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# Unlocking mental health and wellbeing in an English Premier League football academy using Lego® Serious Play®

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study examines the mental health and wellbeing challenges facing young male players in an English Premier League (EPL) football academy.

**Methodology:** The study utilises a creative multi-sensory methodology, Lego® Serious Play®, where the focus is upon the Lego® (method) and not the individual footballer (subject). Data were collected from academy footballers in the Under-14 age group.

**Findings:** The results highlight anxieties surrounding the academy registration and progression process within Association Football. Themes focus on (i) ambition and achievement, (ii) overcoming obstacles, (iii) metaphors for success, (iv) continuous improvement, (v) faith and optimism, and (vi) pushing limits to overcome the impossible.

**Practical implications:** The practical outcomes demonstrate that mental health and wellbeing conversations can be unlocked through play-based approaches. The practical outcomes demonstrate wider potential across various sport and leisure settings, including high-performance sport environments.

**Research contributions:** The study highlights the potential of using Lego® Serious Play® as a creative experiential methodology to better understand mental health issues in sport and leisure settings.

**Originality:** This is the first study to use the Lego® Serious Play® methodology in the context of managing sport and leisure organisations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Mental health and wellbeing; anxiety; association football; Lego® Serious Play®; football academies

## Introduction

Mental health issues among children and young people in England have risen significantly in recent years. According to NHS England (2023), one in five children and young people aged between 8 and 25 are affected by probable mental disorders, including 20.3% of those aged between 8 and 16, and 23.3% of individuals aged 17 and 19. Young men face unique mental

health challenges due to societal expectations that can discourage emotional expression, leading to significant underreporting of their struggles, and highlighting the need for tailored interventions (Young Minds, n.d.).

The elite association football academy system in England, hereafter referred to as football, presents additional challenges. Approximately 12,500 young footballers are enrolled in football

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academies, yet only a small fraction will achieve professional status (Mcgregor, 2019). Deselection from a football academy can lead to psychological distress, emphasising the importance of comprehensive mental health support in these environments (Saward et al., 2023). Traditional gender norms further complicate the issue, as emotional vulnerability is often seen as a weakness, particularly in male-dominated sport environments like football (McKenzie et al., 2022). For young male footballers, expressing mental health concerns can be perceived as a career risk, as it could jeopardise their prospects within the high-performance culture of football academies (Mortensen et al., 2013).

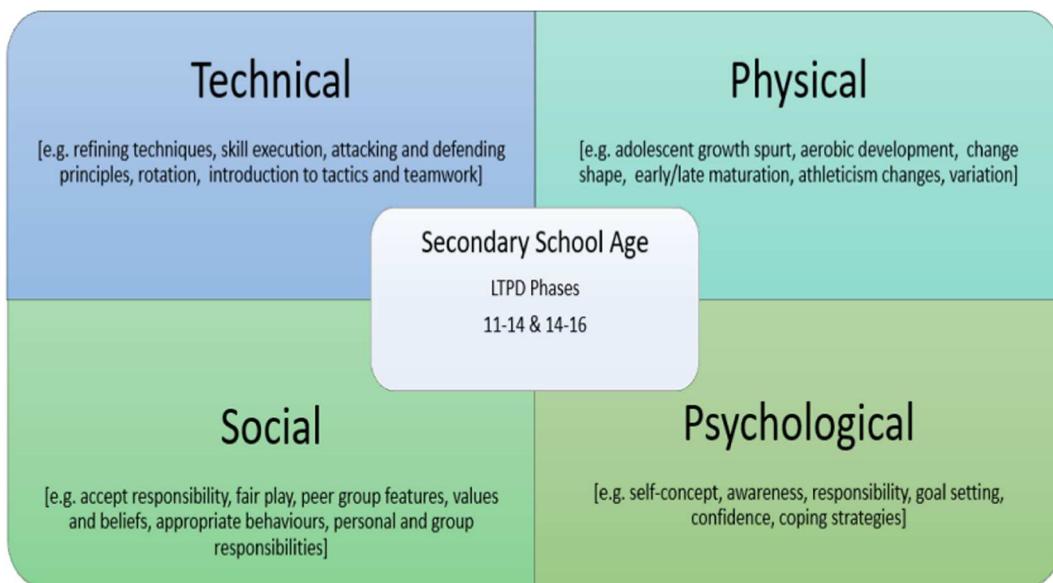
This study aims to explore the mental health and anxiety issues surrounding the registration and progression of young male footballers within the English football academy system. There is significant turnover as half of all academy players leave the system before turning 16, and amongst those who leave, less than 10% secure a professional contract (English Football League, 2024). This study will also demonstrate how *Lego® Serious Play®* can be used as an effective tool to support young footballers in managing anxiety and reflecting on their experiences. *Lego®*, the world's most popular and recognisable toy (Statista, 2024), is an appropriate tool for facilitating open communication and creative problem-solving. The interactive nature of *Lego®* makes it particularly effective in high-performance sport environments, allowing players to externalise their thoughts and emotions in a safe, non-threatening way (Henderson & Shipway, 2022). The findings reinforce Shipway and Henderson's (2023) recommendation for adopting *Lego® Serious Play®* in sport environments due to its scalability, adaptability to various contexts, and ability to be replicated and integrated into existing frameworks across different team sizes and different sports. This study advocates play-based learning pedagogies to enhance young athletes' mental health across diverse sport and leisure settings.

