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‘Elite Youth Gaelic Footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’

Thesis presented by

Brian Cuthbert

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork,

School of Education

Head of School: Dr Fiona Chambers
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August 2018
Author’s Declaration

“This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism.”

___________________________
Brian Cuthbert
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a holistic analysis of the talent development environment surrounding elite Gaelic Football academies in Ireland. In response to existing literature, which has focused on the cognitive determinants of elite performance, contemporary research has suggested a practical and conceptual shift towards an understanding of the role that psychological, social, and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process. Drawing on a holistic ecological case study approach, six individual county academies and their constituent stakeholders (i.e. academy coaches, club coaches, teachers, parents, elite players, and prospects) participated in the project over a nine-month period. Using a systematic version of grounded theory, findings from this research concluded that there were (a) acute dysfunctional relationships existing between constituent stakeholders within the academy environment, (b) limiting structural and organisational impediments to prospect’s progression and transition to elite football, and (c) a number of negative socio-cultural influences impacting prospects and their positive personal development. This combination of factors suggests that Gaelic football talent development environments struggle to support the holistic development of elite youth prospects. As such, success at adult elite level for individual counties in Gaelic football did not correlate to successful Talent Development Environments (TDEs) at youth level.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been completed without the help and support of a number of people. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Fiona Chambers and Dr Bryan McCullick. Your support and guidance has been invaluable throughout this whole process. Over the last three years, you have been my support network, challenging my writing, my thinking, and my goals, all the while encouraging me to grow and develop as a researcher.

Secondly, I am very grateful for the funding and support given to me by Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and, in particular, Mr Pat Daly, who provided me with the means to undertake this study.

Thirdly, the thesis would not have been possible without the commitment, acceptance, and trust of the academy stakeholders in each of the six cases who opened the doors of their academy to me. Thank you for allowing me to briefly be a part of what you do.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. To Michelle, Aoife, and Eoin, all I can say is thank you for your unwavering and unconditional support and love as always. I cannot express my gratitude to you, especially to my wife Michelle for providing me with the time, space, and understanding throughout this project.
Conference Presentations


Book Chapters


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<tr>
<td>ATDE</td>
<td>Athletic Talent Development Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGTM</td>
<td>Constructed Grounded Theory Method</td>
</tr>
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<td>DMGT</td>
<td>Development Model of Giftedness and Talent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPE</td>
<td>Elite Performance Environment</td>
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<td>ESF</td>
<td>Environment Success Factors</td>
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<td>GAA</td>
<td>Gaelic Athletic Association</td>
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<td>GDA</td>
<td>Games Development Administrator</td>
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<td>GNP</td>
<td>Grassroots to National Programme</td>
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<td>GPA</td>
<td>Gaelic Players Association</td>
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<td>GPO</td>
<td>Games Promotion Officer</td>
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<td>HEA</td>
<td>Holistic Ecological Approach</td>
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<td>NGB</td>
<td>National Governing Body</td>
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<td>Personal Assets Framework</td>
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<td>PPCT Model</td>
<td>Process, Person, Context and Time Model</td>
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<td>Positive Youth Development</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Studies of athletic development have traditionally focused on the individualistic, cognitive determinants of elite performance. Bound within physiological and psychological frameworks, the research approach has evolved, from a focus on talent detection, to talent development, with both perspectives converging on the individual athlete. Contemporary research has moved athletic development in an alternative direction away from the individual and towards the wider sociocultural contexts shaping development and performance (Araujo et al., 2010). Situated within these broader cultural, institutional and historical contexts is the specific organisational setting in which an athlete’s development occurs (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a). What is not known is how athlete development in specific organisational settings are influenced by such contexts. As such, it remains unclear how athlete development within specific contexts can be optimised, and by what means such understanding can be used, to inform athlete developmental pathways within sports organisations.

The aim of this study is to provide a holistic analysis of the talent development environment surrounding elite Gaelic Football academies in Ireland. Such academies may be classified as elite since they select young athletes, who possess superior athletic talent, to undergo specialised training from expert coaches to prepare them for competition both now and in the future (Mountjoy et al, 2008). The study focused on successful academies (i.e. counties, that over the last ten years continuously feature in the latter stages of All-Ireland competition at u18, u21 and senior levels) and in particular, the developmental environments surrounding the operation of these counties’ academies. As such, the study looked to attend to the gaps in the talent development literature and develop an understanding of the role that psychological, social, and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process. The investigation took the form of a 9-month ecological case study of six individual county academies and their constituent stakeholders (i.e. academy coaches, club coaches, teachers, parents, elite players, and prospects). Participant observation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and design thinking tools were utilised for data collection. The theoretical perspective of the study was social constructivist, which guided the use of a constructed grounded theory method (CGTM) of data analysis.
This introductory chapter presents an overview of the dissertation. Initially, it outlines the background of the study by drawing on apposite themes within the field. In doing so, it identifies gaps in the literature and key research that underpin the basis of the study. Following this, the focus of the research is addressed, involving a short discussion of relevant theoretical perspectives adopted within the study. The research questions are then presented. Thereafter, the research process is briefly outlined with an overview of the methodology employed. Finally, the chapter concludes by highlighting the significance and originality of the study, before outlining the structure of the thesis to follow.

1.2 Background: Gaelic Games and the Irish Context

Politically, Ireland is divided between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with a total population of over 6.5 million people (CSO, 2016; ONS, 2016). The island is also divided into four historical and cultural regions called provinces\(^1\). These regions are subdivided into counties, of which there are 32\(^2\) in total in Ireland; 26 in the Republic and six in Northern Ireland. In the Irish Republic, the government’s Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport provide funding for sport. The management and funding of sport is governed and administered through the Irish Sports Council known as ‘Sport Ireland’. National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of each sport are allocated funding, in line with the strategic priorities of Sport Ireland, and is aligned to levels of participation, performance, and leadership (www.sportireland.ie). The Irish Institute of Sport are one division of Sport Ireland who are responsible for providing services to all elite athletes. All NGBs are linked to Sport Ireland through service level agreements and the provision of funding. The Federation of Irish Sport act as a representative body for NGBs and as a vehicle for the promotion of sport within the country. In Northern Ireland, The Department for Communities has responsibility for the central administration and promotion of sport in Northern Ireland and utilises Sport Northern Ireland as the development agency to achieve these aims. Sport Northern Ireland’s role is to provide advice and guidance to support NGBs in the management of their sports, including areas such as strategic planning, raising performance standards, sourcing funding, employment matters, and good practice.

\(^1\) Since the early 17th-century there have been four Provinces of Ireland: Connacht, Leinster, Munster and Ulster. The provinces of Ireland no longer serve administrative or political purposes, but function as historical and cultural entities.

\(^2\) The counties of Ireland are sub-national divisions that have been, and in some cases continue to be, used to geographically demarcate areas of local government. These land divisions were formed following the Norman invasion of Ireland in imitation of the counties then in use as units of local government in the Kingdom of England.
One such NGB is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the organising body for the national sports of Ireland: hurling, football, handball, and rounders. The GAA is a 32 county organisation and is Ireland’s largest sporting organisation, with a presence in every corner of the country (Hassan & O’Boyle, 2016). The organisation was founded in 1884 to serve as an agent to gain ‘home rule’ \(^3\) for Irish Athletics. More broadly, the GAA set out to resist the increasing Anglicisation of Irish sport and culture (Mandle, 1987). This was in response to the shifting power balance between the Catholic Irish middle class and the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, in favour of the former, which cultivated the desire for a revival of native Irish games and language (Connolly & Dolan, 2012). By the end of the 1920s, Ireland had brokered independence from Britain \(^4\) and the GAA had positioned itself as a central component in the life of the Irish people, which was authoritatively expressed in the words of arguably its most influential member in the decades after independence, secretary, Padraig O’Caomh:

The GAA holds a unique position and was founded to serve a great purpose in the life of the Irish nation. Centuries of oppression and ages of hardship and struggle

---

\(^3\) At that time Ireland was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Athletics was governed by the (English) Amateur Athletic Association (AAA).

\(^4\) From Union in 1801 until 6 December 1922 the whole of Ireland was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.
were calculated to undermine the morale and sap the vitality of our people. It was only the invigorating intercourse which native games provided which could counteract such demoralising influences and the pursuit of our traditional pastimes remains still a salutary and an elevating resource (GAA, 1929, p. 2).

Such gratification can be traced back to the origins of the GAA and its indelible linkage to the nationalist movement. Through the formal rules laid down to its members⁵, the GAA has embodied an explicit obstruction to British cultural colonialism (Liston, 2014). It was central to the formation of cultural nationalism and the promotion of the Irish culture at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond (Liston, 2014). Through the development of local clubs, the GAA became native to every village and county in Ireland and became central to family and community life. These amateur clubs are directly mapped onto established parish⁶ boundaries in Ireland, small geographical expanses, typically rural in form, which generate a profound sense of loyalty amongst their memberships (Hughes, 2008). From this, the GAA, the Church, Catholic schools and the family unit formed the nexus of Irish society, serving as an ideological apparatus to reinforce further, and reinstate, a distinctively Irish nationalist way of life (Hughes & Hassan, 2015). Under parish rule, members of each parish had to represent the club of their birthplace. In doing so, the GAA became pivotal in the development of Irish self-identity and the ways in which Irish people related to each other (Liston, 2014). This sense of parish identity was crucial in the development of the GAA:

What was clear from the beginning — whatever about the precise nature of the boundaries — was the association between club and place. This stress on the local proved a masterstroke. Residency rules were introduced which restricted the movement of players between teams and these, together with the establishment of a system of internal county-based competitions, helped in the creation of intense inter-community rivalries. This was vital to the success of the early GAA and to the roots it set down. It meant that when clubs took to the field, players were playing for more than personal glory — the reputation of their community was also at stake (Cronin, Duncan, & Rouse, 2009 p. 69).

In fact, inter-parish rivalry fuelled the explosion of the Gaelic sports from their awakening in 1884. It was these very structures, as laid down by the GAA at this time, that have ensured the games developed along amateur lines, since one’s residence decreed which

---

⁵ Rule 21 of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was a rule in force from 1897 to 2001 which banned members of the British security forces from membership of the GAA and thus from playing Gaelic games. Up until 1971, Rule 27 forbade members of the Gaelic Athletic Association from playing or attending foreign sports.

⁶ Clubs, which are the basic unit of administration in the GAA, may have their catchment areas defined by the local Roman Catholic parish boundaries. A parish is defined as being, subject to county boundaries, "the district under the jurisdiction of a Parish Priest or Administrator."
parish club and county you played with, thus centralisation of players and a money based
transfer system were not countenanced. In Irish society, the GAA was seen as both an
organisation and a movement (Cronin, Murphy, & Rouse, 2009). The efficient running of
games and the blended professionalism of paid staff working alongside an army of
volunteers throughout the country lends itself to describing the GAA as an organisation.
However, given the density of the GAA network and the sense of community, discipline,
and civic responsibility it creates, one certainly could describe the GAA as a movement
that has an extremely influential presence in Irish social life (Cronin, et al., 2009).

Throughout the last century, there have been numerous claims in the Irish print media
supporting the assertion that the GAA is the greatest amateur organisation in the world
(Cronin, et al., 2009). This declaration derives from, (a) the obvious dedication displayed
by players for no monetary rewards, (b) the large crowds at games throughout the country,
and (c) the thousands of volunteers serving the association at often times considerable
personal monetary cost (Cronin, et al., 2009). The GAA has over 2700 affiliated clubs in
Ireland, with a further 242 clubs serving the Irish diaspora overseas. The organisation has
a larger membership than any other Irish sporting body across all ages and all social classes
and 40% of all volunteers in Ireland are GAA volunteers (Cronin, et al., 2009). The GAA
owns and has developed an impressive network of grounds and club facilities. In fact,
Croke Park, the national stadium and GAA headquarters, is considered among the finest
stadia in Europe.

If the club is seen as the bedrock of the association, inter-county competitions are what
sustain and strategically develop the association. The best players from each local club are
selected to represent their county to play in the inter-county competitions. All-Ireland
finals attract attendances of over 80,000 annually and the football and hurling
championship are worth over €34 million in gate receipts to the association every year
(GAA, 2018). This is almost half of the annual total revenue of the GAA. The GAA
redistributes much of this income annually to its subunits (see Figure 2). In 2017, just under
€15 million of the total was distributed by the GAA’s Central Council to counties and clubs
to underwrite their operating costs and to defray the cost of their participation in the various
competitions. However, total expenditure between all of the counties on preparing their
county teams for national competitions amounted to almost €25 million (Keys, 2018). This
shortfall is made up of commercial revenue and sponsorship generated by individual
counties. The GAA, in 2017, redistributed over €10 million of revenue on games development and coaching grants.

Figure 2: Grants Redistributed from GAA to its Subunits in 2017, adapted from GAA, 2018

These grants fund the provision of County Games Managers, Games Development Administrators (GDAs), and Games Promotion Officers (GPOs) in each county. These personnel have responsibility for the implementation of the Grassroots to National
Programme. The number of employed GAA personnel varies from county to county due to historical, geographical, and financial reasons. Interestingly, in 2017, Dublin GAA received €1 million more games development funding than any other county. This relates to a stated GAA policy of ensuring that the largest population base receives the most funding to compete against other sporting bodies in securing youth players (Keys, 2017). Despite this anomaly, there is an obvious clear correlation and dependence between Gaelic Games development in individual counties and the commercial importance of inter-county competition for the organisation.

As part of games development in each county, structures are constructed to provide a pathway for the county’s best players to reach their full potential and graduate to the county senior team. These pathways are idiosyncratic to each county but are bound by very broad guidelines by the central GAA body. Within these guidelines, every county is required to have academy squads from U14 to U17 levels. Most counties have, in recent times, introduced academy squads at U13 level. Being part of the academy does not preclude youths from participating with other teams. As part of outlined player pathways, the most talented youths are affiliated to teams at club, school, and county level (see Figure 3). In some counties, anecdotal evidence suggests that the most talented players may represent over 10 different teams during one playing season (some talented youths represent their county in both hurling and football and many play on older age group teams in their clubs and schools because of their ability).

The Grassroots to National Programme of the GAA comprises four key pillars of activity spanning Child, Youth and Adult playing levels - Games Opportunities; Skill Development Initiatives; Applied Lifelong Learning; Organisational Effectiveness.
According to Hughes (2008), representing so many teams creates a level of pressure within the most prodigious adolescent Gaelic footballers to the point of threatening their personal well-being. In their seminal paper on player burnout in GAA, Hughes and Hassan (2015) relate the acceptance of such demands to the unique ideology of the GAA, veiled under the guise of amateurism, whereby players commit, and are subjected, to an exploitive environment. The GAA, according to these researchers, gains ‘intellectual consent of Gaelic footballers through the institutions of civil society’ (p. 13) (i.e. the Church and the school). Youth footballers internalise these social norms as they become more socialised into the GAA environment and ultimately develop a unidimensional identity associated with playing football (Hughes and Hassan, 2015). This process mirrors the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), described as ‘an imprinted, generated schema that acts as a motivating or propelling force in social behaviour’ (Horne, Tomlinson, & Whannel, 1999, p. 105). As such, youth players have little or no control over the environment in which they find themselves. Instead, they unquestionably accept the apparent normality of their experiences within the GAA (Hughes & Hassan, 2015).

Despite this, capability for representing such a multiplicity of teams creates many tensions within the GAA (e.g. scheduling of fixtures, decisions about what to play and who to play for, facilities), some of which will be explored in this study. Despite the obvious difficulties
in terms of player development associated with such a phenomenon, senior elite players have the pressures and expectancies that are part and parcel of everyday professional sport (Schiller, 2016). The question must therefore be asked - how does the GAA develop players so that they are equipped to deal with such pressures and perform at a level congruent to the desired ideals of both the commercial and idealistic objectives of the association? According to Watson (2002), the GAA, across its various strands, is constantly seeking to negotiate the interface between the ideals of the organisation (i.e. amateurism and volunteerism) and commercialisation.

There are numerous examples of the changing context of Gaelic games in modern Ireland that are currently challenging the core values of the association. These include payments to coaches, pay per view television deals, and the commodification of the GAA. These examples are all associated with a developing trend of elitism within the organisation, which according to some commentators has become the greatest obstacle to the GAA in maintaining its core values and ideals:

The elitism that is destroying the game (ruining the work-life balance for our young men, marginalising the club game, paving the way for full-time paid county managers, etc., causing participation to drop by 75 per cent between the ages of 19 and 25, bankrupting the county boards, justifying the GPA’s demands for €2.9m per annum, etc.) can be fixed...The guiding principle must be that the club is paramount (Brolly, 2018, para 4).

The GAA also promote the notion that the club is the most central and crucial tenet of the association (GAA, 2012), yet there is little evidence of this in real terms (e.g. the GAA recently decided to increase the amount of intercounty games in the season, which then impacts on club activities). In fact, there is a disparity between espoused values and the basic assumptions of behaviour in many aspects of the governance of the GAA. For example, in 2013, GAA General Manager, Paraic Duffy, rejected the possibility of televised games being sold to a pay per television station:

There’s a sense that the GAA belongs to everybody in Ireland, that it’s in every parish and village, and that there’d be enormous resistance if we were to take the games off free-to-air, even though the majority of the population probably has access to Sky (Duffy, 2013, as cited in Moynihan, 2013, p. 87).

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8 It is illegal for clubs and counties to pay managers under the rules of amateurism, yet the GAA are powerless to stop the practice happening (GAA, 2017).  
9 On 1 April 2014, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) announced a new 3-year broadcasting rights deal, which involved the sale of exclusive rights to certain championship matches for the first time to Sky Sports.
Within six months, the GAA announced a three-year exclusive broadcasting deal with Sky Sports. Therefore, question marks surround the influence of professionalism within an amateur organisation and this has inferences in relation to how the GAA is presently governed.

1.3 Governance and the GAA

Within the Irish sports system, and indeed internationally, the GAA is unique in terms of its governance structure due to the existence of a large number of layers, committees and levels within its organizational hierarchy (O'Boyle, 2015) (see Figure 4). Roles and responsibilities within the association are often misunderstood due to the complexity of the governance hierarchy (Hassan, 2010). At the apex of this structure, is Congress. This is an annual meeting of over 330 delegates who delineate the rules and regulations of the organisation and approve associated policy. These delegates are representatives of individual counties and other subunits of the association. Decisions decided at Congress require a two-thirds majority to be approved. According to Yeh and Taylor (2008), the decision making process in National Sports Organisations should ideally be the responsibility of between 8 and 10 people. To have such a large representative body deciding on the direction of the sport would seem, outdated, unrepresentative of international best practice, and extremely challenging in terms of proper corporate governance (O'Boyle, 2015).
During the year following the annual Congress meeting, the Central Council acts as the policy promoter and driver of all development and operational issues that may arise. This council is representative of each county unit of the association and includes up to 40 delegates. Again, this presents challenges in terms of good governance. According to O’Boyle (2015), inefficiencies, communication issues, and accountability with regards to the decision making process are potentially, problematic realities for this body. Below the Central Council on the organisational hierarchy, is the Management Committee. This is a 15-person body, responsible for the day-to-day running of the organisation. This committee is made up of the President of the GAA, the Chairpersons of each Provincial Council, fulltime GAA management employees, as well as two independent volunteer appointments, which are presidential nominations. Central Council must ratify decisions taken at management level before they are enacted. Once ratified, these decisions are
communicated to each county and are enacted upon at street level. Provincial Councils ensure that counties within their province abide by decisions taken at central level.

The literature is unambiguous regarding the relationship between inadequate, complex governance structures and the failure of NGBs in delivering the demands of modern day sport (Forster, 2006; Katwala, 2000). The GAA, with over 2000 clubs, various county boards, 4 provincial councils, as well as units overseas, is without question a complex organisation (O'Boyle, 2015). Due to its sheer size, communication issues arise when decisions and strategic direction are relayed incorrectly or misunderstood by various agents within the association. It could also be argued that such scale hinders any accountability measures imposed by the organisation centrally. Thus, considering issues have been identified regarding governance, communication, the efficiency and power of the annual congress, the complexities of the varied and interlinked units, as well as the uniqueness of the governmental approach, it would be prudent if the GAA were to examine its governance practices and how they affect its stakeholders (Hassan, 2010; O'Boyle, 2015).

The uniqueness of the organisation, it seems, has provided a level of self-sufficiency that is sustained almost completely by an unselfish sense of altruism rather than an appropriate model of governance (Hassan & O'Boyle, 2016).

Thus far, the GAA has decided against governance change and has managed its most powerful stakeholders by integrating the elite players in the GPA (Gaelic Players Association), media, and corporate Ireland into the existing system, yet at the same time withholding genuine decision making power (Hassan & O'Boyle, 2016). For example, the GAA, through its commercial and sporting control of the All Ireland championships, allied to the inclination of the stakeholders to operate within the structures, retains for now, its central role in the regulation of the sport in Ireland. However, the sustainability of their approach is questionable due mainly to the principal difficulty outlined above – managing a contemporary sporting body within the confines of a historically determined and amateur context (Hassan & O'Boyle, 2016).

1.4 Focus of the Research

Over the last decade, the GAA has produced a number of reports that highlight growing concern regarding the development of youth Gaelic Games players (e.g. Report of the Task Force on Player Burnout, 2007; Mobilising Forces, Modernising Structures and Moving with the Times, 2012; Report of the Minor Review Group, 2015). All of the reports
reference the Grassroots to the National Programme (GNP), which is a conceptualised framework under the auspices of which all strategic objectives are delivered in a games development context. However, according to these documents, the GNP’s impact is subdued and challenged by a lack of stakeholder conceptual understanding of the GNP framework and its linkage between the player pathway, a developmental approach, and the needs of the individual player (GAA, 2012).

Academies were initially developed by the counties in the Ulster province in the early 2000’s. This happened to coincide with a period of unprecedented success for these individual counties. Anecdotal claims implying a causal relationship between the development of the academy system and the newfound success of Ulster counties increased the popularity of academy structures in Gaelic Games. By 2007, every county in Ireland had adopted an academy model aimed at developing their perceived most talented players in order to better compete with other counties. According to the Report of the Task Force on Player Burnout (GAA, 2007), these academies have, become elitist, engaged in too many training sessions, impinged on club activity, and are too competitive. Of all entrants to the academy squads, 65% of all entrants to academy squads at U14 are deselected by the time they reach the U17 grade (GAA, 2014). Such an elitist approach is of concern to the GAA and, according to the GAA President, John Horan, ‘development squads are, in my view, starting too early and we need to row back from creating a level of elitism in young players, which is unhealthy for our games’ (Horan, 2018).

The Report of the Minor Review Workgroup (GAA, 2015) substantiates the GAA’s 2012 report, Mobilising Forces, Modernising Structures and Moving with the Times, in relation to the lack of a developmental coherency at youth level in Gaelic Games. Research findings signify a high level of coercion and pressure from coaches on youth players, chronic player fatigue, medical negligence in terms of playing whilst injured, and recurring levels of over activity for elite players (GAA, 2015). These findings are endemic in the youth sport literature (Bean, Fortier, Post, & Chima, 2014). Since 2007, all of the GAA reports have highlighted the necessity for the development of a new approach, an approach that ‘will ensure that a holistic and humanistic approach is propagated in Talent Academy frameworks and will also facilitate transition from youth to adult level’ (GAA, 2012, p. 14).

There is a dearth in research on the development of holistic and humanistic approaches to talent development. Instead, research has centred on the individual athlete and the
opposing approaches of talent discovery and talent development (Henriksen, et al., 2010a). Recently, the literature has moved, from focusing on the cognitive determinants of elite performance, towards an understanding of the role that psychological, social, and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process (Domingues, Cavichioli, & Goncalves, 2014). This epistemological shift in perspective towards an ecological viewpoint directs researchers to perceive the development of talent as a social construct and as a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the presence of special environmental conditions (Domingues et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding such a change, the literature remains extremely sparse in relation to empirical research on an ecological perspective of the talent development processes, the role of stakeholders, and organisational context (Bjørndal, Ronglan, & Andersen, 2015; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010). Emerging ecological research has identified commonalities between development environments such as philosophy or espoused values (Henriksen, 2010). However, each individual sports club possesses idiosyncratic features that are largely context specific (Larsen, 2013). Thus, as called for by Henriksen (2010), there is a necessity in terms of advancing the holistic ecological approach, for additional investigations of athletic development environments in countries outside of Scandinavia and across different sports and participation levels than those already researched. By using such an approach, this study will also help to develop an understanding in sports and coaching psychology of how to create and regulate high performance organisational cultures within elite sport settings. It is clear that knowledge is far from complete in this emerging area (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).

Thus, this timely and relevant study coincides with major structural changes to youth competition in Gaelic games. Players since this year (2018) are exposed to All-Ireland competition a year younger than in the past i.e. the competition is for under 17s rather than under 18s. Little is known about environments that are created to support athletes during this key transition phase, termed by Stambulova et al. (2009) as the investment years. Accordingly, this gap in the literature warrants attention (Mills & Pain, 2016). Using an ecological approach, this study will reveal how a talent development system (i.e. the GAA academy structure) aligns its constituent components to support its athletes at this crucial juncture to develop holistically. It aims to somewhat redress the dearth in ecological studies regarding the facilitation of athlete transitions from elite youth to elite adult level sport. The study will also evaluate how the preconditions and processes prevalent in academies
influence the environment’s success. Such an approach takes into account both a holistic individual focus and an ecological environmental focus integrated under one theoretical umbrella (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016).

By analysing the relationships and interactions of the athlete within his surroundings and identifying the factors that underpin successful developmental environments in GAA academies, findings from this study could help young GAA athletes transition more easily between youth and adult level, by providing all academy stakeholders with a renewed vision, mission, and ambition, with regard to player development. It is also hoped that the empirical findings from this study would provide sports organisations with a clear understanding of the strengths of their current development environment and, importantly, generate awareness around areas that may require optimisation. By doing so, this study will redress the dearth in ecological studies of complex sporting organisations and how athletes are supported within their development systems to allow them to transition to elite sport.

In summary, this chapter has identified an increasing interest from sport organisations in facilitating and supporting the transition of talented youth prospects to senior elite sport. However, despite this increased interest, there is a distinct lack of conceptual clarity regarding talent development in the sports literature. Recently, ecological approaches have been deployed in talent research. In contrast to the traditional research approach, which focused on the individual, talent is now perceived as a social construct and as a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the presence of special environmental conditions. However, there is a paucity of empirical research addressing talent development from an ecological perspective, particularly with regard to specific developmental environments and how they support athlete transition. This thesis aims to attend to these gaps in the talent development literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the roles, functions, and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland?
2. What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games?
3. What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?
1.5 The Research Process

The methodology of data collection will be outlined fully within chapter three, but a brief preliminary overview is given here. In addressing the research questions, the study utilised an interpretive case study design constructed around the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) (Henriksen et al., 2010a). The research hinged on one umbrella case study (Gaelic Football academies), which comprised six individual cases: hexads of academy administrator, u21 player, club coach, school coach, parents, and youth player. The study adopted a social constructivist perspective, thus rendering interpretations as co-constructed understandings of academy stakeholder’s experiences of developmental approaches in Gaelic football. The empirical data were collected over a nine-month period and qualitative data collection methods were used to gather data; specifically, focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation, artefacts, design thinking tools, and researcher’s reflective journal. The data were analysed using a systematic six-level grounded theory method (Harry, Sturges, & Klinger, 2005). Utilising this approach, ‘core’ categories were constructed, characterising the talent development environment in Gaelic football academies.

1.6 Originality and Significance of the Study

Recently, the literature has moved from focusing on the cognitive determinants of elite performance (e.g. the emphasis on biological constructs) towards an understanding of the role that psychological, social, and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process (Domingues, Cavichioli, & Goncalves, 2014). This epistemological shift in perspective towards an ecological viewpoint directs researchers to perceive the development of talent as a social construct and as a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the presence of special environmental conditions. However, despite this shift, the literature remains extremely sparse in relation to empirical research from an ecological perspective surrounding talent development processes, the role of stakeholders, and organisational context (Bjørndal, et al., 2015; Henriksen, et al., 2010a). Therefore, researchers such as Henriksen (2010) have called for an advancement of the holistic ecological approach to researching TDEs, especially in countries outside of Scandinavia and in sports not already researched. This thesis therefore offers an original contribution to knowledge on two counts, methodologically and theoretically. Methodologically, this study utilised Design Thinking as a data collection tool with youth participants. Unique to talent development research, this nuanced approach allowed a level of collaboration
between young people and adult researchers which, as described by Fleming and Boeck (2012), is lacking in other methodologies. Theoretically, this thesis makes an original contribution by extending the knowledge base concerning the creation and regulation of high performance organisational cultures at a key transition stage within elite sport settings.

The significance of this study lies in addressing the dearth of empirical research that examines talent development environments from an ecological perspective. This study addresses a recognised gap in the research and provides a case study upon which further investigation can be built. In this study, idiographic knowledge was generated which in turn can contribute to the social construction of knowledge that builds general, but not necessarily, generalizable knowledge (Patton, 2015). Generalisation of qualitative research findings, in studies such as this, takes the form of identified principles that can inform future systems analyses and guide innovation in complex situations (Eoyang & Holladay, 2013). In line with these authors, the principles generated from this study’s findings are likely to be applicable to, and shared by, other relevant settings and groups. However, transferability of such principles is enhanced in this study due to the depth to which explorations were conducted and descriptions were written.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised over fourteen chapters. Chapter One has identified and addressed the research problem, posed the research questions, briefly outlined the methodology and identified the significance of the research outputs. Chapter Two discusses and critiques the literature relevant in undertaking this study. Chapter Three discusses and justifies the methodology adopted in undertaking this study, highlighting the methods of data collection and analysis utilised. This chapter also explores issues of ethics, trustworthiness, and reflexivity. Chapters Four to Nine present case studies of the individual academies analysed within this study. Chapters Ten to Twelve present the core themes from within this analysis. Chapter Thirteen presents a discussion of these findings in relation to relevant and contemporary literature. Finally, Chapter Fourteen concludes the thesis by offering conclusions, implications, and the identification of avenues for further study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine pertinent literature in addressing the aims of this study. In doing so, this analysis reflects three distinct phases in the talent and expertise research; 1) talent discovery and selection, with a focus on genes, giftedness and innate abilities, 2) talent development, with a focus on acquired competencies, abilities and skills and most recently 3) ecological, social and cultural studies, with a focus on the role of the environment and social interactions shaping talent development. The chapter comprises four main sections. First, definitions of talent and how it is determined within the literature are problematized to position this study in relation to the existing literature. The second section reviews findings from studies that have focused on the role of the environment in talent development. The third section reviews key findings from studies that have focused on the role of psychosocial skills in talent development. The fourth and final section interrogates the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA), the theoretical framework utilised within this study.

