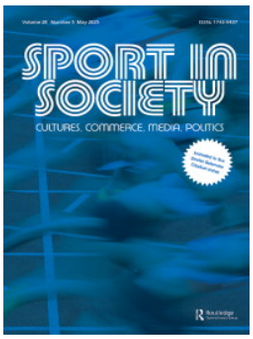

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A critical examination of children's well-being and well-becoming in a professional youth football academy

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a novel application of the concepts of well-being and well-becoming to Professional Youth Sport (PYS). Analysing data from a category one football academy in the United Kingdom, we examine a representation of the lived experiences of children, parents, and the sporting entourage. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identify three key themes: the academy's structural prioritisation of future success, the normalisation of accelerated adulthood, and the burden placed on children to cope in these environments. The study addresses a gap in sports sociology by critically applying well-becoming to PYS, revealing how a hyper-focus on future potential undermines children's immediate well-being and their human rights. The significance of this study lies in its reframing of children's well-being and points for reflection, which challenge the status-quo of PYS to prioritise both children's well-being and well-becoming while aligning practices with their human rights.

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Well-being; well-becoming; children's rights; talent development; football academy

Introduction

Football academies are recognised to be high-pressure environments where young children are selected based on their perceived potential to become professional footballers (Lundqvist et al. 2024). While football academies, as part of Professional Youth Sport (PYS) systems, have been praised for offering children structured pathways to a professional career it is also recognised that there are numerous risks present for the children who compete within them (Aine, Muhonen, and Toivonen 2022; Sothern and O'Gorman 2021). PYS has become 'work-like' for many children and these settings often require intense time commitments, rigorous physical training and a hyper-focus on competition often at a (very) early age (Donnelly 2024). As a result, children may sacrifice other critical aspects of their childhood, such as social development, family time and education (Mills et al. 2014) and are susceptible to maltreatment due to their willingness to progress through PYS (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). This environment often nurtures a mindset that positions children as 'adults in training', emphasising future success over their present well-being (Kehily 2004). While a small percentage of academy players may secure professional contracts, a high proportion

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will be released, with many experiencing negative mental health outcomes, including loss of identity, anxiety, and depression as a result (Brown and Potrac 2009). Such an environment can create an imbalance, prioritising children's future potential - what they are 'becoming' - over their current experiences, or 'being'.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been ratified by 196 states. The principles underpinning the treaty include non-discrimination; best interests of the child; right to life, protection, and development; and the right to express views freely in matters that affect them (UNCRC 1989). The way in which sport positions children has been critiqued by many academics for viewing children as future adults, rather than recognising them as individuals with rights and agency in the present (Donnelly 2024; Kerr 2022; Lang 2022; Matthews et al. 2024). The notion of children as both *beings* and *becomings* highlights the need to balance their immediate well-being with long-term development. In the context of PYS, where high-stakes talent identification and development programs dominate, such a balance is often skewed towards future success, sometimes at the expense of the child's well-being and rights (Lang 2022). Where this balance falls has, for many years, been attributed towards the values, skill and education of adults within sporting spaces (Martens 1993).

This paper explores how children's experiences within a professional football academy are shaped by a misconception of childhood and examines the resulting impact on their well-being. The term 'well-becoming' is not commonly used in everyday language (Edwards 2022) or in sport research, but its introduction offers a novel perspective on understanding children's well-being. In this context, 'being' highlights children as independent social actors with rights in the present, while 'becoming' focuses on their future potential as adults in the making (Uprichard 2008). We argue that an overemphasis on well-becoming risks harmful practices that undermine children's immediate well-being and infringe upon their human rights. Drawing on the lived experiences of children, parents, and the sporting entourage over a one-year period, this study uses documentary data to highlight the effects of the academy's hyper-focus on children's future success. The significance of this study lies in its recommendations for structural changes in football academies, aimed at prioritising both children's well-being and well-becoming while ensuring alignment with their human rights.

