test, initial assessments and diagnostics were carried out by the

club in conjunction with the Premier League, but they only gave a literacy and numeracy level to identify if the scholars needed academic support and would be utilised as an early indication as to what they would get in their BTEC. It would seem prudent for the staff to gain a fuller appreciation of their scholars, their background and motivation towards the course. This moves beyond the attainment levels of the individuals and their supposed learning style and seeks to build a relationship between the scholar and the teacher based upon an appreciation and understanding of what has come before. This type of discussion embedded into the early part of the curriculum or during the induction process could guide the educator in developing an understanding of a student's feelings towards a subject and to promote learning (Cherkas, 1992). There is no universally accepted way to undertake an induction, but the focus at the club might be one that helps foster a relationship between the academic staff and the scholars; it has been suggested that developing these types of relationships is the single most important component of being able to foster a favorable learning environment (Thompson, 1998). Returning to Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011), they offer some options for the club in relation to devising strategies for gathering learning profile data. They suggest developing learning profiles based around five dimensions of what they term the learning identify; these are: biological traits, cultural and societal factors, emotional and social influences, academic performance, and learning preferences. There is clearly overlap with many of the findings emanating from this study. Their strategies to gather this information include conducting parent interviews/surveys, structured observation, structured reflection and student self-reporting.

Developing a greater appreciation and understanding of a student's past experiences may also act as a conduit to developing shared expectations between the

scholar and the teacher. Fruge and Ropers-Huilman (2008) explored the epistemological congruency between faculty members and students. They define this as “the degree of similarity between students’ and faculty members’ beliefs about learning” (p121). Other research spanning across decades has focused on the different levels of expectations that are found between the learner and the educator, and the way in which knowledge is acquired and how education should be delivered (Könings, Seidel, Brand-Gruwel, & van Merriënboer, 2014; Perry, 1968). The later study suggested that the differences in perceptions deserve detailed attention. This dialogue and shared understanding perhaps naturally leads to the teacher recognising the important role that the student has in the educational setting. A step further would be to involve them in the design of the curriculum. Increased levels of engagement and motivation of such an intervention have been described by Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011). This concept is discussed further in section 3.2.

### **3.2 Perceptions of the Curriculum**

Whilst discussing their experiences of school in the first round of focus groups the scholars briefly offered their views of the subjects that they had studied. The scholars spoke more about the perceived value of their BTEC at the club during the second round of focus groups. This emerged in the interviews also and these areas will be considered further in this theme. Sections about the demands of the course and finally how the club differentiates their learners are also reflected.

#### **3.2.1 Subject Relevance**

When the scholars were considering their experiences of school some of them displayed contempt towards some of the subjects that they experienced:

‘Yeh, like cooking and sewing and that. I was just like, not that interested.’  
(Steve/FG2/Line 83)

'..... a GCSE in health and social care. That's that fucking bird one in it? What you do with the fucking baby and that.' (Euan/FG1/Line 24)

'I only failed one GSCE. That was like some arts thing.' (Cian/FG1/Line 52)

One of the scholars suggested that this could have an effect on levels of engagement:

'I reckon it's if you want to do it, if you want to do something you will do it to how good you want to do it. So, if you are playing football and you want to do well in it then you will try hard, but if you put someone in lesson and they don't really like it then they are not going to try hard.'  
(Jack/FG2/Line 105)

Over the last twenty years studies have shown that religious education came bottom for most preferred subject overall for males, with art also in the lower end of the preferences. One of the most preferred subjects was Physical Education (PE), which was rated highly for both males and females (Colley and Comber, 2003; Colley, Comber, & Hargreaves, 1994; Hendley, Stables, & Stables, 1996). This was consistent with the views of the scholars who had a strong preference for PE, which might naturally lead to the assumption that undertaking a BTEC in Sport would result in the scholars enjoying and valuing the subject area. Despite this, and consistent with the findings of Bourke (2003), it was evident from the scholars in the second phase of the research (their attitudes towards education at the club – focus groups) that they felt there was a lack of relevance in the subject that they were studying at this level. This was acknowledged in my research diary after the first focus groups were undertaken (see Figure 3.5).

FIGURE 3.5: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational/ Theoretical Note:**

The club and the Premier League suggested to me months ago that the qualification is there to aid the players with their professional development as footballers, I didn't see much evidence of the players recognising this. I need to look further into subject relevance and the potential impact.

The point is further illustrated by the following extracts: George (FG5/Line 122) said 'I've not learned anything. There is no point.' Euan (FG5/Line 119) suggested that 'I don't see the point as I'm not gonna get anything out of it' and Alan (FG8/Line 210) explained that 'Some would say they haven't learned anything.' Other feedback supported these statements:

'I know for a fact (*other players don't value BTEC*) because they literally say why am I doing this, what's the point in this?'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 459)

'Same, I don't even know what I'm doing. What are we doing? (*people laugh*). We are watching Clash of the Titans or something or Remember the Titans, fucking storming Norman. What does that mean?'  
(Euan/FG5/Line 123)

'It's a good qualification to have, but pointless if you are not going to use it. If I am not going to use it then there is no point.' (Owen/FG8/Line 81).  
'It's not gonna get you anything.' (Cian/FG5/Line 136)

George (FG5/Line 41) suggested that he did see the relevance in relation to football, but only for those seeking to become football managers, a profession he did not wish to pursue: 'My mum knows that if I don't get a pro she knows I'm not going to be a manager or anything'. Other research has considered the relationship between students' perceptions of the value of subjects in relation to future careers. Stables and Wikeley (1999) highlighted how pupils make naïve connections between specific subjects and careers with pupils suggesting that 'There's no point in doing RE unless you're going to be a vicar' and 'There's no point in doing art unless you're going to be an artist' (p.29). Whilst it might be described as naïve, some literature suggests that most pupils considered the usefulness of a subject in relation to future careers when choosing their options at school (McCrone, Morris, & Walker, 2005; Weeden, 2007). This was further reinforced by Kember, Ho, and Hong (2008) who suggested that students can quickly become demotivated on professional programmes if they did not

see how they will prepare them well for their future career. In the case of formal education at this club, most of the scholars did not see the relevance of their course in relation to their ambitions of becoming elite footballers and few acknowledged that it would support them with alternative routes upon de-selection.

It appeared that the disconnect between the relevance of the course in relation to achieving their football ambitions was a cause of frustration. Within the club the scholars viewed the course as a task that needed to be completed, but one that had limited bearing on their footballing aspirations. This is further highlighted in section 3.2.2 Demands of the Course.

One of the scholars during the interviews however did view the focus on football during the BTEC as a positive:

‘try to help you because, like it is a lot, a lot of it is football specific, you know what I mean a lot of the work.’ (Steve/Interview 2/Line 533)

Another remarked about specific benefits when it came to nutrition:

‘Yes the only thing that I found interesting is nutrition, when we were getting told about it, so I found all about that.’  
(James/Interview 4/Line 659)

The scholar in this instance had been able to relate what he was studying to how it could help him as an aspiring footballer. Clearly there are nutritional demands placed upon elite players and the scholars would have benefited by being mindful of their diets. This was not common during the focus groups or the interviews and a more general view was that the BTEC in Sport was of no value and that it was a hindrance rather than an aid for their professional or educational development. This will be explored further in section 3.3 Football the Dominant Culture, but an insight into the scholars’ thoughts about being able to withdraw from the qualification can be gained from the following two quotes:

'just concentrate on your footie and probably play better and that.'  
(Cian/FG5/Line 30)

'it's just shit coming to college, I'm here to play footie.'  
(Euan/FG5/Line 115)

These views are perhaps not too surprising given that these two players were two of the individuals that had some of the more negative views about their previous experiences at school.

Even those that had achieved over 5 GCSEs grade A-C at school and who would be described by the staff at the club as good students raised issues about the course:

'I think we should change what we do every now and again rather than just coming in every Wednesday knowing what you are going to do. It is talk about what you are going to do in the morning and do the assignment in the afternoon. But like, change it every now and again, like on a Weds do something different. Same work maybe, just something different. As I can almost say what we are going to do next Weds.' (Steve/FG6/Line 114 )

'We could just do with something different now and again.' (Steve/FG6/Line 125)

'The work as well, it's all set out the same, like either a PowerPoint or an article.' (Eddie/FG6/Line 120)

'Yeh, and at the end you write an assignment. It all looks the same with a different title every week.' (Steve/FG6/Line 121)

'Just like last season the work seemed to drag with like adding different things on, like you would finish one part and then David would tell you another and then same again.' (Eddie/Interview 5 / L361)

Clearly these scholars were not just questioning the relevance of the qualification but also the way that it was delivered. There was an obvious set pattern in the way in which the BTEC was delivered at the club and the approach did not appear to be engaging many of the scholars.

### **3.2.2 Demands of the Course**

The majority of scholars only viewed the course as a fall back (discussed further in section 3.3.3 Education Not a Priority) in case they failed as footballers. It appeared

that the scholars did not find the demands of the course particularly challenging when this was considered in relation to the difficulty or level of the work. Owen and Alan who had achieved good GCSE grades agreed that the course was not particularly challenging and that it could be achieved with minimal effort:

‘It’s easy.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 65)

‘I don’t think it is challenging enough, it can be done with your eyes closed if you really wanted to.’ (Alan/FG8/Line 200)

‘It’s not particularly hard thing, a hard qualification. I couldn’t believe how easy it was to be perfectly honest with you.’ (Owen/Interview 1 /Line 325)

‘There is only so much you need to do to get that certain grade, so I could genuinely do, realistically 9.30-12 and I could be away every week and that isn’t, I’m not exceptionally clever. I’m just normal and average, someone that works hard.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 191)

Even the scholars that were not perceived as academically strong felt that the qualification could be completed easily: George (FG5/Line 24) explained that: ‘Yeh, you can do your work in about an hour and Thursday we don’t do anything anyway.’ This appeared to contribute to a culture at the club whereby the scholars would come to college on a Wednesday and be given a task to do in the morning that would be related to or part of an assignment. Once they had completed the task they could leave and that was the main focus for the majority of them; they entered college with the mindset of finishing their work as quickly as possible to leave and have a shorter day. The following quotes illustrate this:

‘You want to blitz through the work so that you can then have more time, it’s like a day off really innit if you get your work done. So the quicker you go the better.’ (Ethan/FG6/Line 153)

‘I just put that thing about going at 2 when you work hard, because if you mess about you can’t go at 2 and it encourages you to work hard.’ (Jack/FG6/Line 74)

‘It makes you want to do it to get off. You still have to do the work.’ (Steve/Fg6/Line 79)

It appeared that this had an effect on their levels of engagement with some of the scholars being frustrated by what they felt were long days on their course:

'It's dragged out, it's very frustrating as they say everyone has to be here 9-2 and you do the work.' (Owen/FG8/Line 216)

'It makes you want to be lazy, you think what is the point of getting my head down and you might as well text or talk or whatever.' (Neil/FG8/Line 218)

'No one is arsed about it.' (Jack/FG6/Line 196)

In the focus groups the scholars were asked whether they would continue with the course if they were given the option. Some suggested that they would have opted to withdraw from their course. Cian (FG5/Line 28) held strong views: 'I'd just fuck it off', which the others agreed with. He also suggested that that completing the course had no real value: 'Not bother, it's not gonna get you anything.' (FG5/Line 136)

When asked about their perceptions of their peers' effort and motivation their views were similar:

'A lot of them are clever, it's quite a clever group but some of them can't be arsed. So if they can't be arsed and you an and you just want a quiet life to get on with your work then it's a bit frustrating really.' (Owen/FG8/Line 181)

'We don't even want to do the qualification.' (Alex/FG5/Line 17)

'If they just gave you that at the start and we get Wednesdays off then no one is here to learn. Everyone is just here because they have to be.' (Neil/FG8/Line 196)

'Everyone is like "What time are we going home as soon as you come in?" (Steve/FG6/Line 150)

'Everyone just wants to do it and go. We don't want to spend any more time than we have to really.' (Steve/FG6/Line 194)

Gross Davis (1993) suggested that teachers needed to assign tasks that are challenging and this in turn would lead to increased levels of motivation. Several authors have discussed the importance of having proximal tasks in place to increase motivation towards achieving future goals or ambitions (Day, Borkowski, Punzo, & Howepian,

1994; Hulleman, Barron, Kosovich, & Lazowski, 2016; Miller & Brickman, 2004; Phalet, Andriessen, & Lens, 2004). There appeared to be a clear need in this setting for further consideration of how to better engage these players on the BTEC course.

After the second round of focus groups had finished and as I was about to leave I witnessed one of the players storming out of the building. He had been called into a meeting with the club's Head of Education and Welfare and had been suspended from the club. Apparently the scholar had been offensive towards the female teacher and he was clearly feeling disengaged from the course. During the focus groups he had been one of the more vocal players in questioning the value of doing the course at the club. Figure 3.6 from my research diary explains further what I witnessed and my thoughts at the time

FIGURE 3.6: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

During my time at the club today I observed one of the players being suspended for his poor behaviour in the classroom, I was really surprised that this type problem was surfacing. Another player was also having behavioural problems and I could see the challenges that the staff faced. The suspended player had suggested that he was not challenged on the course in the focus groups. Interestingly, he is one of the more able students.

He had responded to being asked by the staff to put in more time and effort to achieve higher grades, it was met with frustration by him and others, and highlighted the scholars' unwillingness and lack of engagement. Kuh (2009) defined student engagement as 'the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities' (p.683). It was apparent in the first round of interviews

with the 2011-12 intake that there was a lack of enthusiasm to work harder on the course, Greg said:

‘Everyone’s the same, even Owen (a scholar perceived as being of high ability), he’s a bit pissed off about it (having to do extra).’  
(Interview 3/Line 205)

Chapman (2003) identified a number of indicators that characterised an absence of student engagement including becoming passive and withdrawn from learning opportunities. There is a plethora of literature debating what the term ‘student engagement’ represents. In a 2010 literature review on this area, Trowler summarised the term as follows:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (p.3).

The practice of attending on a Wednesday to complete the directed tasks appeared to lead to a focus on results rather than on personal or professional development. There seemed to be an expectation from the scholars that the staff at the club would offer detailed support, perhaps even prescribed information that would aid them to achieve higher marks. It also seemed as though this was standard practice:

‘I wouldn’t want a pass, I’d want to know before then. If it is a pass and I’m on for a distinction then I want to know before it is marked.’ (Neil/FG8/Line 144)

‘I did that last year, I failed one of mine last season. I got to see what they said, they just said you are good at this and that but do this little bit.’  
(Matt/FG7/Line 109)

‘It’s normally just they tell you what is ok and what needs changing.’  
(Paul/FG7/Line 115)

'We don't really get much (*feedback*) but once we have done it they will check it before we go and say if it's alright or what we need to change and then they say yeh and give a bit of feedback...they just tell us if it's alright and what needs changing.' (Steve/FG6/Line 44)

The whole structure of the work that they had engaged in became outcome focused and the scholars appeared to see this as the main priority. When asked about what feedback they obtained about their work they almost all focused on how it was related to their grades – pass / merit / distinction. There was no discussion or consideration to how the feedback could help develop their understanding of the subject area:

'David is good at it; he puts it on a piece of paper. He puts it on the screen, which tells you pass/merit or fail.' (Greg/FG7/Line 111)

'She (*teacher*) told me what to do for a distinction. I want to be told what to do for a distinction.' (Owen/FG8/Line 121)

'They tell you like with that sheet that Jean gives us that some parts are a merit or a distinction and you have to change this to get this and things like that'. (Ethan/FG6/Line 57)

The approach being adopted at the club seemed to be leading the scholars towards becoming results focused and arguably adopting a surface level approach. Their responses included: 'I just do my work, I don't think about it.' (Cian/FG5/Line 129); 'I know, I just do as they tell me.' (George/FG5/Line 130); 'David says do this do that and you just do it.' (Euan/FG5/Line 131) and Cian (FG5/Line 134) went on to remark that 'I just wanna pass.' This was evident from my research diary notes also and can be seen below.

FIGURE 3.7: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

The players are very much results focused and on getting the qualification completed as quickly as possible. It really does come across as though it is a hindrance and there is a sort of expectation that they will get the qualification, it is not seen as a challenge or something that they will need to push themselves towards. I wonder how this compares to regular BTEC students.

At first glance this attitude could easily be criticised but Alan was quick to point out that without the actual qualification there is no progression, and he felt that this applied to other fields:

‘Say you went to University and you wanted to take Sports Psychology and they say you have no grades for it and you go, well I have learned about it for like 2 years and I have sat lessons on it and I know everything about it, it doesn’t matter what you know to what you have got. You could know everything couldn’t you like. I reckon I could do well in maths but if you haven’t got the qualification then they are not going to let you go in are they?’ (FG8/Line 234)

One scholar suggested that he has to pass his work or he fails his scholar, meaning that he could not be offered a football contract at the end if he had not passed his BTEC.

The practices adopted by the scholars are perhaps not too surprising when the work of Peters (1960) cited in Hattie (2009) is considered. Peters argued that the minimax principle (minimum effort for maximum gain), whilst seen as not necessarily appealing, can serve a strategic purpose. In this case, the scholars set out to achieve what they perceived to be an easy qualification and attempted to meet the demands of the club with minimal effort. Potentially, this allowed them to devote more time to achieving their true goal which was to gain a professional football contract. However, there appears to be a significant issue here as the scholars were not engaging in the course in a meaningful way and it did not appear to be valued as a mechanism to aid their professional development. There appeared to be a culture of not trying hard on the course, it was seen as too easy and results had become prioritised above all else. If the players were not being challenged in their educational setting, then surely it was the club’s role to consider how the qualifications were more meaningful and relevant to the scholars’ needs and aspirations. This will be considered in the next section.

### 3.2.3 Differentiation

Whilst the qualification was viewed as easy by the majority of the scholars some did recognise that they were perhaps not being challenged and meeting their full potential. It was also recognised that they were a mixed ability group:

‘It’s a bit frustrating if you are a cleverer lad, he (*teacher*) keeps you, makes you stay, but I know why he’s doing it because he doesn’t want everyone leaving. He wants the other boys to do (*the work*), you know what I mean.’ (Owen/Interview 1/Line 336)

‘I would stay until 4 but I’d like to see something from it. But if you are staying because other people have not done the work...you get punished for being ahead.’ (Alan/FG8/Line 220)

As well as the rate at which players worked Alan also recognised that they all had different aspirations when it came to the outcome of the course suggesting that:

‘Some people want to get a distinction but some just want the pass.’ (FG8/Line 157).

After reviewing my research diary it became apparent that when I was conducting the research, during my initial reflections, I acknowledged this as being an issue for the higher ability students. Figure 3.9 from my research diary clearly points to my prejudices against the lower ability students.

FIGURE 3.8: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

#### **Observational Note:**

I got the impression today that some of the players were being held back if anything on this programme. Some of them had obtained high level GCSE's and yet they find themselves being educated with other lads that were expelled from school having left with few qualifications. I was left wondering what types of things they would have been doing if they had not been involved in football - A Levels perhaps, definitely for some and that was evident with some of their comments.

However, the same frustration was felt by a player that was perceived by the staff as having lower ability:

‘The others just get off, if it was a big college there might be a big games room or something. They are distracting us as they are like: how long are you gonna be as they want to get on?’ (Brian/FG7/Line 77)

This frustration is perhaps neatly summarised and explained by Tony (FG7/Line 76) who suggested that ‘one of the issues is that everyone works at different speeds.’ Despite this, there did not appear to be a strong desire from any scholar to be split by ability or by the pace at which they worked. Owen stated that there did need to be some distinction and something in place to progress people at different rates:

‘Yes erm not necessarily split us up but I think when we finish our work we can’t be treated like the ones who are like slow doing the work because then that’s just completely wrong. It’s rubbish because you do your work and you are just sat there so you might just as well have taken your time but you can’t take your time because that’s not what you are like.’ (Interview 1/Line 439)

He went on and provided some ideas as to how this could be implemented:

‘So I think what there needs to be is you should start everyone off on one goal, do all the work and then once you see the better ones coming through there needs to be something else they could do, you know what I mean? Another classroom would help I’d say, because I think you only start seeing the clever ones and realising who is going to do the work as it progresses do you know what I mean?’