## Literature review

### ***Supporting standards and management in association football academy systems***

A football academy is a training scheme where professional football clubs recruit young football players, with the goal of progressing and developing them into professional footballers (EFL, 2024). The English Premier League (2023) described an academy as an establishment for the coaching and education of players operated by a club in accordance with the rules and regulations set by the Professional Games Board (PGB). In the English football academy system, young footballers at the end of their probationary term with a professional football club are either (i) offered a professional contract, (ii) retained for an additional period within the academy system, or (iii) released by their "employer," the football club. An academy has four categories. Category 1–3 academies enrol players from the Under-9 age group through to professional players. Category 1 is the highest status of the academy. Category 4 is a late development model, operating from the Under-17 age group upwards (English Football League, 2024).

In the English Premier League (EPL), football academies are governed by the (i) Premier League Youth Development Rules and (ii) guidelines from the Professional Game Academy Audit Company (PGAAC). The PGAAC, set up in 2018 by the EPL, the English Football League (EFL), and the FA (Football Association), supports the delivery of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). The EPPP provides independent quality assurance to professional football club academies, ensuring that academies are safe to operate and compliant with youth development rules (Webb et al., 2020). According to the EPPP guidelines, academies must exhibit a holistic approach to personal and professional growth through their ethos, objectives, and practices. This encompasses enabling a nurturing atmosphere, where young athletes can thrive, whilst



**Figure 1.** Secondary school age long-term player development phases (adapted from Football Association (2005)).

equipping them with essential life skills to assume responsibility and contribute positively, as balanced individuals in society (Roe & Parker, 2016). The football landscape makes talent identification a strategic and tactical decision (Ryom et al., 2020). As noted by Diouf et al. (2024), there are very low transition conversions, where only 180 of the 1.5 million players (0.012%) who participate in England's youth development football pathway secured a professional contract with an EPL club (Mallows, 2023).

Previous studies by both Bloom (1985) and Côté (1999) placed emphasis on the varying demands on players, families, and coaches at each stage of development. These findings, supported by actions from other sports, influenced the decision by the FA to adopt a Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) model (Premier League, 2011). The FA's approach is supported by their Four Corner model for the development of players, which provides the framework for player development (Football Association, 2014). This model, illustrated in Figure 1, explores the interaction between technical/

tactical, social, physical, and psychological elements of the players' environment (Diouf et al., 2024). Using Lego® Serious Play®, this study will explore how aspects of the Four Corner model align with the player progression and registration process within the academy system in the English professional game.

Football academy age groups fall within three phases: foundation (U5–U11), youth development (U12–U16), and professional development (U17–U21). This study assesses the youth development phase using an Under-14 age group cohort. The EPL clubs are audited against a diverse range of criteria that assess their standards in relation to leadership and management (O'Gorman et al., 2021). These include looking outside of their own club structures to identify best practices to feedback into their academy and to learn from other sport environments. Football clubs are audited to ensure that they provide mechanisms for staff to challenge the existing processes and engage with external stakeholders to inform practice within the academy system (Webb et al., 2020).

In the English football academy system, there are often high levels of shock, trauma, disappointment, and anger amongst young players released from their football clubs (BBC, 2024). There is an increasing concern regarding the academy experiences of young players, particularly those who are prematurely released at various stages of the development pathway (Mitchell et al., 2020). Potential mishandling of this process can lead to adverse psychological and emotional effects (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Following deselection, Sweeney et al. (2021) observed players questioning their identity, athletic capabilities, and significance of sport (Neeley et al., 2018). Consequently, there is a need for enhanced support mechanisms to protect those young footballers who have migrated through the system and whose personality and identity are very often primarily linked to being a footballer (Mitchell et al., 2014). Too frequently, they become enveloped in their own and often their parents' social media profiles, lose their own individual identities, and become known primarily as the "kid who plays football" (BBC, 2024). As such, football academies are increasingly conscious of the need to better protect the players and enable them to feel "worth for being themselves" and help to safeguard their mental health and wellbeing (Reverberi et al., 2020).

### ***Mental health, anxiety, and association football***

The World Health Organization (2020) recorded that worldwide, 16% of children and young people experience a mental health condition. While organised sports offer physical, psychological, and social benefits, enhancing mental wellbeing, they can also pose significant risks, stress, and drawbacks impacting young people's mental health (Vella, 2019). It is essential to ensure that the benefits outweigh any detrimental aspects, and high-performance sport for children and young people should be thoughtfully constructed (Gould, 2019).

According to Sweeney et al. (2021), young academy footballers face challenges that affect their mental wellbeing, including forming a sporting identity, which can subsequently suffer if disrupted, and impact on mental health. The competitive nature of football, leading to unexpected transitions including injury or deselection, can hinder the formation of deep friendships due to issues with trust and emotional intimacy, which ultimately affect player wellbeing (Sothern & O'Gorman, 2021).