Literature review

Misconception of childhood in sport

Childhood has been described as a 'revolutionary space of transformation' (Kohan 2011, 342) where childhood is a time for preparation so that children can learn and later participate in society (Cassidy 2017). Within childhood studies, the significance of how childhood is conceptualised in relation to children's rights has been explored (e.g. Uprichard 2008; Schweiger 2015). The emerging consensus from such discussions emphasises the importance of respecting both children's current being *and* their future development which often involves incorporating their perspectives into discussions, decisions, and policies about their lives. In practice, this is difficult to implement due to societies misconception of childhood. For example, schooling systems, structures and practices have been critiqued for focusing on preparing children for their future roles thus positioning children as passive members of society (Biggeri and Santi 2012; Cassidy 2017). Shifting the view of children

from passive to active members of society would encourage organisations to develop social order, policy, and practices collaboratively with children, rather than imposing adult-centred visions of childhood onto them (Mayall 2000).

Lang (2022) first problematised the conception of childhood in sports and identified that many normalised practices compromise children's welfare, expose them to various forms of abuse and violate many human rights. When children are labelled 'talented' or enter talent development systems they (and the sporting entourage) are at risk of developing a rigid mindset about their abilities, engagement with sport, future potential and autonomy over their future development (Baker, Johnston, and Till 2024). This feeds into the misconception that children are *adults in training* and aligns with a philosophical position connecting childhood to the concept of *Tabula Rasa*, portraying children as 'blank slates' (Duschinsky 2012). This concept does not imply formlessness but emphasises that a child's mind, likened to white paper, is deeply influenced by their experiences during childhood (Duschinsky 2012). Viewing children through the label 'talented' places them in a state of becoming, emphasising their future potential, and positions adults in roles of responsibility and influence over the direction of their childhood (Kehily 2004). This perspective tends to overlook children as beings in the present, which can limit their opportunities to fully experience their current existence due to an accelerated adulthood and future focus.

The nature of PYS and talent development systems therefore poses a significant risk to children's well-being due to the focus on what the child becomes, rather than who they are. Due to the pressures experienced in PYS, and significant commitments required to meet these pressures, many children sacrifice other opportunities to prioritise their sporting success (e.g. social development and school commitments, see Mills et al. 2014). Whilst some children will be offered a professional sporting contract, the limited likelihood of this outcome renders the sacrifice of childhood for the prioritisation of future success disproportionately skewed (McGlinchey et al. 2022). While not the case for all athletes (Harris, Collins, and Nash 2023), research has shown that players who are deselected from talent development pathways report significant issues in mental health and well-being such as loss of identity, anxiety, fear and depression (Brown and Potrac 2009).

The environment associated with PYS contradicts the idea of safe sport, defined as 'a physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environment where participants can thrive and experience the full benefits of sport participation' (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024, 1323) which applies to athletes of *all* ages. Children specifically have the right to participate in safe *and enjoyable* sporting environments (Mountjoy et al. 2022). When PYS is problematised, many normalised practices can be considered a threat to children's enjoyment of sport and their welfare (Mountjoy et al. 2016, 2022). Such critiques are essential for addressing the broader implications identified in childhood studies, where the misconception of childhood and its impact on children's well-being and future potential must be carefully examined and re-evaluated.

The discourse surrounding PYS has been used to justify maltreatment (Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers 2017) and is amplified by the misconception of childhood, where children are viewed as adults in training (Lang 2022). Given these concerns, it is crucial to understand the experiences children have within PYS over a longitudinal period. While adults should not be gatekeepers to including children's voices (Lundy 2007), without a shift in the way sporting organisations position children or understand childhood, it is hard for children to take initiative and partake in the organisation and structure of their sport (Mayall 2000).

Evidence shows that when children's voices are meaningfully included in sports clubs, it not only adds value but also fosters a redistribution of power that benefits everyone involved (Everley 2022). Recognising children as active members of society and integrating their perspectives can help reassess and improve conditions within PYS, ensuring alignment with the principles of safe and enjoyable sport for children.