Tomlinson and Allan (2000) suggested that all students have the right to expect enthusiastic teachers that move them along a pathway as quickly as possible. There seems to be an argument forming here for the club to consider a programme of accelerated learning to address some of these issues and to aid both the higher ability scholars and to support those that are not perceived to be as developed. There was a consensus that other options ought to be considered, other options that the scholars felt were more relevant. This was something that I considered in the early stages of

the second round of focus groups. Figure 3.9 shows another extract from my research diary and offers a glimpse into my initial thoughts.

FIGURE 3.9: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Theoretical Note:**

It was surprising that during the focus groups today I started to see the issues that the players faced from their perspective more. In the main they are a good group of lads, when I started this research I thought they would all lack motivation and perhaps education was not important to them. Clearly they have footballing priorities but some of them are quite frustrated with their course and the lack of choice. I wonder if other options would improve their engagement levels?

The findings appeared to be consistent with the work of Brown and Potrac (2009) who found that players wanted to study A-Levels and they were discouraged by their clubs. Several of the scholars that had obtained higher GCSE grades expressed a desire to study non-sports related subjects at A-Level:

‘If there was an option to do something else I would have chosen law or something.’ (Brian/FG7/Line 43)

‘...yeh, English. I could have got a decent A-level.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 52)

‘...instead of a B-Tec in Sport we could have just done English, like carry on through college like everyone else.’ (Neil/FG8/Line 62)

Greg (FG7/Line 47) sought more of a vocational route when asked about his preferences: ‘... depends, I liked making stuff like construction at school.’ There did appear to be a consensus that there should have been more options available to them in addition to the one pathway that they currently had available:

‘It has to be optional though, because you could be forcing someone to do something that they don’t want to do. Someone might be interested in maths and we are doing sport psychology.’ (Neil/FG8/Line 228)

'At the start of your scholar (*in some clubs*) you get given the option don't you if you can do proper A levels or not? We weren't.' (Tony/FG7/Line 50)

Two scholars would have considered other options alongside their BTEC in sport:

'...something different to get some knowledge of something else, I would like to do something alongside sport.' (Matt/FG7/Line 44)

'...yeh me too, sport and something else.' (Tony/FG7/Line 46)

The findings reinforce those by McGillivray *et al.* (2005) who suggested that carefully planned learning strategies in clubs could engage players. Some players were frustrated and suggested that they had not been supported by the club as they had not delivered what they had promised, and the course would not help them in the longer-term:

'I really didn't like it. I really wanted to do maths. I was told I would get the tutor and it never happened.' (Alan/FG8/Line 54)

'Spoke with Pete about further study he's like yeh yeh, but he was just fobbing me off.' (Owen/Interview 1/Line 344)

'Yeh, I paid to take it at home (Maths A-Level) and they said they would get me a tutor but they didn't sort anything out.' (Alan/FG8/Line 47)

Alan felt that the BTEC in Sport would actually hold him back in the future when it came to his educational and employment ambitions:

'For where I wanted to work, if I didn't get something here... I just wanted to go to Uni doing maths but obviously now I couldn't and I'd have to go back to college.' (FG8/Line 58)

'It's great for those that want to take sport to the next level but some people might not want to do that. Because now we are stuck, if we want to go to university straight away we have to take sport.' (FG8/Line 78)

Interestingly, Neil provided an insightful response about being provided with more options, he said:

'They should either do that and meet everyone's needs or no college at all. Because like, someone who doesn't want to do this is forced to do this and it just makes them more demotivated and like doing something you don't want.' (FG8/Line 75)

Hattie (2009) stated that 'it can take less effort by a teacher to demotivate students compared to the often greater effort required to motivate them – to turn students on to learning' (p.48). It might be unfair to level this at the teachers at the club as they were not responsible for the course options. However, it was still the responsibility of people in senior positions at the club to do everything that they could to ensure that the players were being challenged within their educational setting and that they were developing at an appropriate rate based upon their needs and aspirations. Owen in his interview did consider the challenges that the club faced in providing bespoke education:

'You have got to open your eyes and you've got to realise that they can't be individual to every person, every scholar. I mean there will be plenty clever lads that are scholars but you know it's hard isn't it so you have to put them under something that they like for the majority.' (Interview 1/Line 258)

It would seem from this evidence that for some of these players the tasks and curriculum that they had been presented with just did not meet their needs. The overall task of completing the BTEC was not relevant and it was being imposed on them. Interestingly, not a single scholar suggested that the club should abandon educating the players; several of them just questioned the course that they had been presented with by the club and the Premier League.

Clearly in the case of this club there is a significant variation in the ability of the scholars and they harboured very different aspirations when it came to education. Some were seeking alternative challenges by way of A-Levels, others wanting to stop studies entirely, and then others that were seeking a blend of the BTEC in Sport with another option. It would seem prudent for the club to consider further the options within the constraints of their available resources. Perhaps there is the beginning of

an argument that points towards the need for greater choice for the scholars and a move away from the standardised offer.

As outlined earlier, the Premier League and the club saw the objectives of the course as two-fold. Firstly, it developed an understanding of topics within sport that could aid the scholars' progression within professional football, examples of this being the units that cover nutrition and sports psychology. Secondly, it offered a universally recognised qualification that could potentially lead the players to employment elsewhere or further study if they were to be released after their two years of being scholars. It would be a naïve position to take to make a claim that there is a quick fire way to improving a scholar's perceptions of how relevant the course could be. It must be remembered that this course is being delivered against a backdrop of the demands and the allure of professional football at the highest level in England.

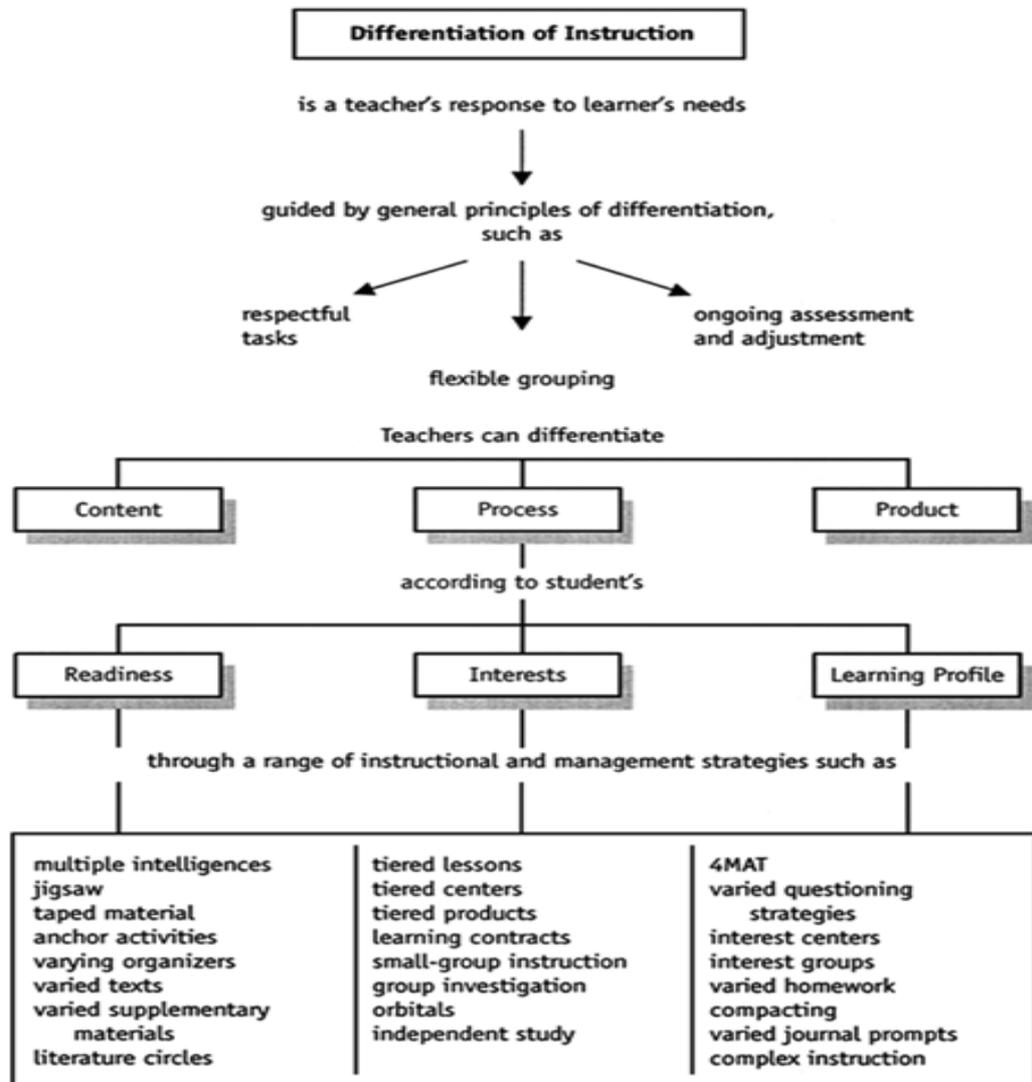
A recommendation for the club is that they could consider offering a wider variation of options and give the scholars the second pathway route so that they can elect to study A-Levels or another vocational course such as construction. The financial constraints that the education team operates within would need to be reviewed. There had been calls made by the scholars for increased variation in curriculum delivery methods, some claiming that they experienced boredom by repetitive weekly tasks. Many had claimed that they just wanted to be told what to do by the staff and these requests appear to have been accommodated. A teacher centred model was adopted as the primary mode of delivery and was based on knowledge being delivered from tutor to student. This assumes that effective teaching is derived through the presentation of information and usually relies upon direct delivery styles; little time is allocated to working directly with students to guide them as they attempt to meaningfully apply the information (Huba & Freed, 2000). The

argument against this could be formed by the view that this leads to a surface level approach with students motivated primarily, and in some instances solely, by results rather than their personal or professional development. This practice appears to have been adopted within the club. Allen (2004) highlighted didactic delivery styles and passive participation as being characteristics of tutor-centred learning. The overall approach needs to be questioned and justification for adopting this tutor-led approach should be considered further. Petty (2009) suggested that we tend to teach the way that we were taught rather than discover new methods to meet the learners' needs. Real life case studies could be used as a tool to engage the scholars in a more active form of learning; they could provide the scholars with the opportunity to discuss and debate the issues and illustrate a link between course material and their practice (McFarlane, 2015). The pedagogical benefits of an active learning approach are widely reported in the literature. Several research studies demonstrate the positive impact active learning can have upon students including an increased enthusiasm for learning (Thaman, Dhillon, Saggar, Gupta, & Kaur, 2013), particularly when compared to the more passive and traditional approaches to learning and teaching (Anderson, Mitchell, & Osgood, 2005). At the heart of active learning is the process of actively engaging learners in higher-order thinking to construct knowledge. After all, active learning is about learners doing things and thinking about the things that they are doing (Bonwell, 1991; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984).

Although the active learning approach has strong advocates throughout the literature, it is not without contention. Michael (2006) suggested that active learning does not happen automatically; the student and teacher work in partnership within the classroom to enable it to occur. By recognising the consequences of their behaviourist approach (Skinner, 2011) the club could adjust its delivery methods and

consider more student-centred approaches to allow the scholars to construct their own knowledge through active engagement (Vygotsky, 1961). This may also help the scholars to develop higher order thinking skills, as discussed by Biggs (2004), and encourage them to make connections between the individual topics covered throughout the BTEC in Sport. This may well act as an enabler for developing their appreciation of the course in relation to their role as aspiring professional footballers. However, there is a danger that teachers revert to type, especially when they are trying to meet the demands of a syllabus that has to be completed and within a set timeframe. The added complication in this setting is that the educators are working with scholars that are diverse when it comes to prior achievement and attitudes towards learning. It would seem sensible considering the resource constraints within the club, and the likelihood that pathway one is adopted, that they consider how to differentiate within the course. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) provided an excellent framework for educators in an attempt to encourage teachers to develop a better understanding of their students' needs and to differentiate. Figure 3.10 provides an overview of their approach.

FIGURE 3.10: A CONCEPT MAP FOR DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION (TOMLINSON AND ALLAN, 2000)



The range of instructional and management strategies includes approaches such as literature circles, varied texts, learning contracts, interest groups, varied homework and group investigation. From observing the approaches adopted at the club it was evident that none of these were apparent. It would have been likely, based on the findings, that prior to the staff changes at the club the scholars would have resisted such innovative and perhaps time-consuming practices. There is more optimism in the short term with the renewed focus on education, assuming the existing staff remain in their positions.

The work of Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011) and the Tomlinson and Allan model (2000) provide a backdrop to draw together some of the suggestions that have been offered in the first two sections of this chapter. The overall aim would be to ensure that the staff at the club develop a better understanding of the scholars, their needs, wants and aspirations. It would also be a priority to adjust the educational practices to meet their needs and to ensure they recognise the relevance and value of their course. However, this needs to be considered in relation to the challenges faced when competing with the dominance of football.

### **3.3 Football the Dominant Culture**

Throughout all phases of the research the importance of football to the scholars and those around them was apparent. This is not too surprising considering the potential rewards on offer and the research setting. The implications of this upon their perceptions of education cannot be ignored and the way in which it has influenced their attitudes towards education will be explored further in the following section. It was clear from the research that education was not a priority for the scholars in comparison to their football ambitions and it was perhaps devalued by the football staff at the club due to the importance of football.

#### **3.3.1 Importance of Football**

In section 3.2.3 Differentiation, the desire from some of the scholars towards leaving their BTEC in Sport was evident. There was a clear message from the players that football was their priority and this view can be traced back to their time at school. From the first round of focus groups the scholars discussed their experiences of school and the role that football played in their lives during that time. Neil discussed his time out of school in order to have trials at another club:

'Yeh, coz like got to like miss lessons; I used to have loads of time off school in the last year. When me and Tom went to Celtic we had three months off school. Just didn't go to school for three months.' (FG4/Line 68)

Alan told of leaving home at 12 years old to live with a host family nearer to the football club that he had joined, which was one of the wealthiest and most successful clubs in the country:

'...year 7 and 8 I had support, but I moved into digs at 12, so I didn't really live with my parents until the weekend.' (FG3/Line 217)

This finding is not uncommon in the upper echelons of professional football and is worrying from an educational and family perspective considering the evidence discussed in Chapter One: Introduction which showed that the majority of those recruited early into elite talent development settings do not become professional athletes (Martindale *et al.*, 2007; Vaeyens *et al.*, 2009). At best the levels of progression are low (Anderson & Miller, 2011; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Green, 2009; Grossmann *et al.*, 2015), which makes it a significant risk to prioritise football above else at such an early age. Figure 3.11 highlights my reaction to hearing about this particular player leaving home at 12 and the surprise that I felt when hearing about it.

FIGURE 3.11 RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Personal Note:**

Listening to the players today it made me think about myself and my son. I just couldn't imagine leaving home when I was 12 or letting him leave home at 12 to go and play football. Perhaps this is because I know that the chance of success is slim. I wonder what would have happened if I had been approached at 12 by a club and asked to move away, would my Mum have let me? Would I have wanted to go? My initial thoughts about Cam are that there would not be a chance I would allow it, perhaps if I worked in a different field and I was not as aware of the success rates. I might - who knows.

Consistent with the findings of De Knop *et al.* (1999), Miller and Kerr (2002), and Cosh and Tully (2015), Tony told of the difficulty that he faced when trying to keep up with the demands of his homework at school:

‘I used to struggle with time as I was at footie every night, used to play on a Saturday and I never had time, especially with my art coursework as it used to take hours, so like even me Nan used to do some of my art coursework for me. Not doing it like, I’d draw it out and that and they’d like paint it and stuff like that, you know what I mean?’ (FG3/Line 213)

Interestingly, it did not seem as though he missed football to catch up. Rather, family members would be drafted in to help to keep up with the demands of the tasks issued by school. It was not just family members that were deemed to be supporting the scholars’ football ambitions at the expense of their education. Surprisingly, teachers were cast as individuals that would help to ensure that football was on track. Here Euan described how one of his teachers covered up his poor behaviour at school so that the professional football club did not find out:

‘When he (*club member of staff*) used to phone my head of year, my head of year used to lie to him, get on that. Said he is still in school and that behaving (after being suspended). He didn’t want to affect my chances in footie.’ (FG/Line 138)

This special dispensation was extended to playing football for the school team for Alex in spite of punishment from other teachers that had resulted in him being banned from playing:

‘because they need ya. When it was like a cup game, they (*PE teachers*) were like, Jack – you playing? Well if you want.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 214)

Perhaps this level of devotion to football: missing school, leaving home, family helping with homework and teachers covering up poor behaviour, contributed to a sense of entitlement when it came to football being prioritised over education. The following quote illustrates how Sean was frustrated at what he felt was an injustice when it came to the lack of time he was given off school to train:

'The other thing with that as well, when I was in school like, I could have, I wanted to have time off to go training in the day and stuff, but Tony the keeper, he went to a school just down the road from me, they let him out to go training. I was never allowed out. I like, I didn't get any other priorities.' (FG4/Line 80)

This frustration continued when it came to discussing their experiences of combining football with education at the club during their time as scholars. Below are some views from the scholars that highlighted their frustration at having to spend time on their course to the detriment of their football:

'We've done nothing, no shape or nothing. We are all just bored of college and we go and get beat.' (Alex/FG5/Line 184)

'Just concentrate on your footie (*as opposed to education and football*) and probably play better and that.' (Cian/FG5/Line 30)

'No one is motivated on the education; we are all here for the football really in it. This is just something on the side.' (Eddie/FG6/Line 192)

'....it's just shit coming to college, I'm here to play footie.' (Euan/FG5/Line 115)

This echoes Bourke's finding (2003) that suggested that young players would not view qualifications important in relation to their long-term development in football. The remarks are perhaps not too surprising when the financial rewards of professional football are considered and that for many of the scholars football had probably been a long-term ambition.

Becoming a professional footballer was seen by James as something that lots of young people aspired to achieve:

'...at primary school you're always told what do you want to do when you are older, everyone said football.' (Interview 4/Line 533)

He placed great emphasis on the importance of the role and considered the profession to be one that many hoped to achieve. The lucrative earnings were not lost on Greg (Interview 3/Line 298) who claimed that: 'If you make that career then you are set for

life... Football is a life changer isn't it.' This was something that I had considered during my time conducting the focus groups and an area I reflected upon in my research diary. Figure 3.12 outlines my thoughts:

FIGURE 3.12: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

I couldn't help but think that these young men could potentially become at the top of the game in football and earn significant sums of money. They have a chance to play in the Premier League if they are successful - it also made me think about what it at stake here for these young people and how young they seem.

It might be argued that the players felt that the education element that they were obliged to complete was something that could restrict or even prevent them achieving their footballing dream, a dream that they had harboured for some time and one in which they had already made lots of sacrifices:

'... like when your mates are playing out and that, when you were younger, it does take a lot of that away.....like when I was with the under 15 &16's, we used to be their Mondays, they used to do like weight sessions, that was like Wednesday, Friday, Sunday, like on a Wednesday night kids are playing out, it didn't seem to bother me like, but some people it will bother won't it?' (James/Interview 4/Line 543)

In line with the findings of Brown and Potrac (2009), players had to make social and educational sacrifices. The impact of having to spend more time on education and sacrificing more football time was something that Owen felt should have been recognised by the education staff at the club:

'I'd say don't forget it is a football scholarship and no matter what way he (*Head of Education and Welfare*) looks at it education will always be second on people's minds. So he has to understand that when we come into college he can't be super busy and expect everyone, because we are just human beings, he can't expect everyone to be like buzzing like it is school.' (FG8/Line 168)

The added difficulty for the education staff was that during the focus groups it became apparent that the scholars felt that the football staff at the club did not value education. The education staff faced the challenge of engaging the players with what appeared to be limited support from the football staff within the club.

### 3.3.2 Education Devalued

There was the perception from the scholars from the second round of focus groups that the football staff at the club did not value education, Eddie felt they only focused on it because they had to because of the Premier League:

‘Tom (*previous Academy Manager*) and that. I don’t know like, if the Premier League didn’t like, it’s the Premier League that makes us do it. Cos if they didn’t say anything then they wouldn’t be bothered about the education. If they had a choice I don’t think they would do it.’ (FG6/Line 206)

Euan (FG5/Line 156) supported this view: ‘Tom tries to act like, you need to go to College, and we are just like, yeh course... he laughs about it and takes the piss out of it.’ These views were also extended to the first team manager, George (FG/Line 153) said ‘but at the end of the day not one Manager gives a shit about it.’ When this line of enquiry was explored further Euan offered this insight:

‘They aren’t really bothered as most of them have made it being footballers and they have been where we are and they didn’t want to be in college and that. So they know what it’s like so they are not too arsed are they. They just have to be arsed a bit coz like it’s their job...– yeh, got to haven’t they, they can’t not.’ (FG 5/Line 161)

Clearly the players perceived the football staff to be playing a role if you like, one of pretence with a focus on education with a wink. The views of the coaches may have inadvertently influenced the players’ views and had a profound effect on their engagement levels within the course, something I acknowledged in my research diary (See Figure 3.13). This supports the view offered by Morley *et al.* (2014) who suggested that players and coaches agreed that school was not a priority when it came

to developing elite players. This interpretation is reinforced by Hickey and Kelly (2005) who found that coaches in Australian Football agreed with the need for their players to be involved in non-football activities, but questioned the level of emphasis that should be placed on these.