The foundational bio-psycho-social model (Engel, 1977) provides a guiding framework for understanding mental health in football, addressing biological, psychological, and social factors. Biologically, players face physical demands like fatigue, injury, and performance pressure, which affect mental wellbeing (Lundqvist et al., 2024). Psychologically, stress from selection, confidence maintenance, and emotional regulation contribute to mental health challenges (Castro-Sánchez et al., 2019). Socially, relationships with teammates, coaches, and external expectations also impact wellbeing (Gucciardi et al., 2009). However, the model has been criticised for oversimplifying individual, context-specific challenges (Gritti, 2017).

Both the bio-psycho-social model and the current FA Four Corner model advocate a holistic approach to player development, though from differing perspectives. The bio-psycho-social model emphasises the interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors affecting mental health, while the Four Corner model focuses on physical, psychological, and social growth in young players. Both models highlight the importance of physical health, mental wellbeing, and social relationships, with the former focusing on stress, confidence, and social dynamics, and the latter integrating these factors into training. Combined, these models both support comprehensive player development. To complement these established models, Shipway and Henderson (2023) suggested that high-performance environments like football academies can benefit from creative

approaches such as *Lego® Serious Play®* to examine player self-awareness, communication, and mental health (Henderson & Shipway, 2023).

### ***The theoretical framework behind the *Lego® Serious Play®* method***

At the heart of *Lego® Serious Play®* are the theoretical elements of constructivism, identity, imagination, and play (McCusker, 2014). Aligned with this theoretical perspective, Shipway and Henderson (2023) illustrated that the *Lego® Serious Play®* methodology relies on four foundational pillars: (i) the employment of metaphors, (ii) bolstered by the principle of play, (iii) the theory of flow, and (iv) constructivism. James (2013) suggested that the methodology is exploratory, creative, and playful, and provides opportunities for participants to experiment and test their ideas without fear of failure or being wrong. This study places the young footballers at the centre of this process. In business environments, Kristiansen and Rasmussen (2014) identified that *Lego® Serious Play®* is regularly used by global organisations, including Google, the International Red Cross, and NASA, to resolve complex real-world problems (Henderson & Shipway, 2024).

At the core of the *Lego® Serious Play®* methodology are theoretical concepts, models, and tools from the fields of both systems theory and behavioural science, and theories of how we know and how we learn (McCusker, 2020). The *Lego® Serious Play®* methodology is based upon two complementary learning theories, constructivism and constructionism (Papert, 1986; Peabody, 2015). According to constructivism (Piaget, 1954), from childhood to adulthood, knowledge and meaning evolve based on our experiences and interactions with the world (McCusker, 2020). This study tests this proposition through managing children and young people in a high-performance sport environment.

Participants progress through a methodology of “build” questions during a *Lego®*

*Serious Play®* session, following a process that will help to scaffold the session (Henderson & Shipway, 2023). According to Peabody and Noyes (2017), the use of metaphorical building followed by a period of group discussion constitutes an innovative way of thinking, communicating, and reflecting. Henderson and Shipway (2024) probed deeper, suggesting that due to the short period of time available for participants, the models are abstract, and this requires verbal description, which explains the metaphors and the underlying meanings and beliefs that are encapsulated in their models. *Lego® Serious Play®* uses a merger of model creation and the subsequent exploration of meaning, through storytelling (Peabody, 2015).

Shipway et al. (2022) argued that a pivotal success factor of a *Lego® Serious Play®* session is the scope to reflect on both the challenges and the process the participants are engaging in. This aspect is frequently neglected in the development and formulation of qualitative methodologies within sport and leisure contexts (Shipway & Henderson, 2023). This study advocates for more reflective outlooks that move away from traditional research approaches and towards more experiential learning activities. *Lego® Serious Play®* is theoretically grounded and empirically proven to help people in organisations to view their everyday management and organisational challenges in different ways (Kristiansen & Rasmussen, 2014). This study proposes that there is added value in applying this perspective within the management of sport and leisure organisations.

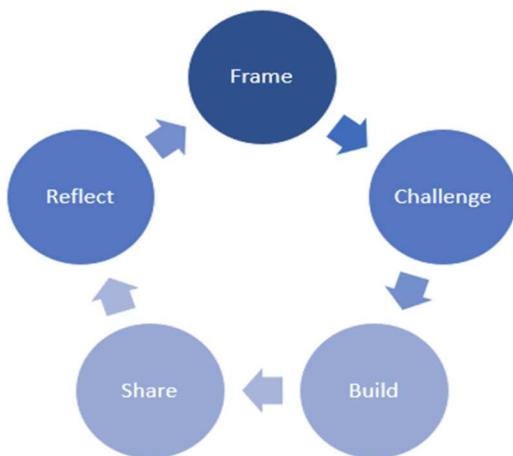
## **Methods**

### ***The creative methodology of *Lego® Serious Play®****

*Lego® Serious Play®* is a qualitative methodology that facilitates deep reflection, communication, and meaning-making through hands-on, metaphorical modelling, prioritising subjective experiences and co-constructed meanings

to capture insights which are often hard to express verbally (James & Nerantzi, 2019). This recognition is essential due to the developmental stage of Under-14 players in this study, who are still refining their emotional intelligence and communication skills, which can make it difficult to verbalise stress, pressures, or anxieties (Mcgregor, 2019). By building models with familiar Lego® bricks, there is an externalisation of complex emotions, social dynamics, and performance-related concerns in a safe and non-judgmental environment. This method unlocks hidden issues that might not surface in traditional qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys (Prior, 2018).