Well-being and well-becoming

In the context of living well, Ben-Arieh (2000) introduced the distinction between well-being and well-becoming. Well-being centres on the present moment while well-becoming emphasises a child's future. Ben-Arieh argues that prioritising well-becoming, aimed at preparing children for adulthood, implies that children are not viewed as citizens in the present which compromises their immediate human rights; this perspective aligns with Uprichard's (2008) assertion that children are often perceived as 'future adults' rather than 'young human beings' in their own right. This has been explored within education, where emphasis is placed on recognising the agency and rights of children in the present and advocating for their participation in decisions that affect their lives, rather than focusing solely on future outcomes (Biggeri and Santi 2012). In the case of PYS, particularly football academies, the focus is often on shaping children into future professional players, with limited attention to their status as children (Adams and Carr 2019). This future-oriented approach overlooks the importance of well-being in the present, despite evidence showing that a child's current happiness significantly influences their well-becoming and future well-being. Recognising children as active agents with rights requires a fundamental shift in how childhood is conceptualised and how well-being is balanced with well-becoming. However, social indicators such as academic performance or participation in talent development programs continue to prioritise future potential over present experiences, reinforcing a narrow and incomplete view of childhood.

A definition of well-being, with input from children, states that adolescent well-being is 'a multifaceted perception of an interaction between an individual's positive feelings and external influences' (Gennings, Brown, and Hewlett 2021, 84). Within sport, external influences such as the training environment, coach's behaviour, parental support, structure of the sport and relationship with teammates and how this makes a child feel can therefore impact children's overall well-being and subsequent well-becoming. If not well managed, investment in well-becoming can easily exploit a child's well-being (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014). Within sport, children are often described as commodities within talent development systems (Anderson et al. 2023; David 1999, 2005; Mountjoy et al. 2016; Lang 2022) due to the system's focus on what the child becomes. Ben-Arieh (2000) argues that there is often no justification for a sole focus on the well-becoming perspective. However, Coakley (2015) outlines that 'the great sport myth' is the justification for PYS and its focus on well-becoming:

> The pervasive and nearly unshakable belief in the inherent purity and goodness of sport. Despite evidence to the contrary, many people combine this belief with two others: (a) the purity and goodness of sport is transmitted to those who participate in or consume it; and (b) sport inevitably leads to individual and community development (403)

Children are active agents with inherent rights, supported by parents advocating for their best interests (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, and Vandevelde 2009). Initiated by the UNCRC in 1989, the first treaty exclusively for children, it explicitly acknowledges children as rights

bearers. Kerr (2022) explains that human rights should be interwoven with children's sport; however, sport is also identified as a space where children's rights can be violated, due to the misconception of childhood as outlined in this paper. The ongoing development of safeguarding in sporting contexts, coupled with under-resourcing and its low prioritisation, further limits the current ability to effectively minimise harm (Ellingsen and Danielsen 2017; Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). David (1999) explains that this is a result of the sporting industry considering how children with talent can benefit the industry, as opposed to considering how sport can benefit the child, thus showing a disregard for their well-being. This relates to the commodification, or dehumanisation (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024), of children who are part of win-at-all-cost systems (Donnelly 2024). Adams and Kavanagh (2020) identified that elite athletes (aged between 23 and 25 years old) saw themselves as 'pawns in a power game' without autonomy throughout their career within high performance sport. Children within high performance sport often need to navigate an accelerated adulthood in the form of pressures, attention from media, separation from parents and high workloads (David 2005). This accelerated adulthood can often contradict their human rights (see Lang 2022 for specific examples).

The current study

This article positions children as active citizens of the present, deserving respect for their current experiences and acknowledgement of their future potential. We aim to critically examine children's experiences in PYS to create change in their world, rather than focusing on improving talent development practices, as is common in research (Wrang et al. 2022). Safeguarding concerns in sports, a topic emphasised for decades (Everley 2020), prompted an exploration of children's experiences within an environment typically associated with an accelerated adulthood, professional football academies. These environments have been described as pervasive in children's lives and pose threats such as economic exploitation, lack of protection from maltreatment, and limited access to health, education, and family life (Mason et al. 2019).