FIGURE 3.13: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, OCTOBER 2012. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

After thinking more about the players today and the areas that we discussed, I can't help but think that the education staff at the club have a near impossible task. The 'power' of football is evident, obvious perhaps. These lads are desperate to make it and I could tell when they spoke about the football staff how much they respected them. They are influential in ways that perhaps they don't even recognise.

Euan felt that the older players did not see the value in education and even suggested that those that did were not as good on the pitch:

'No, everyone is made up aren't they (*those offered professional contracts*) when they leave and get their pro and fuck college off.' (FG5/Line 167)  
'...they (*those looking to continue in education*) are better off the field than they are on.' (FG5/Line 201)

It was clear from the analysis of the focus group data that there was a prevailing culture that prioritised football above all else and devalued education. Some of the scholars were scathing when it came to their educational course and they even resulted to name calling those that seemed to show interest in furthering their educational aspirations. As highlighted by work of Monk and Olsson (2006) and McGillivray *et al.* (2005), clubs did not necessarily provide an environment that valued education and risked compromising the scholars' future should they suffer de-selection.

Several of the players did suggest that the football staff at the club used the educational course as an opportunity to ensure the players were disciplined. A lack of engagement on the course sometimes resulted in football privileges being lost:

‘they look at what your attitude is like in college and if you are dicking around, unless they are really really good and unbelievable then they will let it go. But if you are not that good and you are messing around in college and you are not arsed like they won’t really want you will they? (*to play football*) I don’t think anyway.’ (Brian/FG7/Line 102)

‘I think they think it is important by way of discipline...What they are saying is that if you don’t do college you are not playing football.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 256)

Two players even felt that if they did not pass their educational course then they would not be in a position to progress at the club as full time professionals:

‘Only because it is a pro contract and my mum would say do college because it shows you are keen. Go college as it could affect the decision about if you get pro or not.’ (Neil/FG8/Line 164)

‘I’d have failed my scholar’ (response to being asked about consequences of failing the course). (Greg/Interview 3/Line 376)

This contradicts some of the previous findings about the football staff not valuing education, but there is little evidence that the scholars perceived the football staff as valuing it to help them become professional footballers. There was certainly no evidence to suggest that the football staff acknowledged the importance of the course to aid their development if they were deselected.

The scholars perceived the football staff at the club as those with the power and appeared to take a lot more notice of them when it came to their conduct:

‘Jean, David and Pete (*education staff*) you say things to, not that you don’t respect them as much as the coaches but obviously you aren’t going to say anything to the coaches.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 13)

‘They (*football staff*) would rather you be good at footie obviously, they aren’t going to give you a contract are they saying he is good at college but he is crap at football.’ (Brian/FG7/Line 97)

It would be difficult to make any sort of claims that education is seen as being on an equal footing as the footballing development of the players. Again, this is hardly surprising considering the setting that this research is taking place in. There was the perception that some football staff devalued the role of education, but they did use football as a sanction if the scholars failed to engage in their course.

### **3.3.3 Education an Alternative**

Although there appeared to be a consensus from the focus groups that education was devalued and was not perceived to be a priority for the scholars, there were some that viewed the course as offering them a break from the demands of training and competing as full time football players. This is illustrated by the following quotes:

‘I think it takes your mind off football.’ (Ethan/FG6/Line 159)

‘Coming in on a Wednesday I think that works because it gives you a blow (*rest*) in the week.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 94)

‘It breaks up the week like.’ (Steve/FG6/Line 130)

‘It just gives us a rest day in the week. College breaks it up.’ (Eddie/FG6/Line 131)

‘If we changed days say to a Monday then in the week it would feel like you only did football and it wouldn’t feel like a break. We can get our energy back and have a chill.’ (Jack/FG6/Line 137)

Clearly the benefits of the course in this instance are that it gave the scholars some time away from football. This is in stark contrast to other research that has been carried out in elite sport settings where the demands of fulfilling educational requirements and competing as an elite athlete have determined that it is tiring and potentially a course of anxiety and stress (Georgakis *et al.*, 2014; Miller and Kerr, 2002; O’Neill *et al.*, 2013).

A few of the scholars viewed the course as being positive in terms of offering them other options if they were released at the end of their two year contract. When

asked about the likelihood of them remaining on the course if they had the option, their thoughts were in contrast to those offered by the scholars who clearly stated a desire to leave:

‘I’d do it because even if you are doing well at your football something can still happen that could be serious and you need a back-up.’ (Eddie/FG6/Line 163)

‘It would be nice to have a day off but I would stick at it just in case the footie didn’t go to plan.’ (Jack/FG6/Line 166)

‘I’d stick at it, but it would be very tempting like.’ (Steve/FG6/Line 167)

‘I’d still do it.’ (Ethan/FG6/Line 165)

‘That’s the only reason isn’t it, if I don’t make it as a footballer?’ (Jack/FG6/Line 217)

‘Being unemployed and having nothing is my worst fear. So at least if I had something, I might not be happy doing it but at least I had something. So I’d still do it.’ (Owen/FG8/Line 90)

Eddie (FG6/Line 220) offered an interesting insight into his thinking, which perhaps summarises the dichotomy that the scholars faced: ‘It’s like saying that you won’t make it.’ This is an insightful view of the potential internal challenges that scholars may have encountered if they focused more on their course as a contingency plan. It supports the work of Hickey and Kelly (2005) who found that coaches questioned the level to which players in elite sport in Australia should focus their attention on school work. If they had taken notice of the success rates of those that had gone before them when attempting to become professional players, then perhaps the dream was over before it already began. It would seem like a strange mind-set to adopt, one that focuses on failure and not the potential that was ahead of them. However, for the majority of scholars this was the reality and few of them would gain a professional contract in football. Although learning was not the primary driver for the scholars, some did derive some value from attending their course. However, the value placed

upon the programme was one of convenience, a break from football and seen as a back-up.

When this research commenced the scholars at the club did not significantly value their educational environment; this was set against a backdrop of a dominant footballing culture. When considering the prevailing culture within the organisation it would seem sensible to define the parameters of culture as they are being considered here, as the term 'culture' is hugely contested (Peters & Bulut, 2012; Sewell, 1999) and has evolved over time. Samovar and Porter (2003) suggested that culture is the acquisition and passing of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values and material objects by a group of people between generations. Kuper (1999) simply described it as a way of talking about collective identities. Jahoda (2012) suggested that attempts to define culture are futile and that it is defensible to use the term without defining it. However, whilst it is not within the parameters of this thesis to grapple with the diverse range of discourse related to culture it would make sense to explain how it is being considered. Furthermore, this is supported by Jahoda (2012) who stated that if theoretical or empirical reasons dictate, then the way that culture is being employed in a given context should be offered. It would seem prudent to do so for the purpose of this section.

In relation to the club, culture is being considered as the basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of the club, these may operate unconsciously and in a taken for granted manner (Johnson & Scholes, 2005). Developing this further, culture is not a static fixed immovable object, but rather one that is ever changing and influenced by the people within a particular setting. Alvesson (2002) described culture as 'a set of meanings, and values shared by the group' (p.29). In relation to the club, the collective behaviour, ways of thinking and feelings towards education of the

scholars have all been considered within this study. It is these that are considered further in relation to the scholars' understanding of the value of education and what meaning they give it by way of relevance. Clearly within this setting the football staff at the club had a significant influence over the views of the scholars and the meaning that they attached to formal education at the club. Ideally the views of the football staff would be congruent with those in the education department and this would require changes at the club in order to develop a suitable and sustainable learning environment in the longer term.

Cruickshank and Collins (2012) pointed to a lack of guidance for those responsible for bringing in change within elite sport settings and recognised that those responsible for implementing change are often not afforded time. They go on to criticise the range of literature within change management, suggesting that it lacks theoretical and empirical footings and that many change management initiatives within elite level sport are ambiguous and reliant upon prescribed frameworks. Taking the first point, it would seem sensible to recognise the changing nature of football with the potential for turnover of staff. Indeed, within the timeframes of this research the new Head of Education and Welfare was appointed and a new Head of the Academy was brought into the club (this will be considered further in section 3.5 Impact of Staff Changes at the Club). The second point should also be acknowledged and a tokenistic framework taken from the plethora of change management literature should be avoided. However, lessons can be learned from these frameworks and perhaps some of the more pertinent points around developing a vision and the necessity of leadership should be considered (Kotter, 1990; Mullins, 2005).

The traditional view of leadership is one of having a figurehead that develops a vision, establishes direction and energises people to produce change (Kotter, 1990).

This is perhaps not going to be sustainable longer term in this setting due to the nature of employment patterns within this field. Elite level football is associated with a quick turnover of staff, so unless it comes from the owner of the club whose tenure is typically longer than those in other positions it would be difficult to see long term stability. An alternative view of leadership could be considered, one that relies upon people from within all sections of the organisation. A collegiate approach, perhaps more recently known as distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002) might be more suitable; this relies upon the individuals in the social setting rather than a top down approach that seeks to identify a leader that influences and informs their followers. The Head of Education and Welfare might need to consider how he can continue to engage and to enhance his relationship with core groups and individuals; this would include the scholars, the other education staff, football staff and significant others such as parents. However, there is no avoiding the issue of staff turnover and a strong working relationship between these stakeholders does not constitute guaranteed success. The most likely individual that could support a longer-term focus on education in this particular club would be the club owner and being able to influence that individual would potentially lead to a greater impact in the longer-term upon educational practices at the club. The question to be posed to the owner may be: what is the vision for education at the club and whose responsibility is it? Clearly it is beyond the scope of this research to impose or to articulate fully what this should be, but given the evidence it would seem prudent to consider raising the profile of education and perhaps making it more relevant to the players. The vision perhaps centres around the premise that an education programme can aid the scholars' progression and development as aspiring professional footballers; this is a suggested aim of the Premier League (Premier League, 2011). Based upon the findings of this research it is

clearly not being operationalised or recognised by the players. The course on offer may need to be re-evaluated and other options explored. However, a more detailed look at the content of the course shows an obvious relevance for an aspiring footballer in many of the units on the programme including: Physiology of Fitness, Anatomy and Physiology, Fitness Training and Programming, Psychology for Sports Performance, Sports Nutrition (Pearson Education, 2011). Despite this, there is clearly a detachment between the scholars' course and their football development. Within the BTEC Level 3 Specification issue 2 document there is guidance on the delivery approach, which states that 'Tutors and assessors need to ensure that appropriate links are made between theory and practical application and that the knowledge base is applied to the sector' (Pearson Education, 2011, p26). The apparent disconnect at the club might prompt a rethink in the way in which the course is delivered and the suggestions in 3.2 Perceptions of the Curriculum, which advocates an active learning approach, become even more important.

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), school improvement relies upon transforming schools into professional learning communities. Whilst the research setting is focused on people in further education and elite sport, the message has relevance. The notion of the BTEC in Sport and football training/playing as separate entities perhaps restricts engagement from the scholars and the idea that the units from the course serve as a means to develop them as footballers needs to be pushed to the forefront. Ideas for practice might include breaking up the units into smaller bite size chunks within the week, having some delivery at the football ground and not at college, utilising football staff more for the delivery of the units, using case studies and embedding what they are scheduled to learn into their footballing routine. There is limited empirical evidence of a different approach elsewhere, but some do point to

the elite football clubs on the continent, particularly Spain and Germany, as being examples of good practice when it comes to developing the educated footballer (Nesti & Sulley, 2015).

Redressing the balance within the club and a focus on learning for the professional and personal development of the scholars would see a complete paradigm shift. The intention would be to move from the course being seen as a contingency opportunity (other employment/education) and something that may aid their professional football progression to something that will aid their professional football progression and could be something that they may use as a contingency (other employment/education).

### **3.4 Influence of Significant Others**

Whilst it appears clear that football staff at the club affected the scholars' attitudes towards their educational course, throughout all three phases of the research the scholars also discussed the influence of their peers, family members and teachers during their time at school and at the club. It became apparent that the scholars reflected fondly upon their time at school in relation to being with their friends. The scholars appeared to hold largely positive views of the support that they had received from their family members and they displayed mixed views about their relationships with teachers. Their view of the support that they received from education staff at the club did seem to be consistently positive. The following section highlights the findings from the research in relation to the role of significant others during school and at the club. The role of football staff at the club has already been addressed in the previous section.

### 3.4.1 Impact of Peers

The overall evidence that the scholars presented regarding their relationship with their peers at school was positive. The relationship with their peers at the club as a discussion topic was not as evident during the focus groups interviews, but when it did surface their accounts were largely positive.

Several of the scholars whilst discussing their time at school were extremely positive about the relationship that they had with their peers. When asked to discuss their views of school the positive views of their friends surfaced and illustrated how important friendships were at school. The following quotes illustrate this:

‘Alright, a bit boring sometimes, more bothered about seeing my mates, at dinner and stuff.’ (Ethan/FG2/Line 9)

‘I used to love school, I thought it was like proper funny, you saw all your mates like every day.’ (Steve/FG2/Line 13)

...er, we used to have a proper laugh like , everyday, with all your mates, play footie, lunch and that.’ (Steve/FG2/Line 18)

‘Used to have a laugh every day without fail (*with friends*).’ (Greg/FG4/Line 14)  
‘I liked the friends bit... That got me through it.’ (Sean/FG4/Line 20)

Paul and Brier (2001) explained how in the USA students transitioning from high school to college experienced a form of grief in relation to their old high school friends. They found that those that attempted to maintain these relationships as before would not adjust as well to their new learning environments; they referred to this as friendsickness. It does pose questions for the club about how they can aid the transition of the scholars from school to the club/college. Oswald and Clark (2003) also found in the context of USA high school-college transition that those preoccupied with the potential loss of precollege friends reported psychological distress. Although not as evident in the research, there was some evidence of good relationships forming between the scholars at the club. Steve from the second cohort described during his

interview how he and the other scholars had become really good friends and socialised with one another outside of club activities:

‘...but I’m really good mates with these like. We’re all going on holiday together and that in the summer, they’re easy to get on with.’ (Interview 2/Line 81)

Steve (Interview 2/Line 129) went on to briefly mention how during his time at the club he had benefited from being with the other scholars: ‘...at the same time it’s more enjoyable as well like with the lads and all that.’ Interestingly, Owen perceived the behaviour of others to have been positively influenced by the group:

‘I think a lot of lads have changed since been mixing with the group they’ve become milder or they have grown up a bit. I think it’s, that’s what I do think it is.’ (Interview 1/Line 355)

Research suggests (Brown & Larson, 2009; Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013) that during adolescence peers can have a significant influence upon one another’s attainment at school. It was clear that the scholars valued the relationship with their peers at school and at the club; I recognised this in my research diary (See Figure 3.14). However, it is difficult to determine from the findings of this research if peers had a negative or positive effect on educational outcomes as the scholars focused on their social interactions with peers. Prinstein and Dodge (2008) suggested that all too often peer influence is considered as a factor that leads to negative choices and restricts academic development; yet they reported that peer influence is not always bad. Whilst no claims can be made within this research that peer influence was a factor either way, it was clear that the scholars valued the importance of friendships.

FIGURE 3.14: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2014. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

The players seem to have a really good relationship, it is rare to see them falling out and not getting along. I would even describe some of them as looking like really close friends and they have what might be described as a strong bond. There are though one or two that are perhaps on the edges of the group.

Their recollection of their time at school and at the club in relation to their peers was largely positive. However, Owen showed that he did not value the support of peers at the club to progress his own academic development:

‘No - because I don’t really. I literally stick my earphones on and get on with it, I don’t really because literally my idea is getting on and getting it done (the course).’ (Interview 1/Line 400)

Interestingly, Hattie (2009) suggested that the higher the quality of friendships the greater the magnification of influence of friends on one another. This could be positive or negative. In other research carried out (Evans & Roberts, 1987; Smith, 2003) it was found that physical competency levels have a significant influence on peer relationships from a young age; children with competent physical literacy skills appearing to be popular amongst their peers. With the scholars undoubtedly displaying high levels of physical literacy at a young age it might seem sensible to suggest that the scholars would have been popular members within their school environments. James (Interview 4/Line 581) even stated as much: ‘I mean I had a lot of friends and that.’ It appeared overall that the scholars had formed strong friendships at school and some were starting to form similar relationships at the club which they valued. In relation to significant others, peers did not feature as

predominantly as influencers compared to the role that their other family members played during their time at school or the club.

### **3.4.2 Family Member Support**

During the focus groups and interviews the scholars offered mixed views about the role that their family members had played during their time at school and at the club. Some scholars appeared to have received limited support from parents during their time at school whilst others were complimentary about the role that their parents had played. Siblings and other family members were also mentioned with several scholars discussing the negative impact that they had on them during their time at school. James, in the focus groups, discussed his time at school and how his brother influenced him.

‘My older brother, he was a mess and I ended up copying him. I just wanted to be like him, you have got to meet him to understand how funny he is, honestly. He was in like bottom sets and shit like that, he couldn’t be arsed.’ (FG1/Line 144)

Euan discussed how he felt the behaviour of his uncle had a negative impact on his relationship with his teachers:

‘Like, when I went into school at year 7, my form teacher, my uncle, my mum’s brother, he said, he went, your mum and dad’s thingio, so your uncle’s erm, like said his name and he went, kind of snarled. I was like, what the fuck. and got kicked out la. He fucking hated me.’ (FG1/Line 152)

A growing body of research indicates that siblings influence each other’s risky and deviant behaviour in adolescence (Bank, Patterson, & Reid; 1996; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simons, & Conger, 2001).

He appeared to be frustrated at not being treated fairly due to the comparison:

‘You go to the school yeh, and say someone in your family has been there, they just assume you are like that.’ (FG1/Line 149)

Braun (1976) highlighted this issue in schools suggesting that teachers will draw upon information about a sibling or relative that they have encountered previously to form a judgement about a new pupil. If these experiences are negative, then the child can sometimes be stigmatised. More recently, Siegle, Moore, Mann, and Wilson (2010) found that teachers selecting pupils for gifted and talented programmes were influenced by whether previous siblings had been categorised as gifted and talented. Sean appeared to blame his parents for not achieving as well as he would have liked to at school:

‘I blame my mum and dad me.....Nah, I was only joking, just because like, I don’ t know, I found maths hard and English, I don’ t blame anyone for it, I just find it hard to do and then I don’ t enjoy it.’ (FG4/Line 131)

Whilst this individual did back track it did seem as though he held some initial negative views towards the support he received from his parents. Throughout the focus group phase some of the discussions about parents steered towards their role as the disciplinarian, with some mothers adopting that role and for others it was their father.

This is illustrated by these quotes:

‘I used to get screamed at all the time.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 185)

‘I would say in school that I was more scared of what my mum and dad would do, I wasn’t scared of what the teachers would say or what they would do. I was more scared of my dad or my mum for that matter.’ (Owen/FG3/Line 101)

‘My Dad found out about everything though, me Mum was like the one that would keep it away from my dad if it all kicked off.’ (Euan/FG1/Line 186)

Some parents appeared to use the threat of removing them from football as a sanction if they were informed of any bad behaviour at school:

‘I wasn’t scared, scared like. I was just thinking like that if I got in proper trouble then my dad would say that you are not going to footie or something.’ (Tony/FG3/Line 107)

Interestingly, Ethan explained how too much pressure from his parents resulted in him feeling under pressure at school and perhaps not being as motivated as he might have been:

‘Mine were dead strict on me, if they wasn’t as strict then I think I might have wanted it (achieving at school) more as when they were strict it felt like there was loads and loads of pressure. It was just hard.’  
(FG2/Line 188)

The role of the parent as the disciplinarian would appear to be one that is expected within society. However, when considered in relation to education, there is strong evidence that excessive parental supervision in education can lead to disengagement and have a negative effect on educational aspirations (Amato and Booth, 2009; Hattie, 2009). During the second phase of the research, the interviews, Greg talked about the influence of his family members and explained how they were not focused on education and that football was the priority:

‘Yes everything is football, all they ever talk about is football and like not how’s the GCSE’s, it was how’s the football going now.’ (Interview 3/Line 293).