The tactile nature of Lego® allows players to create metaphors for their experiences, such as a precariously balanced tower, which symbolised instability in team selection. This aligns with Henderson and Shipway's (2024) emphasis on metaphor and storytelling to support change, empowering players to influence academy transitions and to take ownership of their development. By externalising their thoughts through Lego®, players can gain awareness of their reality, expressing tacit knowledge and deep metaphorical meanings which are not easily accessed through other methods (Wengel et al., 2016).



**Figure 2.** The five phases in Lego® Serious Play® (Henderson & Shipway, 2024).

Lego® Serious Play® follows four phases: challenge, build, share, and reflect (Blair & Dröge, 2020) (Figure 2). Henderson and Shipway (2024) introduced a fifth "framing" phase to strengthen the phenomenological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and enhance flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Directing enjoyment, attention, and focus increases engagement (Schutz & Pekrum, 2007) and demonstrates the method's potential in football and high-performance sport environments. Lego® Serious Play® creates a non-hierarchical, collaborative space where participants construct models in response to prompts (Henderson & Shipway, 2023). In this study, value lies not just in the Lego® itself but in its use as a player-led tool for mental health and wellbeing. Within an EPL academy, Lego® Serious Play® enables open discussions about mental health, fostering creativity and psychological resilience.

### Research sample and data collection

The EPL has implemented initiatives to support young footballers' mental health and wellbeing, addressing anxiety and transition challenges (Premier League, 2023). Lego® Serious Play® was chosen to explore these issues during the final months of the players' registration period, with insights from the workshop informing club support strategies for those either retained or released from the academy system. Data collection took place in March 2024 at an EPL training ground before an evening training session, involving Under-14 players. Recruitment was led by the academy manager and head of player safeguarding, with 15 of 19 squad members participating, which is a response of 79%. The sample size number is consistent with other Lego® Serious Play® studies, and the equivalent of three focus groups (Rabiee, 2004).

The ethnic breakdown of the Under-14 group included 46.7% White British ( $n=7$ ), 26.7% Black or Black British ( $n=4$ ), 13.3%

**Table 1.** Session framing and build activity challenges.

	Framing	Build challenge
Skills Build 1 (Technical) SkB1:	"This initial build is a warmup exercise. It is going to tell us a little bit about you and your approaches. You have a time budget of 1 minute to ..."	"Build a model of a Tower."
Skills Build 2 (Metaphoric) SkB2:	"We want you to understand that a brick can mean anything. So, this green 2 by 2 brick I am holding is for the rest of the session going to be Yoda. Pick the first brick that reaches out to you and make it mean whatever you want it to be and shout it out. Right, well done. Now thinking about the values of the football club you have a time budget of 90 seconds to ...."	"Pick a brick that you perceive reflects each of the values of the football club and the academy (ambition, integrity, community, respect and unity)."
Session Build (Story Telling) SB1:	"As you know each year as part of the academy, you have an annual review of your progress. I know when I have my review at work it brings a whole range of emotions, worries and concerns and I must do several things to keep my focus. The build challenge we have, with a time budget of 3 minutes to ...."	"Build a model of how you have approached the challenges of the academy registration and progression process."
Session Build (Outcome) SB2:	"If you could wave a magic wand and make the annual registration and progression review process better, how would you do this? The build challenge we have for you, with a time budget of 3 minutes, to ..."	"Build a model of what would make the academy registration and progression process better."

Mixed-race ( $n = 2$ ), 6.7% South Asian ( $n = 1$ ), and 6.7% from other ethnic minorities ( $n = 1$ ), and thus replicating the football player profile, as outlined by Kick it Out (2022). Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by the Higher Education Institution's Ethics Committee (HEI Ethics ID 54881). Players and parents were briefed on the research objectives and data collection before and at the start of the session, and were informed of their right to withdraw. Signed consent was obtained from participating players, with parental consent secured separately (Henderson & Shipway, 2024; Shipway et al., 2022).

The workshop was co-led by both authors, supported by academy staff. A 30-min briefing session ensured non-accredited Lego® Serious Play® facilitators understood the process, methods, and materials (Henderson & Shipway, 2023). Conducting the workshop in the academy allowed for natural observations of player interactions. The methodology followed structured phases, where facilitators framed the activity and then set the players a challenge "build" question, such as constructing a model of academy values. This prompted players to

engage in hands-on thinking by building and then writing the story and meaning of the build on the cue card, before then sharing and reflecting (Henderson & Shipway, 2023; Shipway & Henderson, 2023). The players were located on four tables in groups of 3–4 with an accredited facilitator or academy staff member on each table to ensure that timings were adhered to and ensure the session was completed in the 60-min window, prior to their evening training session.