This paper investigates the impact of a talent development system on the well-being of children by examining the of experiences of children, parents, and academy staff in PYS. It addresses a gap in the literature by applying the concept of well-becoming to PYS and problematising how misconceptualising children as adults in training contributes to the undermining of their rights, failing to fully empower, respect, or protect children within the system. Wrang et al. (2022) argue that children's perspectives are often used to benefit coaching practices or the academy system, rather than to improve the system itself. This study seeks to use children's perspectives to inform how their well-being within PYS can be enhanced, making a unique contribution to the sports sociology and talent development literature.

Methods

Documentary analysis

In August 2022, the British public broadcasting channel, Channel 4, released a documentary series titled 'Football Dreams: The Academy' which followed the Crystal Palace professional football academy. The six-episode documentary captures a representation of the experiences

of the under 9 to under 18 teams over the course of one year at the academy, broadcasting 282 min of footage. The documentary showcases the lived experiences of children and their families within the talent development pathway. Additionally, it captures the experiences and perspectives of academy coaches, the academy director, the first team manager, the club chairman, and a premier league player who was part of the professional academy as a youth athlete.

Each episode of the documentary focuses on the daily lives of different age groups, ranging from under-9s to under-18s, ending with a contract decision where children learn whether they will remain at the academy or have their time there terminated. While the documentary is not a 'true' representation of PYS, given its careful curation and editing for educational and entertainment purposes, it offers a valuable perspective. Pavlogiannis, Eliasson, and Söderström (2024) emphasise the importance of examining patterns in the everyday realities of children's sports practices through observational studies. This secondary data is particularly valuable as it provides a unique window into the daily experiences of a vulnerable group, including children as young as eight, who might otherwise be inaccessible through traditional data collection methods due to ethical concerns. The documentary captures a broad range of perspectives, including those of children and adults in decision-making roles, over the course of a year. It provides in-depth data through both naturalistic observations (e.g. filming of training sessions, matches, team talks, contract decision meetings, and car journeys to the academy) and elicited data (e.g. individual and group interviews at the academy or participants' homes). By examining a mixture of naturalistic and elicited data from various participants, the documentary provides valuable insights into the talent development pathway that other research methods might not capture. Additionally, capturing the perspectives of adults involved in decision-making roles could enhance our understanding of how children's rights are upheld in sports settings. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of children's experiences within elite sports environments.

We acknowledge that the use of documentaries as a source of data may not be without its issues, such as those related to the motives and biases of the creators, leading questions and the selective editing and presentation of material seen as 'newsworthy', and the need to capture and retain an audience, with a subsequent focus on emotional, rather than objective content. We argue, however, that they also provide firstly an alternative source of data that may not be easily available elsewhere, data that may be more naturalistic, and almost ethnographic in nature. Secondly, while the content of a documentary may present a single point in time, the impact of sport, the practices depicted, and the social consequences occur before, during, and after the documentary is broadcast (McDonald 2007). Thirdly, popular media can glamorise sport, leaving audiences with the perception that sport benefits all those involved. In contrast, documentaries position sport within its social context, revealing dimensions beyond the glamour and enhancing appreciation of the broader sporting context. As such, we acknowledge that their analysis requires a constructivist approach, whereby we are not seeking to identify an objective 'truth', but rather the reality of the documentary. Indeed, as Pollak (2008) notes, documentaries create their own realities, being a product of both their time and their context of production.

Data access, management and analysis

The documentary was observed through *Box of Broadcasts*, a platform designed to provide access to broadcast content for educational and research purposes. The documentary was independently watched and analysed by two analysts (authors one and three). Each analyst maintained a reflexive diary throughout the process. The reflexive diaries were used to record methodological decisions, emerging biases, and reflections on the data, ensuring a transparent and reflexive approach to the analysis. The analysis followed the stages of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2022). For familiarisation with the data, episodes were watched, transcribed, and each transcript was read three times. Meaningful units of text were highlighted and used to generate initial themes. The themes were then shared and discussed between the analysts, with reflections grounded in the concepts of well-being and well-becoming. These discussions ensured a comprehensive and balanced interpretation of the documentary's content. The themes identified were of a similar nature and related to pressures experienced by children, parents and the sporting entourage and issues surrounding athlete welfare and children's rights.