He went on to explain how education was not something that would be discussed within his family:

‘They don’t talk over it... No not that they’re not bothered but I’ve never sat down and said oh, I’ve passed this today.’ (Interview 3/Line 253)

Steve explained how his father was a College Lecturer but he criticised the club for allowing his son to spend too much time on the educational programme, with less time training or playing football:

‘To be honest, he’s a massive football fan, so he’s all about how well I’m playing footie and how long like, he’s always like you’re doing a lot of college aren’t you? Shouldn’t you be playing more time on the pitch and all that?’ (Interview 2/Line 496)

This surprised me somewhat considering Steve’s father worked in education and was something that I had reflected upon in my research diary the evening following this

interview (See Figure 3.15). This reflexive approach clearly brings to the surface my own values in relation to education.

FIGURE 3.15: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2013. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

Listening to the lads today made me again think about my own personal circumstances. I never had any strong role models when it came to education, but I certainly did not have anyone in my life that acted as some sort of deterrent. One of the players told me about how he wanted to be like his brother who misbehaved at school, another even had a Dad that is a lecturer and is complaining about the time on the course. It's made me think about Abigail and Cam and how important it is that they see positive role models in education. In a way they are fortunate that both me and Karen (wife) value it so highly. Others are less fortunate.

These views of parents, combined with the apparent lack of focus on education displayed by the football staff (documented in section 3.3 Football the Dominant Culture), may well serve as extra ammunition for the scholars to question the value and relevance of completing their educational programme. However, there was evidence within the research that parents were supportive of their child's educational development. Greg (Interview 3/Line 282), during the interviews, mentioned how pleased his parents were when he passed his GCSEs: 'So I got 12 GCSEs at school so they was buzzing with that.' Alex (FG1/Line134) mentioned how his parents viewed education as being important: 'My mum and dad used to tell me that education was important.' However, this appeared to be focused around the benefits for them if they needed to gain employment or if their aspirations to become professional footballers did not work out:

'My Mum and Dad just said erm, you only go to school once so just get good grades and if football doesn't work then you have grades to fall back on.'  
(Gary/FG4/Line 98)

'I mean my dad employs people I told you this and he says the importance of a degree nowadays is phenomenal, so I understand that and I probably will do that (*if released*).'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 131)

'She (*Mum*) just doesn't want me on the dole do you know what I mean.'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 93)

This supports the work of Christensen and Sørensen (2009) who suggested that football is the priority for families that are supporting their sons in becoming elite level footballers and education is for the future. The idea of education being prioritised for the sake of learning was not something that any of the scholars relayed. Some parents had invested a lot of time and effort in supporting their children on their route towards professional football. James explained how his Dad used to support his development, along with his brother:

'Yes because my older brother he used to play for Wanderers. My Dad used to take him everywhere, every Sunday, then obviously when I started playing then it was me, because he used to play for Morecambe then like kick offs at 3 o'clock, then he used to have to watch me and it was all the way up there. So yes, every weekend he's been watching football and that, so he has obviously had to make a lot of sacrifice and that.'  
(Interview 4/Line 556)

A growing body of research points to the influence of parent education and family income on child achievement in school (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Davis-Kean, 2005; Hackman & Farah, 2009). However, in this particular setting it is perhaps too simplistic to attempt to analyse the influence of these types of variables on attitudes towards education. The unique backdrop of professional football and the sacrifices being made by family members to support the dream of achieving professional football status all contribute towards shaping these views. The support afforded to the players went

beyond the home with teachers at school and at the club attempting to help them to achieve their aspirations.

### 3.4.3 Support from Teachers

The relationships that the scholars had forged with teachers during their time at school and more recently at the club were varied. The scholars discussed the interpersonal relationships that they had forged with staff members and the support that staff gave them during their time at school and at the club. Generally, the views were mixed with both negative and positive views of teachers given. The majority of the scholars had positive views about their PE teachers and offered positive comments about them:

‘All PE teachers were sound.’ (James/FG1/Line 221)

‘PE teacher yeh. Yeh, I got along with them... They support you with your football and that, but the other teachers don’t and they always pull you up in lessons. (Sean/FG4/Line 59 & 61)

‘They understand you a lot more.’ (Greg/FG4/Line 60)

‘Mine were sound....They are the favourite teachers, but they would say, why you acting like a bellend? I'd just laugh and say shut up.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 220-222)

‘Yeh, my PE teacher was sound you know. He played for Altrincham and then he was the Head of PE in my school. Just like sound and that.’ (Tony/FG 3/Line 138)

The scholars seemed to view the PE staff as having an appreciation of their footballing aspirations and as the first quote above illustrates, one scholar suggested that his PE teacher supported his development. Another seemed to have a sense of affinity with his teacher as he had been a professional footballer. Hamre and Pianta (2006) argued that the relationship between students and their teachers was fundamental to being successful in school. As stated previously, PE was regarded as being one of the most popular lessons in school for high school aged pupils and this may be due to the

relationship that some young people have with their PE teachers (Stead & Neville, 2010). In addition to having a positive relationship with their PE teachers, some of the scholars mentioned having an appreciation for teachers in general:

‘Yeh, it was a good school, like, most of the teachers did extra stuff to try and help you and stuff.’ (Ethan/FG2/Line 28)

‘I had good teachers. So like, if I like the person then I tend to do better, because I want to do well for him and for me.’ (Neil/FG4/Line 33)

‘The girl, Miss White, soundest teacher ever. She liked me as a person. She would say just do a little bit of work and then you can do what you want. So I would do a little bit of work for her.’ (Alex/FG1/Line 230)

‘The ones that I got were boss and they all understand how you feel. They weren’t just teachers they were friends as well.’ (Greg/FG4/Line 45)

It appeared from the data that the scholars felt as though they were more successful and engaged more at school if they had a good relationship with their teachers, one scholar even viewing school teachers as friends. When asked about their views of the education staff at the club the majority of the scholars offered a positive view:

‘Yeh, they are good. You can ask them questions and they will help ya.’ (Steve/FG6/Line 35 & 37)

‘The teachers are good or tutors or whatever they are called...they are easy to talk to. I get on well with them. (Cam/FG6/Line 32 & 34)

‘The teachers, they do help you and that, they’re good.’ (Cian/FG5/Line 52)  
‘Easy to get on with and that.’ (Jack/FG6/Line 36)

The scholars praised the way that the tutors at the club had separated the scholars by year group and the small group sizes of 9-10 meant that they received more tailored support and this helped with their learning:

‘Splitting the groups up, like got us in two classrooms, that’s better as if there was just loads of us it would just be chaos.’ (Steve/FG6/Line 66)

‘Because you learn more when there is less of us.’ (Ethan/FG6/Line 71)

Euan was extremely negative about the relationship between himself and a member of staff from the education team.

She treats you like a kid, like she is a primary school teacher and treats you like a kid. She shouts at you and that and you are like, who the fuck are you talking to? I'm not a kid, I'm here on a scholarship growing up getting paid for it and she's screaming in my face. Fuck off.' (FG5/Line 143)

The relationships between the student and teacher and teaching in small groups is claimed to be significant when it comes to the effects upon achievement in education (Hattie, 2009). Surprisingly, Hattie suggests that this is significantly more influential than other teacher effects such as the quality of teaching and teacher subject knowledge. Despite the positive views held by some of the scholars regarding their teachers there was also discontent shown by some of the scholars when they considered their relationship with their teachers. Several of the scholars had extremely negative views when it came to some of their teachers at school. Alex (FG1/Line 222) described them as: 'Some are dickheads.' His perception was that the feeling was mutual (FG1/Line 44 & 49): 'Couldn't stand mine...Teachers didn't like me. They just didn't like me.' This negative view of teachers was shared by Euan (FG1/Line 219): 'I hated my PE teacher.'

Skinner and Belmont (1993) highlighted the importance of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers as a requirement for optimising student motivation. This was furthered by Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2012) who suggested that students spend at least one quarter of their hours in the week at school and their relationship with teachers was fundamental in either enhancing or inhibiting their development.

Whilst several of the scholars appeared not to like their teachers at school, two of them went further and questioned their competency:

'I had a Chemistry teacher, she used to work in a lab, proper like, no one understood her and no one wanted to listen to her. She used to walk out the lesson as she was getting too stressed. She would go and stand outside for 10 minutes and just like, read to herself. Our whole class got D's and that.' (Steve/FG2/Line 124)

'We had a maths teacher, who didn't even know our names and we always had to correct her. I used to always, when she was doing the answers I knew she would get some wrong and went to the back of the answer book and she got like 5 questions wrong when she was doing it, and she used to argue about it saying it's right and it weren't.' (Ethan/FG2/Line 128)

Clearly this would be an issue when it comes to inspiring learning and improving attainment levels and is quite interesting as it was the only time in the research when the effectiveness of teachers was considered. The education staff at the club received minimal criticism from the scholars with the general consensus being that the staff were helpful and supportive. This is perhaps something that the club could focus upon if they were to seek to improve the perceptions of the scholars about the relevance and value of undertaking an educational programme. However, the comments related to the club education staff are what could be described as inter-personal issues, the student-staff relationship. As discussed in section 3.2.2 Demands of the Course, the majority of support available was focused on improving results and not necessarily improving their attitudes towards learning.

Given the findings of the research, which shows the strong value the scholars place on peer relationships, it would seem sensible to outline a strategy at the club that builds upon this and uses these relationships to positive effect in the classroom. Additionally, furthering some of the recommendations in the previous section (3.2 Perceptions of the Curriculum) regarding adopting an active learning / student centred approach and moving towards developing higher order thinking skills, it might be prudent to suggest that this could be supported by adopting more

peer/group work based tasks on the course which are facilitated and supported by the education staff.

The work of Paul and Brier (2001) was discussed in the results section in relation to the transition from high school to college in the USA; they outlined the importance of developing new friendships to aid transition and to adjust to the new learning environment. The scholars at the club in this research appeared to demonstrate a strong recollection of friends from school and focused less on the relationships that had been formed with fellow scholars at the club. Paul and Brier (2001) suggested a range of interventions to aid transition and it could be important that the club considers how they might support this process for the scholars, with a particular focus on fostering new friendships to aid their development. Hattie (2009) suggested that the effect of positive peer influence in the classroom is considerable, with contributions coming by way of increased levels of engagement (Wentzel, 2010).

Literature exists about the social and academic challenges faced by young people progressing from primary to secondary school (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008; Hanewald, 2013; Jago, Page, & Cooper, 2012) with suggestions for practitioners centering around pre-term inductions and orientation activities to build friendships. There is no literature that specifically considers the transition from school to post-compulsory education in an elite football environment such as this. Additionally, work by Hernandez-Martinez *et al.* (2011) suggested that literature focusing on the transition from school to college in the UK is limited. They make an attempt to contribute to this field by focusing on mathematics students. They conclude that practice should be revised and centred around developing the students' identity in fitting with the distinct social and academic demands posed by the new institution.

Urduan and Schoenfelder (2006) claimed that the desire to affiliate with

friends and peers could have a range of effects on motivation and achievement, with much depending on the motivational and academic aspirations of the group. The club could consider how to develop a shared identity within each new cohort that centres on academic readiness. This could be nurtured throughout the programme by introducing more by way of collaborative learning and ensuring that the scholars can see the relevance of the course in relation to developing as professional footballers. The messages about the importance of education given by the football staff should continue and are a noteworthy factor. This would seem more feasible at present given the renewed focus on education, which will be discussed further in section 3.5 Impact of Staff Changes at the Club.

A large proportion of the work on the BTEC in Sport is undertaken without much collaboration and sees scholars working individually on assessment-based tasks. A number of benefits of group learning activities have been widely reported in the literature (Davies, 2009); these include promoting a deeper level of learning (Entwistle & Waterston, 1988), promoting active learning (Ruel, Bastiaans, & Nauta, 2003), and promoting collaborative and cooperative learning (Lee, Ng, & Jacobs, 1997). Students and staff also value group work, and activities such as group presentations are important in developing transferable skills (Shah, 2013). Assessing group activities recognises commitment, allows the students to value group learning and can address the educational outcomes linked to developing personal skills (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999). Assessment of these group tasks can be problematic (Gibbs, 2009); it may be sensible to suggest that a formative approach to assessment and feedback be adopted.

Boud and Falchikov (2006) criticised the role of summative assessment and its negative effects on learning; they suggested that approaches towards formative

assessment need to be developed. However, the constraints of a formal qualification at the club are unlikely to be removed so regular formative feedback could still be offered leading up to summative work. One way to undertake this could be through action learning sets. Black and Wiliam (2009) argued that this type of formative interaction forms part of the formative assessment approach. An adoption of action learning sets on the course would also aid the shift in focus from a teacher centred approach and more towards it being learner centred (Exley & Dennick, 2004). Biggs and Tang (2007) suggested that both students and teachers need to know how learning is proceeding and that formative feedback can contribute towards student learning, improved teaching and is one that relies upon a collaborative approach; in this case between the scholars, teachers and football staff. Biggs and Tang (2007) went on to state that 'students must feel absolutely free to admit error and seek to have it corrected' (p.164).

A group work approach that centres on tasks related to developing as professional footballers is what Maclellan (2004) would describe as alternative assessment with a focus on real world situations. Boud and Falchikov (2006) argued that students should be focused upon lifelong learning which involves preparing them for many complex judgements about their own work and the work of others. They recognise that in the workplace, graduates will not be taking exams, but will have to ascertain what is good or indeed bad in their own and their colleagues' performance, and plan accordingly. Alternative approaches to education such as these are integral to develop the scholar. Biggs and Tang (2007) suggested that lifelong learning is workplace learning and that it should be quite clear that students have to perform certain behaviours, the closer to real life the more valid the assessment.

Race (2001) in his adaptation of Kolb's Learning Cycle focused in part upon the need to strengthen the want and need of the student to learn. In this instance, perhaps this needs to be prioritised with a real focus on group based tasks and assessments related to the life of being a professional footballer. Ross (2000) cited in Burgess (2004) traced the development of curriculum in higher education from content driven (what is being taught) to objectives driven (learning outcomes) to process driven (a focus on how the learning takes place). Whilst Ross's research focused on higher education the point is still relevant for those in further education. Scholars need to gain applied experience in a professional football environment in an attempt to become more competent in the workplace and moving along a path from novice to expert (Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2009). All of this supports the student in developing their understanding at a deeper level and avoids the surface learning approach identified by Biggs (1999).

The role and contribution of parents has not featured significantly in the recommendations for this section. It is not an oversight, rather, this is fitting with the work of Hattie (2009) and Amato and Booth (2009). They suggested that there is strong evidence that excessive parental supervision in education can lead to disengagement and have a negative effect on educational aspirations. Further discussions would need to take place between the key stakeholders at the club (mainly the scholars and teaching staff) to discuss the level of parental input. It would seem counterproductive to advocate creating an environment where the scholar takes more responsibility for their own learning to then suggest that parents need to scrutinise their efforts more. However, it would seem sensible to involve parents within the induction process in an attempt to heighten their awareness of the club's philosophy

towards education and to explain the importance of the educational programme for helping players to understand the requirements of developing as a professional player.

### **3.5 Impact of Staff Changes in the Club**

Despite the apparent lack of motivation towards their educational programme in the first phase of the research (focus groups) there was a considerable shift in the views of the scholars towards education during the interviews. This was more evident with the final cohort of scholars but did feature across the two-year groups. The interviews took place 5 months (cohort 1) and 17 months (cohort 2) after the focus group discussions were carried out. During this time it appeared that the appointment of a new Academy Manager and Head of Education and Welfare had led to changes in the structure of the educational programme and the scholars appeared to adjust their views of education and its value. The changes that were implemented did lead to some areas of discontent, but overall there appeared to have been a positive impact on the scholars.

#### **3.5.1 Renewed Educational Focus**

The focus group phase of the research began in September 2012 and was completed in February 2013. The interviews with cohort 1 were conducted in April 2013 and the second round of interviews with cohort 2 were completed in April 2014. The interviews took place as the scholars were due to finish their course. By April 2013 the new Head of Education and Welfare had been in post for a few months with the previous incumbent having moved to a new position outside of the organisation. It was clear that the individual had an impact upon the approach of the scholars.

In general the scholars were positive about the Head of Education and Welfare during the interviews and appeared to be enjoying the course more:

'Yes, yes it's better I think, I'm enjoying it a lot more, you know he does a lot more for us.' (Greg/Interview 3/ Line 439)

'More than last year (*enjoying the course*), yes, lot more than last year, especially like all the coaches, Scott (*New Head of Education and Welfare*) and David and that, there's a lot more about education.'  
(Ethan/Interview 6/Line 419)

'It's been better yes, a lot better.' (James/Interview 4/Line 170)

It appeared that there had been a renewed focus on education and the scholars recognised that education had taken on a heightened profile within the club:

'...so a lot of focus now Scott's here, a lot of focus is on education.'  
(Steve/Interview 2/Line 124)

'... last year like the education and that was more laid back, and then since Scott's come in it's been more, picked up a bit.'  
(Eddie/Interview 5/Line 122)

The scholars suggested that the new Head of Education and Welfare had managed to ensure that they were more engaged when it came to their educational programme:

'A lot of them since Scott's come in have just switched on, flew through the work they have done.... it's so more organised and it's so much more, he's making it his business, like that's his primary concern.'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 327)

'...last season no one were brainy anyway, well there was but they had just couldn't be bothered with college...this year it's different because a lot of people want to do it, so people need to do it in there.'  
(James/Interview 4/Line 192)

Some of the scholars had begun to work harder and suggested that there was more of a focus towards their course:

'But since he's come in he's made it a lot more schoolish, the way it should be. Scott has made us get our heads down.'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 311)

'Yes, we are all more focused on it aren't we.'  
(James/Interview 4/Line 205)

These prevailing attitudes appeared to contradict work carried out by others who have suggested that little significance is afforded to education within elite football settings

(Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005) and was something that I was not expecting when I visited the club for the interviews. The following extract from my research diary explains how I felt the evening following the final round of interviews.

FIGURE 3.16: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2014. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

I was amazed at how much the focus on education had shifted. The players seemed really positive and although, like the year before, they were awaiting a decision about their futures it seemed as though they had had a good year on their BTEC. There had been a significant shift in their attitudes towards education and it seemed to be largely due to the changeover in staff and what seemed to be more of a joined up approach between the education staff and football staff.

James even suggested that attainment levels across the cohort were improving:

‘Think its merits, well we are all in it for merits since Scott’s come in...Oh because of that, it was alright, just wanted to do that and then get off (*complete work and leave*), but this year we stayed to get the merits, do you know what I mean?’ (James/Interview 4/Line 137 & 142)

Brand, Felner, Setsinger, Burns, and Bolton (2008) claimed that the educational climate within school settings includes dimensions such as teacher support or achievement emphasis. These factors in isolation or combined can potentially influence the learning and development of students. It would appear in this setting that the support from the Head of Education and Welfare and his renewed emphasis on achievement within education was partly responsible for shifting the attitudes of the scholars towards their educational programme; this had led to them to attach greater value to it.

Evidence from the interviews suggested that this renewed focus could be part way explained by the new Head of Education and Welfare insisting on longer days in college. From the interviews that took place Steve explained how he felt that the

course was more organised and structured since the new Head of Education and Welfare took up his post:

‘It’s more organised, it’s harder like longer days and that, in earlier and get off later, but you know what you are doing every day, like now when you are doing things as well.’ (Interview 2/Line 318)

Eddie explained how he had initial reservations:

‘Not going to work out this and then just get used to it don’t you, because there is nothing really you can change about it.’ (Interview 5/Line 273)

This led to them feeling as though this benefited them in their work:

‘It’s better to get your work done isn’t it, but if obviously like last season we just used to fly out quick and get off, we finished at like 11.30 in the morning and then we could get off. It’s fine now I finish at 5.’ (James/Interview 4/Line 148)

This was possibly quite significant in that it appeared that although the scholars had been asked to spend more time doing their educational course it had not led to them being frustrated. In fact, quite the opposite was true and they appeared to be more engaged with their educational programme. When this is considered in relation to the relevance and value that they appeared to afford their course (section 3.2 Perceptions of the Curriculum) it seems surprising. What became evident in the interviews was that some of the scholars had previously perceived their course to be disorganised and not valued, which in turn affected their attitude towards the course. Greg explained this:

‘I just wasn’t arsed, wasn’t bothered, there was no organisation whatsoever, like you never knew nothing, never had a clue about any work, come in every Wednesday sit down in there, get told off without a briefing of what’s going on so.’ (Interview 3/Line 449)

James agreed that the course appeared to be more organised and outlined his preference for the longer days:

‘In a way staying longer it’s worse isn’t it because you are staying longer, but it’s been, .....that’s obviously better. Everything is more organised, like last

year we didn't know what we were doing did we, and this year it is all set, all in like a time table things like that so it's all more organised, that's what's better isn't it.' (Interview 4/Line 178)

This was an area that I acknowledged in my research diary (see Figure 3.17) and that was unexpected at the time.