2.1 Talent and its Research Journey

There is little consensus in the academic literature regarding the definition of talent (Gagne, 2000; Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998). Emanating from the classical Latin word, ‘talenta’, which denotes a unit of money, it was not until medieval times that talent implied ability (Cobley, Schorer, & Baker, 2012). Most people are of the belief that they recognise and understand talent when they see it, but according to Hohmann (2009), establishing a valid and reliable measure of this concept with clear defining characteristics is much more difficult than what we perceive it to be. In the literature, however, the word talent is surrounded by ambiguity, and according to Meyers and her colleagues, we have yet to answer what talent is (Meyers, van Woerkom, & Dries, 2013). According to Gagné (1996, 2000), the word talent is often utilised to describe two distinct entities; raw materials people possess, as well as the destination point of a developmental process. Similarly, talent, talent identification, and talent development are often confused as being synonymous (Tranckle & Cushion, 2006). This capricious use of talent and its associated terms ‘has resulted in a lack of both definitional and conceptual clarity, leaving the field, at times, imprecise and speculative’ (Tranckle & Cushion, 2006, p. 266).
This lack of agreement can be attributed to the nature vs. nurture debate, i.e. whether sporting development results from biological raw materials (e.g. genes) or environmental influences (e.g. experiences) (Cobley et al., 2012). One such definition that includes both a static and dynamic dimension is that of Singer and Janelle (1999). They assert talent to be a specific combination of anatomical-physical characteristics, abilities, and other personality traits that can only be developed if specific training and other environmental conditions are provided (Singer & Janelle, 1999). According to Tranckle and Cushion (2006), despite the presence of complexity surrounding attempts to define talent, the social composition of talent is crucial for its definition, ‘that talent can only be talent and recognized as such where it is valued’ (p. 266). It would seem that there is a clear need for a common language within the sports research domain because as yet the literature lacks consensus towards a working definition of talent; at present, it is juxtaposed somewhere between sociological, physiological, and biological dimensions.

This conceptual obscurity surrounding talent manifests itself most clearly in the nature vs. nurture debate, which seeks to determine if talent results from innate factors or by learning opportunities (Dai & Coleman, 2005). The naturalist position in this debate centres on the premise that we have the ability to predict exceptional achievement through identifying athletic potential, i.e. biological raw materials or genes play the central role in human development. Howe et al. (1996) outline this stance and point to biological accounts of individuals achieving success in particular domains despite the lack of opportunity (e.g. Mozart). Other evidence related to argument for the innate properties of talent includes the indications that the rate of individual progression in specific contexts is not directly related to effort (Sloboda & Howe, 1991; Sosniak, 1985). Proponents of the innate determinants of talent argue that the role of training and practice is unaccountable for the existence of child prodigies in certain domains, thus attributing early achievements to innate abilities (Feldman & Katzir, 1998). The argument is also supported by the actuality that there are very few exceptional performers across domains in the population and that talent is in fact a rare occurrence (Gagné, 2004). Finally, the ceiling effect, whereby despite ongoing training, the level of performance cannot increase, has also provided researchers with a conclusion that performance is a consequence of genetic factors (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

Proponents of talent acquisition do not completely dismiss the notion that certain innate factors affect performance levels, just as advocates of innate talent do not reject the effect
of practice (Meyers et al., 2013). Abbott et al. (2002) consider it a sensible approach in the
debate to ruminate on the arguments outlined previously and the role they play in
determining talent (Abbott et al., 2002). They point to the reality that both physical and
psychological elements of performance are genetic in their origin. However, these factors
are not stable or predetermined commodities – it is only with the relevant support,
dedication and experience that an athlete can reach his/her full potential (Abbott et al.,
2002). Training, development, and experience are seen as the key components of talent
acquisition and, according to nurture protagonists, variance in talent can be explained by
the nurturing experience by more than 50% (Meyers et al., 2013).

In Gagné’s Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) (2004), it is proposed that talents are
built by enhancing innate gifts through learning and training. Through the developmental
process, gifts are transformed into talents. Without the opportunity to develop, the gifts
become wasted and thus the talent is not developed. In a similar vein, Renzulli (2012)
deduces that some people have potential to display gifted behaviour whilst others do not.
Potential does not lead to excellence without the emergence of above average ability,
creativity and high task commitment through the interaction between the person and the
environment (Renzulli, 2005). Other researchers have championed the combination of
innate factors and accumulated practice (Ruthsatz et al., 2008) and report an indelible
linkage between the genetic contribution to talent and the necessity for practice so as to
perform at extraordinary levels (Vinkhuyzen et al., 2009). Thus, as an approach to
determining the properties of talent, it would seem reasonable to suggest that talent
certainly is dependent on innate features but that these alone are not sufficient conditions
for future achievements, that the actualisation of talent to its optimum level is not possible
without the meeting of the appropriate experience and opportunity (Davids & Baker,
2007).

Some researchers have claimed that deliberate practice is the single most important
The amount of practice has been directly related to achievements in many fields such as
music (Sloboda, Davidson, Howe, & Moore, 1996), soccer and field hockey players
(Starke & Hodges, 1998), chess players (Bruin, Smits, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2008), and
typists (Keith & Ericsson, 2007). Many examples have been cited in the literature in
support of the talent acquisition argument and the role of the environment and training.
These include parental support and success in music (Davidson et al., 1996), the ability of
business organisations to train and promote employees to more advanced positions (Silzer & Church, 2010), and the often cited example relating to the disproportionate number of orphans in the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice who became accomplished musicians due to their profound education in music (Sloboda & Howe, 1999).

Many sport stakeholders believe deliberate practice to be a necessity for elite adult success, thus early specialisation (i.e. focus on a single sport) is both essential and justified (Suppiah, Low, & Chia, 2015). This relationship between hours of deliberate practice and early specialisation has received much support in many sport studies but most especially in sports with a large participation base (Rees et al., 2016), and the individual sports of, gymnastics (Law, Côté, & Ericsson, 2007), darts (Duffy, Baluch, & Ericsson, 2004), and triathlon (Baker, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Deliberate practice has also been shown as crucial in distinguishing performers at different skill levels (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007; Davids & Baker, 2007). Despite such evidence, the early specialisation/ deliberate practice fusion is not without its detractors. Long-term engagement in a single sport has proven to lead to increases in athlete withdrawal from sport prematurely (Wall & Côté, 2007). This withdrawal may be related to the reported high risk of injury and decreases in enjoyment associated with a focus on specialised training during adolescence (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). Research in deliberate practice has also been criticised for methodological weaknesses (Coutinho, Mesquite, & Fonseca, 2016), whilst a recent meta-analysis by MacNamara and colleagues attributes only 18% of expert skill acquisition to the deliberate practice concept (Macnamara, Hambrick, & Oswald, 2014). Apportioning outstanding performances in adult sport to accumulated hours on the training field in a single sport from a young age seems flawed and a lack of understanding of the complexities involved in developing talent in sport (Barreiros, Côté, & Fonseca, 2014; Güllich, 2014; Suppiah et al., 2015).

At the opposite end of the TD approach continuum is a second pathway, late specialisation/deliberate play. Early diversification or late specialisation is based on the premise that children sample a wide range of sporting activities that involve high levels of deliberate play and low levels of deliberate practice (Côté et al., 2007). Deliberate play refers to self-motivating, self-organised activities designed to be enjoyable and fun such as street football, back yard and school yard games. These activities develop flexible and innovative strategies since most games are played in environments loaded with constraints e.g. mixed age groups, different skill levels, natural obstacles such as walls, surfaces or
other boundaries (Henriksen, 2010) and are associated with increased intrinsic motivation (Côté et al., 2007). Early diversification across sport has been shown to produce more athletic success (Hornig, Aust, & Güllich, 2016). In short, there is strong evidence supporting initial diversification with a focus on deliberate play in young athletes as a means for developing elite performance later in their sport careers (Hayman, et al., 2011; Hayman, et al., 2014; Hornig et al., 2016; Memmert, Baker, & Bertsch, 2010; Snyder, 2014).

Talent is also dependent on contextual and individual factors (Abbott and Collins, 2004). These authors suggest that talent may be wasted if contextual factors (e.g. parental support, adequate training facilities, effective coaching) and individual factors (motivation and appropriate learning strategies) are lacking (Abbott and Collins, 2004). Not only is this interaction between context and the individual a necessary condition for talent to emerge, according to Abbott et al. (2002), it is this very interaction that actually shapes the specific manifestation of a talent. Since a talent cannot be separated from its specific setting (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011), and since a specific context might influence different people in different ways (Papierno, et al., 2005), there is a necessity for talent management practices to be both dynamic and adaptable to either context or the individual (Meyers et al., 2013).

In conclusion, the literature places talent on a continuum ranging from determining talent as being completely innate to completely acquired. However, the complexity and scope of debates about innate or acquired talents fall beyond the scope of this thesis. Notwithstanding this, particular perceptions of the concept of talent in general are of fundamental importance to this study. Henriksen’s theoretical understanding of talent, for example, as ‘a set of characteristics, competencies and skills developed based on innate potential and multiyear practice, competition and interactions with the environment’ (Araújo et al., 2010, p. 28) is one which underpins this work. It proposes talent to be much more than a performance outcome, a set of innate or acquired characteristics or a one-dimensional linear process (Cobley et al, 2012). One’s potential for success is very much determined by the interaction of individual, social, and environmental factors. It is this interaction that determines both the learning and developmental opportunities open to athletes and the barriers they face when striving to achieve elite performance (Bjørndal, Ronglan, & Andersen, 2015). This next section interrogates this interaction, emphasising the role that an individual’s environment plays in developing their potential.
2.2 Talent Development and the Role of the Environment

The most considerable conjecture from the talent development literature is that innate talents are not involuntarily converted into elite performers (Howe et al., 1998). The development and subsequent actualisation of one’s full potential is influenced by the acquisition of a variety of psychosocial attributes (e.g. resilience, motivation, commitment) that are nurtured through practices (Larsen, Alfermann, & Christensen, 2012; Li, Wang, & Pyun, 2014), within an environment that is conducive to learning and improvement (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2012). Whilst the literature is comprehensive, with research regarding the necessary components of elite athletic development and performance, there is a considerable gap in understanding the role the environment plays in stimulating these characteristics (Li et al., 2014; Mills et al., 2012; Mills, et al., 2014a). Of the limited studies that have been completed, the yielded references represent two distinct approaches; 1) investigations based on interviews with qualified coaches about the systems they believe necessary for successful talent development environments (e.g. Martindale, Mortimer, & Collins, 2011; Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007; Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005), and 2) case studies of specific sporting environments with a history of producing elite athletes from their junior ranks (e.g. Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010b, 2011).

Despite this under-representation in the research, there now exists an understanding that the successful adaptation of environmental constraints that surround the learner is the most controllable facet of the talent development process (Davids & Baker, 2007; Martindale et al., 2007; Phillips, et al., 2010). Consequently, some researchers have argued that gaining a greater understanding of context is critical to obtaining insight into how to ensure the best sporting experiences for young people (e.g. Bengoechea, 2002). Such environmental-based approaches view athletes as active agents who are engaged in interactional transactions (Bjørndal et al., 2015). Talent is seen ‘not [as] a possession acquired by an individual, nor a fixed property of a performer, but rather [as] a dynamically varying relationship captured by the constraints imposed by the environment and the resources of a performer’ (Araújo & Davids, 2009, p. 24). Environments could thus be more accurately described as the influences shaping the experiences of those who take part in sport: a series of nested, interacting, and self-regulating structures at different levels of proximity to the athlete, ranging from the macro-level to the micro-level (Henriksen et al., 2010a).
Therefore, talent development environments (TDE) are much more than bricks and mortar (Böhlke & Neueschwander, 2015) and De Bosscher and her colleagues outline that the TDE should aspire to be a social and organisational climate that provides the circumstances in which talented individuals can develop into elite athletes and continue to achieve at the highest level in their sport (De Bosscher, Bingham, & Shibli, 2008). Accordingly, Bailey and his colleagues (2013) highlight the need for a shift in focus, from the fixation with researching the anthropological and physiological dimension of talent development, to enhancing our understanding of the environmental factors that play such a crucial role in developing talented athletes.

The approach to describing and evaluating Talent Development Environments (TDEs) outlined thus far has focused on the micro-environment surrounding the athlete (e.g. Matindale et al., 2005; 2007; Mills et al., 2014). Henriksen (2010) took this environment as his starting point and using the holistic ecological approach, focused talent development in a much broader context (Westermark, 2016). From this research, eight features were identified, which according to Henriksen, explained the success within these three environments (i.e. training groups with supportive relationships, proximal role models, support of sporting goals from the wider community, diversification, development of psychological skills, integration of efforts, focus on long term development and a coherent organisational culture). Successful environments are environments that continuously produce elite senior athletes from among its juniors according to Henriksen (2010). Larsen and her colleagues (2013) and Westermark (2016) substantiate these developed successful features in their work investigating male and female Danish soccer clubs. Both of these studies, despite the idiosyncrasies evident at a local level, identify with many of the features present in Henriksen’s work. Similarly, recent studies of TDEs in English soccer academies substantiate Henriksen’s findings (e.g. Mills et al., 2012; Mills et al., 2014b; Mills & Pain, 2016; Pain & Harwood, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that research surrounding successful talent development environments, though underrepresented and localised in Scandinavia and the United Kingdom, shares many commonalities in terms of emerging themes.

What follows is a discussion regarding the macro and micro level influences that shape talent development environments in sport organisations, as outlined in contemporary literature. These influences include cultural values and their effect on organisational structures and social support from significant others.
Macrotechniques

The most salient and pertinent finding in all of the studies is the necessity for a strong and coherent organisational core that functions in response to very precise, clear and robust values and philosophies. The literature has moved beyond simply attributing elite athletic success to the marriage of coaching and sport science and now points to effective management and governance of systems as being the point of difference in terms of competitive advantage in high performance sport (Sotiriadou, Gowthorp, & De Bosscher, 2014). Currently, elite sport is personified by the merging of various elements such as financial and managerial support, sport science and sports medicine support, coaching, talent identification and athlete pathways, training facilities and equipment and competitions (Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2013).

In order to control and direct the merging of so many varying elements, there is a necessity for sporting bodies to operate sport systems, since unorganised activity is not sufficient to generate the conditions for sporting success (Lyle, 1997). The management of sports systems can be conceived of as an input-throughput and output process (De Bosscher, et al., 2006) involving the development of a vision, the management of operations, the leadership of people and the creation of a culture (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Systems consist of interrelated parts designed to deliver a clearly defined objective (Lyle, 1997) and the organisational core acts as a catalyst for the provision of an architecture that surrounds the athlete with a supportive, engaged and motivational developmental environment (Mills & Pain, 2017). Optimal functioning within the environment, according to these authors, is very much contingent on the positive interaction between a coherent operating system and a strong psychosocial structure (i.e. positive, empowering relationships between stakeholders). It is this interaction that aligns the philosophy, values, and vision of a system, i.e. we do what we say we do (Mills & Pain, 2017).

According to Andersen and his colleagues (2015), sport systems 'appear to have self-organising capacities making them difficult to control’ (p. 9). They argue that sport development systems that are prevalent across sports are representative of the decisions taken at ground level; the established routines of coaches, athletes and other stakeholders, the strategies developed in view of resource limitations and other pressures, as these are the realities that shape the experiences of stakeholders across all sport domains (Andersen et al., 2015). This is very much congruent to Lipsky’s (1980) street level bureaucracy theory, whereby frontline workers in sport development systems can be classified as policy
makers in their own right (Sam, 2015). Lipsky’s theory suggests that policy implementation requires a deeper analysis of how these workers at the front line combine with ‘rule regimes’, since it is this interaction that determines good agency performance. It would therefore seem to be important to combine approaches and analyse developmental systems as understood by those at the top of a governing body with an analysis of how the system actually operates at ground level.

This ground level operation is referred to as organizational culture, defined as ‘a sharing of values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group’ (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p. 340). In line with Bayle and Robinson’s (2007) findings, regarding factors facilitating operational performance in sport organisations, the presence of a participatory organizational culture is a crucial component for the internal integration within a sports system as well as its external adaptation with its surroundings (Henriksen et al., 2010b; Storm, 2015). It not only guides the socialisation of its members, but it also becomes a stabilizing force for the group by providing behaviour guidelines through the prevalent basic, unquestioned assumptions within the culture of the organisation.

Such unquestioned assumptions are very much prevalent within the sport pyramid analogy, otherwise referred to as the Standard Model of Talent Development (Bailey & Collins, 2013). The participatory organisational culture within the sport development process is traditionally represented using this pyramid analogy (Shilbury & Moore, 2006). The model’s central working assumption is based on a broad base at foundation level focused around skill, learning and participation, with increasingly higher levels of performance engaged in less and less participants (Bailey & Collins, 2013). It is a model adopted by NGBs throughout the world and its influence is ingrained in sport participation models (Fisher & Borms, 1990). Accordingly, the assumptions underpinning the model have a powerful and residual influence on the thinking about junior sport participation and sport development in sporting organisations (Kirk, 2005).

Bailey and Collins (2013) outline many of the common characteristics of NGBs standard development model:

1. The focus is on those currently classified as talented, even though many not deemed talented enough may become so later on.
2. Progression from one level to the next implies the removal of a large body of players from the system.

3. Players once deselected, find it almost impossible to return back into the system.

4. Presumption that early ability is indicative of later success (Bailey et al, 2011)

5. Early specialisation is vital for progression towards the top levels.

According to Williams and Reilly (2000), sporting systems have a core construct in their performance pathway: the desire to optimize the route, from talent identification, to development, to selection. However, doubts have begun to appear in the literature regarding how empirically driven and valid the pyramid model is (De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, & van Bottenburg, 2013). Even though the model is rarely questioned (Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008), its validity is flawed since many people participate in sport without having a desire to transition to a higher level (Eichberg, 1998). The model also suffers a validity crisis when one considers that some sports can contain elite competition systems without a broad participation base – elite sport cannot be simply viewed as an extension of mass participation (De Bosscher & van Bottenburg, 2011).

Early specialisation practices are beginning at younger ages, thus contradicting the staged pyramid approach to sport development (Eichberg, 1998). Green (2005) argues that the provision of sequential levels within the pyramid do not enhance our knowledge of programme planning, implementation, or evaluation; the vital components of programme provision. More pertinently, considering the model depicts participation opportunity, it does little to explain the player pathway, outline who is involved in them, and in what ways the pathways facilitate sport development. Notwithstanding all of these flaws and validity issues, the model seems very plausible for NGBs and contains certain qualities such as simplicity, concreteness and creditability (Bailey & Collins, 2013). This plausibility has allowed the model to self-generate a belief that it works and that it can account for the success that sport participants may encounter on their journey through sport (Kirk, 2005). Thus, the pyramid model remains unchallenged, valid, and ‘sticky’ as a theory (Bailey & Collins, 2013).

**Micro Level Features**

As outlined above, the sporting careers of youth athletes develop within a social context. At the micro-level, the development pathways of athletes are shaped by their immediate environments. An athlete’s practice environment can be affected by different elements
such as specific activities, social roles, and interpersonal relationships, which are primarily, founded on the athlete’s network of significant others including coaches, parents, teammates and peers (Bjørndal et al., 2015). Accordingly, not only is an athlete’s youth sport experience very much shaped by the combined support effect of this network of significant others but social support of youth athletes has been shown to be critical to successful talent development (Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014). The role of these significant others in supporting athlete development are discussed below.

Parents

The role of parents has been significantly analysed, as parents not only provide tangible support such as transportation and finance, but they also provide very necessary levels of social and emotional support to their children (Carlson, 2011; Gould, et al., 2006; Hayman et al., 2011). Emotional support has been identified in a number of studies as a crucial developmental component, especially in times of stress, disappointment, and uncertainty (Côté, 1999; Henriksen, 2010; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). There is also considerable evidence supporting positive relationships between parents and their children’s coaches and the associated developmental effects on youth athletes. According to Davis and Jowett (2010), the psychological development of a child is substantially impacted by the climate of interactions between parents and coaches. These interactions change and are dependent on an athlete’s stage of development (Martin, Ewing, & Gould, 2014). As children spend more time in specialised training, coaches take on a more prominent position (Côté, 1999), which increases the necessity and opportunity for coach parent interactions (Harwood & Knight, 2009). When these interactions are framed positively, children experience higher levels of enjoyment (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005), reduced perceptions of pressure and anxiety (Jowett & Timson-Katchis, 2005), smoother sport transitions, and more successful talent development (Knight & Holt, 2014). The development of these determinants, not only demands an understanding from parents of their role and the adaptation of this role through time, but also open, regular and honest communication (Gould et al., 2006; Harwood & Knight, 2009).

Studies have also implied that parents can be a negative influence on their children’s development in sport. Research, specific to tennis mainly, has identified parents as being a source of pressure by over emphasizing winning and putting unrealistic expectations on their child (Gould et al., 2006; Lauer, et al., 2010b; Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). Mills et al. (2012), in their study regarding influential developmental factors within English soccer
academies, identified parental behaviours such as inflating their children’s egos and being overprotective as being similarly detrimental for the development of adolescent athletes. Despite these findings, Fraser-Thomas and her colleagues (2017) describe how parents can influence the positive youth development of athletes through their expectations, role modelling, and engagement. This influence is enhanced when parents instil values and work ethic in their children, model humility and respect towards others, and facilitate the development of self-awareness and resilience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017a; Lauer, et al., 2010a).

Coaches

The role of the coach has been identified in a number of studies as the most important social sport interaction (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003; Sheridan et al., 2014; Turnmidge, et al., 2016). Coaches play a vital role in the talent development environment by providing training sessions of high quality, building an appropriate relationship with the child, as well as being the main source of informational feedback regarding the athlete’s performance and development (Holt & Morley, 2004; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). However, coaching is a complex and dynamic task, carried out in an ill-structured, constantly changing environment. Its complexities are the direct result of multifaceted interactions between the coach, the athlete, and their context, resulting in a relationship triad that directly affects athlete learning (Cushion, 2013). Such complexity is compounded since coaches must operate within an organisational system, which in many cases contains limited resources (Algar, 2015). Within these constraints, the coach is expected to employ strategies so that athletes receive a programme of training that is cognisant of their experiences and individual requirements (Carlson, 2011). An understanding of the individual experiences can only be facilitated through player-coach communication and interaction (Henriksen et al., 2010b; Martindale et al., 2007), thus the quality of training programmes is very much dependent on, effective relationships between the player and the coach, the coaches’ understanding of the demands of the sport, and their ability to put appropriate resources in place (Côté et al., 2007). This understanding is even more crucial when one considers the negative effects of incorrect support. Research has shown that insufficient support levels, over-supporting or support engendering a false sense of self-efficacy leads to an impediment to progression (Newsom, et al., 2005: Rook, 1992).

Conversely, expert coaches provide youth athletes with opportunities to be self-motivated and self-directed through the creation of an environment ‘that is structured enough to
stretch learners into new domains of complexity’ (Algar, 2015, p. 29). Such environments facilitate team and personal development through a complex process of change (Felton & Jowett, 2012). However, there is no consensus in the literature on how coaches learn to create such environments (Cushion, 2007). Coaching knowledge is influenced by three basic sources of learning – formal, non-formal, and informal (Nelson, Cushion & Potrac, 2006). Stoszkowski and Collins (2014), while others (e.g. McIlroy, 2015) suggest that formal coach education has limited importance in developing coach education and that instead coaches acquire knowledge through informal sources (e.g. watching other coaches, conversations with other coaches), the foundations of which stem from coaches’ personal early athletic experiences (Bloom, 2002).

More pertinently, in relation to the context of this study, high performance coaches in team sports in Ireland agree with these findings and accept that previous experience as a high performing player acted as a valuable source of coaching knowledge (Sherwin, Campbell & McIntyre, 2017). In agreement with McIlroy (2015), the cohort of coaches in this study, utilised self-directed forms of learning, displayed a preference for informal sources of learning, and indicated that their learning was greatly enhanced by the development of communities of practice (Sherwin et al., 2017). It is through such sources, expert coaches integrate three forms of their developed coaching knowledge (professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal) in various coaching contexts (Rynne, et al., 2017). It is the consistent application of such knowledge that leads to improvements in athlete’s competence, confidence, connection and character, which in turns defines coaching effectiveness (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). As such, coaches are the architects of the sport environment and are charged with creating supportive learning settings that are weighted towards athlete’s personal development rather than coaches’ personal motivation to succeed (Rynne et al., 2017).

**Peers and Role Models**

Positive peer support is also a crucial element of effective talent development (Kay, 2000). Commitment to their sport is enhanced through the social satisfaction athletes develop by making friends through their participation in sport (Carlson, 2011; Patrick et al., 1999). Peers and senior role models provide athletes with informational, self-esteem, and emotional support (Henriksen et al., 2010b; Martindale et al., 2007; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Other studies have identified that peers can act as a barrier to talent development;
jealousy, anger, and low sport motivation are attributed to negative peer influences and comparisons between team members (Keegan, et al., 2009).

Positive role model support has also been cited as a crucial element of talent development (Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013; Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007; Storm, et al., 2014). Henriksen’s work especially relates to the integration of prospective and current elite athletes within the training environment and its positive association towards prospect transition to elite sport. However, studies in elite soccer in Europe would indicate that this type of integration is not commonplace in elite clubs and the transition to elite level soccer is blighted by the lack of cooperation and communication between elite and youth departments within individual clubs (Larsen et al., 2013; Relvas, et al., 2010). It would seem this phenomenon, seen by soccer coaches and administrators as a means of protecting first team players whilst motivating prospects, is not replicated in other sports (e.g. Track and Field, Kayaking and Sailing, as found in Henriksen’s 2010 study; see also Larsen et al., 2013; Relvas et al., 2010).

School

Education and schools play an important role in the talent development process, from introducing sport to children (Sallis, et al., 1997), to supporting elite success by increasing the talent pool (Houlihan, 2000). More pertinently, involvement in school sport has also been shown to improve athletic performance within the Irish context (Bradley, Keane, & Crawford, 2013). However, education can have negative effects on talented adolescent athletes; academic pressures can be challenging and stressful when youths are trying to contend with the demands of both sport and school (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Holt & Morley, 2004; Larsen et al., 2013). It seems that the demands of sport and education are conflicting, they are almost in a competitive relationship grappling for the athlete’s attention and focus (McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006). Thus, it would seem plausible that there should exist a level of synchronisation between the two domains. However, research has shown that this is not always the case and that youths withdraw from sport due to a lack of co-ordination between sport and school (Enoksen, 2002; Lunn & Kelly, 2015). According to Christensen and Sorensen (2009), uncoordinated approaches to development between schools and sports organisations lead to stress and inner conflicts for the athlete. This is despite the fact that research has shown positive empirical and theoretical support for the impact of elite athletic youth performance on academic and social functioning (e.g. Van Boekel et al, 2016). Therefore, as outlined by Henriksen (2010), it is essential that
sport’s relationship with other institutions is co-ordinated so that the athlete gets the opportunity to work in a safe and stable environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this section has outlined the epistemological shift that has occurred in talent research over the past decade from the study of the individual athlete to the broader developmental context or environment in which they develop. In doing so, the literature bookmarks particular macro and micro level features of successful environments common to various domains (Henriksen, 2010; Larsen et al., 2013; Mills et al., 2014b; Mills & Pain, 2016; Pain & Harwood, 2007). These features relate to organisational culture at a macro level and social support of significant others at a micro level. Such diversity supports the recognition that the development of talent is influenced by wider cultural contexts and athletes’ immediate micro level environment (Bjørndal et al., 2015). It is therefore appropriate that talent development practitioners should focus on developing appropriate environments that aid athlete transition rather than focusing solely on developing talented individuals (Henriksen, 2010).

2.3 Talent Development and the Role of Psychosocial Skills

Psychosocial skills have, in a number of studies and in a variety of contexts, also been shown to be a key determinant in the talent development process (Henriksen, 2010; Holt & Dunn, 2004). These findings have advanced the already mentioned epistemological shift in perspective away from the individual athlete to the context in which the athlete is developing (Larsen et al., 2012). Despite this shift, there is still much ambiguity surrounding a precise definition of what constitutes psychosocial skills, but there does exist a commonality regarding key competencies associated with the term. These competencies, according to Harwood (2008), can be divided into both internal and external assets. Internal assets are inclusive of attributes personal to the athlete such as goal setting, emotional control, hard work ethic, and commitment to learning. External assets on the other hand are very much context based and focus on the quality of the environment and its influence on the athlete. Examples would include access to positive role models, social support, and positive peer influence (Larsen et al., 2012).

As well as the sport specific skills taught through athlete involvement in sports programmes, research has shown that many of the assets outlined above are developed in
youth athletes through their participation in sport (Weiss & Raedeke, 2004). However, these positive contributions to youth development are not automatic occurrences but are very much a product of the socially constructed environment within which the sport takes place (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017b). In line with the ecological approach adopted through this study, the psychosocial skills necessary for the successful athlete to transition through sport should not be perceived as internal, independent and stable personality traits but as ‘socially constructed, culturally contingent and highly dependent on the specific environmental conditions’ (Larsen et al., 2012, p. 53). Thus, there is much empirical qualitative support for more emphasis being placed on developing and delivering need specific psychological programmes to athletes within talent development systems (Abbott & Collins, 2004; Johnson, Tenenbaum, & Edmonds, 2006; MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010; Weissensteiner, Abernethy, & Farrow, 2009).

Such an approach may help to alleviate the growing concern in relation to the potential conflict between the goals of talent development (i.e. optimal performance) and positive youth development10 (PYD) (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007; Strachan, Fraser-Thomas, & Nelson-Ferguson, 2016).

The Personal Assets Framework (PAF) was recently proposed as a conceptual model that accounts for the mechanisms and outcomes that constitute PYD in sport (Côté, Turnnidge, & Evans, 2014). Within the framework, it is proposed that youth sport involvement includes three basic elements: (1) personal engagement in activities (what), (2) while creating quality relationships with others (who), (3) in a specific appropriate setting (where). When these three elements positively interact, it creates a context that, when repeated on a regular basis, leads to changes in the personal assets of the participants (Côté et al., 2014). Changes in individuals’ personal assets, such as competence, confidence, connection, and character (4 C’s), have long been associated with positive sport experiences, which in turn lead to long-term outcomes, including continued sport participation, higher levels of performance in sport, and personal development through sport (3 P’s) (Côté et al., 2014). As a framework, the PAF has yet to be extensively tested (Holt et al., 2017) and in reality, such an approach is a rarity in youth sport; conflict remains between the goals of performance and personal development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017b). However, there is support in contemporary literature which outlines how

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10 PYD is way to view development rather than a specific construct, and it is used as an ‘umbrella term’ referring to ways in which children and adolescents may accrue optimal developmental experiences through their involvement in organized activities.
practitioners should embrace a more holistic approach to the elements within the framework (i.e. activity engagement, relationships and settings), which in turn will facilitate a greater understanding of how to optimally balance performance and personal development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017b). According to Côté and colleagues (2014) coaches, parents, and sport organisations have the opportunity to shape each of these dynamic elements in ways that promote personal asset development, which will ideally promote positive sport experiences and longer-term outcomes – both in sport, as well as in other domains of life.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this section outlines the significance of psychosocial conditions and processes within TDEs. Such environments are predicted to affect individual psychology and psychosocial development (e.g. Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010). Understanding and optimising psychosocial conditions within TDEs is now viewed as significant within the talent development research (Cobley & Till, 2017). As a means to developing such understanding to optimise performance and personal development concurrently, the Personal Assets Framework has been postulated as a conduit for positive youth development in high performance sport environments (Côté et al., 2014). Through the positive interaction of the what, the who and the where of youth sport involvement, personal assets are developed that are effective both in sport and in life. These assets are a key factor for coping in future transitions (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007) and are key determinants in the emergence of talented athletes, maintaining excellence and balancing sport and school in the process (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010).

The responsibility for equipping prospects with particular assets and other resources rests within the TDE and not with a particular person or institution (Larsen et al., 2013). Therefore, the implications for TDEs, and their inherent practices, are to assess, monitor, and potentially adapt their psychosocial climates to help preserve and secure the psychological health and growth of their associated prospects (Cobley & Till, 2017). According to ecological psychology, such as Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) bio-ecological model of human development, securing the psychological growth of prospects is dependent on how embedded a prospect is within their environment (Henriksen, Larsen, & Christensen, 2014). In order to better understand this relationship between athletes and their environment, and in line with earlier calls to integrate ecological perspectives into talent development research (e.g. Araujo & Davids, 2009; Krebs, 2009), Henriksen and
his colleagues (2010a) introduced the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) to studying TDEs. As a result of the aim of this study, the HEA will be utilised as a theoretical framework to provide a holistic description of the talent development environment surrounding elite Gaelic Football academies in Ireland.