The 60-min workshop was divided into four sections based on the Lego® Serious Play® method, incorporating both Skills Build (SkB) and Session Build (SB) activities (Table 1). Key questions related to football academy systems and the anxiety of young footballers during the transition process were integrated into the technical and main session builds. The workshop began with two preliminary activities: (i) a "warm-up" exercise and (ii) a metaphor challenge for the SkB. After the SkB, the footballers moved to targeted questions in the Session Build stage, completing two builds: (i) a "Story Telling" Build and (ii) an "Outcome Build". To maintain a positive mindset, workshop



**Figure 3.** The Lego® windows exploration bag.

questions were framed using the flipping process (Stavros et al., 2021), turning negative issues, like concerns about the academy transition, into more positive reflections.

Each player received a Lego® Serious Play® Window Exploration bag (Figure 3) to create individual models, encouraging diversity and valuing different perspectives (Shipway & Henderson, 2023). This allowed them to reflect on their feelings and concerns about the academy system. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. Following McCusker's (2014) four guidelines of (i) trust your hands, (ii) trust the process, (iii) everybody builds, and (iv) everybody takes part, the players agreed to the session etiquette before beginning the first activity.

### ***Analysis and interpretation of data***

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2014), is effective in qualitative research for identifying patterns and themes that offer

insights into participants' experiences. In this study, data were extracted verbatim from footballers' written comments on cue cards and the Lego® models they created. Data integration was achieved by photographing the Lego® models alongside the cue card comments and ensuring both written and visual elements could be analysed together. In the visual models, this involved analysing the bricks used rather than the words, whilst looking for common themes (such as colour, shape, and size). This integration provided a deeper understanding of the players' thoughts, feelings, and interpretations. The cue cards allowed the players to elaborate on their thoughts, values, and perceptions, which enriched the analysis (Henderson & Shipway, 2023). Once the data were coded, the themes and subthemes were reconciled and verified to ensure they accurately reflected the footballers' views. The coding structure for analysis was developed through a careful examination of these materials, guided by the research frameworks of both Holloway and Galvin (2016) and Jones (2022).

In this study, cue cards represented one component of the data collection process, complemented by in-depth discussions among the young players and critical evaluations of the Lego® Serious Play® models built, which provided interpretive depth beyond initial responses. The use of cue cards for data analysis is a powerful and tactile method (Waite, 2011). Harada and Waitt (2024) used cue card methodology in sociological research, showing how metaphorical prompts elicit rich, reflective responses and deepen understanding of routine practices. They are an embedded stage of the LSP data analysis process, helping to establish pattern recognition and inductive reasoning, deepen understanding, enhance readability, support experiential learning and team-based analysis, and give voice to participants (Henderson & Shipway, 2023).

Triangulation is a well-established methodological strategy in LSP studies (Shipway &

Henderson, 2023) that enhances the credibility, validity, and richness of findings by incorporating multiple perspectives and analytical approaches. Denzin (1978) established that triangulation addresses the inherent subjectivity of qualitative inquiry by enabling researchers to cross-validate interpretations and mitigate bias. In their study on women's football, Shipway et al. (2025) emphasised that LSP triangulation is not merely a tool for data verification but a means to develop a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena.

In this study, the in-depth LSP triangulation process involved collaborative analysis between the research team and Football Academy staff, including football coaches, team management, and safeguarding officials, ensuring that interpretations were informed by diverse professional and experiential viewpoints that also helped strengthen the validity of the findings and revealed multi-dimensional insights (Harada & Waitt, 2024). Using LSP in the context of Association Football, both Shipway et al. (2025) and Henderson et al. (2025) demonstrated how this multi-perspective integration strengthened the depth, trustworthiness of the findings and generated a holistic understanding of football players' experiences and the contextual factors shaping their engagement, aligning with best practices in qualitative research for achieving credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As highlighted, to ensure rigour, the academy manager and head of player safeguarding, who were not involved in facilitating the sessions, extensively reviewed the data. Their involvement helped minimise bias and confirmed the codes and themes, and ensured that the analysis was more reliable and balanced. Their external perspectives helped challenge assumptions, provided a more holistic view of the data, and reinforced the credibility of the analysis. This thematic analysis provided insights into the Lego® Serious Play® method by illustrating how it helped the

footballers explore their experiences and emotions. It revealed how the process fostered creative and reflective thinking and enhanced understanding of themes like teamwork, identity, and personal growth. Despite limitations such as a lack of generalisability (Wengel et al., 2021), the study demonstrated that Lego® Serious Play® supported meaningful reflections and discussions and offered a structured and creative environment for the players to articulate their lived experiences.

## Results and discussion

A diverse range of themes was prevalent within the data based on a combination of the written cue card comments and the assembled Lego® models. The findings developed a better understanding of the practices and processes through which Lego® Serious Play® can focus attention on the mental health and wellbeing and anxiety issues facing young players in the football academy system. Where appropriate, the findings were aligned against both the bio-psycho-social model and the FA Four Corner model that aims to enhance the physical, social, technical, and psychological components of player talent identification and development (Diouf et al., 2024).