FIGURE 3.17: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2014. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

This cohort were clearly more engaged and some of them even preferred to do longer days and not one mentioned with regret that they were no longer allowed to finish early when they completed their work.

Kunter, Baumert, and Köller (2007) found that pre-structured and well-organised learning environments may support and stimulate student interest in their topic area. However, they do recognise that learning environments characterised by a high degree of classroom management sometimes lead to negative effects such as decreased motivation, and if the teacher exerts too much control then there is a lack of autonomy for students. Two of the scholars did suggest that the longer days could be a challenge and that they led to fatigue some of the time:

'It has like with the work and that we've been able to get it done, some days you feel like you just want to go home, because you just do it too long...It's probably just the longer like hours that we are doing because sometimes we just get distracted and it's just, tired and that and can't really do your work.' (Eddie/Interview 5/Line 131 & 369)

'It's hard to balance everything because it's all crammed in like, but, yes it is harder than I thought it would be.' (Steve/Interview 2/Line 128)

The findings of this research support the initial claim by Kunter *et al.* (2007) and point to the more rigid structure as being mostly positive. Steve believed that this renewed approach was leading to a greater focus on learning within the educational setting at

the club and that there seemed to be more of a connection between this and his development as a footballer:

‘Scott’s come in and like added a lot more hours to it and made it seem a lot more important to everyone so, definitely it’s got more like, everyone realises education is more important, like the football as well learning as a whole, like trying to develop you.’ (Interview 2/Line 292)

Whilst the renewed focus may partly be attributed to the influence of the new Head of Education and Welfare it would seem sensible to recognise other significant changes at the club. This included the appointment of a new Academy Manager who had direct line management responsibilities for the Head of Education and Welfare and the football coaching staff. He came into post at the club during the period between the focus groups and the first interviews. The scholars suggested that this individual had an influence on raising the profile of education. Steve stated that the Academy Manager was working closely with the Head of Education and Welfare to ensure that education was valued and seen as more important across the club:

‘Before them two like when it was just Pete. I didn’t think there was much pressure or structure within the education bit to be honest, all footy, but Scott’s come in and like added a lot more hours to it and made it seem a lot more important to everyone so... definitely it’s got more like, everyone realises education is more important.’ (Interview 2/Line 291)

James viewed the new Academy Manager as having more interest in them as players:

‘John has had more of an impact on us do you know what I mean, about watching games, and he took a few training sessions as well, he’s with us a bit more, he’s an influence like as well, yes he’s encouraged us in everything.’ (Interview 4/Line 272)

The influence that the new Academy Manager had over the players certainly extended to encouraging them to focus on education and the course:

‘Yes he makes us get here on time after training and everything like that, yes he has to be doesn’t he.’ (James/Interview 4/Line 287)

‘He makes sure you get it all done to a good standard, like they don’t really want you to fail so.’ (Eddie/Interview 5/Line 401)

Steve (interview 2/Line 289) mentioned his presence at the college facility at the club: '... he works close with us now on the pitch and off, to be honest with you, he comes here quite a bit (*college*).' He also suggested that the view of the U18s coach had been influenced by the New Academy Manager:

'I reckon since this season he's (U18's coach) realised more as well (*education is important*), think he's now realised it's more important so he's pushing it now, because at first I thought him and last year were just like get it done, do it sort of thing, same as what my dad is like, but now I think he knows John and that he's more like yes.' (Interview 2/Line 662)

He went on to provide a really interesting insight into his perception that the Head of Education and Welfare was working closer with the football coaching staff by highlighting the importance of learning and development:

'...the coaches are always on about learning and developing and everything sort of thing, but Scott just seems to reinforce it sort of thing.'  
(Interview 2/Line 300)

He also stated that:

'...but it has got a loads better this season, like there's loads, lot more structure, like football wise, they are all about helping us learn, develop and that, same in college and that so, don't know I think it's good.'  
(Interview 2/Line 545)

There was evidence here of a range of stakeholders affecting change within an organisation and working collaboratively. This was acknowledged in the research diary following the final round of interviews.

FIGURE 3.18: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2014. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

It's clear to me that their renewed focus is largely a consequence of what appears to be a good relationship between John, Scott and the apparent support that he has received from the football coaches. The lads seemed to have responded to this and it no longer feels like us and them (football staff / education staff).

Chrislip and Larson (1994) discussed collaborative leadership as a way in which peers that usually have no formal power or authority work together. Whilst the Academy Manager clearly exerts some control over the Head of Education and Welfare and the football coaching staff as their line manager, these accounts do point to a renewed collaboration between these three important roles within the club. It could be argued that they are the three most important at the club when it comes to shaping the scholars' attitudes towards education. This partnership appeared to be affecting the structure and cultural processes within the club and this in turn was leading to a renewed focus on learning with the educational programme becoming more prominent (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008).

Some of the football coaching staff and the new Academy Manager had played professionally within elite level football. Steve's thoughts perhaps explain the influence that these ex professional players have on the views of the scholars. To these young people an ex professional clearly commands respect:

'Yes, but I just think he's achieved like what I'm looking to, he's been there (*Carl – Academy coach*), done it, he knows like, he's played highest level football, FA cup finals, him and John as well. He knows exactly what it takes because he's done it, Carl and John they probably do it as well because they've seen it happen how many times.' (*encourage education due to experiences of seeing lots released*) (Interview 2/Line 609)

During this period of time the staff at the club had brought in other changes. Some of these other changes received mixed feedback from the scholars and will be considered in the next section.

### **3.5.2 Learning Environment**

The new Head of Education and Welfare at the club implemented several other changes during the initial stages of his tenure. One of the most significant being that he developed a partnership with a local college so that the scholars would be educated

one day a week at the club's own college facility and the other day would be held at the local college. This was introduced in August 2013 with the second cohort being the first group from the club to go to the external college. Prior to this the second year cohort had received one and a half days at the club's own educational facility. When they first started they were at the club's old site and they moved to their new in-house facility midway through their first year. In the focus groups the players offered their thoughts about the club's in-house educational facility. An initial view from Owen was given:

'Since we moved into this building it's been much better, much better, that other one was horrible. You never seen it did you it was terrible? It really was a shit-hole but this one's much better, proper classrooms, decent little canteen, it's not too bad. I think if it was at the training ground it would be ideal as it's not far away is it?' (Interview 1/Line 404)

However, several of the scholars were quite disparaging about the new facility. Some of these scholars had not experienced the previous site. Eddie explained that he would not have chosen it if it had not been aligned to the football club:

'It's a bad college (*club's in-house facility*), if there wasn't football I wouldn't have chosen this as an option...It's just dead small as well like a primary school or something.' (FG6/Line 169)

Matt recognised the improvement on the old facility but still had misgivings:

'I reckon facilities as well (*need to be improved*), I know the last place was a proper tip but I think if it was in a proper college like where other people are or something.' (FG7/Line 64)

Whilst Kunter *et al.* (2007) focused predominantly on the impact of social characteristics as factors that influence the learning and development of students, others have considered the impact of the physical environment (McGuffey, 1982; O'Neill & Oates, 2001; Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). Factors such as building age, lighting, acoustics, school design and air temperature are considered as being influential in shaping attitudes within educational settings. Whilst these appear to be

influencing the attitudes of the scholars, the social factors seemed to play a greater role. This led to Steve during the focus groups appealing to the club to shift their course to a local college:

‘There is nothing going on. It’s just us here. There are a few other classes and that but I’d rather be in a busy college. Like some stuff going on and that, yeh, it would be funny that in a big college.’ (FG6/Line 174)

Euan echoed Steve’s thoughts:

‘Everton send them to the sixth form. It would be better to socialise with other people, yeh, if it was a proper college as this doesn’t feel like college. It feels like a fucking unit. It does, it feels like I’m in a unit again.’ (FG5/Line 191)

Despite this view, Tony who had joined the club from another premier league club explained how he had experience of being educated at a local college and suggested that it was difficult to concentrate because of distractions:

‘We used to do ours in a college and we used to mess about and stare at birds and that. Whereas this is just you and like there is no distractions. When we was there we used to sit in the canteen and we knew some birds and we spoke to them and just ended up throwing sweets at each other.’ (FG7/Line 66)

The contrasting views were evident, and the opinions of the scholars in the final round of interviews, regarding the new approach (in-house and local college), were mixed. James explained what he thought had motivated the club to alter the delivery of the course and to move to a hybrid model:

‘To get us out of here, because last season we was all moaning like we need to get out of here, same wall isn’t it?? A full day, I never... I wasn’t too fussed isn’t it, I’d rather stay here.’ (Interview 4/Line 231)

The views of the scholars were unanimous when it came to their opinions about undertaking some of their BTEC at the local college. There was a strong view from the scholars that they preferred to just stay at the club’s in-house facility. This was surprising when there was such a strong opinion in the focus groups that they wanted

to experience an external college. The following quotes offer an overview of some of the negative feedback and preference for their own in-house facility:

'I'm not, I'm not a fan of that going up there no, I would rather stay here and that and get it all done here. It's like driving there, doing your work, then we sit in a building where there's no computers, then we have to travel across the building to do work then obviously save it on their computers, then you have to email it across, just rather do it here and get it over with.' (James/Interview 4/Line 220)

'Probably here (*prefer to stay at the club facility*) because ... if when there is like a lot more people around the college, say if like on your breaks and that, I don't know like, people walking past and that, just getting distracted, but here it's just our own little place isn't it.' (Eddie/Interview 5/Line 339)

'...get more work done here you know because it's quieter and that.' (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 305)

In addition to viewing their own in-house club facility as an environment to be able to focus more on their work, the external college led to the scholars feeling segregated and in some instances embarrassed by their football identity. The subsequent findings support previous work undertaken by Comeaux and Harrison (2011) who found that student athletes in the USA faced academic and social isolation in part due to burden of the sport programme that they were following. Ethan who had become severely injured during his time at the club (discussed further in section 3.6 Uncertainty about the Future) had decided to study additional qualifications (A-Levels) due to the time that he had available. He explained that:

'We just stay as a separate group, I know a lot of people from that college because it's where all my mates from school and that went, so I know most of them, but like on a Wednesday stay with these (*other scholars*), but I go down like every other day of the week to do maths with the other students from there.' (Interview 6/Line 326)

Whilst there was some evidence here of Ethan integrating with others at college Steve explained how this was not the case for everyone:

'We don't talk to any of the students, like we don't, like our classrooms are separated from theirs. Sometimes we go in the OLC the library sort of thing,

maybe there are some students milling about there but we just all go sit together like, we don't really talk to them like.' (Interview 2/Line 428)

Eddie appeared to feel as though other college students were staring at them when they attended:

'It's been alright, it's been like a bit, I didn't like it at first because we was always went in our trackies...Not said anything really, they're just like, they are just staring at you like, what they doing here like.'  
(Interview 5/Line 223 & 238)

It was clear from the discussions with several of the scholars during the interviews that some of them felt embarrassed by having to wear their club tracksuits at the external college. This appeared to especially apply to those players from the local area especially. When they spoke about having to wear their tracksuits Ethan added:

'...they (*other college students*) look at us funny. They just laugh at us. I hate wearing it this year.' (Interview 6/Line 313)

Steve who was not from the local area explained how it was the local players that struggled more with wearing their tracksuits:

'They don't like it because they see it like.... some of them were saying they hate going to college because like they know people there, people know them they feel like. They're going round in trackies like.'  
(Interview 2/Line 385)

This was in stark contrast to the work of Adler and Adler (1989) who discussed the 'gloried self' and the inflated sense-of-self experienced by college athletes. Their identity as the scholars appeared to be anything but flattering and it was one that the local players seemed to want to cast aside in the external college setting. The evidence here suggests that more thought could have been directed towards their transition to the external college. It might have been prudent to establish if they could have been integrated better within the college setting and with other non-football students.

However, this was seemed only an issue for the local players and when discussing the clothing issue Steve did not have the same negative feelings and felt it helped the players to stand out within the college:

‘It is, it is like, it separates you doesn’t it, makes you like stand out a bit I suppose because they know all the people there, like they, I don’t know they feel a bit like, don’t know. Because they are made to, like me and James don’t know anyone so it’s alright for us, like they just see us as FC Club, who like people who play for FC Club, know what I mean?’  
(Interview 2/Line 402)

He felt as though this led to some jealousy from other students, but with it came attention from girls at the college:

‘... people look at you and that... Some lads snarl like rugby lads and what have you, then they probably but... girls, get better attention off girls like, don’t really talk to them know what I mean?... Like you do get the attention sort of thing.’ (Interview 2/Line 414)

This is more in fitting with the notion of the ‘gloried-self’ and for some scholars the football identity reinforced their aspiring professional football identity. Despite this, both year groups acknowledged that they were a long way off being professional footballers and uncertainty about their futures was apparent.

As alluded to in section 3.3 Football the Dominant Culture, there is potential for high staff turnover within professional football. It was evident in this particular club that the appointment of the new staff members was responsible for driving and implementing a number of positive changes at the club; this included a renewed focus on education by the scholars and staff. Given that staff can have such an influence it would be sensible that clubs such as this safeguard against the loss of key staff, particularly those that are in influential roles and those that are creating a positive learning environment.

It would seem prudent that the Chief Executive and owner at the club considers how they can ensure that there is leadership continuity within the Academy in case

either the Academy Manager or Head of Education and Welfare move on to new roles away from the club. Helton and Jackson (2007) explained that succession planning ensures that there is business continuity in the case of retirements, resignations, promotions or reassignments. There is a plethora of literature that relates to succession planning and models are aplenty to aid organisations in their attempts (Durst & Wilhelm, 2012; Greer & Virick, 2008; Rothwell, 2010; Schall, 1997). According to Rothwell (2010), succession planning differs to replacement planning as it relies upon developing talent within the organisation to take over the role of existing staff if they cease to be able to fulfil the requirements of the position. The club might consider how they could up-skill existing football staff to potentially assume the role of the Academy Manager and look to the teaching team from the educational programme as future replacements for the Head of Education and Welfare; all of which contributes further to developing a culture of professional development and education. However, this is perhaps too simplistic, especially when the talent pool within the club is relatively small. There are a limited number of coaches in the Academy and only two other members of staff that deliver on the BTEC in Sport. A clear policy on succession may raise expectations and result in demotivated staff if opportunities for progression do not arise. Another point to note would be the willingness of the staff currently in tenure to engage in the process. According to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), leaders that want to see proper transfer of stewardship when they leave should be involved in succession planning upon commencing their employment with the organisation. Again, difficulty arises here as there are few employees that know exactly the length of time that they will undertake an employment opportunity. This aside, a clear programme of continuous professional

development perhaps linked to an annual appraisal for football staff and education staff may serve as a useful starting point.

The incumbent Academy Manager and Head of Education and Welfare at the club have a responsibility to continue with their policy of working closely together to ensure the best possible profile for education at the club in the mind of their scholars and other staff (football coaches). Clearly, previous research points to education being seen as insignificant in this setting (Brown & Potrac, 2009; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005). However, the club appeared to be bucking the trend in the latter stage of this research with an approach that is seeing education being valued by the scholars and football staff alike. This supports other work by McGillivray (2006) who found that carefully designed interventions aided the development of a lifelong learning culture in education within elite football in Scotland. At the club featuring in this research the Academy Manager and Head of Education and Welfare have ensured that the football coaching staff are also on message and the findings point to them reinforcing the notion that education is important. The views of the football coaching staff seem to resonate with the scholars as the majority of them are ex-professional players and the scholars hold them in high esteem. It might be sensible if the club and the Premier League consider further how they can best engage the football coaches within the academies to ensure that they can all see the relevance of education for the young players and are able to articulate that clearly. The intention would be to reduce the effect on the players of being in an environment that discourages the continuation of formal learning (McGillivray *et al.*, 2005).

The significant changes made at the club revolved around creating a clearly defined educational programme and structure that were understood by the staff and scholars. It was noted by Kunter *et al.* (2007) in the results section that well organised

learning environments support student interest in a subject area. This work progresses previous claims that students can learn in highly structured courses and will be willing to accept higher work demands and routines if there is opportunity to socialise too (Allen, 1986). Previous literature that has been utilised in this study (Oswald & Clark, 2003; Paul & Brier, 2001) has pointed to the importance of friendships and how positive relationships can support student engagement. When considered in relation to the structure of the course it must be pointed out that too rigid a structure could become detrimental. The collaborative approach referred to in the previous section should be fashioned and become an integral part of the learning environment at the club.

In light of the findings in this research the appropriateness of engaging with an external college could be reviewed, especially as the club even uses its own staff to teach the scholars on the college campus. This research found that the scholars felt segregated at the local college, as local players they were embarrassed by their football identity and some scholars suggested that they were able to get more work completed at their own in-house facility. It is unlikely that the scholars are ever going to be fully integrated into college life. Their BTEC is crammed into two days and this has the feel of a part-time mode of study; other students engage in college life throughout the whole week on a daily basis and come together more regularly. So, whilst the scholars are not officially part-time students, they engage in a similar number of hours to many part-time students within post-compulsory education. This leads to issues similar to those identified by Butcher (2015) in a review of part-time students in higher education. Suggestions made included the view that most part-time students felt isolated and disengaged from institutional structures and as a consequence struggled to identify themselves as students. If the club wished to

continue its relationship with the college then they may need to consider how to integrate the players further to alleviate the issues outlined earlier.

### **3.6 Uncertainty About the Future**

The scholars involved in this research had all agreed to pursue their ambitions of being a professional footballer alongside studying for a BTEC in Sport. For the majority, realising their ambition to play professionally was unlikely based upon the evidence that has already been alluded to in this research. During the interview phases of this research the scholars were awaiting a decision about their future. It was evident from this that this created an ambiguous environment and they were tentatively considering other options. These two factors combined appeared to create a lot of uncertainty about the future and this will be considered further in this section.

#### **3.6.1 Ambiguous Environment**

It was evident that the scholars were considering the repercussions of not being offered a full time contract at the club once they had completed their scholarship. A full time contract meant the opportunity to play and to receive the remuneration benefits that were associated with competing in the upper echelons of professional football in England. The following section offers an invaluable insight into the challenges that the young men faced. After reflecting on the first round of interviews in April 2013 I was struck by how difficult an environment these young people occupied. The following diary extract summarises some of my thoughts.

FIGURE 3.19: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2013. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

#### **Observational Note:**

I couldn't help but think that the lads could potentially be at the top of the game in football, they have a chance to play in the Premier League if they are successful - it also made me think about what is at stake here and how young they seem.

All six of the players that were interviewed discussed the uncertainty that they were facing. What initially became apparent was that none of them displayed absolute confidence in being offered a full time professional contract at the club:

‘And I think a few other people well maybe you might have said they’d have got one maybe aren’t sure now so I think maybe I think I’ve got a good chance, it’s 50/50 still.’ (Owen/Interview 1/Line 30)

‘Don’t really know, it’s just I’m not sure.’ (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 130)

‘I don’t know because they could just say no couldn’t they, you know what I mean so, I’ll know more on that, 50/50...‘Hopefully I’ll get on.’ (James/Interview 4/Line 106 & 110)

‘It’s hard to tell you know.’ (Steve/Interview 2/Line 198)

James (Interview 4/Line 525) recognised that few are successful at this stage by stating ‘They don’t take many do they?’ Owen (interview 1/Line 40) alluded to how he had seen many players being released over the years and the ambiguous nature of sport: ‘I’ve seen so many people go.’ Whilst there was no specific mention of the percentage of players in academies in England progressing to become full time professional footballers (Anderson & Miller, 2011; Brown & Potrac, 2009; Green, 2009), clearly there was an appreciation by the scholars that few players were successful in fulfilling their ambitions.