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives - The Holistic Ecological Approach

In this section, the theoretical perspectives, the holistic ecological approach, and its associated working models utilised within this thesis are discussed. As outlined in the previous sections, the aim of this study focuses on the multiple interactions between Gaelic football prospects and their academy environments i.e. it has its foundations in ecology. However, the literature is extremely sparse in relation to ecological approaches to understanding the relationship between the environment and talent development (Larsen, 2013). In response to such disparity, Henriksen and his colleagues (2010a) introduced the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) to studying TDEs. This approach to analysing TDEs widens the previous perspectives by including the macro and the micro systems surrounding the athlete, both in the sporting and non-sporting domain. Henriksen (2010) developed two working models in order to compare existing environments, the Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) working model and the Environment Success Factors (ESF) working model. These models serve as an applied foundation for this thesis and will be discussed later in this section. Henriksen’s models attempt to operationalise theories of individual development that are both contextually rooted and environmentally dependent (Westermark, 2016). These theories, which are outlined below, will serve as a background for this study. Specifically, tenets of systems theory, ecological psychology, and cultural literature, which are pertinent to the proposed research, will be reviewed.

2.4.1 Systems Theory

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is built on central principles of systems theory and founded on the belief system that the world is constructed on the arrangement of, and relations, between the parts, which connect them into a whole (cf. holism). System theory can be viewed as a scientific tradition rather than a distinct theory in itself (Henriksen, 2010). According to Lewin (1936), systems theory is a diverse set of theories that share a commonality, whereby phenomena must be viewed as complex organised wholes that cannot be disassembled into parts without losing their wholeness, their most central quality. A system is composed of regularly interacting or interrelating groups of
activities, which when taken together, form a new whole (Larsen, 2013). In order to represent a phenomenon correctly, systems theory outlines that we must investigate the sum of the parts rather than the parts themselves (Westermark, 2016).

In most cases, the sum of the parts, or the whole, has properties that cannot be found in the constituent elements (Kneer & Mortensen, 1997). Investigating constituent parts of a phenomenon in isolation from the whole may cause it to represent itself differently (Henriksen, 2010). Thus, research approaches involving systems theory imply that we cannot isolate specific items of the system without destroying the whole due to the presence of high levels of complexity within any system (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Finally, systems are seen to be both open and permeable: a change somewhere within the system causes an effect that creates a change elsewhere within the system. Therefore, we cannot attempt to describe or investigate any human system without reference to the environment it is embedded within (Henriksen, 2010).

2.4.2 Ecological Model of Human Development

Much of Henriksen’s approach to operationalise theory was inspired by the work of developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, and his Ecological Theory (1977; 1979; 1994; 2005). Bronfenbrenner (1994) describes the environment as a series of nested structures. The theory identifies five: micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono. The microsystem represents the close environment that the athletes are directly involved in (e.g. the club, the school). The mesosystem concerns the interrelationship between agents in the microsystem (e.g. between academy, club and school). The theory, not only understands the importance of each of these environments as a unique entity, but also identifies the relationship between these communities as being crucial to the development of the athlete. The theory suggests that athletes are also influenced by contexts in which they are not actually situated. This is called the exo-system (e.g. the education system). Bronfenbrenner describes the macro-environment as the values, laws, and traditions in the surrounding community (e.g. national culture). Finally, the chrono-system involves change or a lack of over time, with a focus on both the individual characteristics of the athlete, as well as the environment where the athlete lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).
Much of Bronfenbrenner’s work is influenced by Systems Theory in biology and stemmed from a discontent with dominant research trends in psychology, where the individual and the environment were viewed as dichotomous entities when examining human development (Tudge, Gray, & Hogan, 1997). Bronfenbrenner’s (1951) Human Development Model has incurred successive changes since its first design over a half century ago. This early work had context as its focus with little regard for the role of the person within the context (Larsen, 2013). His later work (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005) adopts a social constructivist approach and puts much more emphasis on process and the role of the individual in his or her own development (Tudge, et al., 2009). This joint interaction of the person with the environment increases in complexity with time (Domingues, Marcio & Goncalves, 2014). Not only do adolescents experience huge and on-going physiological, social and cognitive changes, but Bronfenbrenner (2005) also propositions that complexity is increased due to the presence of key processes such as internalisation (e.g. conforming to the wishes of a parent), the presence of a third party (another adult such as a coach), as well as the increasing complexity of the activity itself (Strachan et al., 2016).
Underpinning Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory are two key propositions concerning human development. The first proposition suggests that human development relates to a complex interaction between a person and his or her environment. These interactions are termed ‘proximal processes’. In line with his work later on in life (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005), the second proposition underpinning his theory outlines how the shape of human development varies according to developmental outcomes sought (process), the individual characteristics of the person (person), the environment surrounding the person (context), and the time period under consideration (time), i.e. development is affected by the complex interrelationship between process, person, context and time (PPCT model).

Krebs (2009b) succinctly describes Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model in terms of analysing the development of human talent by proposing it to be the sum of proximal processes and their interactions with personal attributes, ecological context, and dimensions of time. Bioecological theory has become more prevalent in the study of youth sport, and there now exists a recognition that youth development cannot be perceived, defined, or interpreted without references to the environment (Araujo & Davids, 2009; Domingues & Goncalves, 2014).
2.4.3 Organisational Culture

Inputs from cross cultural and cultural psychology were incorporated into the working models through the inclusion of organisational culture in their design. Organisational culture is described as a phenomenon that is multi-layered and which affects both human experience and behaviour (Westermark, 2016). Stead (2004) defines organisational culture as ‘a social system of shared symbols, meanings, perspectives, and social actions that are mutually negotiated by people in their relationships with other’ (p. 392). Empirical evidence suggests that organisational culture significantly influences stakeholder attitudes and organisational effectiveness (Gregory, et al., 2009) and has a greater contribution to knowledge management and organisational effectiveness than organisational strategy and structure (Zheng, Yang, & McLean, 2010). An organization's culture strongly influences stakeholder behaviour beyond formal control systems, procedures, and authority (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). As such, organizational culture is a powerful means to elicit desired organizational outcomes.

Organisational culture, therefore, is relevant, both at an individual group level and in a broader societal level, since it defines values, guide socialisation of new members and ultimately directs behaviours (Henriksen, 2010). Schein (1992) provides a deeper analysis of the phenomenon in his work on the culture of organisations, when he outlines that organisational culture consists of three layers: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. On encountering an unfamiliar culture, cultural artefacts are the most visible manifestation of the expressed culture of an organisation (e.g. stories and myths, customs and traditions, clothing, buildings, logos and crests) (Schein, 1992). According to Henriksen (2010) and in line with Schein’s model (1992), in order to decipher accurately the meaning of these artefacts we need to know how they connect to underlying espoused values. As Figure 7 illustrates, values underlie norms and artefacts and determine observed patterns of behaviour. Norms are expectations of acceptable behaviours held by members of an organization and have the force of social obligation or pressure (O'Reilly et al., 1991). These are norms, philosophies, and ideologies that the organisation outwardly promotes.
However, these values are not always consistent with behaviours of group members despite them being values that are championed. Schein (2010) believes that we must make a distinction between values that he classifies as aspirations for the future and values that are actually embedded in underlying assumptions. These underlying assumptions are the bedrock of prevailing culture. Being the ultimate driver of behaviour, they comprise beliefs and values that are not questioned but exist in the subconscious of group members. It is only when one understands these assumptions, can we make real meaning from the various behavioural and artefactual phenomena one observes (Schein, 1990).

Despite Schein’s model being one of the few conceptual models offered in the organisational culture literature, some researchers have challenged his approach (Hatch, 1993). For example, subculture researchers have disputed Schein's assumption that organisational cultures are unitary (Barley, 1983; Borum & Pedersen, 1990). Other researchers have contested the idea that the function of culture is to maintain social structure (Feldman, 1991; Martin, 1992), whilst some scholars suggested that the model should be combined with ideas drawn from symbolic-interpretive perspectives (e.g., Alvesson, 1987; Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). Most pertinently, arguments against conceptual models of organisational culture such as Schein’s have been made on the grounds that they oversimplify complex phenomena (Hatch, 1993). However, according to Hatch, such models undoubtedly serve an important role in guiding empirical research and generating theory.
2.4.4 Holistic Ecological Approach and Working Models

Henriksen (2010) created two working models to study athletic talent development environments by integrating theoretical tenets from systems theory, ecological psychology, and cultural perspectives. In particular, it was Henriksen’s aim that the models would allow researchers to compare environments and avail of a scientific approach in managing the expected large data sets. His approach presents two models that are different yet complementary. The ATDE working model is used as a tool to describe the environment whilst the ESF working model provides an explanation of how various factors in a particular environment relate to successful outcomes for developing athletes within that environment (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016). Despite the assertion by Larsen (2013) that the models tend to oversimplify the more complex ecological psychology, both the holistic ecological approach and the working models will provide a theoretical and conceptual basis for this dissertation.

Henriksen (2010) describes an athletic talent development environment (ATDE) as a dynamic system comprising:

a) an athlete’s immediate surroundings where athletic and personal development take place (i.e. micro-level), b) the interrelations between these surroundings c) the larger context in which these surroundings are embedded (i.e. macro-level) and d) the organisational culture of the sports club or team (Henriksen, 2010 p. 160)

This description is very much inspired by the work of Bronfenbrenner (1977; 1979; 2005) and the assertion that talent development must be understood in the light of the particular environment in which it takes place (Henriksen, 2010). The description above also has, in its foundation, elements of cross-cultural psychology (Schein, 1992) and the system theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 2006). The HEA is still a new perspective in talent development research in sport and does not yet constitute a solid base on which to formulate a theory on the nature of successful ATDEs (Henriksen et al., 2014). Also, these authors claim that the prediction that environments, which embody the proposed positive features, will be more likely to succeed in developing senior elite athletes (athletes above the age of 18 who possess superior athletic talent, to undergo specialised training from expert coaches to prepare them for competition both now and in the future), should ideally be tested through longitudinal or experimental research, which was beyond the scope of the present study. Moreover, Larsen (2013) in comparing the HEA with Bronfenbrenner’s models, points to the fact that the HEA is inspired by the earlier work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). Therefore, Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model (2005) is not integrated into the HEA.
nor does the HEA integrate elements of the meso and exo levels of Bronfenbrenner’s models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005).

The ATDE working model is best described as a framework for describing a particular athletic environment and for clarifying the roles and functions of the different components and relations within the environment. Within the model, the environment is depicted as a series of nested structures, with the prospective athletes appearing at its epicentre. The other components of the model are structured into two levels (micro and macro) and two domains (athletic and non-athletic).

![ATDE model, adapted from Henriksen et al. (2010a).](image)

The micro level of the model represents where prospects spend a large portion of their daily lives such as their academy, club, school, and home environments. The macro level refers to the social settings that influence prospects such as sport federations, media, and the educational system, as well as to the values and customs of the cultures to which the athletes belong. The athletic domain refers to elements of the athlete’s environment that relate to sport, whereas the non-athletic domain refers to all other elements with the
prospect’s lives. Finally, the outermost layer refers to time and presents the past, present, and future of the ATDE.

The second model within the HEA is the Environment Success Factors (ESF) working model, which provides a structure for the factors that provide the environment’s success (Larsen, 2013).

![ESF model](image)

**Figure 9: ESF model, adapted from Henriksen et al. (2010a).**

At its starting point, the ESF explores the preconditions of the environment being examined. Preconditions are environmental resources including human, material, and financial resources which are necessary but do not guarantee success. In order to analyse the effectiveness of an environment, the model initialises its approach by identifying the presence of pre-conditional factors provided by the environment. These factors are the environment’s resources: financial, human, and physical. These factors are crucial for the talent development process but their presence does not guarantee success (Henriksen, 2010). The model then outlines that the environment’s processes (e.g. training, competition) leads to three outcomes: the athlete’s individual development and achievements, team achievements, and organisational development and culture. Both team and individual achievements are obviously a product of the processes, especially training, but they also have alignment with organisational development and culture.
Schein’s (1992) theory of organisational culture is central to the model. As described in detail above, Schein theorised that culture has three levels: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. As outlined by Schein (1992), organisational culture is characterised by the integration of key basic assumptions into a cultural paradigm that guides new members in terms of their socialisation into the group, provides group stability and adapts the organisation to a constantly changing environment (Henriksen, 2010). The ESF working model therefore can be utilised to predict the success of an ATDE (i.e. effectiveness in producing senior elite athletes). Success is predicted, according to Henriksen (2010), as a result of the interplay between preconditions, process, individual and team development within the environment, with organisational culture serving to integrate these different elements (e.g. Danish 49ers Olympic Sailing squad).

2.4.5 Conclusion

Literature searches reveal a sparsity of case study research focusing on the interrelatedness between the individual and his or her context and on the role of the environment in talent development in sport. In response, Henriksen and his colleagues (2010a) introduced the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA) for studying TDEs. Two working models represent such an approach. Both these working models, the ATDE and the ESF, will be utilised to guide the research process within this study. This includes the interview and observation guides, as well as the overall data collection process. After analysis, results will be used to develop empirical models specific to the Gaelic football academy environment within each case studied. It is these models that will provide the basis within the study for the advancement of important implications for talent development in youth team sports, since, according to Larsen (2013), the HEA allows for a deeper theoretical understanding of development through providing researchers with the means of analysing the characteristics of specific TDEs.

2.5 Conclusion

The research presented in this review has succinctly divided talent into three themes; biological, psychological and socio-ecological. By doing so, we are drawn to view talent development from a number of perspectives. These perspectives are represented as being in opposition to one another in the literature despite their inherent interdependence in practice (Storm, 2015). This separation has its origins in difficulties with defining what talent actually is. Is talent innate, nurtured or representative of situated, social, and cultural
ability and potential (Storm, 2015)? A definitive answer is not proposed in research, but the literature is now directed towards understanding the origins of talent as a mutual interplay of factors rather than prioritising one over the other. Within this interplay, dilemmas present themselves within the three dimensions. Naturalistic approaches to understanding talent suffer from the fact that it is not really possible to predict future performance or to really measure talent. Similarly, debate reigns in the nurturing literature regarding what exactly is the best pathway to take, in terms of developing elite athletes.

Recently, the focus in the talent development literature has been dominated by analysis of the context in which talent development takes place (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). Within this context, coherence and alignment have been shown to be vital elements towards facilitating young athletes in reaching their potential and transitioning to elite level adult sport (ibid). Successful talent development environments have been proven to include a number of components including appropriate levels of social support, long-term developmental aims, a strong organisational core and a focus on the development of psychological skills (Henriksen, 2010; Martindale et al., 2011).

However, this epistemological shift in viewing talent development as being socially constructed and framed within an ecological standpoint is very much context specific, in terms of its geographical representation in research. Much of this approach is underpinned by Scandinavian countries national cultures, as well as the prevailing cultures of the researched sports. In order to further develop the ecological approach to analysing talent development, there is necessity to examine different sports (e.g. team sports) within a different culture to determine the degree to which successful environments have similarities in structure and organisational culture (Henriksen et al., 2011). In doing so, this study will analyse how an NGB (i.e. the GAA) aligns its constituent components to support its athletes at this crucial juncture to develop holistically. The study will also evaluate how the preconditions and processes prevalent in academies influence the environment’s success. Such an approach takes into an account both a holistic individual focus and an ecological environmental focus integrated under one theoretical umbrella (Aalberg & Sæther, 2016). This should allow for a greater understanding of how to create and regulate high performance organisational cultures in elite sport settings.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The previous two chapters have produced research questions relating to the roles and functions of key components and their interrelations in Gaelic Football academies. In this chapter, the rationale and justification for employing qualitative methodologies is described. Drawing on the work of Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the chapter is divided into two distinct parts in order to ensure the stages of inquiry are transparent to the reader. The first section begins by reviewing the major methodological traditions, before providing a rationale behind the paradigmatic approach taken in answering the research questions. The research approach is then discussed. The second component of the chapter then outlines the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation employed, and discusses the trustworthiness of the research. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the research methodology used in addressing the research questions.

3.1 Paradigm Rationale

It is clear that the procedure for choosing a research paradigm is not a straightforward one, research purpose and questions must inform the choice of research paradigm and methods (Agee, 2009) or as Maxwell (2005) explained, research questions need to account for one’s ‘tentative theories about phenomena’ (p. 68). This invariably suggests that there exists an indelible link between the question, the paradigm and the chosen method. This alignment moves methodology away from a position of orthodoxy and much more towards a position of situational responsiveness and appropriateness (Patton, 2015).

As already outlined, this study aims to develop an understanding of a particular phenomenon; Gaelic football academies. More precisely, this research attempts to progress a comprehension of how agents within these academies support player development. Such undertakings involve accessing the meanings participants assign to the phenomenon and thus require a qualitative approach of inquiry (Hastie & Hay, 2012). As emphasised by Mintzberg (1979), organisational research necessitates a qualitative approach since ‘measuring in real organisational terms means first of all getting out, into real organisations. Questionnaires often will not do. Nor will laboratory simulations…The qualitative research designs, on the other hand, permit the researcher to get close to the data, to know well all the individuals involved and observe and record what they do and say’ (p. 586).
In essence, a qualitative approach in this instance, allows the researcher to ask questions about systems and models of talent development in order to develop an understanding of knowledge and the associated actions of the constituent agents within these systems. Before these questions can be asked and more importantly, their answers understood, we must first ask what is there to be known and how is it we know what we know (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This is in line with the advice of Grix (2002), whereby he espouses the necessity that researchers should fully appreciate the research process and be able to understand the fundamental relationship between the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions underpinning their research.

Patton (2015), in identifying 16 different inquiry frameworks associated with qualitative research, argues somewhat against the advice of Grix and moves researchers towards focusing on core questions as the basis for understanding and contrasting long standing and emergent qualitative inquiry approaches, i.e. theoretical perspectives are distinguished by their foundational questions. These perspectives include ethnography, phenomenology, constructivism, narrative inquiry, positivism, and realism among others. The foundational question in this research study centres on complex adaptive systems and how we can capture, illuminate, and understand their dynamics. In order to answer such a question, this research adopted the paradigm of complexity theory as the framework of inquiry.

Many disciplines centre on one particular paradigm, which aligns to a viewpoint that determines the dimensions, contexts, and limits of the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Talent development in sport has not developed such a consistent received view yet. In terms of this dissertation, talent development in Gaelic football will be viewed as a multilevel complex system. This complexity is manifested in its numerous components, including the body’s movement and cognition system, the athlete as a person, the teams he/she is involved with, the various coaches and other support personnel he/she encounters, team symbiosis at the various levels, and the academy itself as an organisation within the macro environment of the GAA and sport in general. Sports research has begun to address complexity, particularly in the areas of motor control (Davids et al., 1999), learning and performance analysis (Araujo & Davids, 2009). However, mainstream research across multiple sport disciplines has paid little attention to the complexity of approaches. This may relate to the fact that human systems in sport are complex and loaded with problems of control and efficacy (Lebed & Bar-Eli, 2013).
Complex systems need to be seen holistically because the sum of the parts will be less than the whole. There are many human actors in complex social systems and they are involved in the mutual shaping of any particular event, with each event happening under its own unique circumstances. These human actors are known as agents within complex adaptive systems. These agents, according to Complexity Theory, are egocentric and selfish, uncertain about the effects of their actions and reach their goals through trial and error. These goals are intrinsically independent and therefore often in conflict with other agents within the system. This forces a co-evolution within the environment since agents will continuously adapt to changes made by other agents, but in doing so, modify the other’s environment. This continuous adaptation by the system causes it to readjust its structure in order to cope with the pressures brought upon by the agent’s behaviour. However, this process of self-organisation does not always guarantee the success of the system (Heylighen, Cilliers, & Gershenson, 2006).

Complexity theory is not congruent to ontological realism, as it discounts the existence of an objective reality that is independent of the observer and the context (Tremblay & Richard, 2011). According to Morin and Le Moigne (1999), observations are situated in context and embedded in a relationship with the observer, i.e. understanding of phenomena is grasped through humankind’s subjectivity. Complexity theorists view the world as being unpredictable, uncertain, disordered, and adaptable. Prigogine (1987) supposes that we must abandon the dream of total knowledge and illusions of future forecasting; instability in our realities only entertains estimations and extrapolations since our knowledge is a limited window of the world. However, in depth qualitative fieldwork framed in complexity theory and the cases that result from such fieldwork allow for an emergence that will open to us a new view of an ever changing, ever new world (Patton, 2015).

As a paradigm, complexity challenges the traditional dogmas of order, reduction, and logic espoused by the classical philosophers such as Aristotle and Newton (Morin & Le Moigne, 1999). It ascribes to a reality that is subject to various contextual, historical, and social contingencies, where the experimental knowledge of individuals is legitimised through a relativistic viewpoint, thus allowing us access to interpretations of reality as experienced by individuals (Robertson, 2000). This presents connotations of limits in our knowledge. According to Cilliers (2005), these limits are a condition for knowledge, that they actually enable knowledge since all-inclusive knowledge claims are too complex for humans to develop. The knowledge we have of complex systems is based on models or frameworks.
we make of these systems. In developing these frameworks, we must reduce the complexity of the system. Therefore, we cannot have complete knowledge of complex systems; we can only have knowledge in terms of the framework. Thus, our knowledge of complex systems is provisional and we must be modest about the claims we make about such knowledge (Cilliers, 2005).

This is very much at odds with the reductionist approach that has dominated science since the time of Newton. Complexity theorists believe that this type of thinking has gone as far as it can go in addressing the problems of the modern world and that we must look at the world as a complex entity (Patton, 2015). In doing so, we can provide both a framework for this study, as outlined below:

- **Ontology**: To acknowledge complexity is to acknowledge that observations are situated in a context and embedded in a relationship with the observer (Morin & Le Moigne, 1999). In fact, according to Morin (2001), complexity assumes the reintroduction of the knowing subject into all knowledge since phenomena are always grasped through humankind's subjectivity (Morin & Le Moigne, 1999). This means that ontological realism, which postulates the existence of an objective reality, which is independent of the observer and the context (Guba, 1990), is not an option (Morin & Le Moigne, 1999; Gatrell, 2005; Lessard, 2007). Thus, this study adopted a 'modest' postmodern ontological position as described by Heylighen, Cilliers, & Gershenson (2006).

- **Epistemology**: This first imperative of complexity (going beyond ontological realism) also assumes greater reflexivity among researchers such that they are able to account for the influence of their own history, subjectivity and position on the construction and interpretation of knowledge (Taylor & White, 2000; Rortveit, Strand & Schei, 2005; Lessard, 2007). The interactions of those being studied and the researcher were interdependent, co-evolutionary, and dynamic. Thus, this study adopted a subjectivist approach whereby findings were co-created by both the researcher and the participants.

- **Methodology**: At the methodological/theoretical level, complexity assumes a holistic, transdisciplinary approach. Broadly speaking, holism implies taking into account the logic of the individual as much as that of the social system to which the individual belongs (Morin & Le Moigne, 1999). Holism is thus linked to complexity inasmuch as the latter calls for a comprehensive perspective, with
respect to the topic of study, a perspective that allows for the assessment of the emergence, organisation, and interdependence of the constituent parts (Albrecht, Freeman, & Higginbotham, 1998). In-depth qualitative fieldwork and the case studies that result from such fieldwork allowed such an assessment.

3.2 Research Design

In order to investigate the holistic development of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland, a research design that addressed both the real life context of athlete development and the wider social cultural factors was required. To this end, a multiple case study approach was adopted. The following section will examine the impact of this approach within this thesis.

3.2.1 A Case Study Approach

In this study, a case study approach has been adopted because, according to Yin (1994), a case study is an appropriate research design when a phenomenon’s variables cannot be separated from its context. The case study approach was also deemed appropriate when based on Yin’s (2009) assertion that case studies have a particular ability to answer “why” and “how” type research questions rather than simply “what” types, therefore they have the potential to evaluate or explain (Ashley, 2012). Robson (2002) describes case studies as:

A strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (p. 178).

What constitutes a case is wide ranging but according to Thomas (2011) cases are bounded systems whereby their ‘parameters of particularity are set by spatial, temporal, personal, organisational or other factors’ (p. 5) and that are studied with reference to the specific context in which it is situated. Put simply, a case study is a form of research that involves analysing a case or a group of cases from a sociological viewpoint (Stake, 2000).

Yin (1994) categorised case studies as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory:

An explanatory case study is aimed at defining the questions and hypotheses of a subsequent study … A descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon within its context. An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relationships – explaining which causes produced which effects (p. 5).

- **Intrinsic** case studies are undertaken because the researcher wants a better understanding of a particular case; therefore, the purpose is not to build broad ranging theory.

- **Instrumental** cases are chosen where the case provides the researcher with an insight into a specific issue; the case is of secondary interest;
  - ‘It is examined in-depth, its context is scrutinised and its ordinary activities are detailed to help the researcher to pursue an external interest’ (Stake, 2000, p.437).

- **Collective** case studies are essentially instrumental studies that extend to many cases;
  - ‘With even less intrinsic interest in one particular case, a researcher may jointly study a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition’ (Stake, 2000, p.437)

Studies such as this cannot be categorised as fitting neatly into one of these labels. In this research study, the boundaries are blurred since the study contains elements of all three case study types: **intrinsic** because the researcher wants to gain a better understanding of elite youth footballers’ academy experience; **instrumental** because it investigates six specific cases in an in-depth manner; and **collective**, as this study cross-compares the academy context and its interaction with its stakeholders across the six cases.

### 3.3 Grounded Theory Method

Grounded Theory refers to a family of methodologies that share the same basic principle of creating explanatory theories based on data collection in the field (Holt, Knight, & Tamminen, 2012). It has been described as a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in peoples’ lives (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) but has been presented in the literature as a method (e.g. Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnson, 2006), a set of techniques or procedures (e.g. Greckhamer & Koro-Ljungberg, 2005), a set of principles and practices (Charmaz, 2006), an outcome or end product (e.g. Eccles, Walsh, & Ingledew, 2002), or ‘both a method, technique or research design, and the outcome of the research’ (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 117). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that Grounded Theory should be labelled a methodology, whilst
Weed (2009, p. 504) describes Grounded Theory as a ‘total methodology … that provides a set of principles for the entire research process’.

Weed (2009) outlines eight core common elements of a study’s methodology that are necessary for it to be classified as a grounded theory study (e.g. an iterative process; theoretical sampling; theoretical sensitivity; codes, memos and concepts; constant comparison; theoretical saturation; fit, work, relevance and modifiability; and substantive theory). However, the implementation of these core elements within a study, and the truth claims a study may lay claim to, are dependent on the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning it (Weed, 2017). Failure to understand and engage with these assumptions has led researchers to use grounded theory as an incorrect and incomplete methodology and thus contribute to the copious criticisms it has suffered from (e.g. Becker, 1993; Kennedy & Lingard, 2006; Weed, 2009; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996).

Weed (2017) outlines three distinct approaches to grounded theory from an ontological and epistemological viewpoint: realist-positivist, or Glaserian GT (e.g. Glaser, 1992); post-positivist - constructivist, or Straussian GT (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990); and constructivist-interpretivist GT (e.g. Charmaz, 2006). Each approach shares the core methodological elements, as described by Weed (2009), but their implementation differs according to the researcher’s view of reality and of knowledge (Weed, 2017). This study is rooted in a relativist ontological and a subjectivist epistemological position, thus it accordingly adopted an approach to data analysis associated with a constructivist variant of grounded theory (i.e. Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Such an approach has justification since sports are connected with major spheres of social life such as family, economy, media, politics, education, and religion. As parts of society, sports are social constructions that are given form and meaning by people as they interact with each other (Coakley, 2004). Grounded Theory aims to explain social phenomena and processes, the conditions that support the processes, the consequences of the processes and the conditions that support changes in processes. As sport and its associated processes cut across a varied social demographic, it lends itself to Grounded Theory to generate rich data to understand the processes involved and the supporting resources required (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2010).

Therefore, in adopting a Grounded Theory approach, the researcher rejected objectivity and focused on meanings that were constructed from interpretations of collected data. Thus, theory in this study is constructed through a process of interaction between the researcher and the study participants in the field and is ‘coloured by the researcher’s
perspectives, values, position, privileges and socio-cultural context in which they are embedded’ (Thornberg, 2012, p.91). Such an approach involved a constant interplay between induction whereby the researcher was not a ‘tabula-rasa’ or blank slate (Weed, 2009), and abduction, in which pre-existing theories and concepts were treated as provisional and modifiable conceptual proposals (Thornberg, 2012b). Despite this interplay, reflexivity, through the use of a reflexive diary and memoing, helped the researcher remain sensitive to the data. As McGhee and his colleagues argue, Straussian grounded theory researchers who acknowledge that their histories, experiences, and existing theoretical knowledge colour the way in which they understand and interpret the data tend to produce findings that do not simply confirm their preconceived notions but rather generate novel theory, as originally intended by both Glaser and Strauss (McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007).

As such, there can be no observation without theory, as perception is itself shaped by expectations, our previous experiences, and a wealth of accumulated knowledge (Bendassolli, 2013). Some researchers would therefore advocate that one enters the field without engagement in a literature review, as knowledge of extant theories is likely to impede the emergence of theory from the data (Glaser, 1998). That being said, one cannot unlearn that which is already known (McGhee et al., 2007), therefore it is perhaps more appropriate to acknowledge one’s position and manage potential bias through reflexive practice. As Jenkins (2002, p.376) suggests, in ‘double distancing’ oneself from their research (reflectively), a researcher might take a ‘second step away from the object of their research’ so that they might be more than objective, recognising their inherent assumptions. For Timmerman and Tavory (2012) such an approach is perhaps better known as abductive analysis. The authors argue for researchers to enter the field with the ‘deepest and broadest theoretical base possible and develop their theoretical repertoires throughout the research process’ (p.180). Thus, the authors argue that instead of theories emerging from data, novel theories might emerge through careful consideration of methodology and analysis, supported by a researcher’s cultivated theoretical expertise.

### 3.4 Trustworthiness in the Study

A variety of conceptions of qualitative research exist, with competing claims as to what counts as good quality work. Indeed, in order to contribute to the current understanding of psychological phenomena, Sparkes (1998, p. 365) contends that one must appreciate, encourage, and embrace with ‘theoretical tolerance and respect’ these varied
methodologies. Whilst agreeing with this point, Seale (1999) cautions that there is no conclusive criteria as to ensure ‘quality’ research, and that one must consider key philosophical disputes over terms such as ‘validity’, ‘reliability’ and generalisability’. Characterised by Kvale (1995) as the ‘holy trinity’ of methodological rigor, many researchers reject the epistemological assumptions that underlie these scientific principles (Seidman, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Indeed, recently Gutierrez and Penuel (2014) have argued that rigor be derived through a works relevance to practice, that being the capacity of the output to organise present and future concerns within social systems. As such, rigorous investigation is achieved through ‘emphasis on what is happening in the day-to-day life of participants in those systems’ as this ‘helps make visible the structural and historically existing contradictions inherent in complex activity’ (p.20). Certainly, then, it can be argued that the sustained and direct engagement of ethnographic study within this context provides such rigor and relevance through practice.

The traditional conceptions of ‘validity’, ‘reliability’, and generalisability’ require naive realism and linear causality, concepts that do not align with the constructivist positioning of this thesis. Therefore, alternative criteria are employed: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). What follows is a brief outline of each of these criteria and how they were developed within this study.