The first technical Lego® Serious Play® (SkB1) build was to construct a tower. This "warm-up" exercise was completed with a variety of builds that visually demonstrated strong foundations, competitive approaches to building the highest tower, and good use of Lego® flags and Lego® minifigures. For the second build (SkB2), the "One Brick Metaphor" challenge, which was aligned to values of the academy system of the football club, the players showed good understanding of values relating to "ambition," "respect," and "community" as an integral part of the club culture (Figure 4). However, the players were unclear on the meaning of the club values relating to "integrity" and "unity". This indicated that the EPL club had the potential to explore and develop player



**Figure 4.** Samples of player builds reflecting football club values.

understanding of the collective effort required for success and principles connected to honesty, fairness, and ethical conduct (Champ, 2018; Crawley, 2021).

#### ***The “story telling” build: overcoming challenges***

Following completion of the two “warm-up” builds (SkB), attention focused on the two main session builds (SB). The third question, also termed the “Story Telling Build,” was to “build a model of how you have approached the challenges of the annual player registration and progression process at the academy.” Themes from the statements on cue cards and an analysis of the LEGO® builds centred around personal growth, resilience, perseverance, and teamwork. The perceived challenges for the young players focused upon six themes: (i) ambition and achievement, (ii) overcoming obstacles, (iii) metaphors for success, (iv) continuous improvement, (v)

faith and optimism, and (vi) pushing limits and overcoming the impossible. A selection is illustrated in [Figure 5](#).

The cohort of players exhibited a recurring theme of **Ambition and Achievement** linked to striving for more and achieving beyond their current positions. This highlighted the importance of ambition and setting high goals. Oliver noted that he was “always trying to achieve more and to go further,” whilst Jack commented that “the ladder I have built represents my achievements and I can then go up it.” There was a strong emphasis on the theme of **Overcoming Obstacles** and notions of resilience and perseverance, as well as displaying determination to overcome barriers and challenges, on the path to success. Louis emphasised the importance of “working hard to achieve what you want and trying to overcome the barriers to get to success.” Similarly, Harry highlighted that “my build shows me overcoming challenges, such as a bad performance or progression review.”



**Figure 5.** Samples of story telling builds.

The Lego® Serious Play® method emphasises the importance of metaphors (McCusker, 2020). The young footballers often used **Metaphors for Success**, using various metaphors such as towers, ladders, flags, and bridges, to symbolise their journey towards success, with each element representing different aspects such as achievements, goals, teamwork, and overcoming setbacks. Alfie observed that he had "built towers to show success and the barriers I must also overcome. The red brick is for danger, and bad things that happen in football, and the Lego flags represent my football goals." Likewise, Thomas noted that "the Tower stands for success." Similarly, Charlie aligned metaphors for his own success, commenting:

The flag is supposed to mark the end point of the journey. The bridge I have built below is the person and is meant to mark the teamwork we need to reach our goals. Finally, the ladder I have built is supposed to mark how good you

can build up things, and to recover when they don't go your way.

The notion of **Continuous Improvement** was evident in the player written statements and their LEGO® builds. For several players, the challenges in the academy system were about completing small objectives over time to achieve their end goal, and as Josh noted, to "take that extra step to be successful." To reinforce these perspectives, George stated that "my build represents that over time I can complete some of the little objectives that will help me to reach and get to my final goal." Daniel echoed this observation, and his written cue card stated, "to never give up until there is success and to show resilience and perseverance."

The theme of **Faith and Optimism** was prevalent within the data when discussing challenges and concerns within the academy system. There were multiple references to

relaxation, listening to music, praying, and maintaining a positive mindset. For Josiah, it was important to "relax and listen to music and pray for the best outcome." This view was reinforced by George, who commented:

My build is representing that I need to take an extra step to be successful and to get closer to God. If something goes wrong, I will just restart and keep my head up and face the challenges that I have gone through.

This perspective from George had a close synergy with the theme of **Pushing Limits and Overcoming the Impossible**. A strong message emanating from the young footballers was to believe in their own potential, which was mentioned by three players. Will observed that "if you believe, you have the capability to achieve great things," whilst Alfie said it was important "to not stop working hard until you reach your limit," and Louis stated his own commitment to "always try to overcome the impossible."

These preliminary *Lego® Serious Play®* themes correlate with the perspectives of Mills et al. (2012), who delineated a series of crucial factors that shape player development. Like the *Lego® Serious Play®* outcomes, they also found a variety of interconnected domains encompassing awareness, goal-directed attributes, resilience, intelligence, sport-specific qualities like coachability and competitiveness, and environmental influences. Similarly, Cooper (2021) established that those influences included parents, social support, and religion. These insights underscore the complexity of high-performance player development, emphasising the necessity of addressing diverse factors to enable athletes' growth and achievement. These study findings help to validate this significance. The preliminary *Lego® Serious Play®* themes support the argument from both Brouwers et al. (2015) and Huijgen et al. (2014) that talent development programmes should address these factors to increase the likelihood that young players might transition

into senior football from the academy system (Gledhill et al., 2017).

### ***The outcome build: improving the academy process***

The final question for the *Lego® Serious Play®* workshop was to "build a model of what would make the academy registration and progression process better." Based on statements provided from the players on cue cards and *Lego®* builds, five themes and possible solutions were prevalent within the data and focused upon (i) self-improvement and confidence building, (ii) feedback and support, (iii) adapting to environments, (iv) goal orientation, and (v) visualisation and motivation. Samples of these outcome builds are illustrated in Figure 6.