Ethics

This study received institutional ethical approval from Bournemouth University. The ethical concerns surrounding research involving children, a potentially vulnerable group, may explain the limited participation of younger children in this field (Pavlogiannis, Eliasson, and Söderström 2024). Therefore, innovative methods are needed to address these ethical challenges. The documentary offers a creative solution by providing a unique and in-depth representation of the realities faced by children as young as eight years old, as well as their parents and academy staff, within an elite sports academy. As the data analysed were publicly available, informed consent was not required. Although this report uses role descriptors (e.g. player, coach), instead of participant names, to maintain anonymity. Pseudonyms were not used, as it was not possible to consult participants on their preferences.

Regarding positionality, both analysts have experience in competitive sport, with the first author competing at a regional level in Athletics and the second at an international level in Softball. While both have played football, neither has participated in a professional academy setting, positioning them as outsiders to the community under investigation. This dual perspective allows for valuable insights into the pressures of high-performance sport while maintaining critical distance. The researchers acknowledge that their understanding of the children's experiences within the talent development system can only ever be partial, but the author's experiences and perspectives allow them to offer valuable insights into the athletic experience while maintaining a critical distance from the professional football academy system.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the documentary transcripts led to the development of three overarching themes that broadly touch on the different ways that children's well-becoming is prioritised over their well-being. The first theme examines how well-becoming is embedded in the academy structure due to its business-oriented nature. The second theme

explores how well-becoming extends beyond the academy structure by exploring how it is normalised by parents and the sporting entourage. This normalisation fosters a future-focused mindset in children, with little consideration for their present well-being. The final theme examines how the burden of coping with this hyper-focus on well-becoming is placed on the children themselves, potentially masking a system that exploits their well-being.

Well-becoming as an integral part of the academy structure

This theme explores how the business-oriented nature of the academy prioritises a future focus and well-becoming. Talent development pathways in football have been associated with the commodification of young players for commercial interests and the prioritisation of this over the needs and perspectives of children (Yilmaz et al. 2020). One coach captures the performance-focused nature of the academy during a half-time talk:

> If you want to stay on the team you perform. There is no grey area you have to perform. This is the results business. This is elite sport. It does not give you another chance, another chance, another chance. There are no excuses, all right? – Head Coach of U18s.

The emphasis on performance and results pushes children towards adult ideals of sport, accelerating their adulthood and shifting their experiences from what the 'being' child might want, such as fun (Visek et al. 2015) and play (Matthews et al. 2024), to a focus on performance outcomes. Despite this, there is no evidence supporting the effectiveness of performance-focused youth training contexts (Wilson et al., 2024). Instead, there are growing calls for research and the development of person-centred approaches within elite youth sport (Aine, Muhonen, and Toivonen 2022; Matthews et al. 2024; Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). The business-oriented nature of the football academy is also reflected and internalised by parents within the documentary:

> It's not a personality contest, it's a business and the academy need to decide whether they're going to invest more money and time on your child, so that's what it boils down to at the end of the day – Mother of U14s player.

> I need to find somebody who is good at marketing, because it is about a sale's pitch. It is about selling the individual. I know that sounds awful. I am talking about him like a product but that's what he is going to be. Which is really sad but that is what he's going to be – Mother of U14s player.

These descriptions reduce children to investment opportunities, reflecting a lack of concern for their present experiences as beings. Instead, the focus shifts entirely to their future. Commercialisation in sport has become increasingly influential (Bergeron et al. 2024) and these parents openly acknowledge the transformation of their child into marketable products. This highlights the pervasive reach of the academy's business-oriented nature, shaping not only the performance-focused attitudes of coaches but also the way parents perceive their children's value. The documentary narrator encapsulates the relentless business orientation of the academy:

> Seven days a week, morning till night, the academy is a machine geared to developing young talent – Documentary Narrator.

Overall, this theme highlights how the academy's inherent nature as a production--focused, business-oriented entity with a hyper-focus on well-becoming. By prioritising financial and performance outcomes, these institutions often overlook the present well--being of children in favour of their future market potential. This approach reinforces the misconception of children as merely 'adults in training' (Lang 2022).