3.4.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012). In order to achieve this within the study, the research must demonstrate that the constructed themes are sufficiently saturated and represent credible reconstructions of participants’ experiences (Merriam, 1998). Prolonged emersion within the field served to provide credibility by allowing the researcher to become part of the culture within the academy environments. This was achieved through the building of rapport and trust, thus providing a greater sense of the developmental experience:

i. Qualitative research data collection requires the researcher to immerse him or herself in the participant’s world (Bitsch, 2005). By doing so, the level of trust between the researcher and the respondents improves whilst the researcher also develops a greater understanding of participant’s culture and context (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Data was collected over a nine-
month period in this study, thus, as described by Anney (2014), distortions of information were minimised due to contextual insights gained from the extended time period in the field.

ii. Triangulation was also a feature of this study. Triangulation ‘involves the use of multiple and different methods, investigators, sources and theories to obtain corroborating evidence’ (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p.239). Anney (2014) outlines three distinct techniques in triangulation; investigator triangulation, data triangulation, and methodological triangulation. This study was conducted by a single researcher, so investigator triangulation is not applicable in this instance. However, data triangulation was a feature in this study. Different research instruments such as interviews, focus groups, participant observation were utilised. Six different informants from different sources within each of the six cases studied also enhanced the quality of data. Finally, methodological triangulation occurred since different research methods were used to collect data. Outside those already mentioned in terms of data triangulation, a design thinking methodology (Goligorsky, 2012) was also used to collect data from the youth player participants in the study.

3.4.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that this is only possible in a limited manner when dealing with qualitative studies, as is found in this thesis. As a means to facilitating transferability of findings from studies within the qualitative paradigm such as this, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that researchers construct theories that incorporate working hypotheses laden with thick descriptions of context and circumstance. From this, it is suggested that interpretations of meaning may be applied across similar contexts.

The provision of thick descriptions of a study, contained in the final report, is imperative for qualitative researchers (Anney, 2014). This implies that a rich and extensive set of details concerning methodology and context should be included in the research report (Li, 2004). By doing so, not only is the reader capable of determining the extent to which the overall findings ‘ring true’ (Shenton, 2004, p. 69) but also, allows replication of this study.
with similar conditions in other settings (Guba, 1981). Detail follows in this chapter regarding why the researcher made certain decisions during the research, the alleged impact on such decisions on the researcher and informants, and how the data was collected and analysed (Kirk & Miller, 1986).

### 3.4.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the data over similar conditions with similar participants (Polit & Beck, 2012). Within qualitative studies, the literature suggests that this is achieved by demonstrating that a systematic process is taken to address the research questions (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Patton, 2002). To achieve this, observation data included an audit trail and a code-recode strategy:

i. An audit trail involves an examination of the inquiry process whereby a researcher accounts for all research decisions and activities to show how the data were collected, recorded and analysed (Li, 2004). In line with the advice from Guba and Lincoln (1982), the following were kept for cross checking throughout the inquiry process; raw data, interview and observation notes and documents collected from the field. In doing so, confirmability of the study is established (Tobin & Begley, 2004). According to Bowen (2009) an ‘audit trail offers visible evidence – from process to product – that the researcher did not simply find what he or she set out to find’ (p. 307).

ii. Code – recode Strategy: This strategy involves the researcher coding the same data twice, comparing the results, and seeing if the results change or remain the same. In this study, the researcher undertook this strategy with one case so as to enhance the dependability of the inquiry. There was no difference between each set of results.

### 3.4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher’s ability to demonstrate that the data represents the participant’s responses and not the researcher’s biases or viewpoint (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As a means to ensuring confirmability within the research process, the researcher utilised peer debriefing and a reflexive journal, as well as other tools already described within this section:
i. Peer debriefing, according to Guba (1981) ‘provides inquirers with the opportunity to test their growing insights and to expose themselves to searching questions’ (p. 85). Throughout this study, the researcher sought support from other professionals for scholarly advice, including academic staff, the dissertation committee, and fellow researchers. As suggested by Pitney and Parker (2009), peers examined data collection methods and process, data management, data analysis procedure and research findings.

ii. Confirmability or neutrality can be established by use of a reflexive journal, described by Wallendorf and Belk (1989) as ‘a reflexive document kept by the researcher in order to reflect on, tentatively interpret and plan data collection’ (p. 77). By being reflexive, researchers have the ability to assess the influence of their own background, perceptions and personal interests on the qualitative research process (Krefting, 1991). In this study, the researcher’s diary also outlined the challenges and issues they encountered which helped to maintain cohesion between the study’s aim, design, and methods.

### 3.4.5 Authenticity

Authenticity refers to the ability and extent to which the researcher expresses the feelings and emotions of the participant’s experiences in a faithful manner (Polit & Beck, 2012). To achieve this, the researcher utilised member checking. Member checks mean that ‘the data and interpretations are continuously tested as they are derived from members of various groups from which the data was solicited’ (Guba, 1981, p. 85). It is a crucial process that qualitative researchers should undergo since it is at the heart of credibility (Anney, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysed and interpreted data was sent back to the participants in this study so that they could evaluate the interpretation made by the researcher. By doing so, researcher bias is reduced in the analysis of data (Anney, 2014). Member checking was also undertaken through the data developed in the empathy stage of the design thinking technique utilised with the academy players (Goligorsky, 2012). This in itself was a form of structural corroboration that helped establish referential adequacy (Guba, 1981).

Contrary to the assertions of Tracy (2010), there is no universally accepted set of criteria used to evaluate qualitative research (Gordon & Patterson, 2013; Noble & Smith, 2015). However, the strategies outlined above demonstrate that the credibility of this study is enhanced in so far as it is possible. Thus, it is appropriate to suggest that the principles of
practice (Patton, 2015) generated from this study, should become a catalyst for action to improve the holistic development of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland.

3.5 The Case Study

This study analysed one umbrella case (Gaelic Games academies and their various stakeholders) which comprised of six individual cases: six hexads of academy administrator, u21 player, club coach, school coach, parents and youth player. Through such an approach, the phenomenon of how successful Gaelic football academies function and support youth development was studied over a nine-month period. Case studies, as earlier outlined, afford researchers the opportunity of methodological choice in terms of sourcing evidence – interviews, artefacts, documents, focus groups and observations (Yin, 1994). The following table outlines the six cases and their participants.

3.5.1 The Cases

There were six individual case studies. These case studies were selected from 32 under-16 (u16) county football academies in Ireland. In line with Henriksen’s work in Scandinavia, this study looked to examine successful player development environments. In previous studies such as Henriksen (2010), successful environments were defined as those environments that continuously produce elite senior athletes from among its juniors. In this study, counties were selected using a number of criteria including those suggested by Henriksen:

1) As a county over the past decade, regularly feature at the final stages of the All-Ireland senior football championship
2) As a county over the past decade, regularly feature at the final stages of All-Ireland under-21 (u21) and under-18 (u18) championships
3) As a county over the past decade, regularly produce elite players from underage junior ranks
4) Since this study was representative of the whole island of Ireland, counties were also chosen on geographical grounds; thus, all four provinces are represented in the study.
3.6 The Pilot Study

Prior to the main data collection phase, pilot observations and interviews were conducted within one academy separate to those utilised within the main study. The practices of the academy were observed over three visits to a centralised training base within the county. Interviews with the various stakeholders were also conducted during this time. The purpose of this activity was to assess the data collection techniques and to judge the suitability of grounded theory for data analysis. For example, the pilot study served as a testing ground for the suitability for the use of CAQDAS (computer assisted qualitative data analysis software), which proved vital in organising and handling the large amounts of textual data produced within the study. The observations and interviews were recorded using field-notes and a digital recorder, respectively, before being transcribed verbatim. Following this, conceptual categories were constructed and discussed with my PhD supervisor.

From feedback given in these discussions, the approach to collecting data from the youth prospects within this study was altered. As outlined by Yonas and colleagues (2009), engaging youths in research has proven to be difficult. The pilot study confirmed that this would also be the case in this study and it was decided that a different approach needed to be adopted so that youth voices would be incorporated and heard through the study. Thus, as a means of engaging youths, design thinking tools were utilised.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As outlined in the previous section, this study adopted many varying strategies to promote rigour within the research process. In order to acknowledge the role of socially constructed ethics in human research, the researcher grounded these strategies within an ethical framework to ensure that all of the research procedures utilised within the study adhered to professional, social and legal obligations to the research subjects (Gordon & Patterson, 2013). Tracey (2010) describes four dimensions to such a framework appropriate for qualitative research: (a) procedural ethics, (b) situational ethics, (c) relational ethics, and (d) exiting ethics. Ethical decision making was shaped throughout the study by considering the emphasis, balance, and to which conclusions each approach might lead. Thus, the concept of ethics will be addressed using these four dimensions.

Procedural ethics involves gaining approval from participants and according to Sales and Folkman (2000), they include mandates such as do no harm, avoiding deception,
negotiating informed consent and ensuring privacy and confidentiality. A number of mechanisms were utilised to satisfy such mandates in this study. Firstly, ethical approval for the study was sought from University College Cork, Ireland. This involved the submission of a detailed report, outlining all research instruments and consent forms to be used (see Appendix 1). This report was ratified by the Social Research Ethics Committee at the University in June, 2016. Secondly, in relation to the selection of research participants, a number of crucial ethical issues were key considerations:

(a) This research study is part sponsored by the GAA. After numerous presentations and meetings with the Director of Research in Croke Park (GAA Headquarters in Dublin), agreement was reached around the research purpose and aims. Once this was established, the GAA played no further role in the research process, thus allowing the researcher to conduct the study in an objective manner. As suggested by Oliver (2010), researchers should be able to develop a research design, plan a programme of data collection and analysis and draw their conclusions without any reference to, or any involvement with, their sponsors.

(b) In each of the six cases, the researcher had to provide an outline of the study to each respective County Board (the committee charged with running the GAA affairs of each county) prior to receiving consent that the study could precede in particular counties. The researcher was in all instances introduced to the County Games Manager in each county; these are paid employees of the GAA. These employees acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ in terms of accessing the academy and each played an important role in identifying participants for the study. Obviously, this may have ethical implications since some potential participants could be unfairly excluded by the gatekeeper, other participants may be put under pressure to participate or information may be withheld by some participants chosen by the gatekeeper (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Despite these issues with accessing sites through gatekeepers, symbiotic relationships can develop, once both the researcher and the gatekeeper, make a serious attempt to see the point of view of the other (Oliver, 2013). The approach adopted in this study was sensitive to the potential for negative impact for gatekeepers since they were the only participants who were employed by the GAA. Also, this process adopted was very much part of a staged approach to informed consent, i.e. initial introduction about the study at management level, briefings and written information at middle management
level and finally observations and interviews at operational level. This approach also mirrors the social structure of the research site and the GAA in general.

(c) Since all participants were selected as described above, it was crucial that the researcher remained alert at all times for indications that someone had not participated completely freely of their own will. All participants in this study received a description of research purpose and procedures, the potential risks and benefits were outlined to them and it was also explained to them that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time (Ritchie et al., 2013). Prior to each interview, without the presence of the gatekeeper, each participant was reminded that participation was voluntary and that there were no consequences for withdrawal.

Situational ethics refer the ‘unpredictable, often subtle, yet ethically important moments that come up in the field’ (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). What this implies, is that ethical codes and guidelines are simply not sufficient. According to Murphy and Dingwall (2001), the slavish adherence to procedural ethics can actually blunt the researcher’s awareness of the method specific dilemmas that arise in the field. Situational ethics assume that each circumstance is different and that researchers must repeatedly reflect on, critique, and question their ethical decisions. It assumes that decisions should be very much based on the particulars of the research site (Tracy, 2010). In many ways, the social structure of the GAA had ethical implications throughout the data collection stage of the study. These included:

(a) Academy administrators (the gatekeepers) used the interview as an opportunity to make political points by highlighting the lack of support they themselves were receiving from the GAA in general and their respective County Board committees. The researcher had to ensure with each of the six administrators that all of their data collected could be used in the study. Two of the administrators asked to speak off the record, this data were not reported.

(b) One administrator (a gatekeeper) contacted the researcher looking for advice in negotiating with his County Board in relation to having to explain recent results of academy teams in competitions. This showed that the researcher had the trust of the administrator and was regarded as an expert in the field. It also showed that County Boards are consumed with results and winning competitions, which are very much at odds with the approach of the academy in this case. Maintaining
distance as the researcher was difficult, especially since strong relationships were
built with gatekeepers in each county. (c) All administrators were very interested to discover what other counties were doing
in terms of their academies. Again, this is very much in context since the GAA is
a very clandestine organisation in many ways and counties do not share operational
practices with each other. Despite re-assurances from the researcher that all data
collected was confidential and could not be shared, the questions from some
administrators continued throughout the data-collection period of the study.
However, the researcher was viewed by some participants as somebody who had
knowledge that could be used for their benefit. The constant questioning became
tiresome for the researcher and, despite the detailed ethical protocols laid down and
explained to all participants, it seemed some just felt that these could be
circumnavigated with the right question.

Relational ethics are related to the ethic of care that ‘recognises and values mutual
respect, dignity and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between
researchers and the communities in which they live and work’ (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). In
this study, the researcher was the human instrument, thus according to Gonzalez
(2000), he/she should always respect others, which includes allowing participants to
assist in defining rules of the research. Bryman (2008) argues that such an approach
makes it more than likely that the participant will open up more about themselves.

Finally, exiting ethics concerns the fact that the ethical considerations continue beyond
the data collection stage, especially in relation to how the researcher leaves the scene
and shares their results. Presenting research to avoid unjust or unintended
consequences must be considered, especially since researchers never have full control
over how their work is read and understood (Tracy, 2010). Thus, in this study, findings
were presented devoid of victim blaming and their unjust appropriation. Fine and his
colleagues described this approach well when they stated that qualitative researchers
practice ethics when ‘we interrogate in our writings who we are as we coproduce the
narratives we presume to collect and we anticipate how the public and policy makers
will receive, distort, and misread our data’ (Fine, et al., 2000, p. 127).

To sum up, qualitative research involving the study of humans will involve inherent ethical
issues (Patton, 2015). The issues are the result of an intersection between the topic of the
research, the politics of the research and the values of the researcher, participants and
collaborators (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This suggests a complexity far more detailed than
courses of action supposed by ethics guides and protocols. This, in turn, implies that the
researcher requires complex thinking so as to negotiate an appropriate ethical pathway
through the research process.

3.8 Sampling: Purposeful, Initial, Theoretical

In line with complexity science, case study methodology enabled the study of each
academy system as an integrated whole. Complexity theory suggests that key to
understanding the system are contained in patterns of relationships and interactions
amongst the systems agents (Anderson, Crabtree, Steele, & McDaniel Jr, 2005). According
to Patton (2015), what is sampled is what is studied. In this study, each case comprised of
six individuals belonging to the macro and the micro systems surrounding the athlete, both
in the sporting and non-sporting domain. These participants included the academy
administrator, the academy coach, the club coach, the school teacher, parents of the
players, and an elite u21 player. One u16 athlete was also nominated by each academy
administrator to participate in the study.

Sampling in this instance allowed for an in-depth analysis of each case. In doing so, the
researcher built an insightful picture of each case to ascertain how successful Gaelic
football academies function and support youth development. The data analysis process that
followed focused on the intrinsic value of each individual case initially before comparisons
were made across all six cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Attention was then paid to
variations between each case and where relevant, the relationship between different effects
and outcomes. These associations were then expanded upon through thematic connection
within the grounded theory process.

In this study, idiographic knowledge was generated which in turn can contribute to the
social construction of knowledge which builds general, but not necessarily, generalizable
knowledge (Patton, 2015). As outlined already, generalisation of qualitative research
findings in studies such as this, takes the form of identified principles that can inform future
systems analyses and guide innovation in complex situations (Eoyang & Holladay, 2013).
In line with these authors, the principles generated from this study’s findings are likely to
be applicable to, and shared by, other relevant settings and groups. However,
transferability of such principles is enhanced in this study due to the depth to which
explorations were conducted and descriptions were written.
3.9 Participants

The central members of the environments under study were young prospective elite athletes who were recognized as ‘talented’ but who had not yet made it to the senior elite level. Besides the target group of prospective elite athletes, the environments had a number of other participants, such as elite athletes, coaches, experts, managers, parents and others. As a consequence of the holistic ecological approach, these were all included in the study, either as interviewees or during observation, as will be described below.

3.10 Data Collection

Patton (2015), in providing a comprehensive strategic framework for qualitative inquiry, identified 12 core strategies so as to guide decision making and action within the research process. These strategies centre around three major headings: design, data collection, and data analysis. In terms of data collection, the reader is prompted to focus on four key areas: qualitative data, personal experience and engagement, empathic neutrality and mindfulness, and dynamic systems perspective. Combining these strategies allows researchers to develop a depth of understanding in terms of context of the phenomenon under study inclusive of the capturing of vital inner perspectives. This implies going where the action is and attempting to put oneself in the other person’s shoes (Patton, 2015). Thus, a variety of data collection methods and approaches were utilised in this study ‘so as to determine how various actors within the situation view it’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.44). In doing so, insights and interpretations were drawn through the triangulation (Begley, 1996) of methods and sources which provided a basis to confirm emerging findings whilst simultaneously pointing to contradictions and tensions that highlighted areas for analysis (Ashley, 2012). The specific approaches used in this study, so as to allow such triangulation within the case study framework, are outlined below.

3.10.1 Interviews

Interviewing was considered a valuable inclusion to the methodology because this data collection tool can yield rich insights and allow an understanding of unobservable themes that other methods cannot reach (Wellington, 2015). Research design encompasses many different degrees of interview structure, ranging from tightly structured to loose conversational type interviews. When designing this study, the researcher deemed that
semi structured interviews would be most appropriate. This decision is congruent to the study’s aims and also in line with its associated subjectivist epistemological position.

In this study, 30, one to one, in-depth, semi structured interviews were conducted; five participants in each of the six cases. These participants included the academy administrator, the academy coach, the club coach, the school coach and elite u21 players. The purpose of these interviews was to gain in-depth information about key informants’ beliefs and experiences concerning the functioning of Gaelic football academies. A secondary purpose of adopting interviews as a data collection tool was to verify the trustworthiness of data collected from observations, documents, focus groups, and other interviews.

Although use of semi-structured interviews is widespread, they can take various forms (Wellington, 2015). Separate interview guides were necessary for the various participants (for sample interview guides, see Appendix 3). These guides were based on interview guides utilised in other studies where the ATDE and ESF working models were the dominant theoretical framework (e.g. Henriksen, 2010; Larsen 2013; Giraldo, 2017). Since the one to one interview focuses primarily on providing an insider view of the studied phenomenon, it was crucial that the researcher developed questions that provided participants with a structure, which allows them to explain and elaborate on their understandings of the topic (Ennis & Chen, 2012). In this instance, the chosen guides facilitated such criteria since they allowed participants to comment on core themes of talent development research and pre-selected issues derived from the ATDE and ESF working models. Also, specifying a framework of questions meant that the researcher was able to keep himself and the interviewees ‘on track’ with the objectives of the research whilst also allowing comparison across interviews, and simultaneously retaining freedom to probe for clarification and further depth along different avenues as they arose (Stodter & Cushion, 2014).

Each interview guide was divided into four parts so as to follow the themes developed in Henriksen’s (2010) working models. The initial introductory section focused on background questions and the participant’s overall impression of the environment. The descriptive part of the guide focused on the interrelations between various micro and macro components at play within the academy system whilst the explanatory element of the guide focused on the success factors of the environment. The final section focused on a time element and participants’ perspective on the past and the future of the academy.
environment. The actual order of how these questions were asked and the specific language used depended to a large extent on the role of the participant being interviewed. Because the researcher knew the language and culture of the participants, a strong rapport was established quickly. The researcher collected detailed information using a Dictaphone and also took comprehensive notes after each interview. This data was in turn used to inform the construction of new questions for the next stage of data collection i.e. subsequent visits to the research site.

3.10.2 Focus Groups

A focus group interview is a flexible, unstructured dialogue between the members of a group and a facilitator/moderator that meets in a convenient location (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010; Jayawardana & O'Donnell, 2009). Whilst focus groups may not be suitable for collecting extremely sensitive data, they have capability for eliciting multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under scrutiny, as well as providing synthesis and validation for emerging ideas and concepts (Halcomb, et al., 2007; Nepomuceno & Porto, 2010). As a data collection tool, it is very much aligned with an interpretive epistemology since openness is driven through the revelation of multiple perceptions of knowledge from the various participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The main purpose of focus group research is to ‘draw upon respondents’ beliefs, attitudes, and feelings by exploiting group processes’ (Freeman, 2006, p. 493). There are many stated advantages to interaction between participants and, indeed, many see interaction as the key to the method (Kitzinger 1994). The idea is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views and attitudes efficiently, and encourages participation from those who feel that they have little to say (Kitzinger 2005). Through the interpersonal communication between participants, similarities and differences in expressed opinions and/or values are clarified (Freeman, 2006). So as to facilitate such occurrences within the focus group session, the researcher must carefully create a ‘permissive non-threatening environment, a setting that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view without pressuring participants to vote or to reach consensus’ (Krueger & Casey, 2010, p. 4).

In this study, focus groups were conducted with groups of parents from each individual case. The number of participants in each group varied between a maximum of six and a minimum of three participants. Of the six focus group interviews conducted, all
participants were fathers of athletes except in one case where one mother formed part of a group. Since all of the interviews took place at training session venues, the standard of accommodation varied greatly across the six cases. Three of the interviews took place in a dressing room whilst the other three took place in an appropriate setting i.e. a meeting room. Halcomb et al. (2007) outlined other limitations of focus group interviews. These authors consider confidentiality a potential issue whilst they also believe focus groups could lead to conflict resulting in problems in managing group interactions. Others have argued that focus groups produce data that is shallow thus reducing the quality of insight that they provide (Hopkins, 2007). Analysis and interpretation of data is also a challenging task due to the complex verbal and non-verbal responses from participants (Gibbs, 2012). Therefore, in this study, the researcher wrote copious notes on the observations of participants as soon as possible after each interview.

3.10.3 Participant Observation

According to Spradley (2016), participant observation is a useful research strategy when examining contexts that involve complex social relations. As a research strategy, participant observation allows for in situ observations of social practices under study. In addition, to achieve contextual sensitivity and in line with Systems Theory, it is necessary to examine a phenomenon within its natural context (Giraldo, 2017). Observation took place within different contexts over a nine-month period. These included training sessions, meetings, and competition and totalled twenty site visits by the end of the data collection process. Included within the observations were a variety of informal conversations with athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents. These conversations provided many realities of what was actually happening for the various stakeholders within the social context of the academy.

During observations, the researcher kept two main forms of records. Field notes, defined as records of behaviours, activities, events, and special occurrences in the environment, were utilised to provide meaning and understanding of the prevalent culture and social interactions within each academy (Schwandt, 2014). The researcher also kept a diary, with more extensive notes, thoughts, questions and observed environmental patterns. Analysis of these notes, aligned to an analysis of the field notes, occurred immediately after the observations, thus allowing the researcher to foster a sense of self-reflection crucial in developing meaning and understanding in qualitative research (Giraldo, 2017).
3.10.4 Analysis of Documents

The analysis of documents was the least used source of data in this study. This is simply because, outside of a scheduled calendar, counties, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, have not produced any documentation regarding their development systems. Despite repeated requests to each county to provide such documentation, only one county was in a position to provide substantial printed guidelines. There was also little detail on each county’s web page and it was only on attending sessions did the researcher receive copies of strength and conditioning programme handouts amongst other inconsequential one-off pages. The researcher found it extremely difficult to locate any documentation in relation to structures, mission, or detailed planning around individual academies.

3.10.5 Design Thinking Tools

A similar interview guide, based on the components of the ATDE and ESF models, was developed for youth participants in other studies (e.g. Henriksen, 2010). However, the researcher discovered, during the pilot study, that 15-year old adolescents were not overly comfortable in the one to one interview scenario and thus the data produced were not overly rich. This was the researcher’s experience despite following guidelines developed by Mack and her colleagues (2009), when interviewing adolescents. The researcher attempted to share power within the interview with the youth by outlining to him that he could refuse to answer questions, stop the interview at any time whilst he continuously validated the adolescent’s opinions throughout the interview. The researcher also portrayed an appropriate level of unconditional acceptance of the adolescent’s viewpoint whilst continuously evaluating the levels of rapport between himself and the interviewee.

However, on analysing the data following the interview, the researcher decided that data was too shallow to be able to illuminate the actual lived academy experiences of elite youth footballers. When this issue was added to the issues of consent, confidentiality, access, and ascent associated with youth research (Schelbe et al., 2015), the researcher believed that difficulties and problems would arise unless a more nuanced approach was designed.

Research with youth presents complexities, including logistical and ethical challenges yet considerations regarding methods are rarely addressed in the literature (Schelbe et al., 2015). According to Fleming (2010), research with young people requires collaboration between young people and adult researchers. This partnership ‘needs to be based on
principles that articulate the relative powerless position of young people, embrace an emancipatory research paradigm and strive to generate research with young people that will create change in their lives and, in so doing, inevitably challenge assumptions about the purpose, principles and process of research’ (Fleming, 2010, p. 211). In order to develop a proposed solution to such issues and respond to the calls made by Fleming and Boeck (2012) and others, Design Thinking was used in this study as both an ideological and organisational tool for data collection with elite youth footballers.

Design thinking can be defined as ‘a systematic and collaborative approach to identifying and creatively solving problems’ (Luchs, Swann & Griffin, 2016, p. 2). More than this, Razzouk & Shute (2012, p.330) assert that ‘design thinking is generally defined as an analytic and creative process that engages a person in opportunities to experiment, create and prototype models, gather feedback, and redesign’ in order to find a solution. It is therefore viewed as a form of solution-focused/solution based thinking. In design thinking, the process of design is led by a clear goal to find a solution to make a situation better (and not to solve the problem). This way of thinking was led by Buchanan (1992), who applied design thinking to intractable human problems. Examples might include physical inactivity or world poverty. Rittel & Webber (1973) described such problems as ‘wicked’, as they lacked both definitive formulations and solutions and were characterized by conditions of high uncertainty.

The process of design thinking involves the ‘development of idea stages, applying an iterative process that forces them to move back and forth between inspiration, ideation and implementation’ (de Mozota, 2013, p.1). The design thinker must employ a range of skills to navigate this process including empathy, integrative thinking, optimism, experimentalism, and collaboration (Brown, 2008, p.87). Brown (2008) describes how the methods used in design thinking are primarily underpinned by analytical tools, which are both qualitative and quantitative, and then, coupled with generative techniques. Moreover, this hybrid approach helps the design thinker to look at existing policies and practices with fresh eyes, to imagine how these might look in the future and to build a road map to getting there. Using co-creation tools engages users in generating, developing, and testing new ideas. Finally, field experiments are designed to test the key underlying and value-generating assumptions of a hypothesis in the field.

Choosing Goligorsky’s (2012) model of design thinking, the project was aligned with three of his four stages (see Figure 10) – Clarify, Ideate and Develop.
The researcher, having received informed consent for six youth participants, conducted two Design Thinking workshops in two different locations during March 2017. Three participants from three individual counties attended each workshop. The Design Thinking process began with the Clarify stage, which involved using empathy to understand the client (in this case, the experiences of an u16 elite footballer). A description based on gathered data from other participants was presented to the athletes, which outlined a typical persona of a youth footballer, his needs, and his insights. This persona, Eoin, was very real to the youth athletes and all three participants in both locations admitted that they readily identified with the needs and the insights rose.

The next stage of the Design Thinking process was the ideate stage, whereby the researcher presented the participants with questions that they would individually brainstorm and write solutions or answers onto sticky pads. Again, these questions were based on data collected from other participants or were pertinent from research. These included questions such as: What are the barriers Eoin will encounter because of his involvement in the academy? What are the personal characteristics of Eoin’s coaches, what do they value and promote? Each participant placed their answers onto a wall when all five questions were answered. A group discussion followed between the researcher and participants, whereby the athletes spoke around their answers. Following this, participants were given opportunity to add to
their answer to each question and add them to the wall chart. Once all questions reached saturation point in terms of answers, the athletes were then asked to order their answer to each question in terms of importance (see Figure 11). Participants were then asked to complete a storyboard entitled ‘A year in the life of Eoin’ (see Figure 12). This, again, acted as a means of ideation but more importantly as a means of triangulating data (Anney, 2014).

![Figure 11: Design Thinking, Stage 2, Ideation Wall Chart](image1)

![Figure 12: Design Thinking, Stage 2, Ideation Storyboard](image2)
In the final stage of the ideation process, the researcher synthesised the data generated and produced new problem statements. One case was chosen out of the six case studies and 28 stakeholders from the academy in that county were invited to another Design Thinking workshop. 22 stakeholders including athletes, parents, teachers, coaches and administrators, attended on the night. Problem statements based on the new data were presented and participants brainstormed in small integrated groups on how solutions could be found to the problems presented (see Figure 12). Each group transcribed and ordered their solutions onto large paper sheets, which were then collected at the end of the workshop by the researcher.

Figure 13: Example of Problem Statement presented at a Design Thinking Workshop

The final stage of this three stage process was the Develop Stage, whereby all of the solutions were synthesised and visual prototypes developed. Despite this being a novel and rich means to gather data, there are some limitations to be considered when using design thinking as a methodology. In 2015, Liedtka purported that design thinking ‘appears resistant to rigorous empirical inquiry because of the multifaceted nature of its “basket” of tools and processes and the complexity of measuring the outcomes it produces’ (p.925). In particular, she highlighted the issue of cognitive bias. To circumvent these issues, the
researchers engaged in crystallisation of data sources (Richardson, 2000) and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that data collection was a faithful representation of what was said and to thus reduce cognitive bias.

3.11 Research Timeline

This section details the chronological order and detail of the data collection during this study. In all, there were five stages. The relevant documents relating to each stage are found in the Appendices, where indicated.

Stage One: Presentation of Research Impact Statement to the Director of Games Development and Research of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

26th June 2016

Two hour meeting with the Director of Games Development whereby the researcher outlined the necessity for, and suggested impact of undertaking this study through the presentation of a research impact statement.

July and August 2016

Finalised all covering letters and consent letters for the study’s participants (administrators, coaches, parents, teachers, and athletes).

Stage 2: Negotiating Entry into the chosen cases (six counties who met the sampling criteria)

September and October 2016

The researcher had to negotiate entry into the chosen sites. This involved in all cases an initial email to the County Board Secretary whereby information about the study was presented. This was followed up by a phone call. In all instances, agreement to participate in the study had to be sought at an official meeting of the County Board. Once this was agreed, the researcher was appointed a contact person within each county to liaise with. In five of the cases, this was the County Games Manager, an employee of the GAA. In the other case, it was a County Board Coaching Officer, a volunteer. The researcher contacted each of these liaison people and following this forwarded covering and consent letters (see Appendix 2).
Stage 3: Data Collection Cycle One

November and December 2016

(a) Researcher visited each site and conducted a one to one interview with squad administrators in each case.
(b) Researcher observed Strength and Conditioning Programme delivery at each site
(c) Researcher gathered any relevant documentation that was available regarding the practices of each case
(d) Researcher collected consent letters signed and returned by participants through the county liaison person.

Stage 4: Data Collection Cycle Two

January to March

(a) The researcher returned to each site and observed a pitch training session.
(b) The researcher conducted the following one to one interviews in each site with the following participants: teacher, club coach, under 21 player and academy coach (see Appendix 3).
(c) The researcher conducted focus group interviews with parent groups in each case (see Appendix 4).

Stage 5: Data Collection Cycle Three

April to July

(a) The researcher conducted Design Thinking Workshops with youth athletes, one in the south of Ireland, one in the North of Ireland.
(b) The researcher conducted a Design Thinking Workshop for all stakeholder in one particular case.
(c) The researcher attended competition weekends and observed in case in competitive action.

