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Title	Nostalgia as truth, self preservation or identity formation? - Initial accounts from professional footballers in education
Type	Article
URL	<a href="https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/24010/">https://clock.uclan.ac.uk/24010/</a>
DOI	##doi##
Date	2015
Citation	Godfrey, Clint (2015) Nostalgia as truth, self preservation or identity formation? - Initial accounts from professional footballers in education. UCLan Journal of Pedagogic Research, 6 (1). pp. 134-150. ISSN 2048-8815
Creators	Godfrey, Clint

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. ##doi##

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**Nostalgia as truth, self preservation or identity formation? – Initial accounts from professional footballers in education.**

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**Abstract**

This paper provides an update on research being undertaken as part of a Professional Doctorate in Education at UCLan. In particular, it discusses a potential theme that may be emerging from the early phases of data analysis. Primarily, the aim of the research is to explore attitudes towards, and perceptions of learning that players aged 16-18 in a Premier League football club display. The first phase of the research focussed on players' experiences at high school and an initial thematic analysis of one of four focus groups highlighted the emergence of a potential area of interest. Specifically, there appears to be evidence of strong nostalgic recollections from some of the players based upon their past experiences of school. Consequently, it is suggested that this may be due to players becoming anxious as a result of being embedded in the notoriously uncertain and ambiguous environment of professional football. At the time of the focus group the players were waiting on the club to make a decision about whether they would be offered contract extensions. It is also inferred that the players' nostalgia could be an attempt to form a shared social identity based upon the machismo stereotypes apparent in elite football. The potential consequences of such a phenomenon are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Within Premier League football clubs 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 apprenticeships. Alongside this contract players are expected to study for a BTEC National Diploma in Sport or another qualification that is appropriate to their level and needs. It has been estimated that only a small percentage will ultimately play football for a living. Green (2009) suggests that there are approximately 10,000 boys playing in these academies across any one football season, with less than 2% going on to make a living from the game. Wider research suggests that the vast majority of young people who are recruited early into talent development programmes, across a wide range of sports, do not become successful elite athletes (Martindale et al., 2007; Vaeyens et al., 2009).

Even though the economy shows signs of recovery, employment rates are still on the decline and at their lowest in three years (Office for National Statistics, 2013). There are approximately just over three quarters of a million HE graduates each year, many undoubtedly entering the job market (HESA, 2012) and there is a distinct chance that many of these young footballers aged 16-18 when released from the clubs will struggle to compete in this environment. For these players to obtain meaningful employment or a place on an undergraduate programme at a university, a positive attitude and high attainment levels within their educational course may well be vital. Historically at some Premier League football clubs the players' results have not always been satisfactory from the perspective of the education staff employed at the club (anon, 2011: personal communication with Head of Education and Welfare at one club).

There is no research that specifically focuses in-depth on players of this age and their experiences of education before and at the academies. The academies will be under greater scrutiny perhaps than ever before with the advent of the Elite Player Performance Plan which requires the club academies to adhere to strict Premier League criteria (Premier League, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that the clubs provide an educational programme that meets the needs of these players and the criteria.

The research being 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 factors that influence the approach of these elite apprentices

towards their educational course. 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. Due to the research being in the very early stages it is not expected that any generalisations will be made from this particular paper; it merely serves as an initial discussion paper and seeks to highlight a potential area of interest that may be emerging from the early parts of my research.

### **Literature Overview**

There is a wide range of discourse focussing upon factors that influence students' performance in and beyond the classroom. Hattie (2009) in a meta-analysis of achievement in learning discusses prior achievement, socio-economic status and the influence of peers. These factors can all play a part in shaping an individual's attitude towards learning. Myers (2009) defines attitude as a favourable or unfavourable reaction to something or someone; such reactions can be influenced by predispositions and the society in which we live. Kind et al. (2007) define 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.

Limited research exists that focuses specifically on youth development in Premier League football clubs. Monks and Olsson (2007) analysed the rationale for youth development in professional clubs and the off-the-job training available for apprentices (pre-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 do 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 would have been capable of studying at this level based upon GCSE results if they had not been involved with the football club. 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.

This paper seeks to analyse the accounts of players towards their previous education in high school but as part of the wider research study their perceptions of the value of their current educational courses will be analysed. 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.