Normalised focus on well-becoming

The emphasis on well-becoming is not only an integral part of the academy structure but also a cultural norm, internalised by coaches, parents, and players alike. In the documentary, both parents and coaching staff assume that the goal of becoming a professional footballer is universally shared:

> It is *everybody's* dream to play in the Premier League – First Team Manager.

> *Everyone* wants the same outcome. There's millions of children in the world and *everyone* wants their child to be the next Marcus Rashford – Mother of U11s player.

> My dream would be that he represents his country. *Any parent* would love to see that – Father of U9s player.

While it is right to nurture and develop children's talents, it is worth questioning why adults push these talents to their highest possible level, particularly when the pursuit of children's well-being is overshadowed by the drive to achieve professional success. Within education, this deficit view of children as lacking skills and needing to be 'rescued' from childhood to prepare them for their future lives has been critiqued for positioning children as powerless, limiting their influence over their futures, and marginalising their voices (Cassidy 2017). The prioritisation of well-becoming raises significant concerns over their well-being as show in the quotes below.

> In my family, we have a mantra. So we have faith, we have family and then we have football. Everything revolves around football. And to get to that next level is a massive commitment. So, one is me travelling to [the training venue]; on average, it probably takes me three hours every day going from East London to South London. For [the child], it means usually us coming home at nine o'clock in the evening – Father of U11s player.

> I would love for [the child] to become the greatest footballer there ever was, you know, and play for England. But if they close the door on [the child], we will go and open another door. And he knows that. He knows full well that I've got his back, and I'll follow him wherever he needs to go – Mother of U9s player.

Parental influence is a major factor in children's choice to engage in a particular sport at an elite level (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). Harris, Collins, and Nash (2023) noted that while children in youth sports appreciate having parents who are knowledgeable about their sport, this preference requires a delicate balance to avoid parents becoming overbearing or overly involved. The documentary portrays that most parents have an intense passion and are willing to make large sacrifices to support their child's well-becoming where they potentially tip the balance from knowledgeable to overinvolved. Importantly, the sociocultural environment shapes individual actions (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024) and norms are developed based on what individuals observe (Aine, Muhonen, and Toivonen 2022). Therefore,

parents should not be criticised for providing intense levels of support; rather, this behaviour is a reflection of the well-becoming emphasis embedded within the academy structure, which has become normalised in this context. This is problematic because normalising a hyper-focus on well-becoming can lead to a sacrifice of well-being, as evidenced by the following children.

> We don't go on holidays. We just work hard. We have football, fitness, football, fitness, football, fitness every single week. My dad sacrificed everything for me – U11s player.

> I don't think about plan B, cos my dream is to become a professional footballer. I want that scholarship so much. Like, that will just be my…my joy if I can get that scholarship – U16s player.

> My dream is to become a pro footballer and I wanna score a winner for England in the World Cup. I could picture, like England v France, at the 90th minute I get the ball, dribble past everyone and score. I've got very high expectations cos if I'm not a footballer I don't know what I'm gonna be – U14s player.

These narratives highlight how children's identities and well-being are deeply entangled with their aspirations. Ronkainen and Ryba (2019), in their narrative enquiry into pre-elite youth athletes' identities, observed that young athletes were primarily concerned with who they will become, rather than who they are in the present. The hyper-focus on well-becoming is also normalised by the broadcast of the documentary. Future media production should move beyond reinforcing the naïve social belief in the inherent goodness of sport (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024) and instead critically challenge the organisational structures and practices that elevate well-becoming at the expense of well-being. The hyper-focus on well-becoming extends to coaches, who may lose sight of the fact that these players are still children.

> When they're in this elite environment, you do forget that these boys are only 16, 17. Sometimes you can be too hard on these boys. They are still kids. – Head Coach of U18s.

Exploitation of ambition placing undue pressure on the 'being'

Successful athletes are often celebrated for their determination and drive (Mallett and Hanrahan 2004). The idea that determination is key to success is widespread among academy players and their families:

> If I work hard, I would make the two-year contract. I just have to strive for it – U12s player.