Once data had been collected in this manner, the researcher became immersed in the data and used grounded theory to actively induct key themes.
3.12 Data Analysis

Grounded Theory is an iterative process of simultaneous data collection and analysis (Holt et al., 2012). In this study, data analysis began as soon as the first data was gathered, which lead to an interaction between data collection and analysis throughout the study. This conjoined approach led to the discovery that there was a necessity to involve additional participants who were not originally identified in the research proposal. This interplay between data analysis and data collection is facilitated through theoretical sampling, ‘sampling on the basis of emerging concepts’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.73). In simple terms, the researcher, on analysing gathered data, makes decisions on where to go next. In advancing this process, the grounded theorist can utilise a number of analytic tools such as the flip flop technique, analysing the meanings of words, questioning and thinking in terms of metaphors and similes. However, the two most important analytic tools are memo writing and coding (Holt et al., 2012).

3.12.1 Coding

So as to move from basic data to theory development, researchers must analyse data at increasingly abstract levels. This is achieved by segmenting the data and attaching labels or codes to the different segments.

3.12.2 Memo Writing

According to Glaser, memos are the ‘theorizing write up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding’ (Glaser, 1978, p.83). By writing memos, researchers are driven to investigate their codes, as well as the relationship between them. In doing so, memos encourage the researcher to question the data and provide a connection between concepts and theory (Holt et al., 2012), thus, memos are a crucial component in data analysis.

3.12.3 Grounded Theory Process in this Study

Level One and Level Two: Derivation of open codes and conceptual categories (Open Coding):

This involved the researcher labelling the concepts in each paragraph of the data, by asking ‘what categories, concepts or labels do I need to account for what is of importance to me
in this paragraph’ (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004, p. 637). To do this, the researcher utilised the data analysis software package, Quirkos, to analyse all six case studies. This involved importing each data source into the software and fragmenting the data line by line. Codes were developed as the microanalysis continued. Memos were also written about each fragment of data. Reports were then extracted from the software in relation to each source. These reports highlighted coded data according to colour. An example of this is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 14: Example of Open Coding Process in Quirkos Software

In the next phase of Axial Coding, these categories were linked to sub-categories in Quirkos. Figure 15 shows an example of a report on the category, Barriers, and the sub-category, coaches’ thinking.
Level Three: Developing Themes (Selective Coding) – The researcher began to determine which categories were dominant in the data. This was done by viewing the data categories and determining which category encompassed the most data from the perspectives of all the participants. It appeared that the themes most relevant at this point were: stakeholder relationships, environmental factors, cultural issues and the GAA, and considering personal development.

Level Four: Testing the Themes – This process involved member checking (Rossman & Rallis, 1998) and crystallisation (Richardson, 2000) so as to ensure that the data was represented in a transparent manner. Each identified theme was interrogated in relation to what each participant said about it.
Level Five: Interrelating the Explanations – The themes at this level become the explanation of the data (Harry et al., 2005) since the themes are now grounded in extensively crystallised data (Richardson, 2000). In drawing final conclusions, the researcher discovered that three factors impinged on elite youth Gaelic footballer’s development through their involvement in GAA academies.

Level Six: Delineating Theory – As already outlined, theory generated from this study had both formal and substantive aspects.

3.13 Mechanisms for Reporting Data

The researcher used two key methods for reporting data:

(a) Crystallisation of data within case studies
(b) Relevant Theoretical Frameworks to organise thematic data

Crystallisation of data within case studies

In this study, crystallisation (Richardson, 2000) occurs twice. In Chapters Six to Eleven, contextual data are reported from participants in six individual case studies through vignettes. These opinions on specific issues also envelop the three thematic chapters (see Chapters Twelve, Thirteen and Fourteen). This congruency between the case study contexts and the key themes inducted from the six-level grounded theory process (Harry et al., 2005) proposes that knowledge is generated in this study through a deepened complex interpretation of data (Richardson, 2000). Depth of interpretation and crystallisation is achieved ‘through the compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organising, and analysing those details’ ( Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 10). Thus, through the process of crystallisation, a contribution to the talent development literature can be made.

3.14 Researcher’s Positionality Statement

This act of examining the research process in the context of the researcher’s positionality can be described, at least in part, as reflexivity (Bourke, 2014). Mays and Pope (2000) defined reflexivity as ‘sensitivity to the ways in which the researcher and the research process have shaped the collected data, including the role of prior assumptions and
experiences’ (p. 51). Others have simply labelled reflexivity as the continuing mode of self-analysis (Callaway, 1992). Thus, through practices described earlier (p. 14), self-scrutiny was very much prevalent within the methodological approaches used in collecting and analysing data within this study.

As already outlined in this chapter, the researcher is a co-construct of knowledge. With such a pivotal positioning within the research process, it is an imperative that researchers recognise their inquirer posture and the implications of whose voices are represented in texts (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Simply put, they must be explicit about their subject positions and points of view and actively manage this through reflexive practices as earlier described (Fine, 2006; Hsiung, 2008). This sense of researcher visibility within the project allows the reader to develop an understanding of where both the researcher and participants reside within the study (Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013). For this project, in the interest of full disclosure and of guarding against unethical or unintentional influences on the researcher’s interpretation of youth athlete’s holistic development in Gaelic Games academies, the following discussion outlines the researcher’s personal experiences germane to this study.

The researcher has invested a huge portion of his life to the GAA organisation. Like many Irish girls and boys, he grew up idolising sporting heroes from within his own county; all of them were household names within the GAA and the country in general. His earliest memories revolve around playing in the garden, dressed in the red jersey of Cork and imitating the play of his idols. The researcher, above anything else in life, wanted to be just like them. His sporting journey took him some of the way there, having represented his county at schools, youth, and adult level. However, the researcher was never destined to reach the dizzying heights he dreamt about as a young boy. Along that journey however, his identity very much morphed into that of a ‘GAA man’. All of his leisure time was spent in his local club and all of his friends were very much involved in Gaelic Games also.

Over the last number of years, on retirement from playing, the researcher became involved in coaching. This culminated in being appointed as coach/manager to the Cork senior football team in 2014 for a two-year term. Throughout his involvement in Gaelic Games, the researcher has had many positive and negative experiences. Selection on elite teams growing up, however, seemed to lead to confusion and chaos. The researcher can vividly remember an incident whereby he had two matches in one day; his club coach arranged a game the same evening as he had an activity with Cork under-18s. He went to the Cork
game but discovered that his club coach got the bus driver to park the bus outside his gate for thirty minutes. He was convinced that the researcher was inside in his house and was going to make him play with my club. This alone well describes pressures and confusion that elite youths encounter in their development. It is these memories that resonate most strongly within the researcher when he considers his playing career in Gaelic Games. Therefore, when the opportunity arose, the issue of elite development within Gaelic Games was an obvious choice of study for the researcher.

It was really through the connections made over the two-year spell as the Cork manager that the researcher was able to access the participants necessary for the completion of this study. Throughout this process, he continuously reflected on what role his positionality as a ‘GAA man’ studying Gaelic Games academies played. Prior to commencing data collection, the researcher made an assumption that his position as an insider would afford him a wonderful insight into the practices of the various academies under the study umbrella. Such an assumption would appear reasonable considering the commonalities he would share with participants. The researcher has been an elite player (of sorts), has coached at county, club and schools levels, and is very familiar with the administrative workings of County Boards. He believed, as was the case in other studies, that stakeholders in each academy would gravitate towards him based on these shared commonalities (Bourke, 2014).

However, the researcher was very much mistaken regarding his perception of positionality. Even though he could be very much classified as an insider in terms of researching a culture that he is very much part of himself, he felt that participants sometimes viewed him as an outsider. The researcher felt as if he was viewed as a Cork man rather than as a GAA man. It was if he represented Cork and some stakeholders feared that he was going to extract information from them that was going to be of some benefit to Cork. This may be part of the GAA culture; counties traditionally have operated clandestinely. The researcher remembers returning home from one interview in one of the cases and receiving a phone call on route. It was the squad administrator pleading with him that he would not tell the people in Cork what they were doing in their county.

Looking back through the data collection process, the researcher now senses that he achieved a greater sense of solidarity with stakeholders from his own county. It was as if they needed a champion to right some of the issues they had and maybe they felt due to the researcher’s previous positions within the county that he might be able to right some
of their perceived ills. It was also possible that the researcher drew on his insider status more so with these participants than with others, initially. However, as the researcher entered into further cycles of data collection with each academy, the researcher got the sense that he was becoming more of an insider. This obviously had linkage to the development of relationships and trust between the researcher and participants. This may also signify that the researcher was becoming more engaged in the reflexive practices the he had adopted, as well as having more opportunities to discuss the commonalities that he shared with the various stakeholders (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003).

On reflection in terms of an overall positioning within this study, the researcher sees himself of having adopted what has been referenced as the ‘space between’, a perspective that supports the notion that individuals operate within a location where they can be both a part of and separate from a group (Dwyer & Bucker, 2009). The researcher does not view his positionality as a limitation within this study. The expression of voice within the findings of the study is related to the researcher’s subjectivity and the particular details of the lived experiences of the participants (Bourke, 2014). In line with his epistemological viewpoint outlined earlier, the researcher believes that both he and his participants shape the research by who they are and the interactions that occur between them. Thus, by remaining reflexive throughout the research process, the positionality of the researcher meets the positionality of the participants.

3.15 Conclusion

An Armchair Walkthrough

As a means of summarising, as well as servicing the necessity for methodological coherence, the researcher provides an overview of design decisions in Table 1. This table is adapted from Holt and Tamminen, (2010b) and is referred to as an ‘armchair walkthrough’ which has been described as heuristic intended to provide a planning framework for the key decisions a researcher may take in designing a Grounded Theory study.

Table 1: Methodology Armchair Walkthrough (Adapted from Holt and Tamminen, 2010b)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Decisions</th>
<th>Items to Consider</th>
<th>Decision Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontology, Epistemology</td>
<td>Select philosophical perspective consistent with variant of GTM.</td>
<td>Relativist Ontology Subjectivist Epistemology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Usually focus on examining some form of social process in context, with the goal of creating a grounded theory. GTM is useful for areas/issues where adequate theorizing does not exist.</td>
<td>1) What are the roles, functions and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland? 2) What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games? 3) What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Identify appropriate population and settings to be sampled. Purposeful sampling</td>
<td>Stakeholders of Gaelic Games Academies in Ireland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Decisions</td>
<td>Items to Consider</td>
<td>Decision Taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Use principle of theoretical saturation, make estimates based on previous studies, use guidelines in literature.</td>
<td>6 cases were chosen as the sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for Interaction of Data Collection and Analysis</td>
<td>Engage in analysis as soon as first data are collected.</td>
<td>Data collection and data analysis ran concurrently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-Collection Methods</td>
<td>Consider interviews, observations, documentary analysis (specific decisions will be based on variant of GTM selected).</td>
<td>Interviews, focus groups, documentation, observations and design thinking methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data-Analysis Methods</td>
<td>Use coding techniques and other theory-generating techniques based on variant of GTM selected.</td>
<td>6 level grounded theory approach from Harry et al. (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Product</td>
<td>Know what type of theory will be created (e.g., substantive or more formal).</td>
<td>Theory is both formal and substantive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please note that Chapters 4-9 (pp. 84-195) are unavailable due to a restriction requested by the author.
Chapter 10: Theme One - Dysfunctional Stakeholder Relationships

This chapter draws together the data reported in the six case studies reports in order to analyse: Theme One: Dysfunctional Stakeholder Relationships.

In doing so, it answers the following research question: Main Research Question 1: What are the roles, functions and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland?

The findings relating to this theme are centred around four key aspects or sub-themes. These include: (1) the role of the coach, (2) the academy and club coaches, (3) the role of parents, and (4) the relationship with the school.

10.1 The Role of the Coach

When asked about the role of the academy coach, the majority of respondents spoke around upskilling prospects and readying them for competition and for the demands they would face at the next level of inter-county football. This role was seen as being orientated towards technical development and related directly to perceived coaching deficiencies at local club level. Participants felt that the academy coach had little choice but to focus attention on improving the playing skills of the prospects since many prospects were lacking in basic skills. One County Games Manager described the perception:

*I would say that, at present, he probably has a technical development role, but if our club structures were right and our underage coaching club structure’s right, guys would be coming in at 14 and they should be able to kick left and right.*

Coaches in two particular counties felt the administrative elements of their role simply dominated their work in the academy and they could not give the prospects the time that they know they require. Both of these counties have not employed a squad administrator, as is the case in the other four counties. The coaches’ role in these counties becomes very much administrative, in terms of finding training venues, notifying players, transporting training equipment, and organising games with other counties. One administrator when
speaking about developing coach-athlete relationships in one of these counties admitted that ‘coaches probably don’t get time to develop that stuff at present’.

Regardless of the academy structure, very few participants mentioned the development of an appropriate relationship between the coach and the prospect as being part of the coaches’ role. Across the six cases, access to the prospects varies between 20 sessions a season in one county to almost 60 sessions in another. Coaches in some counties felt that the lack of time with the prospects denied them the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships and therefore, their role related to ‘identifying the talent, upskilling the talent and selecting the team.’ The coaching sessions observed very much mirrored this mind-set. One coach felt that this is not always the approach within the academy and that coaches change as they move up the age grades with the prospects:

As times goes on you become less holistic whereas we should almost be becoming more holistic as the pressure increases.

This change of approach may be somewhat related to the motivations of some academy coaches. In some instances, their focus is on the team performing well in competition so that they are promoted along the coaching ladder within their county. A number of coaches openly alluded to the importance of team performance and how it influenced their own coaching careers. Such a focus has connotations for the prospects who believe that coaches ‘do what they think to win more matches so as to get their reputations as good as possible’. Sometimes, prospects felt as if they are just another number in the ranks of the academy and their coach doesn’t really know them. One elite player remembered his time in the academy and in particular his relationship with his coach:

I didn’t have a big relationship with him, I actually remember after being involved at this stage with the squad for about six months and he asked me my name at a training session.

Only one of the six academy coaches interviewed described an approach with the individual prospect at its epicentre. It is not surprising that this coach had experience as both an elite player in the past and is presently an elite coach at senior level with his county, whilst he is also one of the lead coaches in the academy. He outlined succinctly an approach focused on developing individuals first and players second. He also outlined the importance of a value-laden environment in which enjoyment, fun, respect, mistakes, and the playing of other sports were encouraged. Most interestingly, he described the importance of providing a platform for accepting feedback from the prospects on how they
felt they were progressing and what it felt like to be involved in the academy. He summed up his approach to his role as the coach as follows:

We’re not giving them their identity, they’re giving us their identity. These are what we feel are the concepts and principles and values and that’s what we’re trying to push but ultimately they will decide what it is. They will, in effect, have the environment and I don’t want to be in a position where I’m saying “this is what we expect you to do”. All we want to do is paint a picture of this is how we see it and then it comes back to us. It’s almost like a mirror image, this is how we see it and then based on your behaviour we will see where the place is.

This focus is unique within the six cases and is very much at odds with the mind-set prevalent in other counties.

10.2 The Academy and Club Coaches

As already outlined, the GAA structure is founded on the club, which is a representation of each community area within each county. The club is seen as the home of elite players; however, elite adult players are rarely available to represent their clubs throughout the season due to their commitments with their county team. The GAA at a central level have tried to avoid this occurring at youth level by insisting on a maximum number of academy sessions in each county. Policing such decrees have proven difficult. Individual counties have circumnavigated the rules and have built academy structures that suit themselves. Despite this localised approach to structure, academy coaches still cited the lack of time with prospects as a huge barrier to development. Juxtaposed with this belief are the feelings of club coaches. They, especially coaches of Division One clubs, steadfastly felt that they could provide a developmental experience equal to that of the academy and there was little need for prospects to spend so much time away from the club. As one club coach outlined:

We would like to think that what we are aiming to achieve in our club, is every bit as good as what is going on at development squad level.

There was also a variance in terms of the value that club stakeholders placed on the academy system in the different counties. This sense of value seemed very much related to the success the county was experiencing at U18 levels and above. Although club participants from all but one county spoke around the necessity for the academy, they also noted how it interferes in the activities of the club. Club coaches in these counties stated that ‘having lads on the squad bodes well for the club … it’s very difficult running sessions minus your best players.’ This interference is tolerated by the club coaches on condition that the academy abides by its calendar and rigidly sticks to its designated days for activity
so as to provide space for club activities. This sense of division between county and club
tallied well with unequivocal stated beliefs expressed by club coaches, who felt that they
were very much bystanders in terms of input into the development of prospects at academy
level:

*Generally what has happened was once the player was picked on the development
squad the phone number is given and the manager comes out of the loop. Some
development squad mentors would still contact the manager or if the manager’s
son happened to be on it that’s how he knew what’s going on. That was by chance.
So in terms of engagement with the club, after the initial contact, there’s very little.*

This feeling of disengagement is acutely felt by club coaches and they have limited
understanding of what actually occurs when the prospects are with the academy. Some
coaches felt it was the duty of the academy to communicate and sell their approach to club
doaches and an attitude of ‘club coaches are more than welcome here’ acclaimed by some
academy stakeholders is not representative of reality. Club coaches reported limited ad hoc
communication between themselves and academy coaches. This void has led to disparities
between the delivered message at coaching sessions at club and county levels, with
prospects describing how confusion sometimes arises due to the different demands placed
upon them by their various coaches. These demands also include uncoordinated training
and game schedules that could include up to four games a week. In these instances, it is
usually the club coach who ends up resting the player.

However, there is recognition in some counties that the club coach could help enormously
with delivering some of the goals of the academy. Academy personnel spoke of attempting
to ‘build the link between us and the clubs’; however, there was little evidence to support
such claims. Administrators in two counties in particular expressed a desire that the
academy would become more inclusive in terms of upskilling and resourcing club coaches
so that obvious knock-on effects occur with prospects when they return and participate
with their clubs. However, academy coaches felt that placing more demands on club
coaches might not be practicable in terms of their time and that ‘educating them into the
proper way of thinking may not be easily done’. Despite this slightly patronising viewpoint,
conditional opportunity still exists to integrate clubs into the development process
according to one club coach:

*At the end of the day, as a club’s person I’m sitting waiting for them to come to me.
I’m not going to go to them. If they don’t come knocking on my door that’s alright,
my lads are here and I’ll coach them but they have to come and knock on my door.
How they communicate that and how we interact, it’s like everything, they have to
be offering the club something. You have to be offering the club better coaching and offering the players better opportunities. Otherwise we’re not going to buy into it.

10.3 The Role of the Parents

Prospects identified their parents as their main influencers and supports in terms of their development in Gaelic Games. Both elite players and prospects described how their parents, not only offered them tangible supports such as transport, playing gear and access to proper nutrition in the home, but more importantly, provided emotional and psychological support throughout the ups and downs of their sporting career. Many participants also spoke about how their parents helped them make decisions when fixtures clash due to the uncoordinated approach of some academy stakeholders. One elite player spoke about his time in the academy and how he felt that his parents were his ultimate support in terms of managing his activity load and how he has come to the realisation that they are the only ones who truly care about him:

I’ve come to understand it now but it was a bit daunting when you know it’s just your parents who give a crap about you. I’d say one year only for my parents pulling me from games, I probably wouldn’t be walking now. I remember an U16 game when my mother had to come down to the sideline to take me off in a game. I had torn my calf and the coaches refused to take me off, they told the physio to strap it up. I was in agony and couldn’t move.

Despite this undeniable connection between the prospect and the child, the academy does very little to involve parents in the development process. Most academies met parents once a year as a group so as to outline what the programme is for the year and maybe to speak about the importance of nutrition and hydration. Outside of attending these events, parents had no other involvement with the academy. In some instances, the academy communicated directly with the prospects with regard to training schedules and timetabling. Some parents reported that they felt isolated from the academy and knew very little of what actually goes on. This is despite the fact that many parents attended the squad sessions as observers.

Academy personnel claimed that some of these parents were ‘maybe over-interested’ in their son’s development. They pointed to the fact that many of the prospect’s parents get carried away with the idea that their son is going to be an elite player in the future:
Unfortunately you could have a father out there and the kid gets on a development squad at 14 and straight away your man is thinking of Croke Park and All Ireland senior football final day and there is no talking to him going “there’s a long ways to go”.

This sense of heightened expectation has led some parents to actually employ private coaches for their son so that he could work on his own away from the academy. One parent described how this was a recent phenomenon amongst his son’s group but it was very much driven by parents from a non-GAA background:

"I know some of the fellas I’d be involved with are actually paying fellas to train their young fellas, to make them better. It’s parent-driven I think, a lot of it. If you have a son involved you know how good they are and you’re probably more critical anyway whereas if you have a parent that hasn’t the background, “why isn’t Johnny playing”, even though he might not be at that level, ”I am going to get him extra help to get him to the level”.

Some club coaches were also critical of non-GAA parents who prioritise the academy over club activities. These coaches believe that the behaviour and influence of these parents are increasing any disconnect between the club and the academy that may already exist:

"Parents who wouldn’t have a major GAA background just see the lights of Dublin and see everything is about Dublin, 16s, minors, 21s, that their son can’t miss a Dublin development squad session but yet if that’s your third or fourth session in a week he needs a rest for our club session. There’s a bit of problem with the parents as well because a lot of parents we find now who wouldn’t have any GAA background would just be a push towards development squads and the club gets further away.

Squad administrators claimed that these types of parental issues are not solely confined to non-GAA parents. One County Games Manager, who has ultimate responsibility for the operation of the academy, claimed that there is no link between the squads and the parents and that the academy has failed to educate parents on what is an appropriate approach in terms of their role. His claim alludes to the fact these issues will continue to present themselves until a different approach is adopted by the academy:

"I would say as well, that there’s not a link... there’s not enough parent education out there. Within our academy, we’d say that’s a weakness in a sense that a lot of our parents are actually inhibiting the player’s development as opposed to helping...So, I think maybe that we need to do more in terms of parent education, and identify for the parents what the process involves, where we’re going with it, and how we intend to get them there. And I think there needs to be a lot more bases covering that."
10.4 The Relationship with the School

Prospects, even within individual counties, experienced a variety in terms of exposure to Gaelic Games at schools level. Some schools have a huge tradition in Gaelic Games, while others have none at all. Three of the counties contained some very traditional and successful schools, whilst the other three counties were more reliant on their clubs to promote the development of the prospects. The traditional Gaelic Games schools within the former counties attract many of the prospects to enrol with them since school’s football is seen in these counties as an important building block in the development of the player. In the counties who don’t have such a schools tradition, prospects are more inclined to go to the nearest school in their locality.

In all but two of the cases studied, there is a limited relationship between the academy and the schools of the county. In these counties, some teachers reported a negative perspective on the very existence of the academy; there is a belief from some teachers that ‘the academy can get in the way’. One teacher described the feelings of teachers towards the academy in his county:

_I’d say overall probably negative. Overall it’s a pain in the neck to a lot of teachers and a lot of clubs as well to be honest._

Those involved in the academies in these counties felt this negativity manifests itself in a sense of independence in terms of how the schools operate. Academy personnel reported difficulties with infiltrating schools and developing linkage between themselves and the teachers working with prospects. However, as one administrator described, sometimes the approach may be the issue:

_Some would be begging you to come and others have the door closed. But if you have resources coming and you’re willing to invest that wouldn’t be long eroding some of that. If you talk to the principal you might get in. If you ring the wrong person in the school who’s defending his turf._

One elite player, whilst positively affirming the work done by his games teachers in school, mentioned losing control when asked if he thought his teachers would have welcomed help from the academy when he was in school:

_They could say no. They would feel they’re not in control then and they feel someone else has taken over._
In instances whereby counties have developed working relationships with second-level schools, the focus was very much on increasing participation rather than helping to develop elite players. This support was delivered by paid staff employed by the GAA, which, in some counties, has little relationship with the academy coaches (this is not common to all counties). In other counties, it is the paid staff that actually deliver the academy sessions to the prospects. However, their work in schools has little relation to their work in the academy (one county has managed to provide a very strong link between both). It is as if they must wear two hats dealing with the same prospects but in different environments. This is not the case in one county in particular. In this case, a paid employee of the GAA is almost based exclusively in one second level school, which has 23 prospects enrolled. This allows the academy to manage the load of the prospects at schools level and dovetail all activity around the school. Academy sessions are held in the school in the evening time whilst the teachers within the school allow the GAA employee an unobstructed role in coaching school teams for competitions. He is seen as a huge resource by the staff of the school and as the conduit between the school and the academy within his county. This type of co-ordinated approach is unique in terms of a relationship between a school and its associated academy. Most teachers outlined how they never had any conversations with academy coaches; one teacher admitted he actually didn’t even know who these coaches were. This lack of a relationship led to issues described by many participants. Parents spoke about prospects playing school matches during the day and coming to the academy session that evening. Club coaches outlined how they were often left frustrated by school teachers because they tended to fix and then move games without any consultation with other stakeholders. Prospects described how their teachers had no idea of their involvement in elite sport and did not understand the difficulties experienced in relation to studies, homework, and assignments. Elite players described how they often had clashes between school fixtures and academy fixtures when they were prospects and how they felt stranded in the middle of very difficult situations. One elite player described how he learned to deal with these situations:

*I just tried to fit it all in initially but then started saying: ‘here's my school manager's number, here's my county manager's number. I will do whatever you want me to do, just kind of work out amongst yourselves’.*

10.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter’s findings addressed the following research question:
Main Research Question 1: What are the roles, functions and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland?

In investigating the relations of the key components of the environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland, it was found that academies operate in general, as a singular unconnected and isolated unit within the fragmentary that is elite youth Gaelic football. At the most basic level, there are limited relationships between academy coaches and prospects. These limitations are somewhat attributed to the academy structure in some cases but in many instances, coaches feel pressurised into a focus that is far from holistic. Similarly, issues blight the relationship between the academy and its associated clubs. Club coaches are mere bystanders and have little appreciation for or understanding of the activities of prospects at the academy.

Parents, despite being identified as the main influence in the life of prospects, are viewed as being a ‘hindrance’ and ‘over-interested’. There is little consideration around how they might help with prospect development and they are denied any forum in terms of involvement with the academy. Finally, the findings also highlight tensions and limitations in the relationship between schools and academies. In particular, many teachers view the work of the academy in a negative light and outlined how the academy makes little effort in communicating with them. Inferences are made that this may actually suit school teachers; they may rather retain their independent approach without any interference from other agents. It may be argued, considering the above that prospects are not at the centre of the developmental process but instead experience a process that is laden with tensions and frustrations that they have little control over.
Chapter 11: Theme Two – Limiting Structural Impediments to Development

This chapter draws together data reported in the six case studies reports in order to analyse: Theme Two: Limiting Structural Impediments to Development.

In doing so, it answers the following research question: Main Research Question 2: What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games?

The findings relating to this theme are reported around four key aspects or sub-themes. These include: (1) programming, (2) Funding, facilities and politics, (3) coach education, and (4) mechanistic approaches.

These aspects dominated the environment and acted as barriers to development to varying degrees in each county. Despite the presence of such barriers, the cases studied are historically and presently the most successful counties in Gaelic Football in Ireland.

11.1 Programming

Schedule programming was seen as the major barrier to development in five of the six counties studied. Participants from the Dublin case did not identify this aspect as a barrier but this may relate to the fact that nearly 30% of Ireland’s population resides in Dublin (Census, 2016). Prospects in other counties, with smaller playing numbers, played on numerous teams across age grades in club and school teams. This was not an overt feature in Dublin. It was also noted how much credence was afforded to the schedule calendar in Dublin in comparison to the other cases. Each County Committee publishes a schedule for the season, which includes dates for club and academy activities. Once the calendar was developed for the season by Dublin GAA, there was little allowance for manoeuvring fixtures. This was in sharp contrast to the experiences of stakeholders elsewhere. One County Games Manager described how despite the presence of a calendar, individual personalities had more power than structure:

“There’s games being called off left, right and centre, and the structure isn’t strong enough, and the people running the structure probably aren’t strong enough to enforce the structure that they’re putting in place at the start of the year.”
In all cases, the outlined structures developed by each County Committee, were dominated by club activities. Academy events pot marked the proposed schedules. Some counties had as little as 20 academy events a year, while others had close to 60. Most prospects also played football on school teams. School fixtures were developed by other committees and were not part of the published schedules. Some prospects also play hurling at club, school, and academy level. It was not unusual for prospects to have games or training every day in the week, at certain months in the year. Some prospects reported often having two events with different teams on the same day. Due to the intricacies and demands related to representing so many teams, prospects encountered many difficulties in relation to attempting to manage the associated activity load.

As a response to numerous internal reports (e.g. GAA, 2015) regarding the level of demands prospects were experiencing, the GAA introduced an online player monitoring tool for all academy players nationally. However, its effect was minimal. Academy personnel rarely responded when gathered data indicated high levels of volume for individual prospects. Initiatives such as this were deemed by one administrator to be pointless within the GAA culture and do little to help prospects cope with the demands placed upon them:

> Even when you say sports science to me now my eyes glaze over because I feel like saying I don’t care what sports science you have, you put them into the GAA pot, you can bring him from The States and put him into our pot and the fact that the boy he’s talking to has three games in the next three nights doesn’t matter what you’re telling him, he can’t cope.

This issue of coping was most salient in relation to the views of parents and their experiences with programming. In many instances, schedules were dependent on progression in competitions and often the published calendar bore little resemblance to what happened from week to week. This in turn led to fixture chaos when club, school and academy fixtures all fell on top of each other, sometimes over the one weekend. Parents cited instances of trying to sort out the schedule themselves for their children since managers of different teams could not agree on a coordinated approach for prospects. Prospects in some of these instances felt very vulnerable and as if ‘they were being pulled in all directions’. Depending on the outcome of the decisions they arrived at, prospects described how not playing for their club led to alienation from other club members and teammates. Pressure was very much part of the prospect’s vernacular; the sense of alienation fed into this overall feeling. One squad administrator testified that this
perception by prospects was a major issue within the environment and has a causal relationship with withdrawal from Gaelic Games:

Player pathway my ass! If his mother rings you and says he hates GAA and could you do something about it? You can have whatever vision you had and sell it in whatever fancy shop you want. The customer will tell you I'm not coming to your shop.

11.2 Facilities, Funding and GAA Politics

Facilities posed an issue for squad administrators in five of the six cases studied. Tyrone was the only county with a fully operational Centre of Excellence that had the capacity to cater properly for all of their inter-county teams. Donegal and Kerry had just begun to develop their own Centres of Excellence, whilst the Mayo Academy had the occasional use of a training pitch at the back of the county stadium. Cork and Dublin mainly relied on the use of facilities belonging to universities within the county. Outside of the Tyrone case, all other counties also relied on clubs lending pitches to the academy so as to facilitate training or games. Administrators and coaches spoke about the amount of energy wasted on sourcing facilities and how this had an impact on the development of proper coach-athlete relationships within the academy:

You have only so much emotion to fill a vessel, but it's time or not, it's an emotional investment. I see that with loads of people in the GAA. They get worn down by all the stupid stuff and then the important stuff, it just can’t get done. They never get to tell them what they need to tell them.

Some coaches also identified the lack of a ‘home’ for the academy as an impediment to the development of a county culture. Coaches spoke of the benefits of seeing other coaches in practice and how a Centre of Excellence would help develop communities of practice for county coaches. Other coaches spoke of the benefits that would accrue for prospects if they could train alongside the elite adult athletes of the county. Tyrone, with its Centre of Excellence, was the only county studied where prospects had experience of such opportunities. The Centre also acted as a promoter of culture within the county through its use of displayed artefacts and symbols. Other coaches from the other cases identified this as a real positive; they felt that they are denied these supports within the academy environments that they worked in:

If you want to have a culture you need to have a home, an identity. You walk in and see pictures, posters, quotes, trophies. You see your intercounty players walking along going to their training session. It's the dream, you go into any place. Go in
to Man City and you see posters of Sergio Aguero, the exact time where he scores a goal. In terms of developing culture and identity I think it would be massive.