Brown and Potrac (2009) suggested that 85% of players aged 16-18 do not continue at the clubs after 18, are deselected and face identity issues. They go on to state that because most players have been involved in clubs from an early age they have developed a strong athletic identity and this is taken away upon release. The study does not focus in an in-depth way on the players' approach to education although the authors do allude to players being disillusioned by education for three reasons: the clubs do not prioritise it or treat it with significance, football is the dominant discourse, and finally, they relate this to the work of Adler and Adler (1989) and the 'glorified self' which suggests that the ascent of the glorified self results in the loss of a future orientation or long term planning. Aquilina (2013) on the other hand does address the relationship between sporting and academic success from the point of view of elite athletes that are studying alongside performing. She found a strong correlation between the desire to compete at elite level sport and their commitment to succeed in their education. However, this particular study focused upon athletes and sports that are significantly less well paid in comparison to premier league footballers and are not typically expected to be viewed as a career option.

Whilst this literature does not present an in-depth insight into the players' perspectives towards their educational programmes in professional football, it clearly presents staff involved in education departments within clubs with a significant challenge when considered collectively. They must consider how they deliver educational programmes to ensure that they are valued by the players and other professionals within the club and they need to consider how this education can aid the longer term progression of the players away from football.

## **Methodology**

My research has been founded upon an exploratory approach which is described by Stebbins (2001) as allowing for new meanings to emerge. He advocates the need to remove the strait jacket of the traditional research approach 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. In this context the research has unearthed new concepts, described by Grix (2010) as a form of concatenation, the joining of concepts to others in order to develop new theories or knowledge. It is hoped that the new data and meanings that will potentially emerge from the study will be invaluable within the practice of educating players within professional football.

It might be argued though that my approach does not offer a 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 not take into account or recognise the important role of my interaction 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 not something that I am striving for. I am striving for trustworthiness and credibility. My reflexive approach has recognised my influence upon the final outcomes of my research and recognises reality as a human construct, which is not independent of the thoughts and feelings of the individual and researcher, and is an approach adopted by interpretivists.

The focus will be on a single Premier League club, therefore adopting a case study approach (Yin, 2003). Macpherson (1999) argues that case study research is capable of creating thick descriptions and rich understandings of social contexts. The research adopts an interpretative epistemological approach and a belief that social reality is shaped by the individual. This type of approach enables me to explore the feelings, experiences and emotions of individuals who shape their society and develop their own meanings and interpretation of the social world. The research that I am undertaking has similarities with the approach taken by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) who advocate Schutz's social phenomenological approach. They suggest 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 subjective meaning is the focus of my study and this has influenced the method and data analysis.

## **Method / Data Analysis**

A focus group approach has been utilised for the first phase of the research with four being held with 5-6 players in each one. These focus groups concentrated on identifying general themes related to the players' attitudes towards their previous experiences of education whilst at school. Focus groups are unstructured interviews with small groups of people who interact with each other and the group leader uses group dynamics to stimulate discussion, gain insights and generate ideas in order to pursue a topic in greater depth (Bowling, 1997). Furthermore, it has been noted that group processes can help people to explore their views and generate questions in ways they would find more difficult in face-to-face interviews (Kitzinger, 1996). Focus groups can provide an environment that aids discussion with peers and allows for shared or opposing views to surface.

For the purpose of this paper one particular focus group will be considered in more depth (Focus Group 1). A purposive sampling approach was adopted when this particular focus group was organised. Participants were selected by the club staff based upon the perception that they had not been motivated or engaged in the educational programme that they were undertaking at the club. Five players were in attendance and three of the five had a history of poor academic performance (less than 5 GCSEs grade A-F) prior to starting the BTEC. Typically purposive sampling is used to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample (Bryman, 2012). However, it was felt by the club's educational staff and the researcher that this group also contained the more dominant characters and a judgement was made that for other players to be heard in the other groups, they should be kept separately. It was determined that this would enable a wider range of views to surface.