> My nan encourages me if we get some kind of disappointment, she just says 'keep on going, keep trying and the outcome you would like will eventually come.' So I always listen to her and never give up – 16s player.

> We explained to him that if this is your dream, it doesn't matter. Just keep pushing at it, keep working at it and you'll achieve that – Mother of U16.

Relational influences such as coaches, professional players and family can offer guidance to young athletes who have not experienced life as an elite athlete by showing how their sporting future might look, and which behaviours are more desirable than others (Phoenix and Sparkes 2007; Ronkainen & Ryba 2019). The narrative that determination is key to success in the academy is understood by children and perpetuated by the first team manager and coaches within the academy:

> There's a lot of kids who want to be a football player, but just a few of them will make it, and the difference will be, how much do you want to make it happen? – First Team Manager.

> The hard work, not giving up, I think that just comes with the environment. That's what we expect anyway – U12s Coach.

Roderick (2006) explains that a 'good attitude' in professional football is associated with values such as a constant desire to win, a willingness to conform to club norms, and an acceptance of surveillance. This is problematic because players are expected to consistently adhere to these norms, and the criteria for what constitutes a 'good attitude' are often applied arbitrarily (Roderick 2006). While research on deselected players' experiences in football academies has praised these systems for fostering transferable skills like intrinsic motivation (Williams and MacNamara 2020), we argue that attributing success in the academy to determination oversimplifies reality. This narrative disregards the complex structural factors shaping player outcomes and shifts the burden of coping with a hyper-focus on well--becoming and systemic pressures onto the children themselves. By framing determination as the key to success, the system absolves itself of accountability for the challenges it imposes, leaving children to internalise failure as a personal inadequacy. This raises significant concerns about who ultimately benefits from such a narrative. We argue that emphasising determination as the defining factor of success does not serve the best interests of children and their well-being. Instead, it benefits the academy by masking an exploitative system that prioritises institutional goals over children's well-being.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study provides a qualitative investigation into children's experiences within a talent development pathway, highlighting the factors that reinforce a hyper-focus on well--becoming in sport. The value of this research lies in examining children's experiences in academy football through the lenses of well-being and well-becoming. By addressing a gap in sport research regarding how childhood is conceptualised, we explore how PYS can impact children's well-being and human rights (Lang 2022). Our findings show that the academy maintains a hyper-focus on children's well-becoming, which is deeply embedded in its structure and reinforced by the sporting entourage as a social norm. Furthermore, coping with the focus on well-becoming is often placed on children and attributed to their determination to succeed in PYS. We argue that framing success in the academy as dependent on a child's determination conceals a system that undermines their well-being.

Critiques of early specialisation and talent development systems have existed since the 1970s (Maheu 1972). However, the aim of this article is not merely to critique academy football but to offer suggestions for creating positive change within football and beyond. Donnelly (2024) outlines that we must discover how to nurture young athletes while acting in the best interests of the child. Aligned with Bergeron et al. (2024), we argue that children's rights must take priority in sport settings and competition, as their well-being cannot be effectively supported without this foundation. This research focuses on a context where children have formal human rights protections which raises important questions about environments where such safeguards are absent. In such settings, children may be even more vulnerable to exploitation and the pressures of high-performance

sport, emphasising the need to examine how these contexts influence children's rights and well-being.

To conclude, we outline four points for reflection that challenge the status-quo and encourage a critical evaluation of the environments created for young people. Although these reflection points may appear radical, we argue that the current academy structure is already radical when viewed through the lens of well-being and well-becoming. As Everley (2022) suggests, any solutions to these challenges are inherently complex, requiring a combination of cultural change within organisations, avenues for children to express their perspectives, and a commitment to genuinely listening to children.