The issue of appropriate funding was mentioned by stakeholders in all counties. The GAA headquarters funds each county to the tune of €30,000 annually. This grant does not cover the academy costs, however; County Boards in each county provide their academies with extra funding to cover other incurred costs. However, there was evidence of constant conflict between academy personnel and County Board officers in some counties with regard to funding. Coaches described how they constantly sought permission and funding to hire buses to travel to play matches in other parts of the country. They also outlined how they used their own equipment to run sessions. In one county, prospects brought their own footballs to each session and these were used by the coaches to run the practice. Coaches also charted how they had to accept that the academy operated under strict budgetary guidelines and they had to make do in many instances.

Administrators outlined that they sometimes had to run fundraising initiatives to help fund academy activities. Funding from GAA headquarters goes through each County Board and is fed down to the academies as the County Board sees fit. All administrators spoke about ‘getting what they needed in the end’ but having little knowledge of what funds were actually available to them from the County Board. Administrators spoke about the financial constraints they suffered whilst the senior elite team operated within a fully supportive fiscal environment. They perceived that the academy was very much playing second fiddle to the senior elite team and coaches operated as best they could within these constraints. There was a prevalent level of acceptance from coaches at academy level that administrators felt wouldn’t be tolerated at elite adult level. One coach described how his county academy supported him:

I have my own gear. I have my own cones, my own stuff. I bought my own... not refunded by the way. I have bibs there since 2012. We have a development set of jerseys from 2010.

The provision of facilities and funding for the academies has political implications. Academy stakeholders in some counties outlined how power and control to make change and improve elite youth development completely rests with the officers of the County Committee and there is little that they can do on the ground to affect change. One administrator outlined where he felt influence lies within his county:
I hate saying it because it's the excuse again but unless you go back and have schools, club, county working together, we are in trouble. Now maybe that's too ambitious but County Board, County Board Chair, County Board Vice-chair, Senior Administrator of the County; they're the only people in the county who can really bang a table and say no.

However, academy personnel in most counties felt that the academy is very much an addendum to the activities of the older elite teams and it didn’t receive the attention it deserved from these people of influence. These officers are volunteers in many instances, thus there is a finite amount of time they can give to their posts. Academy stakeholders spoke around change, on how this is somewhat stymied by the political power exerted by these County Board officers. One administrator outlined how the call for change was seen as a challenge of authority of those who hold these voluntary positions in his county:

You're challenging people in positions. They see it as a challenge whereas if I was in their position and somebody tried to help me, I'd say thanks, I'll take the credit for it... In this environment where there are big resources, there needs to be big coordination... The officers, they are the only people who can make a decision. We don't need a dictatorship. We want good people, good boards and good facilities and those people are there. We must use these people to help bring change.

11.3 Coach Education

Coaches at academy level in all counties officially must have undertaken coach education to Level 1 standard within the GAA coaching pathway. All the lead coaches in each case possessed this qualification and administrators who had responsibility for making coaching appointments were very cognisant of this coaching requirement. Coaches in most counties were initially identified through their attendance at coaching courses, which are delivered by the paid coaching staff within each county. These employees identified the potential of up and coming coaches and relayed this information back to the County Games Manager. It was part of his remit to recruit these coaches with potential to the academy and mentor them to develop their practice.

Coaches, in some instances, saw their involvement with the academy as a precursor to being selected as an elite coach at a higher level within the county. This ambition created a sense of pressure within the mind-set of these coaches; they felt that winning games and competitions reflected well on them and would aid their own personal progression. This had connotations for the type of environment prevalent at the academy. It was observed that ego orientated environments dominated the cases studied (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Coaches, on observation, had little experience of developing a different type of
environment. Counties do run their own coaching workshops, but these are mainly technical by nature. In fact, once coaches had their initial qualification, there was no requirement for them to undertake any other form of coaching education. This according to one administrator implies that coach education is simply a box ticking exercise and holds little value with coaching personnel or academies in general.

In some counties, there is a dearth of available coaches who have both the inclination and expertise to operate within the academy environment. Two of the counties utilised their paid employees (GDAs) to operate as coaches to their academy teams. They attempted to dovetail their day to day coaching duties at schools and club level with the duties of an academy coach. This, in some ways, can lead to a dilution of both roles and some administrators felt that is was far from ideal practice. However, administrators in these counties felt that they had little option but to appoint these employees into the coaching positions. In other counties, there was huge demand for coaching positions with the county academy. Coaching at the academy was viewed as being extremely prestigious and offered coaches the opportunity to develop their practice whilst working with elite players. In these counties, the role of the paid employees was to facilitate the operational aspects of academy sessions and to ensure that coaches could solely focus on delivering sessions to prospects.

11.4 A Mechanistic Development Approach

In line with aspects already developed in this chapter, prospects ended up receiving in most cases, an approach to development at academy level that very much mechanistic. Academies are keen to provide a different approach for prospects in comparison to what they receive at club and school level and, in doing so, they borrow some of the practices that are prevalent at elite adult level. These include strength and conditioning sessions, nutrition and psychology workshops, video analysis, as well as workshops on media education. However, funding and personnel are not available to make these areas of expertise available on a more permanent basis within the environment. For example, most counties focus solely on strength and conditioning in the winter months and once the season starts in spring, these sessions are no longer delivered. In many instances, these sessions are delivered by volunteers or students working in the discipline. Prospects are given a programme to do at home in their own time, but, as outlined previously, this only adds to the crowded schedule they already have.
Similarly, experts in areas of nutrition or psychology were invited into some academies to give an occasional workshop. In some instances, these visits were favours to academy personnel and were delivered at times by personnel who had no involvement with sport. These experts belonged to the broader discipline of nutrition or psychology and delivered workshops they felt would be applicable to prospects. Again, follow up support was not available to prospects. Administrators and coaches often cited workshops such as these as ‘the next level’ for prospects and there was a sense that they felt there was an obligation on them to deliver some form of scientific element to the programme.

This may be related somewhat to the practices prevalent at adult elite level. Experts in many of the areas mentioned above are permanent members of management teams at this level and counties recruit and employ them on yearly contracts to work with their elite teams. However, their remit is solely with the adult elite team. The academy attempts to mirror their presence in the prospect’s environment with interns, volunteers, and students. Many stakeholders questioned the quality of what is delivered to prospects in these areas and pointed to the inequalities that existed between adult and youth elite levels of preparation. Added to such inequalities, there was also a sense of limited co-ordination between the various elements delivered. Football coaches, in some instances, were not present at strength and conditioning sessions and had limited knowledge of what the S&C coach was programming for the prospects. Similarly, visiting experts delivered workshops on an ad hoc basis and had little knowledge of the challenges prospects faced.

11.5 Summary

This chapter’s findings addressed the following research question:

Main Research Question 2: What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games?

Prospects encountered many limiting impediments in their development as elite youth athletes. This was despite the fact that the environments analysed were the most successful counties in Gaelic Games in Ireland. Managing the demands of club, school, and academy football commitments was extremely challenging for prospects, which is not helped by the lack of a co-ordinated scheduling approach between all three constituents. Prospects had difficulty coping with such demands and often turned to their parents for advice and help in alleviating the pressure that came when fixtures clashed. There was a huge desire from some stakeholders to bring about change for prospects so that in the future these issues
could be avoided. However, politically, the GAA was perceived by these stakeholders as being very reticent to change. Power rests with the senior officers of County Committees. These committees are perceived as seeing change as a challenge to their authority. Their focus, according to some participants, remained steadfastly on the county senior team and funding their preparations. This perception implies that the academy is somewhat superficial in the eyes of key administrators in each county. This lack of support led to a mechanistic developmental approach at academy level, since academy administrators believe that they had little option but to piece together a methodology founded on favours, volunteers, and links with local universities. Such an approach is underpinned in many instances by a coaching approach that lends itself to an ego-orientated environment that has self-progression of its constituent coaches as its epicentre.
Chapter 12: Theme 3 – Socio-Cultural Influence on Player Development

This chapter draws together data reported in the six case studies reports in order to analyse: Theme Three: Socio-cultural Influences on Player Development.

In doing so, it answers the following research question: Main Research Question 3: What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?

The findings relating to this theme are reported around four key aspects or sub-themes. These include: (1) Social Pressures from non-athlete peers, (2) Balancing Sport and School (3) Psychosocial Skill Development, and (4) County Pride, Engagement and Rivalry

12.1 Social Pressures from Non-athlete Peers

Most participants believed that prospects mainly formed friendships with their peers who had an interest in sport and in particular GAA. Coaches, teachers, and parents spoke about the importance of solid friendships for prospects and how they often observed prospects in non-academy environments socialising in groups containing only those who play GAA. This observation was common to all six cases. Prospects themselves however, cited pressure from non-athlete peers as a major barrier to their development. Many prospects outlined how their involvement at academy level had implications for their social life and ‘they cannot do what their buddies can do’. They also spoke of ‘having little time for anything in their life outside of football’ and the ‘lack of understanding from others on what it takes to becoming an intercounty footballer’. Most prospects believed these limitations on their lives as being the greatest barrier to their development and that involvement with the academy related to a form of ‘sacrifice’ on their behalf.

This sense of sacrifice was in some ways promoted by some academy coaches. Prospects, when asked about what their coaches advocated, outlined how they are instructed to ‘have a county player’s attitude’, ‘do your extra work at home’, ‘commit completely to the academy’ and ‘have a different vision than your friends’. Coaches were very aware of the negative effect that unsupportive friends had on prospects and described how prospects had to deal with ‘much slagging from their peers’ in relation to representing their county and the related life choices that involvement promotes. One coach spoke overtly about the need for prospects to possess a different set of priorities than their peers and the effect socialising had on training sessions:
I remember we had a session after Halloween and we got the sense that energy was low. Again, in the de-brief we explained that we all have friends and we all want to do certain things which is important but sometimes your friends might not see things the way you do in terms of what your vision is and there is an element of difference there. So by all means you have friends but there are times if you want to be involved at a certain level in your sporting career that you have to make decisions.

12.2 Balancing Sport and School

Most stakeholders felt that fulfilling potential in sport and education simultaneously was difficult to achieve for prospects. One teacher described how planning and the influence of good parenting were crucial components in supporting prospects with their schooling:

It means it has to be very well planned and their schedule has to be very well organised and it does depend a lot on the parents. There may be the odd session they’re going to have to miss depending on exams but I’ve seen enough lads coming through, working hard at their books, and being able to be fully committed to squads.

Prospects that live some distance from the academy training venues were most at risk from suffering an imbalance between sport and school. Travel time to and from sessions in some instances took over four hours. This meant that prospects were leaving home in the late afternoon and not returning until late in the evening. On some of these occasions, prospects failed to complete their homework or scheduled assignments. One elite player described how he managed his studies when he was in the academy:

What I usually did was we’d usually leave around 5 or 5.30 and what I did was I’d get up maybe an hour or an hour and a half before I go to school and do an hour of study before school. I’d do an hour at lunchtime and then I’d stay in school and I’d do maybe from 4 to 5.30. So that was 3 to 3.5 hours of study and you’re not going to do much more than that in a normal day when you have no training or anything. I just think it’s all time management. People are making excuses. If there was no football they’d find a different excuse.

Attitudes such as this were prevalent with some prospects, but many of them also pointed to the fact that regardless of their attitude, managing their school work was difficult. There was limited support in most cases for assisting prospects in developing their time management skills and limited understanding from some coaches as to what educational pressures prospects were encountering. One teacher outlined how coaches do not take into account what is actually going on in the lives of prospects. He described how prospects are almost coerced to prioritise training over other areas of the life:
If he comes to you with a problem, if he has grinds to go to or something to do you have to just say that’s fair enough, you go home and do what you need to do. But you have other managers then who would still demand that the young lad does this that or the other when it’s the exact opposite they need. We underestimate these young lads. These young lads are under a lot of pressure, a lot of them, but there’s still the mentality out there, “sure it’ll be grand, come training tonight and it’ll be fine”.

12.3 Psychosocial Skill Development

When asked about how they felt when involved with the academy, there was much uniformity in the prospect’s responses. They spoke about ‘feeling overwhelmed’, ‘pressurised to perform’, ‘lacking in confidence’, ‘hating having their mistakes highlighted’, ‘nervous about being cut’ and ‘only happy when there is nothing big happening’. There was little awareness from other stakeholders that prospects were suffering such levels of pressure through their academy involvement. Coaches especially felt that prospects are well understood and supported in the academy environment:

We develop them as players and people, we’re very conscious of the needs of young people and their development. I think it has become more holistic ... I think that development, the player, but not only the player, developing the person, is now definitely recognised.

Recognition of the development of the person is admirable, but there was no evidence to support such believes in practice. The focus across all cases was on team and individual technical development. In some cases, the coaches’ focus was on performance at competitions and beating rival counties. One administrator, whilst understanding the need for individual holistic development, identified winning games as a crucial component in terms of promoting the academy within the county:

Everyone wants to win and you can harp on about developing the person ... but there’s an element of people watching and saying, what’s going on here and if you are not winning, then questions are asked.

Positions such as this highlighted the pressures felt by the prospects. A focus on winning had associations with the following: 1) pressure from coaches on prospects to perform, 2) ego-orientated environments, 3) limited game time for some prospects, and 4) eventual prospect deselection. These aspects combined resulted in fluctuating confidence levels for prospects and ultimately coping difficulties for a portion of them. This was recognised by coaches, but there was little done to help prospects develop psychosocial skills and become more resilient in dealing with the setbacks that are part of elite sport. Instead, prospects
turned to their parents in most instances and sought their guidance in how to deal with these pressures that were an accepted element within the academy environment.

12.4 County Pride and Engagement

The GAA as an organisation is founded on the sense of belonging that Irish people possess for their place of birth. Prospects play with their local club in internal county competitions. The best players within each county are then selected to play with their county in inter-county competitions. This structure is what sets the GAA apart from other sports, according to one coach:

_The GAA has kept one crucial thing that distinguishes it from other sports; loyalty through the parish rule. You play with your parish, you have no choice._

The sense of representing where you come from resonated with all participants. Parents described how much they wanted their sons to be successful and represent their county, whilst prospects outlined how they were continuously reminded about their responsibilities to the jersey they were wearing and what it represented. The traditions associated with the county jersey, colours and crest also were described by stakeholders. Most academies developed an academy jersey such was the importance attributed to ‘real’ jersey of the county. Prospects were reminded that through hard work, they might earn the right to wear the proper jersey in time. Symbolism such as the crest and the jersey were representative of an affinity stakeholders had with their county; they evoked a sense of tradition and belonging in the psyche of all participants. Other stakeholders spoke of the importance of the GAA in terms of identity; this was most prevalent in Tyrone, one of the six counties in Northern Ireland:

_It’s very important. It’s a very important part of their life. Football is a very important part of life in Tyrone for people from a GAA background and for young fellas it’s crucial…. You ask any fella that has a pair of boots on him and playing Gaelic football, ideally playing for their county is where they’d want to be._

In many ways, prospect engagement was promoted through the embedded culture of the GAA within each county. Prospects spoke of the ‘massive pride’ associated with being involved at academy level. Coaches mentioned how prospects should recognise how ‘much of a privilege it was to be involved’. Parents attributed words like ‘prestige’ and ‘honour’ to their son’s involvement with the academy. This level of endorsement is reflective of the level of passion and interest Irish people have for Gaelic Games. These elements were very
much omnipresent in the prospects’ environment and promoted a sense of motivation within the prospects to excel in the sport.

This desire to represent your county also acted as a buffer against some of the barriers identified in this and other data themes. Prospects accepted that this is simply the way it is and battled to succeed despite the pressures that they encountered. This level of acceptance may be somewhat related to stakeholder beliefs about the GAA. Some coaches and parents believed that the GAA is ‘within our DNA’ and prospects must ‘strive to be the best that they can be despite the barriers that they encounter’. This especially resonated with some parents who identified the effect Gaelic Games has, in ‘pulling people together within a county’. These parents described how ‘something is instilled in their children’ and how it was important to them that this sense of county culture would not erode with time. Other stakeholders, such as administrators and coaches, delineated that, from their vantage, engagement from prospects ‘has never been better and what they are selling is very tangible for prospects’. This sense of palpability and visibility correlated considerably with the organic aspirations prospects possess in relation to playing inter-county football.

12.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter’s findings address the following research question:

Main Research Question 3: What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?

In investigating the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland, it was found that prospects encountered pressure from their peers who did not participate in sport. This pressure developed due to time and behavioural limitations imposed on prospects through their involvement with their county academy. Outside of football, elite youths described how they had little time for anything else in their lives. This lack of time also had implications for their education. Prospects with inherent time management capabilities tended to balance the dichotomous demands of school and elite sport, but many youths described how they had difficulty coping. Prospects in general described how their involvement with the academy created an overwhelming sense of personal pressure and there was little understanding from other stakeholders regarding this phenomenon. This pressure was buffeted somewhat by a GAA culture and the associated inherent desire in prospects to ‘make it’ as an elite Gaelic footballer.
Chapter 13: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide a holistic analysis of the talent development environment surrounding elite Gaelic Football academies in Ireland. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the research in talent development in four important ways as it:

1. Redressed the dearth in ecological studies of complex sporting organisations (most especially outside of Scandinavia) and how these organisations support and nurture athletes within their development systems;
2. Specifically, clarified the roles and functions of key components and their interrelations within the environments contiguous to elite youth Gaelic footballers,
3. Examined successful player development environments in Ireland and sought to establish the factors that underpin optimal ecologies for the holistic development of elite adolescent Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) players and
4. Explored the lived experiences of elite adolescent Gaelic footballers and how these experiences affected their development.

In sum, the results of this study revealed that the workings of Gaelic Games academies, despite their unique sense of altruism, connection and prestige, had limited resemblance to the characteristic features of successful talent development environments, as described by Henriksen (2010) (i.e. environments which consistently produce elite senior athletes from among its juniors). As such, the results of the empirical analysis revealed that athlete development in Gaelic football was blighted by dysfunctional stakeholder relationships and limiting organisational impediments. This lack of cohesion within the environment amplified prevalent socio-cultural and economic developmental influences¹⁹, which, in turn, led to many unintended consequences for individual athletes. Simply put, athlete progression was hindered by numerous external environmental factors, many of which were outside the control of both prospects and coaches. In this regard, this study specifically offers a contribution to the literature on the career transitions of youth athletes.

¹⁹ These influences include for example county pride and engagement, school/sport balance and the inequities in governmental funding between counties in Northern Ireland in comparison to the Republic.
What follows is a discussion of these findings conceptualised within The Funnel of High Performance Sport Management Framework (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). This framework comprises three interrelated components: (a) the cultural, social, commercial and political factors that affect the operation of sport organisations (macro-level factors classified as high performance management), (b) the developable and manageable processes within the talent development system (meso-level factors classified as the high performance environment), and (c) the individual qualities of the athlete and their personal environment (micro-level factors classified as the high performance athlete). Athlete performance is implied within the framework to ensue from the complex interrelationship of all three factors (Sotiriadiou & De Bosscher, 2017).

This three-pronged framework provides a clear mechanism under which findings are organised (see Figure 34).

(a) The cultural, social, commercial and political factors that affect the operation of sport organisations (macro-level factors classified as high performance management)

The first finding examined is the influence of commercialisation, professionalism and culture on talent development in the Gaelic games context. In particular, these macro level factors are presented in relation to the governance structure of the GAA. This finding reveals that the unique intertwining of such factors affects the operation, management and complexity of the developmental process within the academy environment.

(b) The developable and manageable processes within the talent development environment (meso-level factors classified as the high performance environment)

Here, the implications of this study’s findings are considered in relation to optimal development environments and the process factors underpinning them. In doing so, the characteristics of the academy environment as derived from the empirical findings within this study are juxtaposed with the characteristics of successful ATDEs. Such an approach reveals that there are many constraints within the ATDE of Gaelic football, which inhibit the holistic development of prospects.

(c) The individual qualities of the athlete and their personal environment (micro-level factors classified as the high performance athlete)
Under this heading, the results of this study are extrapolated to explore how the lived academy experiences of individual athletes affected their holistic development. Using the Personal Assets Framework (PAF) (Côté et al., 2016) as a framework, this section discusses the development of talent within academy prospects in the context of their overall healthy development by examining the three key elements that shape youth encounters in sport: (1) personal factors (i.e. the what), (2) relational factors (i.e. the who), and (3) organisational environments (i.e. the where).

13.1 The Cultural, Social, Commercial and Political Factors that affect the Operation of Gaelic Football Academies

This section interrogates how commercialisation, professionalisation and the prevalent culture within Gaelic Games has influenced talent development at academy level. More pertinently, whilst framed within such a backdrop, this chapter unit argues that the governmental structures of the GAA are not responsive to these influences and this has implications for developmental practices at academy level in individual counties. In doing
so, it will outline the congruence between conceptual and methodological shortfalls in
talent identification and development practices, as described in the literature and the
contributions made by this study’s findings. Finally, this section will discuss how these
shortfalls are ineffaceably linked to poor outcomes for Gaelic prospects in terms of their
holistic development and transitional needs.

As is the case with sport in general, the commercialisation of Gaelic sport has promoted a
movement towards convergent and divergent professionalised sports practices (Andersen,
Houlihan, & Ronglan, 2015). The difference in this instance is that the GAA is an
indigenous amateur sporting organisation and that a commodified, professionalised
approach is very much at odds with its associated ideology (cf. pgs 2-4). However, a trend
of convergence has developed within the organisation whereby global practices in
professional sport have been adapted to the prevalent conditions of Gaelic Games (cf. pgs
5-9). These emerging practices include contemporary approaches to sports science and
medicine, coaching methodologies, talent identification and development systems, as well
as training facilities and equipment (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). These homogenous
approaches to talent development suggest that academy stakeholders believe that TID
systems are transferrable from one sport to another or from one national context to another.
This investigation, in line with previous findings in the context of Norwegian handball
(Bjørndal, Ronglan, & Andersen, 2015) revealed that stakeholders, when adopting such
standardised methodologies to TID, do not consider the unique social and cultural
complexities inherent within the academy organisational setting.

Such complexity was most pronounced within the actual governance and operation of the
various development systems of individual counties. Despite the limitations of resources
evident surrounding the academies, academy personnel have attempted to provide ‘the next
level’ of development to prospects. This ‘next level’, as referred to by many stakeholders,
has direct connotations to a mirroring of the professionalised approach now prevalent at
elite senior levels in Gaelic football (Keeler & Wright, 2013). Prospects, in turn, believe
that in order to eventually transition to elite level senior football, it is imperative that they
are provided with such an approach. However, as has been reported in other sporting
domains (e.g. Agergaard & Ronglan, 2015), the complexity created by the
professionalisation of the development approach, has resulted in a change in learning
conditions for talented youth athletes. In the context of Gaelic football, this change in
conditions has instigated a number of negative implications for prospects. The findings
from this study supported previous research in other domains (e.g. Pankurst & Collins, 2013; Pinder, Renshaw, & Davids, 2013) and revealed that prospects encounter a level of developmental support at academy level that is questionable at best and that is characterised by non-ecological practices, inappropriate workloads, and limited adaptive interdisciplinary case management and education.

Prospects are also subject to talent identification and development strategies that are over reliant on biophysical measures (i.e. physical development dominated the training landscape) leading to an approach that could be described as mechanistic. These precepts, according to Weissensteiner (2017), are all constituents of the prevailing approach to athlete development pathways worldwide. Such an approach, however, ensures that the developmental and transitional needs of prospects are not being met (Gullich & Emrich, 2014; Stambulova, et al., 2015). It therefore could be argued that Gaelic Games academy stakeholders have thus far failed to capture a holistic, integrated and longitudinal understanding of the athlete pathway and instead have concerned themselves with attempting to provide young talented athletes with what stakeholders, in this study, termed ‘a professional approach’.

Such an approach also stems from the beliefs stated by some academy administrators and coaches, that there is a necessity to provide prospects with an approach which has similarities with that provided by other sporting organisations. This, according to Skille and colleagues (2017), can be related to the inclination of policy implementers to display a form of legitimacy in relation to utilising similar strategies, techniques and vocabulary within and across sporting domains. The desire for legitimacy in this instance impregnates the ideas, values, and conditions underpinning the organisational culture of Gaelic Games academies. In order to control and direct such legitimate aspirations at ground level, it is imperative that organisations such as the GAA provides a responsive governmental structure for its developmental pathway stakeholders to operate within (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) i.e. the GAA have, in the past, threatened sanctions against counties who did not comply with guidelines for development. However, this sanctioning did not materialise, as has been the case in other contexts in the GAA (e.g. counties do not conform to legislated winter-time training bans but do not receive sanctions as laid down by GAA rule).

As already outlined (cf. p 9), the network governance approach has had little influence on talent development in Gaelic Games. Therefore, responsibility for change appears to rest
with individual County Boards, the regulatory bodies responsible for all GAA activities in each of the 32 counties in Ireland (cf. p 10). At present, these boards mirror the national hierarchical structure of the GAA and divest power and control of youth activities to subcommittees. These committees have limited connection with the central organisation and in many ways, as already mentioned, the stakeholders at ground level become both policymakers and implementers. In sum, Gaelic football academies are currently dominated by the experiences and decisions of ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980).

The GAA as a result, as described by Hassan (2010), have become bystanders in jurisdictions (e.g. individual units of the organisation do not conform to central policy) and have lost control of the sport amid its relentless drive towards professionalization and commercialisation. Therefore, in order to realign and synergise a vision for youth development, there is a necessity for a restructuring of the governmental design within the GAA towards a stewardship model, as suggested by research (Hassan, 2010; Hassan & O’Boyle, 2016). Such an approach would provide a strategic direction and create higher levels of accountability that might encourage both volunteers and paid staff to act in the best interests of the organisation, which in turn would, perhaps allow the governing body an element of control (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012).

These governmental structural issues and their negative implications for talent development were augmented in this case by a distinct lack of stated strategy or strategic direction from associated boards in individual counties and accordingly, managers and administrators operated largely to their own agenda. Deficiencies in terms of the strategic direction delivered by the boards of sports organisations have been reported previously in research (e.g. Forster, 2006; Katwala, 2000) but the strategic voids revealed in this study’s findings were particularly ominous for prospect development. For example, only one county of the six studied, produced any documentation of note regarding planning and processes related to the operation of the academy in their county. Key performance management functions, as described by Sotiriadou (2013), such as planning, capacity building and leading, resourcing, as well as monitoring and evaluating were not evident within the environment and stakeholders made limited reference to any of these components. This lack of a systematic approach to development is concerning when considering the weight of evidence in research supporting the necessity for systematic and strategic development of elite athlete pathways (e.g. Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017). However, systematic dysfunction cannot be viewed as surprising in a Gaelic Games
context, since sport organisations in general encounter difficulties in founding development on appropriate strategic systems (Gulbin, et al., 2013) and typically struggle with the delineation between athlete participation and athlete progression within their systems (Richards, 2016).

Therefore, the continuum from a child’s first exposure to sport to elite competitive success should be founded on a pathway that entails clarity of purpose that is consistently driven by stakeholders with a shared value set (Collins & MacNamara, 2017). The GAA, through its Player Pathway model (cf. p 7), have attempted to provide such clarity and consistency to coaches and administrators. However, anomalies existed between coaching practice and pedagogy since the basic assumptions at academy level in Gaelic football contradicted the espoused values contained within the pathway model. This is not uncommon and mirrors very much, for example, findings from research into athletic departments in American universities and high schools (Schroder, 2010). It is also evident that the academy approach in Gaelic Games is not informed by the environment and context in which it is operationalised but instead is weighted heavily towards biophysical methodologies. More pertinently, this investigation revealed that Gaelic football academies are based upon the non-empirical, dated sport development pyramid model (cf. p 26), which does not acknowledge the complex, dynamic, and non-linear nature of athlete development (Bailey & Collins, 2013; Gulbin et al., 2013).

These structural issues, when combined with the prevailing mechanistic, non-ecological developmental approach, dominate the academy culture. Such a culture, however, does not impede the desire of prospects to progress through the academy and attempt to become an elite footballer within their county. Prospects are socialised within this culture and do not question the level of constraint that the academy involvement generates around their development. This level of acceptance and consent is, according to Hughes and Hassan (2015), related to both social and identity factors within the lives of the prospects, as well as the indelible links between the GAA and the cultural and sporting lives of the Irish people. Accordingly, involvement at academy level for many prospects is fundamental to who they actually are as people. Linked with the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), prospects become associated with very little else besides football, thus, as they become more socialised within the GAA culture, Gaelic sport becomes all-consuming in their lives.
This indoctrination process is also complemented by the manner in which the GAA and the media convey prestige on those elite athletes who have proven their athletic ability. Such prestige has indelible links to how the media has in the past mobilised a ‘we image’ whereby true Irishness and the GAA became inseparable (For a review, see Connolly & Dolan, 2012). According to Hughes & Hassan (2015) and supported by findings from this particular study, prospects strive for such recognition and this ensures subordination to the dominant culture. Within this process, relational power is the preserve of managers, coaches and in some instances parents (i.e. some parents attempt to control their son’s athletic activities). In the absence of an appropriate governmental structure, these aforementioned stakeholders decide on the developmental agenda within each constituency. Consequently, through a complex process of socialisation, identity formation, and conforming behaviours, the GAA has, at the extremities of its network, an army of compliant and highly motivated prospects. However, compliance and consent is predicated through a deep-rooted fear of losing the personal meaning, positive effect, and self-esteem that is sourced from their academy involvement (Krane, Barber & McClung, 2002). As such, academies have much control over the behaviours and actions of their prospects.

This has obvious implications for the GAA and how it should identify and develop its talented youth. As an organisation, it must provide academy stakeholders with a direction that will fully capture and contribute to a holistic and longitudinal understanding of the athlete pathway within the cultural and social context of Gaelic Games in Ireland. This study, in support of previous findings from Hughes and Hassan (2015), revealed that talent identification and development, as it currently stands within Gaelic Games, is short sighted and unilateral, with limited empathy or understanding amongst academy policymakers of how deeply socialised prospects are within the culture of the GAA. A key example lies in prospects conforming to and accepting unrelenting workloads due to uncoordinated scheduling, committing up to 25 hours a week to GAA activities and forgoing educational commitments to attend training sessions. Such a lack of understanding is not surprising since there is such confusion surrounding the development of an optimal talent trajectory within youth sport (Ford et al., 2011; Gulbin et al., 2013; Pankhurst, Collins, & Macnamara, 2013). However, despite such confusion surrounding talent development environments, it may be argued that the findings in this study signal a lack of stakeholder concern and empathy for the actual experiences of the academy prospects. In fact, stakeholders, through their own behaviour, facilitated many of the negative developmental
outcomes described within the findings of the study e.g. fixture clashes between player schedules at school, club and academy level. Such levels of incoordination and athlete self-sacrifice are omnipresent within the culture of the GAA (for a review see Hughes & Hassan, 2015) and when combined with isomorphic trends of coaches and administrators resulted in a learning environment focused on the consequence of talent development rather than the process itself i.e. the focus is on endpoint of the player development process.

As a means of creating a better learning environment within Gaelic Games talent academies, much can gleaned from recent research (e.g. MacNamara & Collins, 2014; Martindale, Mortimer, & Collins, 2011). Based on the evidence from this and other studies, it seems clear that the GAA, through its constituent counties, should provide academy stakeholders with empirical and theoretically based guidelines for practice so that academies can move beyond prescriptive models of talent development (e.g. The Standard Pyramid Model of Talent Development). Such a framework should include the features of best practice and how they could be implemented in the applied settings of GAA academies around Ireland (MacNamara & Collins, 2014). In doing so, the GAA might gain a level of control within the development context and contribute to a positive personality development of talented athletes. The findings within this study suggest that attaining such control will be fundamental to achieving such an outcome.