A form of thematic analysis has been the preferred approach for the data analysis in the initial phase of my research with open coding being the tool to achieve this. Thematic Analysis (TA) is described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) as a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.' Both Bryman (2012) and Braun and Clarke (2006) allude to TA as being devoid of any clear identifiable heritage but suggest that it is commonly referred to in qualitative research studies. Thematic analysis appears on the whole to fit with the foundations that my research is built upon. Despite there being no agreed standardised framework for its implementation there are well documented

frameworks that have been utilised (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) for my research. The starting point was to read the transcriptions of the focus groups and interviews, re-read and to try and identify areas of interest and sort into categories. Attempts were then made to make meaning and identify relationships between categories to form themes. It allows for new emerging themes to be identified and for a collaborative understanding to be generated by the researcher and the research participants.

The subsequent areas of discussion emerging from the data should be viewed as tentative links to relevant theoretical concepts. Further work needs to be carried out before the analysis can be viewed with confidence and it situated to inform practice.

### **The Participants**

The participants for this focus group were five males each contracted as a Scholar at the Premier League club. They were all studying for a BTEC National Diploma in Sport and aged between 17-19. Two of the players were in their first year as a Scholar with the other three in year two. Outside of their educational course the players trained and worked together on a daily basis at the football club. A brief biography for each participant has been given with each adopting a pseudonym for anonymity.

**John:** John was in the second year as a Scholar at the club. He had obtained 1 GCSE at school and was regularly suspended for behavioural problems. He had moved to the club after being released from what would be regarded as a higher ranked team.

**Jack:** Jack was in the first year of his time at the club and had not obtained any GCSEs at school. 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.

**Preston:** Preston had obtained 5GCSEs grades A-C 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.

Robert: Robert gained 7 GCSEs grades B-D and joined the club from a lower league club. He had no significant behavioural issues at school but has not engaged with the BTEC. He was a first year scholar at the club.

Brian: Brian gained 6 GCSEs grades C-D. He had joined the club at 12 and had come through the academy system at the club. He had no significant behavioural issues at school. He was in his second year at the club.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Nostalgia as truth?**

The participants were given the opportunity to discuss their time at high school and on several occasions John, Jack and Preston 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’. (John)

‘But like, the teachers used to proper like me. First school lad, nothing beating it’. (Jack)

‘Schools just a laugh that though in it. ..All P.E teachers were sound. I’d just do what I did and go back to school because it was funny’. (Preston)

What became apparent is that these three participants, who seemingly did not engage in school in a typical way, reflected upon many of their experiences in school positively and enthusiastically. It is difficult to determine if these nostalgic accounts accurately reflect their true feelings, the truth even and the meaning behind the accounts. It might be argued that the participants are using the focus group to reinforce their identity or provide a platform to reflect to times gone by that were more comfortable. This will be discussed later in this section. This issue highlights a limitation with the stage that this research is at and for a clearer picture to emerge there is the need to go back and explore things further with the individuals and to corroborate the findings. However we can still consider some of these findings in

relation to literature associated with nostalgia without making any claims at this point in the research.

### **Nostalgia as Self Preservation?**

The term 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. Batcho (2013) cites Hall (1904) who argues that adolescents are particularly susceptible to nostalgia. Perhaps there is the beginning of an argument here that points to players becoming anxious as a result of being embedded in the notoriously uncertain and ambiguous environment of professional football with contracts in the early stages 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 secure.

Each of the participants in the focus group had significant behavioural issues and they had faced suspension and expulsion on many occasions. Here they note some of their experiences:

‘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’. (Jack)

‘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’. (Preston)

‘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 we me and my mates got kicked out though, then we would rob a ball from PE. I just didn't care. It sounds bad saying it now, but I just didn't care about nothing other than footie'. (John)

John appeared to be the one in the group that was reflecting upon his experiences in education in a regretful way. He recognised that his focus was purely on football and he had no interest in anything else. Potrac and Brown (2009) discuss the strong athletic identity that is nurtured in elite level football players that have been involved in a professional club from a very early age and this might be evident here. Routledge et al. (2011) argue 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. Perhaps John who was facing a very difficult period had been given the opportunity via the focus group to reflect and add some meaning to his current situation and reduce his anxiety through a nostalgic view of his past experiences.

What is important at this stage of the research is to highlight that the players that go to the club as Scholars bring with them a range of experiences in their previous educational settings. Neither Robert nor Brian had any major behavioural problems to report from their times at school. Here for example Robert explained:

'I did ok at school, I was alright. I knew they weren't going to do nothing if I misbehaved, but I wasn't bad in school really'.