1. Commitment should come from the academy to the child.

The focus should shift toward holding academies accountable for retaining children by evaluating and improving their own practices. We suggest that children should not have to commit to an academy, but the academy commits to a child until the age of 16 or 18 years old. This would force academies to genuinely consider holistic development. It also emphasises commitment to the child's present (well-)being rather than solely on their future potential. At the age of 16 or 18, children should then expect to 'graduate' from the academy. Crucially, this approach would empower children by giving them more choice and autonomy in their developmental pathway as they would choose whether to stay at the academy that has made a commitment to them. Subsequently, academies could be motivated to improve their practices and align with children's needs in order to retain players.

2. Safeguarding policies and academy structures should be co-created with children.

Existing research has suggested that children do enjoy the challenges associated with PYS, but a wider understanding of enjoyment needs to be explored in these settings (Harris, Collins, and Nash 2023). Children's voices need to be placed at the centre of exploration, but how their voices are empowered needs to be considered. The inclusion of their voice should be more than just 'add children and stir' (Pugh 2014), which risks superficial engagement or 'well-being washing' (Jackson, Sam, and Dawson 2024). Children cannot be kept safe if they are not listened to therefore co-creating safeguarding policies with children ensures their concerns will be genuinely reflected in policy. Likewise, the academy structure should be re-envisioned with children's perspectives to ensure it truly reflects their needs, expectations and experiences. Importantly, children will only share their perspectives if they feel it is safe to do so. Therefore, academies should consider how they can create a safe space for children to share their views (See Lundy 2007). Additionally, this revision of policy and academy structure should be developed with sociologists of sport or childhood – or at least open to scrutiny by them (Lang 2022). Through children's engagement with future research, we should gain understanding by developing new questions, ideas and a vision of PYS through children's unique vantage point (Pugh 2014). This will help to align policy and practice with research.

3. Embedding children into the organisation and governance of sport.

We propose the establishment of a children's movement within sport, developed *by children, for children*. This movement should have meaningful representation at all levels,

including club, academy, and national governing body boards. Andersson (2022) serves as an example of good practice, illustrating how youth-driven initiatives can thrive when adults provide the necessary resources, mentorship, and structural support. The adult's role here is to facilitate and resource this process while stepping back to allow children to direct its focus and drive. This approach moves beyond tokenism and cultivates a generation of empowered children while ensuring their voices are integral to shaping safer sporting environments.

4. Implement an age restriction on academy recruitment until children's rights are upheld.

Children's rights are non-negotiable, and both children's well-being and well-becoming cannot be supported if their rights are not upheld. Until academies can evidence how they will uphold children's rights and support both children's well-being and well-becoming, recruitment should not occur for children under the age of 16 or 18 years old. The purpose of this recommendation is not to oppose talent development pathways but to advocate for ways they can be best experienced by children (Harris, Collins, and Nash 2023). Ultimately, the responsibility for this lies with public and private sectors of society, rather than individual coaches, parents, or athletes (Aine, Muhonen, and Toivonen 2022). Policy and practice need to align with research focused on children's rights and their well-being before change can occur. Once alignment is achieved, recruitment can resume, with careful consideration of the appropriate age or developmental stage at which children should be introduced into the academy structure (Bergeron et al. 2024).

Limitations

This study draws on a single documentary, which focuses on specific narratives within one professional football academy. Documentary narratives are subject to editorial bias, with selective editing potentially skewing the portrayal of participants and overemphasising certain perspectives. However, our findings align with existing research, and we do not claim to present novel data. Instead, the study's significance lies in applying the lens of well-being and well-becoming to PYS and offering evidence-based recommendations for practice.

There is a lack of longitudinal research exploring the everyday realities of children in talent development programs (Pavlogiannis, Eliasson, and Söderström 2024; Wrang et al. 2022). Gaining access to this sample over a one-year period, alongside the sporting entourage, presents significant challenges. To address this gap in the literature, we adopted a creative methodology that allowed us to capture a range of perspectives that might otherwise have been inaccessible. Although participants were not directly involved in the research process, and their feedback on the findings could not be sought, we argue that this approach provides a depth and breadth of perspectives that traditional methods might miss or simply be unable to capture. Future research should consider using similar creative methodologies to explore professional youth sport and gather diverse, rich data from hard-to-reach populations.

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