Delivering such a framework and achieving the necessary levels of control within individual counties may involve some level of organisational change for the GAA. Rather than attempts towards superficial conformity as has been the case up to now, the GAA requires a level of leadership that can be operationalised within a professionalised and bureaucratic structural design in order to attempt to bring about change. Within such a design, it may be possible for some level of transformation of the organisation to occur and allow the sharing of power between the professional and volunteer elements of the association. Organisational change, according to Casey and colleagues (2011), is achievable in sports organisations such as the GAA, once the focus is on capacity building. They identified these capacities as organisational development, workforce development, resource allocation, leadership and partnership. The findings of this study imply that these five areas may be an appropriate starting point for the GAA in order to properly influence volunteers at ground level in individual counties.

In conclusion, this section has outlined how the commercialisation, professionalization and the culture of the GAA have combined to affect the operation of talent academies in Gaelic
Football. These macro level factors have influenced both policymakers and implementers to adopt convergent methodologies in their approach to talent development. As of yet, the GAA as an organisation, has not been able to secure control of the development context which contributes to an approach at ground level that is idiosyncratic across cases, uni-dimensional, restrictive and predicated by biophysical markers. This thesis argues that such an approach, if it continues, will ensure that the holistic development and transitional needs of prospects will not be met.

Against such a backdrop, the next section of this chapter discusses the resultant meso-level influences on the holistic development of prospects. Derived from the empirical models presented in each case study (i.e. Athletic Talent Development Environment Model (ATDE) and Environmental Success Factors Model (ESF)), these environmental influences are considered in relation to the characteristics of successful athletic talent development environments as described by Henriksen and colleagues (2010b).

13.2 The Developable and Manageable Processes within the Talent Development Environment

This section discusses the athletic talent development environment (ATDE) of Gaelic football academies, its inherent processes and their effect on the holistic development of elite youth Gaelic footballers. In doing so, the characteristics of the academy environment as derived from the empirical findings within this study are juxtaposed with the characteristics of successful ATDEs as developed by Henriksen and colleagues (2010b). Such an approach reveals that there are many constraints within the ATDE of Gaelic football, which inhibit the holistic development of prospects. It is also argued that such constraints act as a barrier to the successful transition of many prospects to elite level Gaelic football within their county. What follows is a discussion surrounding the characteristics of the Gaelic football ATDE and how the constituent environment impacts the transition trajectory and holistic development of prospects.

Previous studies investigated successful environments within different sport disciplines (e.g. athletics, sailing, surf, soccer), different sport domains (individual and team sports)

20 Holistic Development within this study refers to the development of prospects both as athletes and as people.
21 Successful ATDEs are described by Henriksen (2010) as athletic environments that continuously produce elite athletes from amongst their junior ranks. Successful environments within this study are defined similarly but with the added caveat of counties competing regularly at the latter stages of the All-Ireland competition at elite adult, u20 and minor level within the past decade.
Despite these idiosyncrasies, these successful sporting environments shared a number of common characteristics that imply that successful athlete transitions are reliant on certain features being present within the environment (Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). The findings from this study show that these characteristics were not present within Gaelic Games academy environments. As a result of the development of the empirical models within each individual case, the contradictions inherent in the ATDE of Gaelic football can be summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 8: Contrasting the Features of Successful Sport ATDEs with the Features of GAA ATDEs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of Successful ATDEs</th>
<th>Features of GAA ATDEs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training groups with supportive relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Training groups devoid of supportive relationships</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for inclusion in a training community; supportive relationships and friendships within the group, despite performance level; good communication.</td>
<td>Performance was the ultimate criteria for inclusion within the group, thus prospects saw others as rivals. Limited communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proximal role models</strong></td>
<td><strong>An absence of role models within the environment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community of practice includes prospective and current elite athletes; opportunities to train with the elite athletes; elite athletes who are willing to pass on their knowledge.</td>
<td>Airtight boundaries existed between elite athletes and prospects; there was limited exposure to proximal elite player role models within the environment. Prospects were precluded from training in the same venues as elite players.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support of sporting goals by the wider community</strong></td>
<td><strong>Sporting goals not understood within the wider environment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to focus on the sport; school, family, friends and others acknowledge and accept the athletes’ dedication to sport.</td>
<td>Non-sport environment shows a lack of understanding of elite sport and the demands involved e.g. school, friends, family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support for the development of psychosocial skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>Lack of consideration for the development of psychosocial skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to develop skills and competences that are of benefit outside the sporting domain (such as autonomy, responsibility, and commitment); considering athletes as ‘whole human beings’.</td>
<td>Focus not on personal improvement but on relative performance level. Focus is solely on sport.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training that allows for diversification</strong></td>
<td><strong>Training that promotes specialisation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to sample different sports during early phases; integration of</td>
<td>Early specialisation was promoted, focus solely on developing sport-specific skills,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>different sports in the daily routines; appreciation of versatile sport profiles and basic sport skills</strong></td>
<td><strong>prospects interest in trying different sports was considered a potential threat</strong></td>
</tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
| **Focus on long-term development**  
Focus on long-term development of the athletes rather than early success; age appropriate amount and content of training. | **Focus was on short-term success**  
Focus was very much on short-term success, prospects were seen as miniature elite athletes |
| **Strong and coherent organisational culture**  
Organizational culture characterized by coherence between artefacts, espoused values and basic assumptions; culture provides stability to the group and supports a learning environment. | **Disjointed Organisational Culture**  
Fragmented culture in which espoused values did not correspond to actions; uncertainty and confusion among coaches, prospects and others; lack of a common vision |
| **Integration of efforts**  
Coordination and communication between sport, school, family and other components; athletes experience concordance and synergy in daily life | **Lacking synergies in terms of integrating efforts**  
GAA academies did not provide integrated efforts, prospects feel trapped between conflicting demands from parents, school, their club and the academy demands |

In mapping the findings onto the features of successful ATDEs leads to an obvious question; how can the most successful environments in GAA be the antithesis of successful TDEs in other sports with similar inherent cultural backgrounds (e.g. westernised and developed)? Prior to addressing this question, it is necessary to highlight one fundamental contextual difference between this study and other TDE research; Gaelic Games is a non-Olympic, amateur, and indigenous sport whereby players can only represent the county in which they are born or reside. All counties, regardless of size or population participate in the same competition, the All-Ireland Championship. There is no recourse for supplementing playing resources with imports from elsewhere, counties must rely on what they produce themselves (c.f. Chapter 2). This should compel GAA academies to examine successful characteristics of other TDEs and infuse them into the organisational and cultural milieu of the GAA. However, for some reason, this does not occur. There was limited evidence within this study’s findings to support the notion that stakeholders place importance on the development of appropriate TDEs. Instead, individual county academies and their constituent ‘street level bureaucrats’ focus on identifying the most talented and training modalities or what some stakeholders classified as a professionalised approach. In short, the processes observed at ground level within the academies bore
limited resemblance to the characteristics of successful environments in other sports (e.g. (Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013).

These aforementioned features now scaffold the interrogation of inherent pivotal problems in the development of talent in Gaelic football. The analysis of environmental conditions of Gaelic football ATDEs revealed eight barriers for successful prospect transitions that were categorised as: (a) training groups devoid of supportive relationships, (b) an absence of role models within the environment, (c) sporting goals not understood within the wider environment, (d) a lack of consideration for the development of psychosocial skills, (e) training that promotes specialisation, (f) a focus on short term success, (g) a disjointed organisational culture and (h) a lack of synergy in integrating efforts. Some of these barriers are further developed below:

An absence of player role models within the environment

Previous literature has described proximal role models as pivotal in other successful TDEs (Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013; Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007; Storm, et al., 2014). The findings of this study, however, outline that there is a ‘distance’ between youth GAA academies and their elite senior counterparts. Interestingly, this gap mirrors the environments found in soccer clubs across Europe whereby little integration was found between youth departments and the professional first team regardless of organisational structure within the club (Relvas, et al., 2010). The ‘distance’ described in their study referred both to the physical (i.e. different training venues) and the cultural (i.e. distinct operational practices). This has connotations within this study since prospects were often denied the opportunity of training at the training centre on the nights that the elite players were there. Similarly, from a cultural perspective, the elite team assumed a priority role within the environment, implying there was a limited focus on youth development in terms of funding and the provision of specialist services.

The rationale for the presence of this ‘distance’ was described by Relvas and colleagues (2010) as a means to ‘protect’ the first team players whilst stimulating a motivation within youth players to fight to enter the professional ranks of the club. Accordingly, this indicates that clubs believe that youth players should be able to work out transitions for themselves and maybe that they didn’t see value in elite players and youth players interacting (Larsen et al., 2013). The lack of proximity within Gaelic Games TDEs would denote that similar
outlooks exist in Ireland and because of this physical and cultural ‘distance’ between prospects and elite players, it is more difficult for prospects to transition to adult elite sport.

**Sporting goals not understood within the wider environment**

As was reported by prospects within the struggling Danish golf TDE, prospects in Gaelic Games academies outlined the constant tension between their academic, sporting, and social lives. In general, teachers were not empathic toward prospect’s sporting commitments (homework was an issue for some prospects on the nights they had training). Across the cases studied, only one school met the criteria to be considered an ‘athlete friendly’ school (Radtke & Coalter, 2007). The environment within this school included extended deadlines for the completion of assignments; extra tuition for talented athletes; the possibility of prospects extending the duration of their second-level education; close working relationships with the GAA; and close working relationships with the student-athlete local clubs, as well as the county academy. This school was an outlier within the study, but its support for the development of prospects allowed for a level of coordination not witnessed elsewhere within the studied counties. Much of this can be attributed to the tradition within the school and their long association with Gaelic football in Kerry. Footballers are placed upon a pedestal within the county and the school very much facilitates a common approach between the academic and sporting goals of prospects.

**Lack of consideration for the development of psychosocial skills**

The environment provided prospects with many internal assets, as described by Harwood (2008). Most conspicuous amongst them were the ability to work hard, manage your time, deal with pressure, as well as goal setting. These elements were overt within the environment. However, there was incongruence between the feelings some prospects described in relation to their actual involvement with the academy and what adult stakeholders perceived these feelings to be. Both coaches and parents spoke around about how involvement brought about increases in self-confidence, ‘that they’re a lot more confident in what they’re doing away from the development squads’ (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017). Parents spoke about their son ‘feeling better about himself’ through their academy connection. However, these utterances are hugely at odds with the opinions of prospects. Some of prospects openly described the level of pressure they faced, how they felt nervous around their involvement, and how they were constantly worried about losing their place. This would imply that prospects in some instances are struggling
to function effectively and comfortably in the complex world of Gaelic Games academies. This struggle indicates a lack of support, as well as an inability on the part of prospects to deploy psychological skills that would aid coping within the environment. This contradiction may also indicate that some parents are consumed by the prestige associated with squad selection and are not really aware of the psychological hardship endured by their son through his involvement with the academy.

These coping skills are often ‘caught’ instead of ‘taught’ within TDEs, according to Larsen and colleagues (2014). In their study of a Danish soccer club, they found that because of the lack of proximal role models, prospects may not be aware of what is needed to transition to elite level sport. In order to transition, therefore, prospects must develop strategies to cope but the environment (coaches, managers, elite athletes) provides no obvious support in doing so. This has much resonance with the findings of this study since the focus within the TDEs of GAA academies is on the development of individual technical skills and team tactical ploys so that prospects can better function within the collective of a team. This implies that prospects are considered solely in the context of their sport instead of their holistic development, as was the case in successful TDEs in other domains (Henriksen et al., 2010b).

Focus on Short-term Success

Coaches, as well as prospects, are embedded in a system whereby there is limited availability for training days outside of club and school activities. Equally, the number of academy training sessions was limited but varied from county to county (40 ± 20 per annum). This time constraint, when aligned with the focus on ‘selection of the talented’ implies that, in fact, individual development is not prioritised, and coaches, in their own minds, have little choice but to focus on the collective team performance and winning competitions. Such an approach seems to conflict with the conclusions of the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007) where it outlines that elite performance may be better fostered by later specialization and not by exclusively focusing on early success (c.f. p 21).

This internal role conflict between winning and personal development experienced by some coaches is, according to Gilbert & Trudel (2004), related to a lack of guidance. Most counties were overt regarding the imposed curriculum for technical and physical development, but coaches were left to their own devices with regard to finding a balance.
between development and winning in this emerging athlete context. This, according to Rynne and colleagues (2017), is not a new phenomenon in such domains but may be compounded in this instance by the lack of governance, as outlined in the previous section. However, regardless of this connection between governance and coaching philosophical dilemmas, coaches, as ‘architects’ of the sports environment, require support so as to develop an increased understanding of the requisite knowledge in order to effectively practice (Cushion et al., 2010; Cuthbert, Chambers, & Vaugh, 2018).

Disjointed Organisational Culture

Within the TDEs of GAA academies, the organisational culture was incoherent. The visible tokens of culture within the environment, such as values and mission statements, did not correspond to stakeholder behaviour. It was also noticeable that what people ‘said they did’, did not correspond to ‘what they actually did’. Such ambiguity and incoherence leaves members of an organisational culture in a state of uncertainty (Chambers & Armour, 2011, Schein, 1990). Such incoherence is also at odds with findings in the literature regarding the factors facilitating operational performance in sport organisations; the presence of a participatory organizational culture is a crucial component for the internal integration within a sports system, as well as its external adaptation with its surroundings (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a; Larsen, 2013; Mills, et al., 2014; Mills, & Pain, 2016; Storm, 2015).

At national level within the GAA, however, there is recognition of the importance of developing a supportive, engaged, and appropriate motivational environment in individual county academies. As an organisation, the GAA believe that academies should act as an adjunct to club and school activities within a coordinated framework between club, schools, and County Boards. The vision they promote for talent academies is one of partnership and support:

*The aim of academies is to develop and prepare highly skilled young players to play for Counties and the broader Club and School Game, supported by an effective, well trained workforce of coaches and other personnel, delivered within a strong partnership of County Boards, Clubs and Schools (GAA, 2017)*.

Implementing such a vision at ground-level within singular county academies has proven problematic due to the level of heterogeneity, complexity, convergence and divergence evident within and between counties.
The coordinated, support-laden framework, as espoused by the GAA in its vision, was not evident in the organisational culture within most academies studied. This is not surprising since sport systems have self-organising capacities that make them difficult to control (Andersen et al., 2015). The fact that the GAA has 32 individual counties under its remit (and most counties have both hurling and football academies) elongates considerably the level of complexity in relation to the variance in interests, structures, and competencies. Complexity is also influenced by the very presence of professional staff working alongside the organisation’s volunteers (Amis & Slack, 2008), as well as the growing body of internal and external stakeholders the GAA is attempting to engage with (Hassan, 2010). The inherent governance structure within the organisation is not reactive, nuanced or proactive to such complexities and, according to Hassan (2010), change to a stewardship model of governance within the GAA is necessary in order to meet the demands of modern day sport (cf. p227).

Currently, control within the GAA occurs through a ‘network of influence’, which can be considered as a complex web of interrelationships between stakeholders in which different groups exert power in different ways (Hassan & O’Boyle, 2016). This description projects illusions of numerous organisational subcultures operating concurrently within the organisation as previously described in other sports organisations (Aims, Slack & Berrett, 1995). These networks of influence attempt to respond to the many mounting and competing agendas presenting within the GAA (e.g. commercialism and professionalism v GAA ideology, rural depopulation and urbanisation, youth withdrawal from Gaelic Games, competition structures). However, the development of talent at youth level does not seem to be a priority (developed guidelines are not adhered to by individual counties but there are no sanctions for ignoring these guidelines). The operation of Gaelic Football academies thus reflect Lipsky’s (1980) street level bureaucracy theory, whereby the organisational culture is very much reflected in the decisions taken at ground level; strategies are developed taking into account the reality of resource limitations and other pressures. This places academy coaches and administrators as policy makers in their own right, which in turn has obvious implications for the GAA as an organisation. Most pertinent amongst these implications is the development of a culture within some settings whereby prospects are treated as future commodities with little consideration for the psychological impact on them, in relation to selection for and deselection from the academy.
The lack of synergy in the integration of efforts

The most conspicuous result was the lack of integration of efforts within the environment. Prospects were often confused by the numerous demands placed on them by coaches working in various domains within the GAA (c.f. Chapter 2). In the context of this study, athlete development was influenced by three levels of coach - club coach, school coach, and academy coach. Each of these levels operated independently of each other and had very limited interaction in most cases. This is not surprising since the literature has shown that unifying and aligning coaches across different team settings has been problematic in other domains (Camiré, 2014; Jones & Wallace, 2006) but is achievable once coaches mutually adapt to and ‘notice’ other coaches’ actions. Such adaptation requires coaches to let go of some of their power in order to ensure that the talent development system remains high functioning and coordinated at an individual level (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2017).

Coach orchestration (Jones & Wallace, 2005) is therefore necessary to manage the complexity of the interactions within these multiple coaching contexts. Such an approach would allow ‘flexible adaptation to constraints’ (Jones & Wallace, 2006, p.52) such as the scheduling issues faced by prospects within this study. Managing such constraints involves much ‘string-pulling’ in the background so that coaches are ‘steered’ towards a longer term and integrated perspective of development (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2017). However, the organisational structure surrounding prospect development in GAA academies is presently lacking a conductor to oversee and coordinate the endeavours the various stakeholders make with one another. This may well be a governance issue, but it is also concerned with coaches’ recognizing and understanding of the complexity of the coaching process within this specific context. Coaches must improvise and be constantly aware that talent development in Gaelic Games is a result of an eclectic amalgam of ongoing varying processes and combinations across a multitude of settings (e.g. prospects play on club, school and county teams across various age grades and sometimes also play the other GAA sport, hurling. This can result in some prospects having to represent more than ten teams in one season).

Conclusion

Considering the findings outlined, it may be that success in the elite adult competitions are simply the result of county size, population, economics or the internal club structures inherent in the counties. Prospects within these counties may experience ‘an outlier effect’
(Gladwell, 2008) whereby a combination of ability, special opportunities and the arbitrary advantage of being born into a county that possesses a GAA culture which supports the development of their talent. Notwithstanding this assertion, there remains much ambiguity around why counties are deemed to be successful (i.e. continuously producing elite senior athletes from their junior ranks so as to allow them compete annually at the later stages of All-Ireland competitions), but this is outside the scope of this study. However, there is certainty from the findings of this study that prospects encounter multiple barriers in attempting to transition from youth to elite Gaelic football. This mirrors very much the findings of Henriksen and colleagues (2014) in their work with a golf TDE in Denmark. As was discovered in that study, the Gaelic football environment was characterised by features that are in opposition to those of successful environments; e.g. a lack of supportive training groups and role models; little understanding from non-sport environment; no integration of efforts among different parts of the environment; and an incoherent organisational culture.

This section describes various levels of constraint within the talent development environments of Gaelic football academies. Some of these constraints are cultural (sport-specific), while others are organisational. Regardless of their origin, these constraints are potential inhibitors or barriers to the successful transition of prospects to elite level Gaelic football within their county. In line with other studies (e.g. Henriksen, 2014), the TDE of Gaelic football could be classified as a ‘struggling environment’ since so many of its characteristics are in opposition to those described as being prevalent in successful environments in other sporting domains. Considering this to be the case, success in Gaelic Games, in terms of athlete development and the associated transition trajectory, is not relative to approaches in other successful sporting environments elsewhere.

The final section of this chapter considers how these macro and meso level influences affect the personal development of the individual prospects. Using the personal Assets Framework (Côté et al., 2016) to guide the discussion, the personal, relational and organisational factors prevalent within Gaelic Games academies are extrapolated upon in terms of the overall healthy development of their constituent prospects.

13.3 The Individual Qualities of the Athlete and their Personal Environment

As outlined in the previous section, the level of constraints evident within the environment has implications for the transition of prospects to elite level Gaelic football. Such analysis
raises large question marks around the validity of the Talent Development Pathway (TDP) within Gaelic football, especially in relation to prospect’s personal development and their long-term relationship with sport and physical activity. In order to achieve optimal development outcomes for prospects through their academy involvement, there must be a balance between the goals of developing performance with individual personal development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017). This section discusses the development of talent within academy prospects in the context of their overall healthy development by examining the three key elements that shape youth encounters in sport: (1) personal factors (i.e. the what), (2) relational factors (i.e. the who), and (3) organisational environments (i.e. the where) (Côté et al., 2016). Such discussion will act as an useful adjunct to the Holistic Ecological Approach (Henriksen, 2010; Henriksen et al., 2010b) utilised throughout this study by identifying the mechanisms within the TDE of Gaelic football that could be used to promote long-term positive developmental outcomes.

**Personal Engagement in Activities**

Côté and his colleagues (2016) highlighted one’s personal engagement in activities as the first dynamic element of the Personal Assets Framework (PAF). Within this element, these authors identified how time invested, training activities, and developmental trajectories may shape youths’ sport experience and asset development. Significant time investment has been associated with positive outcomes such as diverse peer relationships, adult networks, time management, and positive relationships (Strachan, Fraser-Thomas, & Nelson-Ferguson, 2016). However, there are also detrimental effects, i.e. physical and emotional exhaustion, less family integration and a unidimensional self-concept (Strachan et al., 2016). The findings of this study suggest that prospects struggle with the level of time commitment involved with selection for a county academy. Some prospects outlined their cumulative commitment to Gaelic football amounted to over 25 hours per week and how this had a negative effect on their school commitments in particular. In many counties, much of this time commitment involved travel to and from training and games. However, in Hughes and Hassan’s (2015) study into burnout in Gaelic Games, only 8% of the sample studied displayed the symptoms of burnout, which would indicate that prospects are able to manage the physical demands their football commitments place on them. Future research may focus on the effects this level of commitment has on the psychosocial development and self-identity of prospects.
In terms of training activities, and in line with the work of Vierimaa and colleagues (2017), prospects were exposed at the academy, to forms of ‘rational learning’ whereby they engaged in coach-led deliberate practices (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993) so as to facilitate the development of sport specific skills. This training approach was mirrored across the various domains with Gaelic Games (academy, club, and school). When combined with the time investment, the developmental trajectory for most prospects had a focus on specialisation. In fact, in pursuit of performance, there was limited understanding from coaches regarding the benefits of sampling other sports; soccer was seen as a particular threat by some stakeholders in some counties. In sum, factors associated with prospect’s activity engagement (i.e. time, type, and trajectory) in this instance indicate that prospect’s personal development may be compromised in the pursuit of performance (Fraser-Thomas et al, 2017).

The next section concerns the second dynamic highlighted within the PAF – quality relationships. This element constitutes the ‘who’ of the developmental process.

**Quality Relationships**

This section explores how relationships with coaches, parents and peers may shape prospect’s sport experiences, asset development and outcomes of performance and personal development.

**Coaches**

It is abundantly clear from the literature that youth’s development through sport hinges upon adaptive social relationships with many different actors within the sport environment. However, across the various relationship spectrum within TDEs, coaches have been shown to represent one of the most powerful sources of influence (Sheridan, Coffee, & Lavallee, 2014; Schempp, McCullick, & Mason, 2006; Turnnidge, et al., 2016). Within the academy environments in this study, coaches were mainly ‘up and coming’ volunteer coaches who were supported by paid GAA staff. These coaches all spoke around an appropriate holistic developmental approach for prospects but, as described by Miller and Kerr (2002), they continuously faced a complex challenge of trying to balance performance success against athlete’s personal development and well-being. Coaches, it seemed, internalised deep rooted social and cultural beliefs that winning competitions had associations with their own self-progression.
Entirely focusing on results is much at odds with descriptions within the literature of coaching effectiveness and expertise (e.g. Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Expert coaches find a balance between their own motivation to win and the prospect’s personal development (Gould, Daniel, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). It was noteworthy in this study that the coach with most experience (i.e. Dublin Academy coach) was an outlier within the dataset, with regard to finding this balance for his prospects. He has played at the highest level with his county, is the assistant coach to the most successful elite Gaelic football team of modern times, as well as being the u16 academy coach. It could be argued that his playing career combined with his exposure to the environment of the elite senior team has given him a different insight than other academy coaches within this study. His work in the academy, unlike that of the less experienced cohort of coaches in other counties, shared many commonalities with the descriptors presented in coach effectiveness research (e.g. Schempp et al., 2006). Most notably, the environment surrounding the prospects (a) was task orientated (focusing on learning and improvement), (b) autonomy-supportive (including athletes in decision making), (c) engaged athletes in meaningful relationships (being caring and communicating effectively), and (d) modelled appropriate values (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009; Gould, Daniel et al., 2007; Strachan, Fraser-Thomas, & Nelson-Ferguson, 2016).

Such a focus on enjoyment and positivity provides coaches within this county with a framework from which the personal assets of prospects can be appropriately developed (e.g. competence, confidence, connection and character) (Côté & Gilbert, 2009), so they can reap the long term benefits of sport, i.e. higher levels of performance, life-long participation, and personal development (Turnnidge et al., 2016). Evidence suggests that effective coaches influence these personal assets (Côté & Gilbert, 2009) in addition to the long-term objectives of the 3Ps (participation, performance and personal development) (Vella et al., 2011). Discovering how effective coaches learn and acquire knowledge would be a good starting point for many coaches who operate within GAA academies (Schempp et al., 2006). This must be the responsibility of the GAA as an organisation but also the responsibility for those charged with the development of coaching within individual counties. The findings of this study would suggest that coaching effectiveness in Gaelic Games is influenced by the coaches’ playing history, but more importantly, by being provided with learning opportunities through their direct involvement with other elite teams. This involvement refers very much to the learning networks (e.g. mentors, communities of practice, partnerships and coalitions) within talent development.
environments as advocated by Algar (2015) and others (Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012; Partington & Cushion, 2013).

Parents

A positive interaction between parents and coaches has been identified as leading to smoother sport transitions and more successful talent development (Knight & Holt, 2014). However, there was limited interaction in general across academies between parents and coaches. Parents were seen as the providers of tangible supports such as transport and finance and were invited to attend a parent’s night annually where academy personnel outlined their plan for the year. At the academy sessions, many parents were present, observing and attempting to decipher what coaching decisions within sessions meant for their son (e.g. subbed off, not selected for a game). Many parents spoke of feeling alienated from the whole academy process and their role was viewed as a support to academy activities (i.e. they viewed themselves as a provider for their son in terms of transport and emotional support and advice but the academy personnel did not formulate any particular role for parents).

However, despite this, it was very obvious that many parents felt that their behaviours were a support to their child’s talent development and his progression through the academy (i.e. employing coaches for individual training, providing performance related instructional feedback). Some prospects may perceive these behaviours to be negative, and thus, a hindrance to their optimal personal development (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017). This was not overtly described by any of the prospects interviewed but parents have been shown in many studies to be a negative influence on youth’s sport development (Gould, et al., 2006; Mills, et al., 2012). As a means to ensuring the effects of such influence are minimised, it is vital that academy coaches develop appropriate relationships with parents. By doing so, prospects become better equipped to develop the internal and external resources necessary to succeed and transition through Gaelic Games as better participants and performers (Harwood & Johnson, 2016). These transitions will also be more easily achieved when prospects are provided with unconditional emotional parental support within homes distinct from the pressures of the sporting environment (Laurer et al., 2010).

Peers
Prospects within this study unequivocally agreed that their peers played a pivotal role in their athletic development. All studied prospects mentioned that making new friends within the academy was very important to them. In line with the work of Holt and colleagues (2009), academy prospects were observed to influence each other in terms of life skill development. Through interactions with teammates, prospects learned social and psychological skills, as well as developing their work ethic, as described by Carlson (2011). Prospects also indicated that their academy involvement allowed them to develop friendships with others who understood them and shared their lived experiences. These findings are mirrored in MacPhail and Kirk’s (2006) work in youth athletics. However, it was also evident that non-athletic peers were in many instances barriers to prospect development. Though underrepresented in the literature, prospects spoke about the pressure they were routinely subjected to in order to conform to the social norms of their non-athletic peers which indicated a limited appreciation and understanding from non-athletic peers of the commitments of prospects. This is in contrast to the findings of Gould and colleagues’ (2002) study into the development of psychological constructs within elite youth athletes and the positive role of classmates as confidence builders and supporters.

**Appropriate Settings**

The third dynamic element highlighted in the PAF (Côté et al., 2016) is appropriate settings. As discussed, the academy environments in this study bore limited resemblance to the environments described in the literature as being successful in the transition of prospects to elite athletes (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). However, that is not to say that there were elements within the academy environments that provided opportunities for prospects to develop life skills. According to a number of studies, the underlying processes within elite contexts in sport may promote positive youth development through the inherent elements of commitment, challenge, responsibility, work ethic and time management (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017; Gould, et al., 2007; Strachan et al., 2016). Outside of implicitly ‘catching’ these inherent skills, prospects were not exposed to any explicit forms of life skill development. This was not surprising since, as of yet, there is limited research evidence to suggest that a congruence could exist between the goals of positive youth development and the realities of high performance sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017).

To synopsize, this section has outlined how Gaelic Games academies have not yet found a balance between performance and personal development outcomes for prospects.
Academy involvement demands that prospects invest a large portion of their time to training that has a deliberate practice focus. This, in turn, promotes a concentration on a ‘specialised approach’ that, not only has a cost in terms of participation in other sports, but, more importantly, a cost in terms of prospect’s personal development. Similarly, the absence of quality coach-athlete relationships, the obliviousness of parents as to their role, as well as the unforgiving social pressures from non-athletic peers all conspire to obstruct the many possibilities for positive youth development within and around Gaelic Games academies.

13.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study revealed that the workings of Gaelic Games academies had limited resemblance to the characteristic features of successful talent development environments as described by Henriksen (2010). In fact, findings reveal that GAA academies provide prospects with little assistance with their attempted transition to elite Gaelic football and, in some ways, provide many obstacles to their positive personal development. In line with findings from other studies in other sports (e.g. Algar, 2015; Martindale, Collins, & Abraham, 2007; Pankhurst & Collins, 2013), talent development systems in Gaelic Games are thwarted by deficiencies in the utilisation of evidence based knowledge, as well as other organisational dysfunctions. This study highlights how these deficiencies are compounded by the relentless influence of commercialism and professionalisation with the GAA, which is sustained by a governmental system that is outdated and antiquated. This obstruction at the macro-level of talent development environments has serious developmental implications at both the meso and micro levels.

In a broad sense, Gaelic football is a compelling case example, which illustrates how factors at the macro level within a sports organisation can have indelible links to the holistic development of individual athletes within their surrounding micro-environment. The findings from this study revealed that a combination of factors exists within the GAA context, that has created a ‘runaway train effect’ with regard to talent development within the organisation. This eclectic amalgam of factors has resulted in developmental processes that are unilateral, short-sighted, and lacking in empathy and understanding of the ‘socialisation effect’ that Gaelic Games has on the youth of Ireland. The findings from this study suggest that it would be most appropriate that the GAA, as an organisation, gain a level of control within the developmental context and contribute to the positive personality development of talented athletes.
Chapter 14: Conclusion, Thesis Contribution and Future Research

14.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to provide a holistic analysis of the talent development environment surrounding elite Gaelic Football academies in Ireland. This study is the first qualitative review of the holistic development of elite youth athletes in Ireland. The research adopted a case study approach because the phenomenon being studied (i.e. elite youth development), could not be separated from its context (Yin, 1994). The research hinged on one umbrella case study (Gaelic Football academies), which comprised six individual cases: hexads of academy administrator, u21 player, club coach, school coach, parents, and youth player. Data were collected over a nine month period using qualitative data collection methods. Specifically, in-depth focus groups interviews, semi-structured
one to one interviews, observation, artefacts, design thinking tools, and the researcher’s reflective journal were the heuristics used. The data were analysed using a systematic six-level grounded theory method (Harry et al., 2005). Issues of trustworthiness were addressed by ensuring that the methods and findings were reported in a detailed and accessible manner. Although precise replication of the study in the traditional sense would be difficult, sufficient methodological information is provided to ensure that a similar study could be undertaken in the future (Kirk & Miller, 1986). With respect to issues of credibility, the concept of crystallisation (Richardson, 2000) was adopted; the researcher viewed the issue under investigation from the viewpoints of all participants in this study: administrators, coaches, parents, teachers, elite athletes, and prospects.