However, there was no evidence that the educational staff at the club took these previous experiences into account when delivering the BTEC in Sport. Players were taught together by year group and there were no special measures put in place for those that had a history of disengagement and bad behaviour in education. The club could perhaps consider this in more depth and develop a policy that reflects these prior levels of engagement.

### **Nostalgia and Identity**

These accounts might also be perceived as a group of individuals attempting to form a shared identity built upon exaggerated machismo tendencies. Mirande

(1997) states that machismo is nothing more than an attempt to mask a sense of powerfulness, 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 et al. (2008) who suggest that traditional machismo is related to aggression and antisocial behaviour. Interestingly, they also suggest that traditional machismo was also associated with less education. There is very little evidence of this tendency being displayed by Robert or Brian who both achieved higher GSCE results than John, Jack and Preston.

The players work at the club together on a daily basis in male dominated environment. Perhaps there is evidence here of them living up to stereotypes in their industry. Here Jack 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'. (Jack)

Brown and Humphreys (2002) cite a range of literature (Davis, 1979; Gabriel, 1993; Wilson, 1999) which illustrates the link between nostalgia and identity. In their research of Turkish faculty staff 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 seem to almost delight at reliving some of their experiences. Perhaps as also noted by Brown and Humphreys (2002, p.142) this is a 'means of maintaining a collective sense of socio-historic continuity, a source of resistance to hegemonic influence and a defence against anxiety'. This might manifest itself as the players are faced with or certainly perceive 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. The educational staff at the club could consider how they can best devise a strategy that ensures that the players have an affinity with their educational course and even construct new

identities as academics as well as footballers. This is no easy task set against a backdrop of machismo and the prevailing football discourse.

### **Nostalgia as boredom**

Van Tilburget al.(2013) suggest 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 be that John, Jack and Preston are simply bored and not motivated in this particular setting. The second round of focus groups that will be conducted as a follow up to the one discussed for this paper will consider in-depth the players' attitudes towards the educational setting at the club. It is not in the parameters of this paper to discuss this in detail, but boredom does feature in those discussions when the players reflected upon their time at the club, interestingly not just on the educational side of their programme.

### **Concluding remarks**

There is obviously a need to treat this initial analysis with caution. It relies upon one focus group containing five players from the club. It is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the initial phase of focus groups and the dialogue will be strengthened after the analysis of the second phase of the research which is focussed on the players' attitudes towards the education service provided at the club. The first focus groups also need to be scrutinised in more depth and once this is completed it is expected that the research participants will be consulted in order to check that the meaning and interpretation is accurate.

However, by relating this initial analysis to the theoretical concepts related to nostalgia we can start to see some really interesting debates emerging from the data. The role of nostalgia upon first glance might be perceived as being somewhat negative and in some instances only used when something negative is transpiring. However, it might also be seen as a really useful tool to boost social relationships, individual self esteem and meaningfulness in a community (Van Tilburg et al., 2013). Routledge et al. (2013) agree with this and argue that perceiving one's life as meaningful and with purpose is directly related to psychological well being. However, we have to treat this with a certain degree of caution. The issues that these participants are currently facing are not necessarily going to be addressed by

simply developing a shared identity and staring fondly in to the past. The reality is much more complex and uncertain and they will inevitably have to develop their own strategies for overcoming any disappointment that they may subsequently face at the club.

Clearly the research participants are working and being educated in an environment of uncertainty, which brings with it a great deal of pressure and anxiety. This may help us to understand better why these glowing renditions are surfacing and being re-enacted. 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 face an uncertain future and it is likely that the majority will be released from the club and will not make football their profession. This just strengthens the case for having a proactive education department at the club, but equally it places greater responsibility on their shoulders. The educational team might need to re-consider how they group the players together in the educational setting that they provide, whether that be on ability or student preferences. They must consider their educational policy and practices to ensure that the players are being supported in the best possible way so that they are able to progress from the club, if they are released, into another field of work away from being a professional player, whether that is in education, sport, football or something entirely different. Their needs and aspirations perhaps need to be considered in a more meaningful way in order to determine what pathway would be best suited for their long-term development outside of football – beyond the two years that most will spend at the club.

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