It seemed as though the scholars were uncertain about the process that the club followed for informing them about a decision and they did not know exactly when they would find out. Owen (Interview 1/Line 42) demonstrated this: ‘I imagine they just get you in an office and just tell you and that’s the end of it really.’ The uncertainty was clearly leading to some of the scholars feeling nervous and apprehensive with Owen (Interview 1/Line 36) suggesting that ‘...it’s a tough time, one of the toughest times.’ Another made the same point but began to reflect in a positive way about his time at the club:

'Well it's just getting a bit nerve racking now, with it coming to a decision and you don't really know what they are thinking but yes it's been a good year.'  
(Eddie/Interview 5/Line 28)

Additionally, Owen (Interview 1/Line 41) explained how he had considered what it would be like waiting for a decision for some time: 'I've always imagined what it would be like.' Greg highlighted how the uncertainty had led to some tension within his family:

'My mum and dad, my dad is more like he's frustrated I've waited so long that's all, because if I got told now, wouldn't get a contract now till the end of the season (*at another club*).'  
(Interview 3/Line 112)

Harwood, Drew, and Knight (2010) noted that academy processes and the quality of communication was a significant stressor for parents across all phases of elite football development. They highlighted the need for clubs to adopt clear communication practices to aid parent support and well-being.

It seemed evident that the players were hoping for a decision as soon as possible so that they could make other plans if they were released:

'Yes I am getting a bit nervous like, I just want to know so I can either just look forward to next season or just sort something.'  
(Eddie/Interview 5/Line 69)

'In life really (*need to get organised*) because, even I haven't applied to no universities.'  
(Owen/Interview 1/Line 57)

In this setting the players are seeking to gain some sort of control. However, the uncertainty about their future and the ambiguous de-selection process adopted by the club appeared to be acting as a barrier that restricted the young men from exploring other options. In practice this may not have actually been the case, it could be argued that they had been able to apply for a university place or alternative employment as a contingency if they had wished to. However, they did not and they had not been encouraged to. Perhaps the allure of professional football means that young people

aged 16-18 act just like their senior counterparts who are facing retirement. They simply avoid making other meaningful plans, demonstrate a lack of control over their lives and do not plan for life after football (Brownrigg *et al.*, 2012).

Owen (Interview 1/Line 264) held mixed views about the possibility of being released, he said 'to be honest with you Clint getting released is frightening'. Earlier in the interview (Interview 1/Line 74) he had been more pragmatic and recognised the aspirational nature of trying to obtain a professional contract: 'It is because you have got to chase your dreams, but you've got to be realistic.' He reflected upon his time at the club and seemed to be grappling with the realisation that it might be coming to an end:

'And then I get released after 2 years and I'm in my early twenties then I'm just further down the line in exactly the same position. It's a tough one....but that's the problem with a scholarship really as a footballer you're not like getting anything really in the background.'

(Interview 1/Line 71 & 164)

As with the work of Purdy *et al.* (1982), in relation to the USA collegiate sports system, it appeared in this instance that some of the scholars were unprepared for life professionally and emotionally outside of the club. There was an apparent emotional desperation in these accounts, which is not surprising given that some of the scholars had been involved in professional football from a very young age.

A really interesting point was raised by Owen who outlined his fear that higher positioned clubs would be releasing players and that could have an impact on his position at his club:

'So the problem is and I mean and the clubs as well, if all the other premier league clubs (*are releasing scholars*) so there is only us and another club I don't know who it is, I haven't found out, then there are going to be quality kids from other clubs going taking potential places from you, do you know what I mean?'

(Interview 1/Line 64)

There was a clear concern here from this particular scholar as he had been told that a higher ranked team with significantly more resources was about to start releasing their scholars. His understanding was that all the other clubs had already informed their players and those released from the higher ranked club posed a threat. Other players had already experienced this at a younger age, illustrating the demanding and competitive nature of elite football settings. James reflected upon his experience of being released from another club when he was 15, and although not certain, he thought that the reason for his release was due to another player that played in the same position arriving at his old club:

‘No I said they didn’t give me a reason, that was all I was saying to them, I didn’t actually know, it was only the start of the season when I found out they had a new right back in, and I thought well, obviously that was the reason wasn’t it.’ (Interview 4/Line 409)

He could not be certain why he had been released as no reason was offered by the club, thus highlighting the ruthless nature of elite football for adolescent players. Steve described how he and a friend were both released from a higher ranked club with more resources:

To be honest I wasn’t too bad because I came with Euan, and he was from Juniors FC (*club name anonymised*) as well, so I came with him, so I knew him and it was easier for me to settle in knowing a few people, but I’m really good mates with these like.’ (Interview 2/Line 75)

This is in some way consistent with the findings of Anderson and Miller (2011) who highlighted that most of the first team players at the elite clubs in England no longer play for the clubs that trained them as teenagers. It demonstrates the transitory nature of elite football and perhaps illustrates how many that reach the upper

echelons of professional football displace those that had occupied their position at a lower ranked club.

James explained the challenges that he faced upon his release with regards to his friends and family:

‘Yes I was proper gutted inside, not going to cry or anything like that it’s not me but, I was gutted yes - very gutted...Telling like all your mates, they are asking and that and, oh no...I was thinking what can I say, when they was asking why and that, I don’t know...They (*parents*) were gutted for me proper yes, you could tell.’ (Interview 4/Line 440 & 467)

James was potentially facing this situation again with the imminent decision about his full time contract looming. The ambiguity that the players felt at the club was also as a consequence of other factors such as potential injury threats and in a few instances feeling marginalised. Reinforcing the findings of Schnell *et al.* (2014) three scholars during the interviews mentioned their injury problems with one explaining how a very serious illness had stopped him playing:

‘When I did my leg, it made me ill and I got diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. It’s like a, you know like a it’s one of those IBD - irritable bowel diseases or something, but like, that nearly killed me and that, I was in hospital, in intensive care. Good now, miles better now, just waiting for another operation now to reverse it... it made my lung collapse and that, because when it gets bad it starts messing with your vital organs and that, they said that was the next stage or my vital organs were shutting down.’ (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 40)

Interestingly, the break from football enabled Ethan to undertake more qualifications on top of the work that he was already doing for his BTEC. He had gained 12 GCSEs at school:

‘The other week I was supposed to be integrating into training, but then I got an incomplete stress fracture in my leg, that was just from overworking it, so that’s just put me back a few weeks, so I don’t think I will play this season, but I’m quite close to playing again...I’ve done more since that, because I didn’t think I’d be back playing, I thought it would stop me playing completely so I started like the extended B Tec, took Maths at AS level at the moment, if I stay next year then I’ll do the full A level.’ (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 113 & 294)

The other scholars that mentioned injuries had only missed playing football for a small period of time, but the challenges that they faced for selection were a significant factor causing them concern. Ethan suggested that the club had supported him and that they had given extensions to other players in the past:

‘They’ve not said like, they’ve said you might be able to get like, they might extend your contract, just to give you more time...probably 3 or 4 month ago coach said to me like take as long as you want to like get back, but not no-one said like for definitely what’s going to happen...there was someone called Adam at the club, he was injured through most of his scholarship and he got his contract extended and that.’ (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 140 & 147)

Clearly this instance illustrates the fragile nature of the scholars’ place within an elite sport environment and serves as a reminder to those involved about the need to consider other options longer-term, albeit a difficult sell for other people around the player when the ‘dream’ is being chased. Several authors have explained the need for athletes to develop transferable skills during their sport career to aid their transition from elite sport to retirement (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Stephan, 2003). Perhaps there should be greater calls to ensure that these transferable skills are being developed in case of career threatening injuries such as those faced by this player. McGillivray (2006) explained how in Scotland some career development support to individual players had been largely reactive and ad hoc in response to career threatening injuries. Clearly there is a need for those involved in developing and supporting young players to be more proactive in enabling young players to better understand a range of alternatives away from professional football.

Although the opportunity to try-out at an elite professional football club would appear at first glance to be illustrious, it would seem that some of the scholars were frustrated about what they thought were incidents of mistreatment. Two of the scholars voiced their frustration at having to do extra jobs around the club:

'So, say like you get put in groups like, I'm on first team duties, Marty's on youth team,... like as soon as we finish training they just get all the balls in and that's them done but we will be sitting around waiting to get the balls from the first team, about an hour and a half.' (Steve/FG6/Line 103)

'And we have to wait for Carl and that to tell us when we can go and when we can have a shower. It would be easier if they said once your jobs are done you can go and get a shower.' (Eddie/FG6/Line 106)

Another issue for the scholars was they were frustrated at having to spend time waiting to get something completed:

'Sometimes like when they say we are having dinner for an hour then we might ask can we just have half an hour. So we can get everything done quicker as you are only eating your dinner for about 15 minutes. At college we wait around a lot during the day, only sometimes though.' (Eddie/FG6/Line100)

'That's like in training, we will wait around a lot. We wait around a bit to be told what to do...When we finish training we have to go back in until the first team goes out, then we have our dinner and get the equipment in and sort out all the drinks and things and the gym and stuff.' (Cam/FG6/Line 96)

The frustration did not stop there with three of the scholars outlining what they thought was bad practice and mistreatment:

'You should see how bad it is, it's stupid. If the Premier League came in and seen how we get treated, the club would get fucking annihilated. I don't mind cleaning boots and that, but they have cleaners, clean the whole fucking building, fucking Hoover up lad. It winds me up.'  
(Euan/FG5/Line 63)

'They treat us like we are not even there.' (George/FG5/Line 67)

'Anything goes wrong it's our fault.' (Cian/FG5/Line 70)

When asked if they had voiced their concerns to their managers Owen's response was:

'well we do, but it doesn't really get listened to, it doesn't get, whatever we say it won't make a difference.' (FG8/Line 8)

Work undertaken by Parker (2006) outlined the importance of organisational conformity to become successful in this setting. When analysing professional football apprentices in the 1990s Parker suggested that it was crucial within these settings that trainees showed an enthusiasm for their profession, accepted institutional

subservience and conformed to workplace standards. Interestingly, the scholars that objected to having to undertake the additional tasks at the club were the same scholars that were discussed in relation to their suspensions and expulsions from school in the previous sections. Parker (2006) outlined that 'providing that individuals readily adhered to these stipulated norms and values... they then stood a chance of successfully completing the transitional phase from apprentice to artisan' (p.692). There was no evidence to predict if their lack of enthusiasm for the additional tasks at the club would restrict their progression or not. Contrastingly, it was evident that Steve seemed to value his role in performing the additional tasks with one explaining:

'...we're responsible for loads like at the training ground, like making sure all the fridge, might sound like little things, it's important, like the fridges are full, the play corridors are all cleaned, we clean the 1st team booths, we get their equipment in, we take it out in a morning. If we weren't there like a lot of things wouldn't get done you know what I mean got quite a responsibility like.'  
(Interview 2/Line 134)

This optimism and this experience may have served some of them well if they became one of the many 18-year-old players to be released from the 90 professional clubs in the country in that particular season.

### **3.6.2 Alternative Options**

When the scholars were asked in the interviews about other options away from football it was clear that several of the scholars were considering progressing within education if they were released. Some discussed still playing at a lower level and several discussed careers in sport, hinting at a slight contradiction about the lack value of relevance of the course. Perhaps this was further evidence of the scholars valuing education more, a shift towards that had occurred under the new regime. Two of the scholars also mentioned other alternative careers.

Steve and Ethan explained how they would seek to carry on with their education if they were released:

'If things didn't work out at all football wise I'd probably look to go to Uni, something to like stay in sports and do a sport like...immediately like I'd probably prefer a job but, looking long term I would rather like go to Uni, get like a proper qualification like go into something properly, a career sort of thing.' (Steve/Interview 2/Line 236 & 252)

Yes probably just start uni early next year if I feel like I'm not, if I don't get offered a contract or I just don't feel healthy enough and that.' (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 167)

Steve was confident that he could meet the demands of degree level study:

'I'd be able to (*do a degree*), I'd be quite happy going to do a degree and that you know what I mean, getting myself a proper job like, and wouldn't like think oh my god I'm finished do you know what I mean?' (Interview 2/Line 455)

Owen (Interview 1/Line 57) explained that 'I haven't applied to no universities' and appeared frustrated with having to wait for a decision. Despite the contextual differences between these scholars and student athletes in the USA this finding is consistent with the findings of Kimball and Freysinger (2003) who found that sport was getting in the way of the academic aspirations of student-athletes in the USA. Other career options were considered by the scholars and this was discussed during the interviews:

'...I'd try and, I want to be a personal trainer and gym and things like that, wouldn't mind doing that.' (James/Interview 4/Line 118)

'I want to stay in sport really, just to benefit in sport.' (Ethan/Interview 6/Line 288)

Another scholar that had hoped to go to university if he was unsuccessful in achieving a full time contract hoped it would enable him to progress into PE teaching. Additionally, one scholar viewed his future elsewhere if he was released, an ambition that appeared to have been influenced by his father:

'I wouldn't mind like working on a not a building site, becoming something good like, a foreman or on the rigs like that something like that, hands on couldn't do all like the office stuff... my dad's in construction as well so like I would listen to what he says stories like when he lived like I done this, and like wow...Not bad money either to be honest.'  
(Greg/Interview 3/Line 479)

Clearly this particular individual could visualise his future away from sport and it could be argued that if he had been presented with other vocational qualifications then he would be better placed if he were to be released by the club. McGillivray (2006) alluded to this in his research and highlighted work undertaken in Scotland where elite football clubs produce individualised programmes of study for each scholar. He went on to recognise the challenge that this posed for governing agencies and what he did not disclose was how much variation and bespoke support was actually available to each individual.

Out of the six players interviewed five of the scholars discussed playing elsewhere or at a lower level as their priority if they were released. The player that did not mention it was the injured player who was hopeful he would be given an extension to prove himself when he was fit. The five all suggested that they would all consider playing for lower league clubs with one even suggesting that he would drop down if he was only offered a short term contract at the Premier League club:

'Well the first thing I'd try is obviously another club.' (Eddie/Interview 5/Line 98)

'I'd go down a couple of divisions and get a 2 year contract at a club and alright money to see me through the 2 years.' (Owen/Interview 1/Line 68)

'Obviously I'll try somewhere else... I wouldn't mind going to a lower league like the Evostik (*semi-professional*).'  
(James/Interview 4/Line 117)

'Yes, if I get like offered the 6 month one like they have done in the future, have been before like offered 6 month ones so I'll say no. It's not worth it is it?'  
(Greg/Interview 3/Line 71)

'If it didn't work with this club, like now for this year, I would be, I would be confident I could like go and play somewhere else...and I've got like a football agent sort of thing as well, and he's really good with me, he tries to help me out all the time so he'll probably help me out.'

(Steve/Interview 2/Line 451)

The only other option discussed by the players was the opportunity to play in the USA on a scholarship at a College; this would have been regarded as dropping down to a lower level to play. Owen (Interview 1/Line 343-44) stated that 'I've been talking to a guy from America about going over there.'

So it seemed that the priority if they were released from this particular club was to search for other footballing opportunities. University and other career options were perceived as a back-up and to be explored if football at some level did not work out. When considered alongside the work carried out by others (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Grossmann *et al.*, 2015) it would seem that the more sensible option would be to prioritise these alternative routes as the likelihood would be that the majority of players would not make it as elite level players. Regardless of the alternative options that the players were hoping to pursue if they were released, it would have made it much easier for the scholars if the club had been clearer about how and when they were to inform them about their progression. Figure 3.20 offers an insight into the frustration that I felt after listening to the scholars during the first phase of the interviews in April 2013. The same issues surfaced during the interviews in April 2014 with the second cohort. It reminded me of the emotional difficulties that I faced when I was their age and I unsuccessfully attempted to join the Royal Air Force. There are obvious policy and practical implications for those responsible for supporting these young people with regards to their transition if they are unsuccessful in their ambitions to become elite football players in England. Work is being undertaken in the clubs but

this research suggests that more is needed by way of preparing players better for what follows their scholarship years.

FIGURE 3.20: RESEARCH DIARY ENTRY, APRIL 2013. (SOURCE: AUTHOR)

**Observational Note:**

I was really struck today by how vulnerable the lads are. They are unsure about what comes next and it must be really difficult to wait. I can only imagine what it must feel like. It reminds me a bit of the RAF (note: when I was 17 I applied to the RAF and my application was rejected - I was quite far into the process and I was absolutely devastated. The RAF were really unclear as to why and one Officer even told me that he couldn't understand it. That uncertainty made it worse). This isn't the same but I can't help but think that the club could be clearer with the lads and explain when they will find out and explain the process. The lads told me that lots of other clubs have already done it. I do feel sorry for them.

It is unlikely that the ambiguity relating to securing a professional contract within professional football academies will ever be removed. The uncertainty will always exist due to the low progression rates and the competitive nature of the environment. Due to the low probability of success, it could be argued that acquiring educational qualifications is of fundamental importance for the scholars at the club. There was clear evidence of the scholars experiencing uncertainty towards the end of their scholarship at the club when it came to waiting for a decision to be made about their futures. There was no defined timescale or process outlined to the scholars and the club should consider communicating to the players a clearly defined way in which they handle these decisions. Several authors have discussed the link between uncertainty and a heightened sense of anxiety and stress (Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Grupe & Nitschke, 2013). The uncertainty of waiting for a decision comes at a critical

junction when the scholars are finalising their work for the BTEC. When considered in another context, the scholars are waiting on what they hope will be a decision that sees them being offered a full time professional contract at the club; it is a certainty that the majority will not experience a positive outcome. Bar-Anan, Wilson, and Gilbert (2009) found that the feeling of uncertainty intensifies affective reactions within individuals. It is likely that some of the scholars that are unsuccessful will experience an amplified sense of rejection and failure. If this is combined with a lack of alternative career planning during their time at the club then the scholars may then face even more uncertainty upon their release.

The lessons that could be learned from having a clear plan for future development in case of release should not be seen as something that is considered or indeed completed towards the end of the scholarship programme. This research has pointed to the challenges that one scholar in particular faced due to a life threatening illness. The ambiguity of such an occurrence, and the potential for lesser injuries to result in being released, should emphasise the need for alternative career/education planning to be embedded across the duration of any one individual's time at the club beyond their school years. Schnell *et al.* (2014) discussed the likelihood that athletes in elite sport settings would be extremely willing to take physical risks, a view reinforced by Dunn (1999) who found that high performance athletes competing in high contact sports become desensitised to the physical risks that exist in elite sport. On the one hand this provides further evidence of the need to consider alternative options in case of a serious injury, but on the other hand illustrates the single mindedness of elite sports performers and the challenges that people supporting the elite athletes face when attempting to split the focus of the athletes' attention.

The research pointed to several of the scholars feeling marginalised in their education and football setting at the club. There was a frustration at the way in which they viewed the communication between themselves and the staff, and they had a perception that they were being unfairly treated in the workplace with too many additional demands being placed upon them. Rose and Shevlin (2004) discussed the value of pupils having a voice within school settings, they claimed that by listening to student voices educators have much to learn. They concluded that educators must be willing to listen to students and act upon their feedback if they are to create an inclusive educational environment. Mitra (2008) examined the importance of student voice in high school reform and highlighted the importance of partnerships between students and educators within school settings. The use of student forums to represent the views of the young people was reviewed and found to have considerable impact within the school and on engagement levels. The views of the players surfaced in great depth throughout this research, but at no point did it become apparent that they were given the opportunity to voice their opinions about their experiences at the club outside of this research. A manager or coach at the club may well have understood and appreciated the issues raised by the scholars about having to carry out extra duties if some form of open and accepted communication between the scholars and the club officials was put into place. Additionally, this two-way communication could potentially aid the understanding of the players about the expectations and the requirements that the club places upon them. A whole range of issues could be considered and would potentially alleviate issues of uncertainty and ambiguity.

A final point to note in this section is that of supporting the scholars with their longer-term career aspirations out of football. The club along with the Premier League does provide a range of guest speakers from a wide range of industries in order give

the scholars an indication of alternative career options. This should be continued and the scholars' interests could further be developed by perhaps considering adding a compulsory work placement element to their course. If a bespoke educational programme is not economically viable due to funding constraints then perhaps the club could support the players with the time that they need to explore other options outside of football and sport. The scholars are also told that upon release they could consider university as another option and the application process/timelines might need to be considered within the club to ensure that those released have the option to take up a place in the September of the year of release. Players are typically told of their release in April/May, which is much later than the deadline for UCAS applications.