Several young players focused on personal growth, building confidence, and overcoming their fears. This included seeking tips, having more conversations, and working hard to secure their next academy contract. One underlying theme was **Self-Improvement and Confidence Building**. Alfie observed that he would benefit from "having more of a conversation to help build my confidence to be better," and similarly, Jamie felt that a solution to his concerns and worries was the ability "to overcome my fears and to be having more conversations about what is needed and when."

Oliver felt the progression and registration process would be easier if "I could be more confident and if the club were more supportive." This observation does not indicate that the club was not supportive and was just Oliver's perception of support to deal with his challenges. Confidence building was noted both on and off the field of play. Thomas stated that it was important for him to "build confidence off the pitch," and Harry stressed the need for "building my confidence up, and for working hard, to get another contract with the club."

The concepts of **Visualisation and Motivation** were evident. The use of visualisation,



**Figure 6.** Samples of outcome builds.

such as imagining scoring goals to secure a professional contract at the EPL club, was mentioned on several occasions, which reflects issues relating to motivation and mental preparation amongst the players. Daniel highlighted this commenting "I built a model of me scoring a last-minute winner, which helped me to secure my contract with the club." Jack observed that he would benefit from "the club preparing me for what I will face in the coming months, both in the matches and also when I go home."

Amongst the cohort, there was a recurring theme of seeking **Feedback and Support**. They indicated this should include more frequent discussions and receiving support from both professionals (the academy staff) and their peers. This encompassed requests for more one-to-one discussions, day-to-day feedback, and suggestions that would help them

to be more confident and supported. Will suggested he would benefit from "going for a walk and talking to a professional player, so we can get for tips to help us, but from actual players instead of just our coaches." Josh indicated he would prefer the club to "tell me things over a longer period of time, so I don't have a short period of time to make it all perfect." Linked to the frequency of feedback and support, Alfie said that he would like "more one to one discussion," and Louis also asked for "more day-to-day feedback."

Multiple cue card statements focused on **Adapting to Environments**. This varied from whether the environment fitted their style of play and how they aligned this to the style of the team, or multiple observations about finding ways to ease the challenges of training and games. This centred around improving commute times between home or school and

the training ground. George was cognisant of his off-field challenges, but also requested “tougher experiences” to test his resolve, noting:

I’d like the club to challenge me more through tougher experiences on the pitch. Off the pitch, it would be helpful if there were easier or quicker ways to get to training and to all the games. This is hard for me, and my family.

Similarly, Alfie confirmed this perspective, commenting: “things that would make my academy probation much easier off the pitch is fitting the style of play at the club to my style of play.” The fifth theme linked to possible solutions focused on **Goal Orientation**. The players emphasised the importance of setting and achieving goals, whether connected to improving their performance on the pitch, taking chances better during games, or securing a renewal or extension of their contracts, through hard work and dedication. Josh succinctly stated that his priority was to “take my chances better,” Oliver felt his solution and goal was “being good at school to allow me space for my football,” whereas Will made a forceful statement “I will do anything to gain a professional football contract and I don’t care what other people think, as that is my goal, and I’ll do anything to get there.”

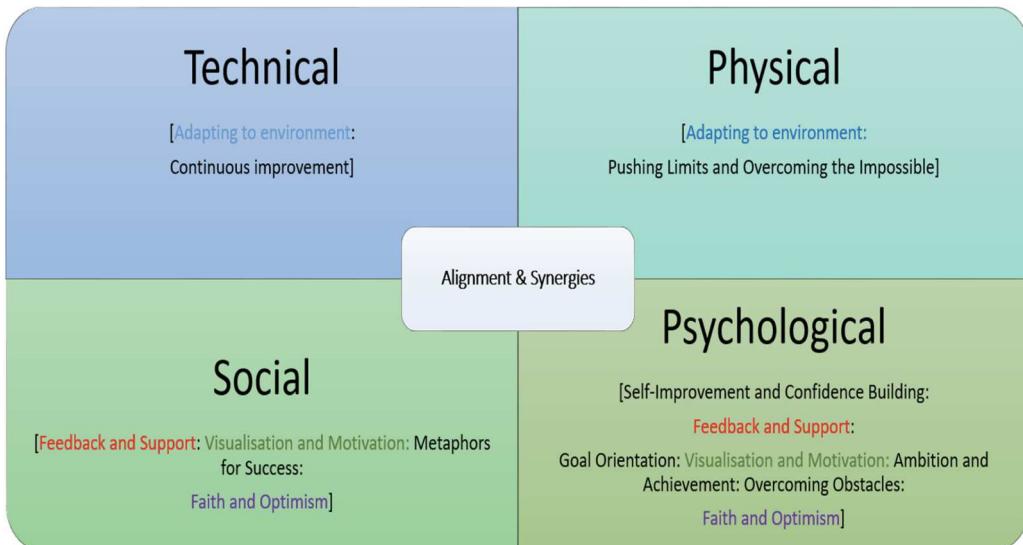
These results align with the foundational findings of Eisenberg (2014), who identified various individual and situational factors that impact prosocial behaviour. Among these, self-identity and personal goals were prevalent as significant influences on prosocial action. In sport studies, both these areas are recognised as components of the self-structure framework, through which individuals perceive their identity and worth (Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). It has been suggested that self-structure can help shape moral behaviour by influencing moral intentions, which reinforces Eisenberg’s concepts of personal goals and self-identity. The findings also link with the psychological and social aspects of the bio-psycho-social

model (Engel, 1977), highlighting the role of motivation, feedback, and social influence in player development. While physical adaptability is acknowledged, the biological dimension lacks depth in areas such as genetics and injury susceptibility and requires further exploration for a more comprehensive perspective.

