

Title: Sport or School? Dreams and Dilemmas for Talented Young Danish Football Players

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Main Theme: Culture

Secondary Theme(s): Wellbeing and Mental Health, Role of the Institution

Aims: The purpose of the research was to shed light on the underlying reasons and the ways in which young talented footballers experience the combination of sport school. This research was conducted to further the findings in the Danish elite sports organisation Team Danmark's report on their support concept from 2008.

Method: The study took a qualitative and social psychology approach and utilised four focus groups (6-7 in each) with 25 young, male footballers aged 15-19. These focus groups were followed by semi-structured interviews with eight footballers from the focus groups to gather additional data. All data gathering focused on narratives of the participants. The participants were selected on the basis of three criteria: 1) half the participants were to be involved in the official talent development programme (ITU players) and half the participants were to be ordinary talented footballers at the same level as ITU players, 2) both younger (aged 15–16) and older (aged 18–19) talents were to be represented, and 3) participants living at home and those living away from home were to be represented.

Results and Practical Implications: Young footballers have three different schooling opportunities after finishing primary education. They can either continue on a three-year course, which is the most common option, or enrol in a two-year course if they have

completed 10 years of primary school. The third option is to enrol in a four-year course set up in upper secondary schools in association with Team Danmark. This course has fewer classes and is flexible to let young athletes keep up with both school and training. All options try to provide flexibility whilst still upholding academic demands. The espoused values of getting a good education were confirmed and reinforced by schools and the footballers' parents. However, time pressure is a significant threat to the espoused value of gaining an upper secondary education. To balance sport and school, footballers highlighted self-discipline and psychological resources to adapt as necessary. A recurrent theme was that the young footballers viewed school as a necessary evil, or at best, as a secondary time-consuming priority. Most found themselves at the horns of a dilemma, since the pressure meant that they could end up attaining lower grades in school. Consequences of not properly balancing sport and school could be lower grades, stress, drop-out of school, and the potential for a mental breakdown. One player reported to have experienced a mental breakdown. Feeling frustrated by trying to combine sport and school, and thus trying to conform to the espoused values of two cultures proved too much to bear. The excessive tension between different arenas in one's life can be an obstacle to healthy development of young footballers. The elite football culture has an almost magnetic attraction for the young footballers in the study. Even if the espoused value of a good set of academic qualifications does not entirely measure up to this. Football clubs and school systems should allow for flexibility for the young athletes, to enable them to gain the benefits of both arenas. Not doing so could lead to the above stated problems, and completely focusing on sport may lead to identity foreclosure and other mental issues.

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