Balancing the expectations of the scholars who are chasing what for some is an impossible dream is clearly not void of challenges and the suggestions made in this chapter would in turn need further consideration. It would be difficult to explain to a young person in full that they are not likely to make it to the top tier of professional football; they have an opportunity and some do progress. The stark reality of the environment cannot be neglected and it could be argued that clubs have a social responsibility to these individuals to ensure that they are fully prepared for life outside of the game; a claim that this club could not make with certainty. It would be irresponsible not to encourage these young people to focus on their educational programme due to the low number of scholars that have a career in professional football. It would be equally irresponsible of staff in the professional clubs to avoid telling the scholars of the stark reality that is facing them. A glance towards the work of Deci and Ryan (1985, 1991) who coined self-determination theory might serve them well. This work focused on ensuring that intrinsic levels of motivation are developed in students by focusing on three areas: autonomy, competency and relatedness. Many

have covered their work (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2005) and focused on the importance of ensuring that students have a willingness to learn on their own and that they value what they are studying. The importance of feeling competent in a particular task and being in control of one's own learning all combine to provide the conditions for a heightened sense of motivation and increased engagement levels. Clearly some of the suggestions started earlier will contribute towards improving the conditions within the club related to these three domains.

### **3.7 Making Sense of it all with Possible Selves and Language Games**

This section offers, through a theoretical perspective, an opportunity to consider the complex nature of these findings. It was clear that the scholars viewed themselves as emerging football professionals rather than academics, which differs from the dual identities being forged in other contexts elsewhere in countries such as the USA and Canada. This is perhaps not too surprising when the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) is considered in relation to possible selves. They describe possible selves as 'representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future' (p.954). They go on to explain that our views of ourselves in the future (possible selves) are influenced by significant others in our social environment, and that individuals view the successes and failures of those around them as influencing their own potential possible selves in the future. This is summarised neatly as 'what others are now, I could become' (p.954). This view can be both positive and negative and when considering future possible selves an individual is likely to have a successful possible self-view in a particular area if others around them have enjoyed success in that environment or activity. In this particular setting the scholars are surrounded by other players from the first team and previous scholars that had been successful in

securing longer-term contracts at the club or who had moved from another club. They are surrounded by older players that have made it. Additionally, they had all been successful in securing a scholarship at this particular Premier League club and this, combined with the successes that they enjoyed on the field growing up, is likely to have lead to most of the scholars being able to recount a past possible self that was successful in football. Contrastingly, some of them had already experienced being released from clubs and they will have observed scholars from the year above them being released from their current club. Despite their successes self-doubt and uncertainty was underlying due to these conflicting experiences.

In relation to education, some of the scholars had been successful in school whilst others experienced low levels of attainment, so it could also be argued that some of the successful scholars would view themselves as having a future in education. The evidence from this research clearly suggests that this would only be viewed as a fallback position and therefore was not a desired future possible self; the focus was on football and that is not surprising given the setting. There was no obvious person that they had come into contact with that had left the club and moved on to higher education or had been successful in another career. They were likely to have existed, but it was not something that the club featured. Whilst it is unlikely that this will ever change completely within elite level football, the club may need to consider how they can part way influence the scholars' view of their future possible selves so that they find more of a permanent role or home for education.

Various authors have reviewed the role of possible selves and considered it in relation to education, specifically the need to ensure that adolescents perceive education as having a positive influence on their future possible selves (Hock, Deshler, & Schumaker, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). This will always be extremely

challenging in elite football considering that the scholars are aiming to achieve football success and education is regarded as a fall back in case it does not work out. It would take a significant cultural shift to view it in another way and if a scholar's desire to become a professional footballer diminished then it is likely that they are in the wrong setting altogether.

Hock *et al.* (2006) explain that students need to be able to see how their course will support their future development and have devised a programme called 'The Possible Selves Program'. This aims to support educators with improving student motivation and is based upon the premise that the students identify their hoped-for possible selves, expected possible selves and their feared possible selves (what they want to avoid). It is possible that if a scholar in a professional club was offered a place at a university on a degree course, followed by a graduate position in the sports sector, then it may be that this would be something that they would fear or avoid. As Eddie on page 126 alluded to 'it's like saying that you won't make it'. It is not their dream and therefore, to improve engagement levels on the BTEC, it is likely that clubs would need to ensure that scholars view their course as a tool to aid their professional development as a footballer; this is their hoped for possible self. There was evidence in this setting to suggest that this was not the case despite this being a priority for the Premier League and the club. Others have attempted to develop alternative interventions within education in order to encourage students to engage more with their educational programme in order to help develop academic possible selves and future career possible selves (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). It would be a significant undertaking on behalf the club.

In relation to the work of Wittgenstein (1958) there is evidence in the findings to suggest that the scholars and staff at the club are playing a different type of language game. Wittgenstein's premise suggests that individuals and groups of people can create shared meanings in different contexts through language, and that you would only understand the meaning of these if you were assimilated in the group and regularly use the language. In the club, the scholars appeared to view the qualification as something that they had to complete as a basic requirement of their two-year tenure. They initially viewed it as having limited value or relevance to them personally or professionally, whereas the staff at the club viewed it as being integral for the scholars' development as potential professional footballers or as a contingency. Several examples of this appear throughout the findings and discussions chapter. This disconnect between the scholars and the staff resulted in football and education being treated as separate entities. Examples of this tension are prevalent in Chapter Three, particularly when course relevance and demands of the course are considered.

There was also evidence in the findings of the football staff undermining education in front of the players and this emphasised further division at the club. Through unenforced staffing changes at the club there appeared to be a shift in the perception of education by the scholars and football staff. However, this was not part of a deliberate recruitment strategy by the club to address the issue. In many ways the language game changed, yet it could have remained the same if different personnel had been recruited to those positions. There is also an argument to be made that the renewed focus on education which was driven by the new appointments could well disappear in the future if the current post holders move on and they bring an entirely new type of language; the game just keeps changing.

Consequently, suggestions have been made in this chapter to help the club to build on the renewed educational focus that appeared across the club. The recommendations offered in the next chapter try to aid the educational staff at the club, and those in other educational settings, in developing their work so that they can encourage and motivate students further in their educational programmes and potentially revise their perceptions of their courses in relation to their future possible selves. The focus is on trying to raise the profile of education in the minds of the 16-18 year olds that will pass through professional football clubs in subsequent years.

# Chapter Four – Implications for Practice, Recommendations and Conclusions.

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There is a growing recognition that the likelihood of progressing from a scholar to a full-time professional in football in England is low (Brown & Potrac, 2009; The Football Association, 2014; Green, 2009), a pattern replicated in other elite sports settings from around the world (Grossmann *et al.*, 2015; Martindale *et al.*, 2007; Vaeyens *et al.*, 2009). There has been an increasing emphasis on the inner-workings of football in England and across Europe, including work around career transition, career planning and de-selection (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Brownrigg *et al.*, 2012; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005). There has been some research carried out that focuses on the educational practices that clubs offer to their 16-18-year-old scholars which suggested that the programmes are not meeting the needs of scholars when it comes to their long term development (Monk & Olsson, 2006; Morley *et al.*, 2014; Platts & Smith, 2009). However, there remains a shortage of in-depth research into the way in which academy scholars view their educational programmes. As such, the aim of this thesis was to address this significant gap in research, to contribute additional knowledge in this field and to inform practice relating to educating 16-18-year-old scholars in elite football clubs.

The aim of this thesis was to explore the attitudes towards education that scholars aged 16-18 displayed in a Premier League football club. To address this aim, the following research questions were posed:

- 1) What were the scholars' perceptions of their experience of education at school?

- 2) What attitudes did scholars display towards their current educational course?
- 3) What influenced their attitude towards their educational programmes?
- 4) How might the findings from the research inform practice?

The results and discussion chapter has provided a platform for inquiry related to the aim and the research questions of this study. There is still a need to consider these findings further and how they might inform educational practice within elite level football clubs in England. The impact upon the delivery of qualifications to 16-18 year olds in professional football clubs in England could be significant. The following chapter attempts to summarise the main points from the six themes that have been identified and provides some initial recommendations for practitioners in professional football clubs. The chapter will also have some relevance to educational practitioners that are providing opportunities for adolescents and young adults in other educational settings. In fitting with a constructivist approach, these recommendations are not definitive and should be seen as a starting point to aid the development of education within this particular club and beyond. Clearly, more work would need to be undertaken by those involved in developing educational policies and practices within any educational institution in order to establish what best fits their institutions. It would be unwise to prescribe a step-by-step guide that might be more in fitting on the self-help shelf at the local bookstore. These recommendations reject the view that a positivist stance can be taken when trying to support and guide educators in practice, this would be too simplistic and fails to take into account their experiences, views and the nuances of their practice.

## 4.1 Summary of Results

The findings discussed in section 3.1 Diversity of School Experiences answered the first research question. Interestingly, the first round of focus groups indicated that the scholars' experiences of school were extremely varied and it was evident that their attainment levels and levels of engagement differed significantly. It was evident that, like other learning environments that considered prior achievement (Burns & Mason, 2002; Harker & Tymms, 2004; Tomlinson, 2003), the club did not focus significantly on the implications of this diversity and appeared not to adapt their practice to address these obvious differences. Prior achievement was cited as a powerful predictor of a person's ability to meet the demands of a course (Hattie, 2009), but other factors such as emotional and behavioural stability (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012) were also relevant.

In relation to the second research question, section 3.2 Perceptions of Curriculum highlighted that the views of the scholars were consistent with the findings of Bourke (2003) and McGillivray (2005). The majority of the scholars at the club did not see the relevance of their BTEC course in relation to aiding their development as either professional footballers or for a career beyond professional football, despite this being an objective for both the Premier League and the club. It was argued that the club should review the relevance of the course being offered and perhaps consider alternative options that are more bespoke and tailored to the scholars' interests. It was recognised that this was not without challenges due to the financial constraints that the club operated within. During the focus groups and first round of interviews it was identified that the scholars appeared to lack motivation to fulfil the requirements of the course at the club and this was clearly impacting upon their levels of engagement. This supported the work of Kember *et al.* (2008) who found that

students could become disengaged from professional programmes if they did not see how they prepare them for future careers.

Sections 3.3-3.6 helped form a response to research question 3 and outlined some of the factors that had contributed towards influencing the scholars' attitudes towards education. The rewards of the game were not lost on the scholars and this was discussed in section 3.3 Football Dominant Culture. Despite the low progression levels to professional football the scholars prioritised football from a young age over their educational progress. Consistent with the work of previous research undertaken in academy football settings (McGillivray 2006; Monk and Olsson, 2006), and research undertaken in other elite sports settings (Hickey & Kelly, 2005), the scholars outlined their views on the lack of focus on education by the football staff at the club. Their educational programme was perceived as being something that gave them a break from football and a back-up. A few of the scholars did see the course as offering them alternative options in case of de-selection.

Consistent with the findings of Brown and Larson (2009) and Lynch *et al.* (2013) there was evidence in section 3.4 Influence of Significant Others that pointed to the scholars having strong inter-personal bonds with classmates at school and that their peers at school and the club influenced their levels of engagement. In support of other research (Davis-Kean, 2005; Hackman & Farah, 2009; Hattie, 2009) siblings, parents and other family members appeared to be significant influencers upon engagement and attainment levels; the prioritisation of football over education was evident. There was evidence of negative perceptions of some teachers from school along with positive accounts of the support that was received. There was a principal view from the scholars that the education staff at the club were supportive and helpful.

One of the most significant findings discussed in section 3.5 Impact of Staff Changes in the Club was the appointment of a new Head of Education and Welfare at the club. Combined with the appointment of a new Academy Manager this appeared to lead to a significant improvement in attitudes towards the educational qualification across the club. During the final interviews it was apparent that the scholars had a renewed focus on education and had begun to value its place in their development. This was in stark contrast to the previous findings outlined in this thesis and in previous research that focused on academy football (Brown and Potrac, 2009; McGillivray *et al.*, 2005). The significant changes made at the club included the implementation of a more structured educational programme and the football coaching staff appearing to extol the value of education.

It emerged from the interviews in section 3.6 Uncertainty About the Future that the scholars faced a great deal of uncertainty with regards to their future in this setting, specifically in relation to whether or not they would be offered a contract at the end of their two year tenure at the club as a scholar. The findings illustrated the ambiguous environment that the scholars were operating within and brought to the forefront their concerns and fears about being released. It was also shown that they had considered limited options beyond football as a career path, which was in line with their senior counterparts who demonstrated a lack of pre-planning and preparation for retirement (Brownrigg *et al.*, 2012). It was apparent that there was a lack of transparency at the club regarding the decision making process about who would be successful in securing a professional contract, a trait seen in the work of Harwood *et al.* (2010).

## **4.2 Recommendations: Implications for Practice**

Whilst the results and discussion chapter responds to the research questions that have been set, there is still a need to consider how these can inform practices within the field of education in this particular Premier League Club and beyond.

Firstly, an obvious step for the practitioners in the club is to have a more in-depth understanding of their scholars' past educational experiences. This should not only be based upon prior achievement but also consider how to generate a more rounded appreciation of the scholars' experiences of school and their prior levels of engagement. The work of Powell and Kusuma-Powell (2011), which was highlighted in the findings and discussion chapter, could serve as a useful starting point. They suggest that teachers will reap a range of rewards from this inquiry, these include: creating a psychologically safe environment for every learner, determine their readiness for learning, identify multiple access points to the curriculum to increase engagement, and finally, to develop and demonstrate greater emotional intelligence in the classroom. Strategies they recommend employing to gather this information include compiling learner profiles, conducting parent interviews/surveys, engaging in structured observation, structured reflection and student self-reporting (included in assignments). It is essential that the educators consider how to develop and incorporate a system that takes into account some of these approaches in order to establish a clearer understanding of the scholars.

Secondly, it was apparent that a 'football identity' was being nurtured in these young men from an early age, perhaps leading to them questioning the value of their education and its relevance even before joining the club. It was evident that the staff at the club faced a significant challenge in fostering a culture of learning against this backdrop and going forward need to consider how to improve the scholars'

perceptions of the relevance of the BTEC in Sport. Due to the significant findings in the research that explain the role of parents and extended family members in shaping the scholars' attitudes towards education, it would be prudent to consider how best to engage with family members to gain their support in heightening the value of education. It is worth acknowledging though, that it would be wise to contemplate the implications of trying to distort this 'football identity' if the priority for the club is to develop professional players from their youth ranks. Therefore, the need for greater emphasis on developing an active learning approach that relates more to their day-to-day football activities and to develop higher order thinking skills could be advocated. An outcome of this would ideally see a shift from the tutor centred approach towards one that was more student focused. Tomlinson and Allan's (2000) Concept Map for Differentiating Instruction could be utilised to develop an ongoing dialogue with the students to ensure there is a greater level of engagement, to improve perceptions of relevance and to differentiate their learning.

Building upon these findings the work of Hamre and Pianta (2006) has been highlighted; they suggested that the relationship between students and their teachers was fundamental to being successful in school. In relation to this, there is perhaps a need to develop more of a collaborative learning approach between the scholars as opposed to the myriad of individual tasks that they have to complete; this should be facilitated and supported by the educational staff. The staff might be encouraged to adopt a formative approach to assessment to support this process, the benefits of which have been discussed at length within a range of different educational settings (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 2009). The pedagogical tools referred to will only be as useful as the people delivering them. For example, a tutor's role in developing a relationship with their students or inquiring about their

past experiences is vital, and therefore, they may need to review their approach and how best to develop these relationships.

Thirdly, there are several implications for the club in light of these findings if the club is to develop and embed a prevailing culture that values education. A distributed leadership approach (Gronn, 2002), which relies upon a collegiate approach to leadership, could be explored and implemented across the club. This could help to improve the focus on education and to ensure a holistic approach that combines football and education. As highlighted from the work of Helton and Jackson (2007), for the club to ensure that there is business continuity in the case of retirements, resignations, promotions or reassignments, they may need to consider their approach towards succession planning. Further training and development of education and football staff might be one approach to adopt if they are to recruit from within in the case of one of the senior members of staff moving on. There is clearly a need to ensure that all education staff are up skilled and they embrace a more innovative approach to delivering education at the club.

Finally, a recommendation was made for the voice of the scholars to be more prevalent within the club. Outside of this research there did not appear to be any formal mechanisms in place for them to air their views. This would potentially lead to a greater understanding and perhaps empathy between the scholars and the staff at the club within the football and education sections. In order to develop a more inclusive environment that puts the needs of the scholars at the forefront of the educational practices at the club, the club would be well advised to consider how they can best capture honest and meaningful feedback from the scholars during their time at the club. The value of capturing the student voice has been extolled (Mitra, 2008; Rose & Shevlin, 2004) and would aid with the ongoing challenges of understanding the

scholars better, improving subject relevance and would certainly help to accomplish a culture within the club that sees education as being important for the scholars' personal and professional development.

### **4.3 Specific Recommendations: Future Research**

The incipient findings of this study reported in Chapter Three lay the foundations for educators in elite level football clubs to understand their scholars' attitudes towards education and the factors that influenced these. However, due to the largely exploratory nature of the study these are not intended to provide definitive answers and more questions are perhaps posed for educators in the field; future research can expand upon this work. This section does not intend to provide an exhaustive overview of potential future research, but serves as a starting point for those interested in exploring some of the themes that have been generated as a result of this study.

Firstly, the limited observations that were afforded as part of this study did yield some valuable information about the informal social interactions between the scholars and educators within the club. It would seem wise to consider future research that relies more upon observation in the field. An ethnographic study that is led by someone that is employed as an educator in an elite level football club would offer a more extensive insight into the day-to-day practices within the club setting. Furthermore, research led by one of the scholars or a past scholar would also help to generate a deeper understanding of the complexities that this research has pointed to and would enable other avenues to be explored. Opportunities to view the scholars in the classroom or during the informal encounters in their educational setting would notably improve our understanding of the environment. The notion of language could be considered further in line with this and the day-to-day language that the scholars

and staff at the club adopt might be of real interest in order to delve deeper into the language games that are in play in this setting.

The research identified parents as significant influencers upon the scholars' attitudes towards education. Further research might explore this and seek to view this phenomenon from the perspective of the parents of the players. Likewise, the views of the educational staff and football coaches at the club might be the focus of future research to understand their relationship with the scholars from their perspective. These approaches would serve to offer a more rounded view of the environment and attention could be given to those who play a significant role in supporting the scholars during their two-year period at the club. To be able to compare and contrast the views from the scholars and significant others would allow for a greater insight into the practices at the clubs.

Further study could be undertaken to develop a better understanding of attitudes towards education displayed by scholars across a wider range of clubs within elite level football within England. As outlined in Chapter One, this particular research focuses on one of the clubs in the Premier League with limited financial resources compared to other clubs. It would be interesting to explore the educational programmes within these clubs, particularly those that offer bespoke programmes.

Additionally, it would be of great interest to investigate the practices that are adopted in the lower echelons of professional football, especially those outside of the Premier League who are reliant upon the League Football Education for funding and support.

The results from the aforementioned future research would contribute to improving knowledge in this field and would help to inform the development of educational policy and practices within elite level football. Clearly, there is need for

more scholarly enquiry in this specific area. It has already been outlined that academy football yields great attention from academics, but more often than not the educational practices employed at the clubs do not face extensive scrutiny.

#### **4.4 Limitations of this Study**

Whilst the research approach that has been adopted for this study has been justified, it must be recognised that there are areas that could be identified as specific limitations and these should be acknowledged in this thesis.

It is evident in this study that an extensive literature review in order to identify a theoretical framework to guide the research has not been undertaken. An outline of previous research that has been conducted in the field was offered in the introduction and was provided to give context for the reader, but not to determine a theoretical framework. Maxwell (2013) argued that such a review should not be to summarise what has already been done but to give the reader a clear sense of the theoretical approach to the phenomena. Rationale has been provided in section 2.5 as to why this was not adopted as part of the phenomenological approach that is evident in this research, but for some it would be labelled as a limitation.

The sample size within the single site that was identified as appropriate for this research may be deemed as too small in order to generalise any subsequent findings beyond this particular club, potentially limiting the scope and influence of the research findings and recommendations (Crowe *et al.* 2011; Yin, 2013). All but one of the participants were aged between 16-18, white and from one particular region of England, again limiting the range of viewpoints in this field.