In [Figure 7](#), to illustrate synergies and connections, the *Lego® Serious Play®* themes from the data find partial alignment with component parts of the English FA Four Corner model, the multi-disciplinary framework for improving player identification and development (Diouf et al., 2024).

Based on the interpretation by Diouf et al. (2024) of the FA’s Four Corner model, the *Lego® Serious Play®* outcomes demonstrate overlaps in the technical and physical corners, connected to “adapting to the environment.” There was also an overlap in the psychological corner, connected to (i) feedback and support, (ii) visualisation and motivation, and (iii) faith and optimism. These findings align with the perspectives of Kelly et al. (2023) that both social and psychological characteristics can influence selection and development.

When aligning against elements of the FA’s Four Corner model, themes from the *Lego® Serious Play®* method demonstrate strategic alignment and synergies across the model for supporting player progression/transition within the academy system (Diouf et al., 2024; Mallows, 2023). Themes reinforce one of the primary advantages of the model, which is its depiction of various factors rather than focusing solely on individual determinants (Ryom et al., 2020). A notable limitation in existing literature highlighted by Diouf et al. (2024) on the transition from development academy to first team in English football is the tendency to prioritise input from academy managers, coaches, and sport scientists, rather than incorporating the first-hand lived experiences of players themselves. This has resonance with the outcomes of Brouwers et al. (2015) in the



**Figure 7.** LSP alignment and synergies to the FA Four Corner model.

context of high-performance pathways in tennis. In contrast, this study, working in close collaboration with the young footballers, has adopted a bottom-up approach and used a co-created creative methodology, *Lego® Serious Play*®, to help address this gap.

## Conclusion

This study used a creative approach, *Lego® Serious Play*®, to help support the mental health and wellbeing of young male academy football players. The findings highlight potential to adopt creative approaches, such as *Lego® Serious Play*®, to help football academies in England to meet some of the guidelines set out in the Premier League Youth Development Rules, which prior to this project, were only partially met by many EPL and EFL clubs (Premier League, 2023). The importance of supporting standards in academy systems is a central prerequisite within the professional game, extending to protecting player wellbeing (Diouf et al., 2024).

Holistically, in the broader context of high-performance talent development pathways, there are few studies linked to creative

methods and approaches amongst young people in high-performance sport-based environments. As such, there are opportunities for clubs, federations, teams, stakeholders, businesses, and organisations to (i) use this learning process as an effective pedagogy and (ii) as a podium for future studies of children and young people in high-performance sport environments.

The *Lego® Serious Play*® structure allows flow, sharing, and reflection (Henderson & Shipway, 2024), and contributes to knowledge by using creative methods to better understand mental health, wellbeing, and anxiety issues surrounding the registration and progression process for young male footballers within the academy system. The outcomes suggest that *Lego® Serious Play*® has applicability and scalability amongst young elite athletes in a diverse range of talent development pathways and high-performance sport environments.

The first study limitation was the focus on the Under-14 players at the EPL academy. There is scope for studies across the full spectrum of age ranges of players. Second, logically, during the workshop, the Under-14's

worked in small groups of three or four, and future studies should consider activities being undertaken on more of an individual basis, to avoid players “copying” each other with their Lego® builds. A third limitation is the focus solely on male footballers. Given the increased profile and expansion of women’s football, we advocate for future studies that employ closer scrutiny of the women’s game to better understand how they negotiate and transition through various stages of their football pathways (Culvin, 2023). Finally, it was beyond the scope of this study, but we would advocate for future research exploring the life choices and career paths for young footballers leaving the sport and facing life “after academies” (BBC, 2024; Mallows, 2023).

We endorse that within the academy system, there is added value for creative play-based learning approaches to be embedded in both the EPL and EFL structures to demonstrate learning outcomes and therapeutic benefits for young male players. Fundamentally, the Under-14 players from this EPL academy were integral partners in this co-created process. Additionally, whilst beyond the remit of this study, from a theoretical perspective, there is merit in future studies that explore our current understanding of stress and wellbeing amongst children and young people, and to explore the links between these concepts in the context of high-performance sport environments (Simpson et al., 2021).

The contribution of this study is to demonstrate the power of Lego® and other creative, play-based approaches to complement more traditional, conventional learning approaches used within sport for children and young people, and to help unlock their authentic feelings, values, thoughts, and perspectives (Henderson & Shipway, 2024). This study highlights the importance of a bottom-up approach within the academy system of English football, one co-created between the young footballers and academy staff, to explore issues that cause them anxiety. This is paramount, as

early interventions can help reduce the probability of issues escalating into more significant mental health and wellbeing challenges for children and young people in high-performance environments.

## Disclosure statement

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