The club granted access on the basis that set times were established to enable me to undertake the research introduction, the focus groups and interviews. Due to the limited access given by the club hierarchy it was difficult to observe the scholars in

a meaningful way in their day-to-day setting. This might be something more associated with an ethnographic study, but nonetheless it would strengthen any research that seeks to develop an understanding of people within their social setting. Some informal observations were carried out and they have been incorporated as caveats into the fieldwork and acknowledged in the reflexive research diary comments (Patton, 2002). Having more informal opportunities to observe the scholars may have led to thicker and richer descriptions of their shared experiences in their social setting (Merriam, 2009; Myers, 2009).

The limitations of focus groups have been highlighted in a number of research methods text books, the general consensus is that they are criticised for being difficult to manage, they are time-consuming, they can result in individuals being marginalised and individuals may express views that they perceive to be socially acceptable within the group (Litosseliti, 2003; Scott & Morrison, 2007). Some of these concerns may also be attributed to the use of interviewing individuals as a research method, they could also be perceived as time consuming and participants may offer views that are in fitting with what they deem to be socially acceptable (Bryman, 2012). In relation to the previous point regarding observation, Silverman (2006) points to interviews and focus groups as contrived methods that depart from using naturally occurring data such as observing people in their natural setting. He has also referred to this as data as being manufactured and that interviews and focus groups should be carried out as a last resort (Silverman, 2006). However, Kawycz (2007) argues that Silverman uses these comments as a means to encourage students to look beyond more traditional approaches; he goes on to state that in some instances the use of natural methods (observations) or manufactured approaches (focus groups and interviews) will be more effective.

## **4.5 Concluding Reflections**

As the thesis draws to a close it is clearer to me now how difficult and challenging it is to fully comprehend the world from the viewpoint of others. I have attempted to represent the views of the scholars in an accurate and reliable manner. However, there is no hiding from the inevitable conclusion that this research represents my interpretation of their views. Before commencing upon this research, and I have discussed this at length in Chapter Two, I did not fully understand the implications of this and had not grasped the complexities of the research process. This research journey has left me in a far better position in this regard and I now want to continue to develop myself as a researcher. I aim to disseminate the findings from this research to key stakeholders in elite level football and for academic publication. I look forward to this next stage.

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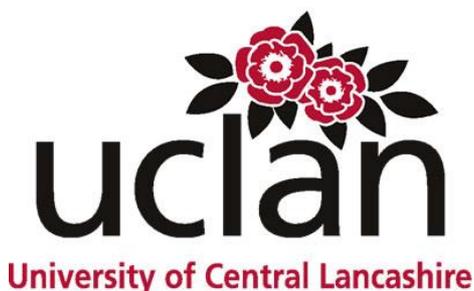
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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1.0 Participant Information Sheet and Research Consent Form



### Research Information Form

*An investigation into the attitudes towards learning and educational attainment of 16-18 year old professional footballers*

You are being invited to take part in a research study at your club. Your club is working in partnership with the University of Central Lancashire, Preston. We are hopeful that our research might be able to support your on-going learning and development. Before you decide if you would like to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. It would be great if you would like to get involved.

Thank you for reading this.

- What is the purpose of the study?

The education and development of younger players is an important focus for ????? Football club. The club is hoping to use discussions with yourself and other players as a way in which to continuously improve the way that they work and to assess how they can better support players on the educational side of your programme at the club.

The aim of this research project is to explore the level of engagement and attitudes towards learning that players aged 16-18 display in a Premier League football club and the factors that may have influenced these. A further aim is to establish if a specific learning intervention can impact upon the players' attitudes towards education

The potential of the research will be achieved through the consideration of the following questions.

- 1) What attitudes do players display towards their educational course?
- 2) What has influenced their attitude towards their educational programme?
- 3) How might the findings from the research inform practice?

- Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are currently contracted as a scholar at the club and we feel that you have a really important part to play in supporting the club. We would therefore welcome you to take part in the research by agreeing to undertake two interviews over the period of your contract at the club with the researcher, allowing us to use a transcription of your recorded dialogue for analysis and agreeing to take part in four educational workshops. These will take place during your existing curriculum times.

- Do I have to take part?

If you do not wish to take part then you have the right not to do so and should speak to the Head of Education and Welfare at the club about your decision.

- What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do agree to take part, your assessed dialogue will be recorded, anonymised and transcribed. If you wish to review the transcript at any time, you may do so by asking Clint Godfrey ([cgodfrey1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:cgodfrey1@uclan.ac.uk)).

You will also be invited to attend for interview, which will take approximately 45 minutes – 1 hour.

If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached permission form.

- What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

We do not consider that there are significant risks to taking part. Care will be taken to ensure confidentiality and your anonymity throughout.

- What are the possible benefits of taking part?

A benefit of taking part will be that you can use your transcribed dialogue yourself to reflect and refer to as a professional development record. You will also be contributing to findings that will benefit further participants in this form of programme at your club and elsewhere, and enhance the delivery of educational programmes in football clubs.

- What if something goes wrong?

If something goes wrong or you become concerned, you should contact Pete and/or Clint Godfrey, and discuss this. You may withdraw at any time, you do not need to give a reason for this and it is without prejudice to yourself.

- Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. Transcriptions and interview transcriptions will be dealt with in strictest confidentiality and anonymised; institutions will also be anonymised when analysing data.

- What will happen to the results of the research study?

As part of the research we are intending to analyse recordings of your assessed dialogue to identify whether the workshops support your development. We will also draw on data gathered from interviews about what influences players' approaches toward their education and development. We might wish to use some of these results to inform practice at the club and premier league. We might also wish to use some of this material for publication purposes. Again, your information will be anonymised.

- Who is organising and funding the research?

The University of Central Lancashire and your club.

- Who may I contact for further information?

If you wish to find out more about the project itself you can contact Clint Godfrey ([cgodfrey1@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:cgodfrey1@uclan.ac.uk)).

Thank you for your interest in this research.

## Consent form

**Title of Project:** An investigation into the attitudes towards learning and educational attainment of 16-18-year-old professional footballers

**Name of Researchers:** Clint Godfrey (University of Central Lancashire)

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my professional work or legal rights being affected.
3. I give permission for my dialogue and views to be recorded and to be used in publications from the research study and to inform practice. I also understand that they will not be used for any other purposes.
4. I understand that any transcriptions or recordings will be securely and anonymously stored according to the requirements of the Data Protection Act.

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

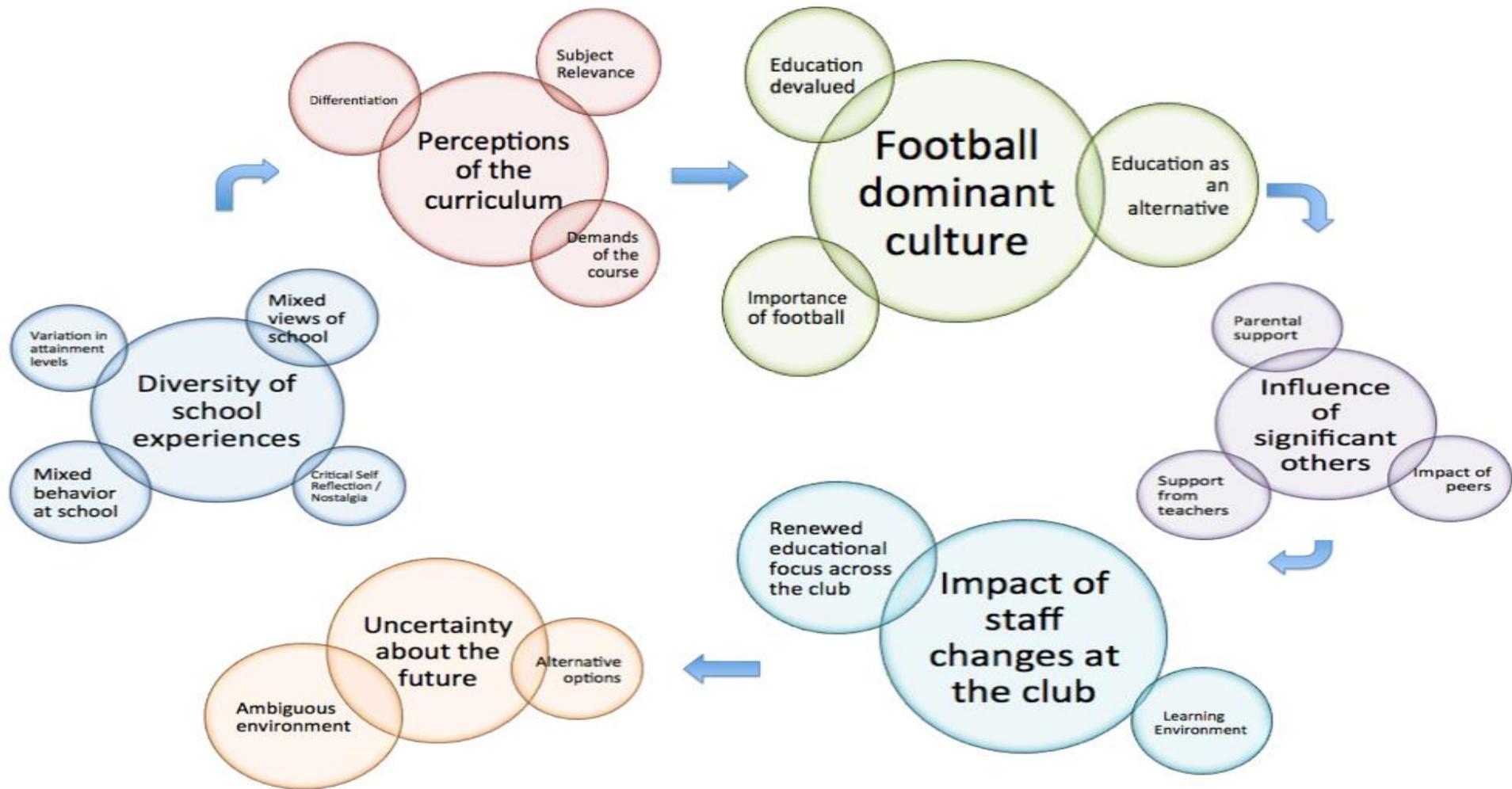
Name of Researcher

Date

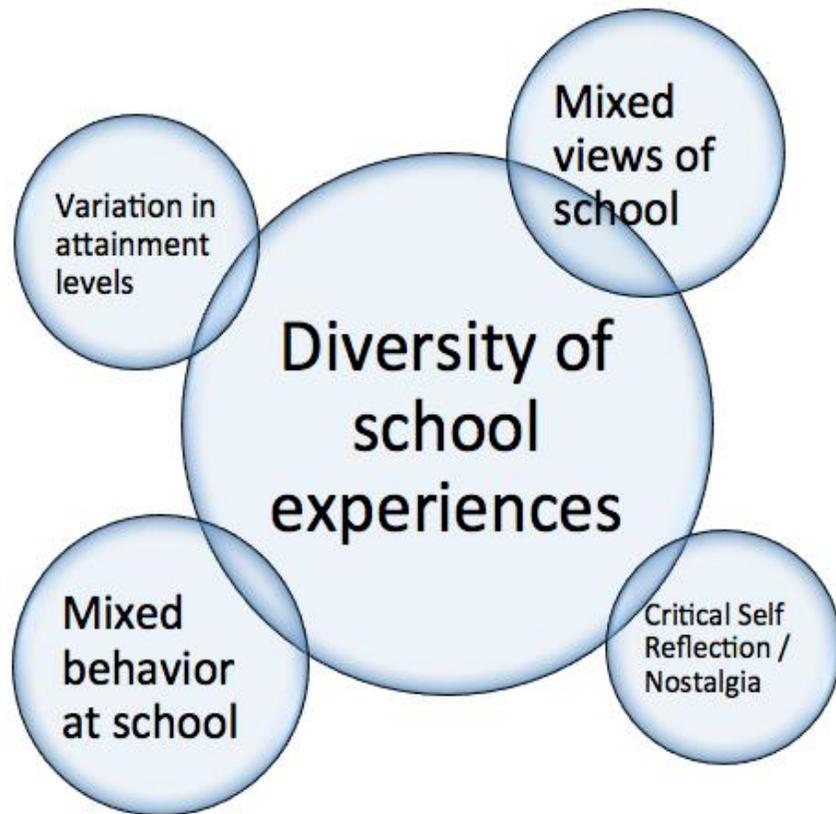
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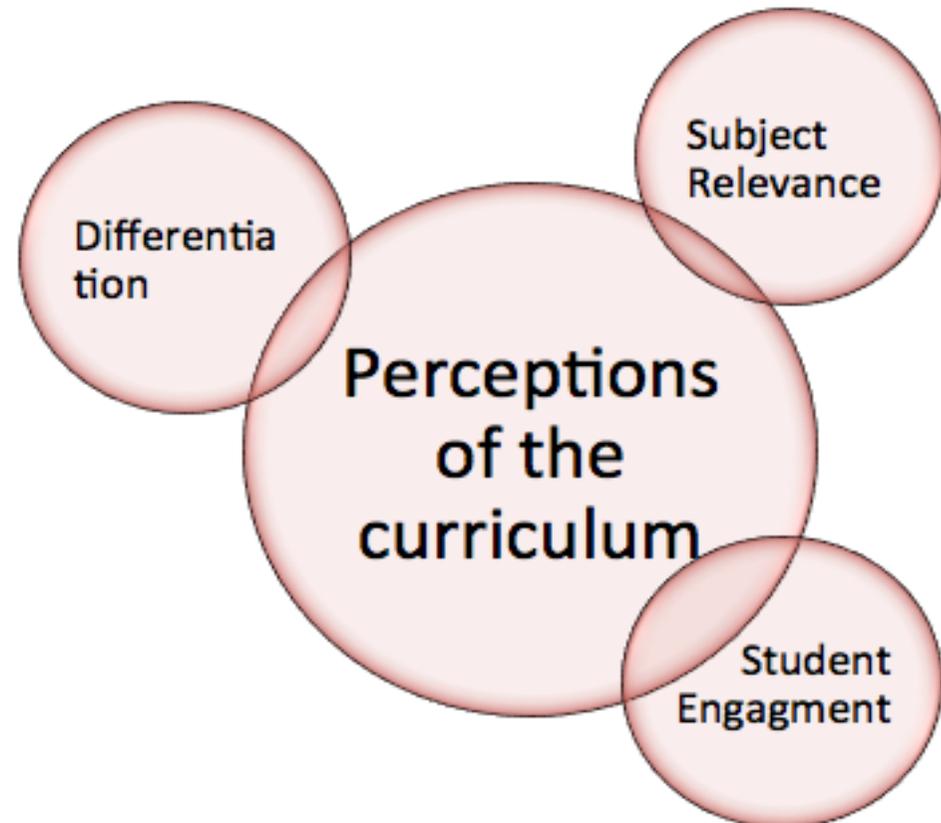
## Appendix 2.0: Magnified Themes and Categories



**Theme 1: Diversity of School Experiences**



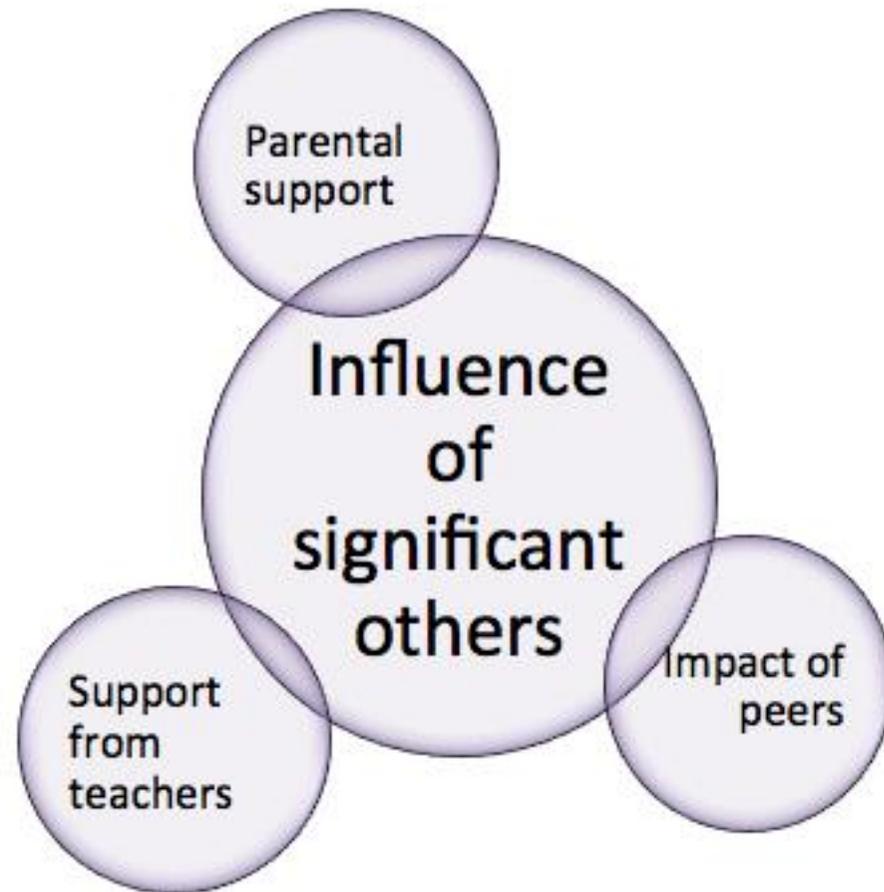
**Theme 2: Perceptions of the Curriculum**



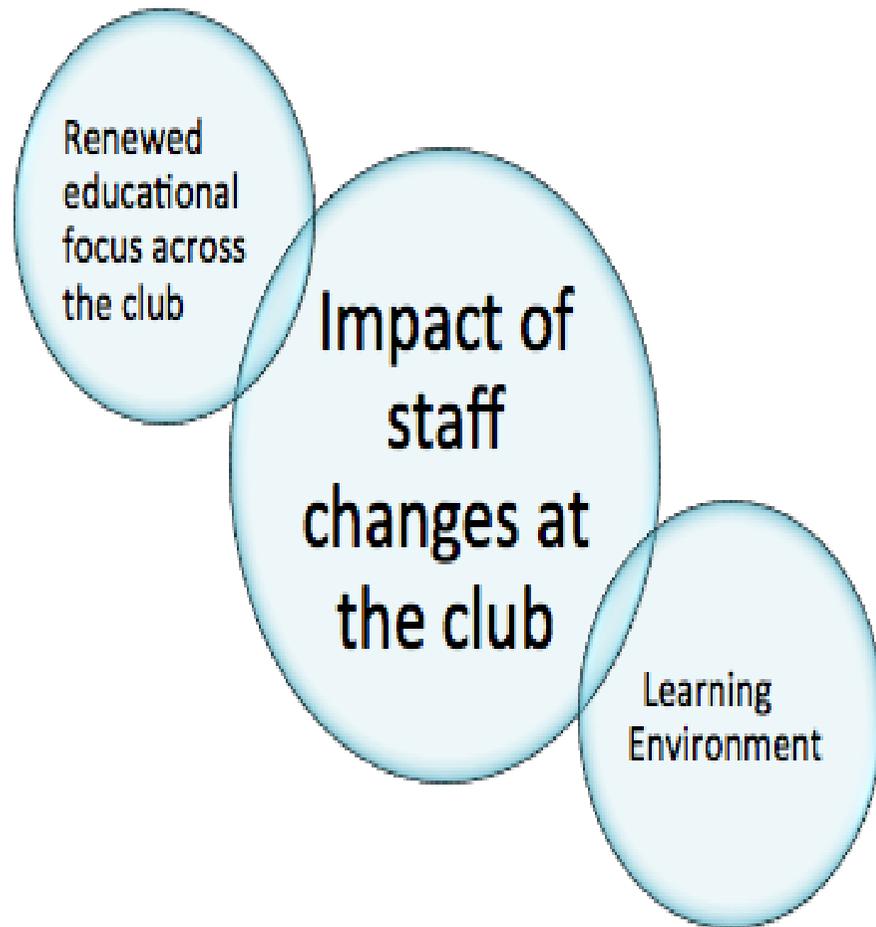
**Theme 3: Football the Dominant Culture**



**Theme 4: Influence of Significant Others**



**Theme 5: Impact of Staff Changes at the Club**



**Theme 2: Uncertainty About the Future**