Working within a qualitative research paradigm, this study addressed three main research questions.

**Main Research Questions**

1. What are the roles, functions, and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland?
2. What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games?
3. What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?

This concluding chapter comprises three sections:

1. Thesis conclusions
2. Contribution of the research to existing knowledge
3. Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

**14.2 Thesis Conclusions**

The following section provides an overview of the main research findings and conclusions by addressing the research questions. Initially, the procedural research questions are independently explored, before these findings are drawn together to provide final conclusions in response to the main aim of the study.
Research Question 1: What are the roles, functions, and relations of key components within talent development environments in Gaelic Games academies in Ireland?

The results reveal that academies operate in general, as singular, unconnected, and isolated units within the fragmentary that is elite youth Gaelic football. Data indicated acute dysfunctional relationships between constituent stakeholders within the academy environment. Such dysfunction was a derivative of the considerable levels of heterogeneity, complexity, convergence, and divergence in the developmental practices and perspectives of individual counties. Academy stakeholders (coaches, administrators, parents and teachers), have, as yet, failed to capture a holistic, integrated and longitudinal understanding of their role within the athlete pathway, but instead, in an attempt to gain legitimacy (Skille et al., 2017), they have attempted to provide prospects with ‘a professionalised approach’ to their development. However, such approaches, which are very much mechanistic, ensure that the developmental and transitional needs of prospects are not being met (Stambulova et al., 2015).

The findings from this study also suggest that the organisational culture evident within individual academies is very much at odds with the co-ordinated, support-laden framework espoused by the GAA centrally. As initially identified by Hassan (2010), the GAA, as a controlling body, has lost control in jurisdictions and stakeholders at ground level have become both policy makers and implementers in their own right. This has implications for prospect development since control of the prospect’s environment is contestable between the myriad of stakeholders who play a role in individual prospect development. As a means of providing prospects with a level of appropriate clarity, with regard to their development, it is necessary that the GAA regains control of the development context and provide stakeholders with empirical and theoretically based guidelines for practice.

Research Question 2: What factors underpin development environments in the most successful counties in Gaelic Games?

In answer to the above question, this study concluded that despite the studied counties being described as ‘successful’, they were in fact struggling to provide an environment that was conducive to preparing prospects for the transition to elite level football. Findings from this study were in opposition to findings from other successful TDEs (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2014; Henriksen et al., 2010b, 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). In particular, the prevalent TDE within Gaelic football academies included the following barriers: (a) training groups
devoid of supportive relationships, (b) an absence of role models within the environment, (c) sporting goals not understood within the wider environment, (d) a lack of consideration for the development of psychosocial skills, (e) training that promotes specialisation, (f) a focus on short term success, (g) a disjointed organisational culture and (h) a lack of synergy in integrating efforts. Therefore, the most successful counties in Gaelic football provide prospects with development environments that do not correspond to the practices of successful TDEs as described in the literature.

**Research Question 3: What are the developmental experiences of elite youth Gaelic footballers in Ireland?**

The findings from this study suggest that prospects, through their academy involvement, experience an environment which is very much weighted towards improving performance. In fact, there was little stakeholder cognisance towards an attempted balance between positive personal development and performance. Prospects were exposed to performance coaching that was rooted in ‘deliberate practices’, which demanded huge time commitments. These elements combined ensured that there was limited time for diversification and prospects had little choice but to specialise in Gaelic football. When this approach aligns with limiting coach-athlete relationships, uncertainty from parents in relation to their role and the lack of support from non-athletic peers, it becomes very evident that the TDEs of Gaelic football academies are limiting the opportunity to develop positive personal outcomes that such environments may promote.

**14.3 Contribution of the Research to Existing Knowledge**

This study is very much original and nuanced within talent development research. Recently, the literature has moved from focusing on the cognitive determinants of elite performance towards an understanding of the role that psychological, social, and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process (Domingues, Cavichioli, & Goncalves, 2014). This epistemological shift in perspective towards an ecological viewpoint directs researchers to perceive the development of talent as a social construct and as a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the presence of special environmental conditions. However, despite this shift, the literature remains extremely sparse in relation to empirical research from an ecological perspective surrounding talent development processes, the role of stakeholders, and organisational context (Bjørndal, Ronglan, & Andersen, 2015; Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010). Therefore, researchers such
as Henriksen (2010) have called for an advancement of the holistic ecological approach to researching TDEs, especially in countries outside of Scandinavia and in sports not already researched. In this context, this thesis makes an original contribution by extending the knowledge base concerning the creation and regulation of high performance organisational cultures at a key transition stage within elite sport settings. This thesis proposes that success at adult elite level in Gaelic Football is not supported by successful TDEs at youth level, as described in other sporting domains. The following section outlines the implications of this work, the inherent limitations, and the recommendations for future study.

14.4 Implications, limitations, and Recommendations

As outlined in Chapter 1 (Introduction), the aim of this thesis was not to generate grand generalisations, as this very motive goes against the epistemological stance of any interpretive study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). That being said, it is hoped that this work can offer insight into other related contexts (Silverman, 2005) for both sport organisations and TID researchers alike. From the findings of this thesis, it is possible to suggest a number of implications for the organisation and operation of elite youth TDEs so as to simultaneously promote positive youth development and performance.

14.4.1 Recommendations for the promotion of PYD and performance in TDEs

The following are the practical recommendations emanating from the findings of this study:

- That sport organisations would realign their governmental structures so that talent identification and development can become the responsibility of one regulatory body. In the context of this study, it is recommended that the GAA delivers on the recommendation from its own Strategic Review (GAA, 2002) and move towards a stewardship model of governance. In essence, the GAA requires a proactive organisational approach that is sensitive to the ‘degrees of difference’ between the 32 counties of Ireland, player centred and properly founded on clearly articulated policies and programmes determined by consensus of the main stakeholders.

- That sport organisations provide academy stakeholders with empirical and theoretically based guidelines for practice so that academies can move
beyond prescriptive models of talent development (e.g. The Standard Pyramid Model of Talent Development).

- Within each talent environment, organisations should appoint a talent development manager so that a co-ordinated, support-laden framework for both prospects and stakeholders could be developed and managed. Such a person is even more necessary in heterarchical organisations and could assist in the development of a level of orchestration between the multiple layers of settings to which talented prospects are committed. Such a practitioner should possess an understanding of the various strands of sport science, an appreciation of the sport in which they work and a familiarity of holistic approaches to working with adolescents. Such a brief would afford prospects a coordinated, supervised, and educated approach to their competing demands.

- The findings underline the importance of the role of proximal role models and the necessity for organisations to build strong links between the academy and the senior team. Currently, this much depends on the senior team manager and their viewpoint. However, the findings from this study contend that inviting established elite athletes to pass down their knowledge, share their experiences of the development process, and provide insights into how they met the challenges that young players now face could play a crucially important function in the development of players at this key transitional stage.

- Coaches at the youth level should be encouraged to ground their practice around an athlete-centred model where performance excellence co-exists in the same environment as personal excellence. When applied, this approach to coaching is considered a powerful tool in empowering young athletes to learn and take more responsibility for their own development, which, ultimately, results in enhanced performance, a thriving, supportive team environment, as well as the development of individual personal assets (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2017). Such an approach over time may lead to the formation of the 4Cs of PYD (Côté, et al., 2010), which comprise competence, confidence, connections, and character. The efficacy of such an approach would greatly rest upon sporting organisations advocating a holistic policy as part of their vision for player development.

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22 A heterarchy is a system of organization where the elements of the organization are unranked (non-hierarchical) or where they possess the potential to be ranked a number of different ways.
There is a need for alignment of the different Communities of Practice within sport systems. For coaches, there appear to be important inhibitors when it comes to their participation in a coach Community of Practice, not least of which is the competitive nature of coaching practice. Despite the barriers, however, coach Communities of Practice seem to be a worthwhile approach for the promotion of informal coach learning and, as such, need to be facilitated within the academy environment.

Figure 35: A model for Athletic Talent Development Environments in Sport

4.4.2 Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations are made:

- Investigating elite performance environments (EPEs) may reveal to what degree ATDEs differ, in essence, from successful EPEs. This would increase understanding of how best to support the transition from ATDE to EPE.
- Undertake a longitudinal study in which individual prospects are followed over time, which would allow the demands and challenges of different career phases and transitions to be mapped.
Evaluate the impact that deselection from the academy has on individual players in terms of their engagement with Gaelic Games and the effects deselection has on their personal development.

Evaluate the effects on psychosocial development and self-identity of individual prospects through their involvement with Gaelic football academies.

Use the holistic ecological approach to study a successful TDE in non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) societies so that a comparison could be drawn between existing findings and those from such societies.

Use the holistic ecological approach to study the TDEs of Irish rugby and soccer academies and compare findings to this study.

Use the holistic ecological approach to study a TDE from another indigenous team sport such as Australian Rules Football so as to compare findings with this study.

Examine the academy environments using quantitative methods such as the Talent Development Environment Questionnaire (Martindale et al., 2010).

Evaluate from a qualitative perspective as to why certain individual counties are more successful than other counties.

14.4.3 Limitations

Limitations in this study fall under three key headings:

1. Transferability
2. Reliability and validity
3. Researcher objectivity

Transferability

Firstly, given the culturally specific focus on the GAA academy system, the transferability of interpretations to player development environments in other domains may be classified as speculative. From a broader perspective, Merriam (1998) questioned the generalisability of outcomes from a single case to a larger population. It is acknowledged in this study that small qualitative studies are not generalizable, in the more accepted sense; however, it is also argued that studies such as this have laudable qualities (Myers, 2000). In this study of
Gaelic football TDEs, the generalisability of the research does not emanate from how representative the sample might be, but from the way in which the experiences are likely to be appropriate to other organisations in related contexts. It can be argued that the strength of the qualitative approach employed in this study is the depth of exploration and description, which produces a vivid and detailed understanding of the idiosyncrasies of the situation under investigation.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

It has been argued by Kirk & Miller (1986) that reliability in research is attained in two ways;

(a) The study is reported in a detailed and accessible manner so that it may be replicated.
(b) The results of the study are reported in a transparent way in terms of theoretically meaningful variables.

The researcher has addressed each of these demands in reporting this study. In order to ensure reliability, the research procedure for this study has been documented in a detailed and clear manner (Minichiello et al., 1995) in Chapter Three. In theory, the research could be replicated, although there are clear challenges in seeking precise replication in studies of this nature. In addition, in order to ensure rigour in this research, there was an imperative to work with the reality of each case as it presented itself and thus to use data collection methods that suited the situation (Yin, 1994).

**Researcher Positioning**

It has been acknowledged in this study that the researcher had the status of both insider and outsider (Minichiello et al., 1995). It could be argued that, as an insider, the researcher was blind to the everyday, mundane nuances of the context. That said, the researcher does not claim objective independence, instead arguing that their position as an insider offers a unique insight into the organisation and operation of TDEs in Gaelic football. What is more, a number of strategies have been employed throughout the research process in order to ensure that the study was credible, rigorous, and dependable. These methods included peer debriefing, member checking, and the incorporation of data that was thick with description, and grounded in the experiences and discourses of the research participants. In providing a clear audit trail throughout this body of work, the methods utilised have
been identified, critiqued, and illustrated for reader clarity. Reflexivity has been adopted throughout the research process so that any factors that might have influenced the data collection, analysis, and interpretation have been acknowledged.

14.5 Concluding Thoughts

There have been substantive calls from within the TID literature to look beyond the individual athlete to the broader developmental context or environment in which they develop. Using a holistic ecological approach, this study took an overarching and holistic approach to the investigation of the talent development environments of Gaelic football academies. In doing so, this study supplements the contemporary literature on athletic talent and career development. The data from this study suggests that the TDE of Gaelic football could be classified as a ‘struggling environment’ (Henriksen, 2014), through which prospects receive limited support to transition to elite level football. An important finding from this study was that success at adult elite level for individual counties in Gaelic football does not correlate to successful TDEs at youth level. This study also identifies that the opportunities for positive personal development within TDEs are subsumed by a focus on developing performance. As such, there is a need for sporting organisations to consider how to develop, within stakeholders, a holistic, integrated, and longitudinal understanding of their role within the athlete pathway. To conclude, this study raises fundamental questions that need to be addressed in the development of organisational cultures that can guide athletes and other TDE stakeholders in their pursuit of excellence.
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Appendices
Appendix 1: Ethical Approval Form

ETHICS APPROVAL FORM

Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC)

UCC academic staff and postgraduate research students who are seeking ethical approval should use this approval form. Ethical review by SREC is strongly recommended where the methodology is not clinical or therapeutic in nature and proposes to involve:
- direct interaction with human participants for the purpose of data collection using research methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observations, focus groups etc
- indirect observation with human participant for example using observation, web surveys etc
- access to, or utilisation of, data concerning identifiable individuals.

Application Checklist

This checklist includes all of the items that are required for an application to be deemed complete. In the event that any of these are not present, the application will be returned to the applicant without having been sent to review. Please ensure that your application includes all of these prior to submission. Thank you.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Completed Application Checklist</th>
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<td>Completed Description of Project</td>
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<td>Information Sheet(s)</td>
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I have consulted the UCC Code of Research Conduct and believe my proposal is in line with its requirements ✓

If you are under academic supervision, your supervisor has approved the wording of and co-signed this application prior to submission ✓
Please note that you must confirm you have taken account of the University’s Code of Research Conduct in order for your application to be considered by SREC

(http://www.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/documents/CodeofGoodConductinResearch_000.pdf)
### APPLICANT DETAILS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name of applicant(s)</th>
<th>Brian Cuthbert</th>
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<td>Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department/School/Unit, &amp; Supervisor’s Name</td>
<td>School of Education Dr Fiona Chambers Prof. Bryan McCullick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>0876942329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence Address</td>
<td>23 Elton Lawn Bishopstown Cork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Cuthbert-brian@hotmail.com">Cuthbert-brian@hotmail.com</a></td>
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<tr>
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### ETHICAL APPROVAL SELF-EVALUATION

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

19. Aims of the project (briefly)

The aim of this study is to investigate how elite male youth Gaelic footballers are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and dispositions in elite Gaelic football academies on the island of Ireland. In doing so, it is intended that this study will identify the optimal ecological factors required for the holistic development of elite adolescent Gaelic football players.

The main research questions guiding this study are as follows:
1) How are elite youth Gaelic footballers supported to develop holistically throughout their involvement with their county academy?
2) How do coaches, parents and administrators view their role in supporting player development within the academy environment?
3) What are the perceptions of academy players regarding the quality of their development within the academy environment?
4) What factors underpin successful player development within the academy environment?

Subsidiary questions addressed in the conduct of this study:
1) What does international literature offer of the key elements of holistic development of elite athletes?
2) What does international literature say about the characteristics of effective elite player coaching academies?
3) What is the optimal design of a sporting organisation that fosters an ecological approach to elite athlete development?

Rationale for the Study

Over the last decade, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has produced a number of reports which highlight growing concern regarding the development of youth Gaelic Games players (e.g. Report of the Task Force on Player Burnout, 2007; Mobilising Forces, Modernising Structures and Moving with the Times, 2012; Report of the Minor Review Group, 2015). All of the reports reference the Grassroots to National Programme (GNP), which is a conceptualised framework under the auspices of which all strategic objectives are delivered in a games development context. However according to these documents, its impact is subdued and challenged by a lack of stakeholder conceptual understanding of the
Academies were initially developed by the counties in Ulster in the early 2000’s. This happened to coincide with a period of unprecedented success for these individual counties. Anecdotal claims implying a causal relationship between the development of the academy system and the new found success of Ulster counties increased the popularity of academy structures in Gaelic Games. By 2007, every county in Ireland had adopted an academy model aimed at developing their perceived most talented players in order to better compete with other counties. According to the Report of the Task Force on Burnout (GAA, 2007), these academies have become elitist, have engaged in too many sessions, have impinged on club activity and are too competitive. Currently, a key question is whether things have changed hugely regarding the elitist ideal of keeping the best and forgetting the rest when one considers that 65% of players who begin the development process will be deselected over a three-year period (GAA Annual Report for the Irish Sports Council, 2014).

The Report of the Minor Review Workgroup (GAA, 2015) substantiates the GAA’s 2012 report, Mobilising Forces, Modernising Structures and Moving with the Times, in relation to the lack of a developmental coherency at youth level in Gaelic Games. Research findings signify a high level of coercion and pressure from youth coaches on youth players, chronic player fatigue, medical negligence in terms of playing whilst injured and recurring levels of over activity for elite players (GAA, 2015). Subsequently, throughout all of the reports since 2007, there is reference to the necessity for the development of a new approach, an approach that ‘will ensure that a holistic and humanistic approach is propagated in Talent Academy frameworks and will also facilitate transition from youth to adult level’ (GAA, 2012, p. 14).

There is a dearth in research on the development of holistic and humanistic approaches to talent development. Instead, research has focused on the individual athlete and the opposing approaches of talent discovery and talent development (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010a). Recently, the literature has moved from focusing on the cognitive determinants of elite performance towards an understanding of the role that psychological, social and cultural circumstances play in the talent development process (Domíngues, Cavichioli, & Gonçalves, 2014). This epistemological shift in perspective towards an ecological viewpoint directs researchers to perceive the development of talent as a social construct and as a phenomenon that is highly dependent on the presence of special environmental conditions (Domíngues et al). Notwithstanding such a change, the
literature remains extremely sparse in relation to empirical research from an ecological perspective surrounding talent development processes, the role of stakeholders and organisational context (Henriksen et al, 2010; Bjornal, Ronglan & Andersen, 2015).

Thus, this is a timely and relevant study which coincides with major structural changes to youth competition in Gaelic games. Players will, from next year, be exposed to All-Ireland competition a year younger than in the past i.e. the competition is for under 17s rather than under 18s. Using an ecological approach, this study will reveal how a talent development system (i.e. the GAA academy structure) supports its athletes to develop holistically. Using Henriksen’s and his colleagues (2010a) holistic ecological working models as the theoretical framework underpinning this study, we can evaluate how the preconditions and processes prevalent in academies influence the environment’s success. By analysing the relationships and interactions of the athlete within his surroundings and identifying the factors that underpin successful developmental environments in GAA academies, findings from this study could help young GAA athletes transition more easily between youth and adult level by providing all academy stakeholders with a renewed vision, mission and ambition with regard to player development.

20. Brief description and justification of methods and measures to be used (attach research questions / copy of questionnaire / interview protocol / discussion guide / etc.)

This study will examine Gaelic games academies using an approach grounded in Complexity Theory. Hence, an organic, holistic and ecological epistemology will guide the researcher throughout the research process. An exploration of talent development environments from an ecological perspective clearly lends itself to a research design that allows the researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events (Yin, 2009). Thus the study will adopt a qualitative approach. Researching into “the natural occurring experiments” as described by Yin (2009, p. 4), means studying phenomena that we do not control while we study them. The case study is, therefore, a strategy to empirically explore chosen contemporary phenomena in their natural context by using sources of data that can be used as proof of evidence (Robson, 2002). For these reasons, the case study is an appropriate methodological choice for this dissertation, as the aim is to work in and with the environment and uncover the realities of the challenges faced by elite youth Gaelic footballers.

The study will adopt a multiple case study approach with six individual cases. According to Firestone and Herriott (1983, p183) this approach transcends “the radical
particularism’ of the single case and asks the question – *do these findings make sense beyond a specific case* (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p173). The following criteria will apply to selection of the six cases so as to ensure maximum variation;

a) Cases will not directly influence each other even though they are part of the same network i.e. the GAA is an association made up of 32 individual counties that are autonomous in terms of their approach to player development  
b) Variation in length of time the academy system has been in situ within each county  
c) Variation in geographical location  
d) Variation in the level of success each case has encountered over the last six years.

To interrogate each case, a narrative inquiry approach will be adopted to the extrapolating the experience of one player from each distinct context. Narrative inquiry involves making meaning out of individual experiences expressed in lived and told stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher places emphasis on using participants’ own words and capturing their voice. The stories are complex and interwoven with their context (Glassett, 2012). Narrative inquiry is utilized to acquire a deeper understanding in which individuals organize and derive meaning from events (Polkinghorne, 1995) by studying the impact of social structures on an individual and how that relates to identity, intimate relationships, and family (Frost, 2011).

Within the case study framework, the researcher will use the following **data collection techniques**: open profile questionnaire, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The **data analysis procedure** adopted will be one of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), i.e. "an inductive process of discovering theory from data" (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004). This approach means that the qualitative researcher has "grounded their theory in data and validated their statements of relationship between concepts" (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p.5). This ensures that the researcher is confident about the conclusions he/she has reached and is convinced that they will withstand criticism from the target audience. Grounded theory claims to reflect “objectively” on the data thus generating new understandings and theory (Pidgeon & Henwood, 2004).

The study will involve **three phases of research**:

**Phase 1: July 2016**

*Pilot Study*: The purpose of this phase is to undertake a pilot study so as to refine techniques and instruments developed for the main study. This study will be conducted in a case
resembling as close as possible the environment to that of the actual research (Glesne, 2006). Participants will be encouraged to take an active role in suggesting improvements to the research instruments as suggested by Ashley (2012).

**Phase 2: September to December 2016**

*Desk Study:* The phase can be viewed as an exploratory phase based on Yin’s (2009) case study protocol. This procedure involves progressive structuring of the research process involving an exploratory phase followed by a semi-structured phase. The exploratory phase will involve a desk study whereby documents relating to each academy will be sourced, read and analysed. As well as being a source of richly contextual data about each case, the exploratory phase will seek to provide the groundwork for the semi-structured phase, most especially in relation to building a rapport with key informants, identifying participants and settings for selection and understanding from a general perspective how cases work. Understandings derived from this phase will inform how the data collection methods in the semi-structured phase may be altered in ways that are more suited to specific cases (Ashley, 2012)

**Phase 3: January to October 2017**

a) **Stage One: Data Collection**

Initial open ended qualitative questionnaire will be sent via each squad administrator to the players in each squad [see Appendix C]. **Players will be at least 15 years of age.** The questions posed in these questionnaires have been informed by a) Talent Development Environment Questionnaire for Sport (Martindale, Collins, Wang and Westbury, 2010) b) The Task and Ego Orientation for Sport Questionnaire (Duda, 1989) c) the literature review of the research focus of this study and d) the researcher’s experience of being a primary school teacher, school principal, intercounty coach at both minor and senior level and academy chairperson in a county.

Cluster analysis on survey results will create statistically distinct groups as described by Glassett (2012). Profiles are created for each group using a task or ego orientated questionnaire (Duda, 1989) and linking this with to Deci and Ryan’s Self Determination Theory (2000) which will form the basis of the next phase of this stage, narrative inquiry. In this phase, six male youth Gaelic football participants are selected from each group for in-depth one to one interviews. These interviews will attempt to capture each participant’s lived experience. The subsequent interpretation will use both narrative analysis and analysis of narratives (Glassett, 2012).

b) **Stage Two**
In each of the six cases, following on from the exploratory phase, semi structured interviews will take place with three coaches (one academy, one club and one school) and the squad administrator (informed by best practice guidelines in Creswell 2007). Focus groups discussions will be undertaken with parents of the players in each squad. These parent participants will be purposively selected and will be representative of parents whose son has been more than two years involved with the academy. Data collection and analysis will happen simultaneously throughout this phase of the research (Yin 2006), hence some data may provide evidence that leads to further focus groups and/or re-interviews as the study progresses. The combination of methods of data collection outlined in 1) and 2) above, along with the range of research participants involved in this study, will allow for an in-depth exploration of the topic, and triangulation of data (Creswell, 1998) will through grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) generate key themes.

21. Participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria, detail permissions

Researcher Personal Critical Statement
The aim of this study investigates how elite Gaelic footballers are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes in elite Gaelic football county academies on the island of Ireland. The setting is one that is very familiar to the researcher since he has in the past acted as a coach to the academies in Cork, as well as a coach and manager to both the Cork senior and minor football teams. In his professional capacity, the researcher is a principal of a primary school in Cork city that has a history of supplying participants to the Cork GAA Academy. Hence, the researcher has the advantage of a thorough knowledge of the workings of these programmes and ease of access to the research participants.

The converse of this fact has also to be considered, since the personal knowledge and situated practice of the researcher will have to be rigorously examined throughout the study. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002, p. 8) argue "In qualitative research it is increasingly common for researchers to be part of the social group they intend to study". Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 61) support this opinion suggesting that as qualitative researchers "...we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it". This 'insider/outside' perspective, which Breen (2007) calls the researcher in the “middle”, provides the researcher with the advantage of in-depth knowledge of the research situation, but it also brings with it the challenges of remaining objective throughout the research process. Careful consideration and cognisance of the advantages and disadvantages the
insider/outsider standpoint (Gerrish 1997, Bonner & Tolhurst 2002, Corbin Dwyer & Buckle) will be maintained throughout the study. Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, the issue of subjectivity cannot be ignored (Hastie and May 2012). The triangulation of evidence described above (question 20) will help to maintain double distancing and objectivity needed by the researcher and it will ensure that the ‘voices’ (ibid, 2012) of the researcher participants as well as the researcher will be heard. In addition, meticulous recording, and ongoing availability of the data gathered (Yin 2009) will help ensure that the researcher remains transparent (Cronin 2014) throughout the research.

1) **Coaches**
Eighteen coach interviews will take place in this study, three in each case. Each interview is expected to take forty minutes. A coach from the squad, a participant’s club and a participant’s school will be included in each case. Inclusion criteria for coaches within this study will include length of time coaching at the level of representation within the study. Squad coaches will have to be at least two years coaching at inter county level; school coaches must be coaching at least five years at school level whilst club coaches must be coaching at least five years at club level. Coaches must voluntarily wish to participate in the study and have signed written consent to do so. Exclusion criteria will be those coaches who do not wish to participate in the study. All coaches’ identities will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

2) **Administrators**
Six administrator interviews will take place in this study, one in each case. Inclusion criteria will include length of experience as an administrator within the academy structure within each case. Each administrator will have to have at least 2+ years experience as an academy administrator. Administrators must voluntarily wish to participate in the study and have signed written consent to do so. Exclusion criteria will be those administrators who do not wish to participate in the study. All administrators’ identities will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

3) **Parents**
Parents will have opportunity to participate in focus groups in each case. Inclusion criteria will include signed consent, a voluntary wish to participate in the study and at least two years’ experience of having a child involved with the academy. Exclusion criteria will be
those parents who do not wish to participate in the study. All parents’ identities will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

4) Players
The focus of this study is on male youth elite Gaelic football players, thus no female players will participate in this study. All players in each case will participate in a questionnaire survey as outlined in Appendix C. Six players will be selected for one to one interviews using a task or ego orientated questionnaire data (Duda, 1989) and linking this with Deci and Ryan’s Self Determination Theory (2000). Participation is presupposed by informed consent (Shaw et al, 2011) and is guided by the Child Protection Policy of University College Cork. The researcher will conduct all interviews with young people in an open space (e.g. team dining area) and will have another adult present at all times. The researcher will comply with the guidelines as laid down in the Child Protection Policy of U.C.C. and will not at any stage be alone with a young person. The researcher is a primary school principal and has Garda clearance. The researcher is also the Designated Liaison Person for 400 primary school boys and has a full and thorough understanding of child protection and welfare. The researcher understands that the onus is on him to show that he has taken the steps necessary to ensure that the person whose consent is being sought has been given the requisite information and has been supported in developing an adequate understanding of the research. Exclusion criteria will be those players who do not wish to participate in the study. All players’ identities will be protected by the use of pseudonyms.

**Figure 1: Targeted sources from each case for data collection**
22. Concise statement of ethical issues raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them

**Compliance**

- Research will comply with UCC Code of Research Conduct (June 2010).
- Research will comply with UCC SREC guidelines.
- Research will be scrutinised by two supervisors and ethical issues, which may emerge, will be raised in a timely manner by the researcher.
- Researcher has, and will continue to, read widely in area of ethics while adhering to good research practice.

**General**

- All participants who are not over 18 years of age will be asked to give informed consent. In addition, their parent/guardian will give informed consent.
- Participation in this research study will be completely voluntary.
- Each participant will sign an informed consent form and may choose to withdraw at any stage.
- Each set of participants will be reminded at the beginning of the session to observe confidentiality and anonymity, and participants will have committed to same when they sign the consent forms.
- Participant identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms during the write up phase of this study, to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.
- All assessment results will be provided to all participants for verification prior to publication.
- A meticulous and secure data management system will be maintained which will enable the researcher to locate and analyse the data generated in this study and provides a transparent ‘chain of evidence’ (Yin, 2009) or an ‘audit trail’ (Seale, 1999). See appendix E.
• All data generated by this study will be maintained by the researcher for seven years’ duration in a locked cabinet and in a password protected computer folder. Thereafter it will be destroyed.

23. Arrangements for informing participants about the nature of the study (cf. Question 3)

The purpose, nature and format of data collection of the study will be explained to participants in writing (information sheet accompanying the consent form) and verbally by the researcher prior to the signing of informed consent forms. Throughout the study participants will be informed of its progress.

24. How you will obtain Informed Consent - cf. Question 4 (attach relevant form[s])

The researcher will disseminate informed consent forms to each participant for signature. All participants will sign the appropriate consent form only after reading and being fully aware of the study content and protocol.

25. Outline of debriefing process (cf. Question 9). If you answered YES to Question 16, give details here. State what you will advise participants to do if they should experience problems (e.g. who to contact for help).

Participants’ will be debriefed at the end of their participation in the study, and in the interest of openness and transparency the key findings will be presented and discussed by the researcher.

26. Estimated start date and duration of project

July 2016 – December 2019

Signed
Date: 1st of June 2016
Applicant

Signed
Date 1st of June 2016
Research Supervisor/Principal Investigator (if applicable)

Notes

1. Please submit this form and any attachments to srec@ucc.ie (including a scanned signed copy). No hard copies are required.

2. Research proposals can receive only provisional approval from SREC in the absence of approval from any agency where you intend to recruit participants. If you have already secured the relevant consent, please enclose a copy with this form.

3. SREC is not primarily concerned with methodological issues but may comment on such issues in so far as they have ethical implications.

This form is adapted from pp. 13-14 of Guidelines for Minimum Standards of Ethical Approval in Psychological Research (British Psychological Society, July, 2004)

Last update: September 2015
Appendix 2: Consent forms

Information Sheet

Title of the Study: Elite Male Youth Gaelic footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate how elite male youth Gaelic footballers are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and dispositions in elite Gaelic football academies on the island of Ireland.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to participate as you are one of the key persons at the centre of this study, i.e. a coach.

Do you have to take part? No, the participation is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study before it commences or discontinuing after data collection has started.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. The identity of research participants will remain anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential and in a secure password protected location for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the project, they will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the research study; Participant identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms in the write-up. The study may be published in a research journal and at international conferences.
**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don’t envisage any negative consequences for participation in this study.

**Who has reviewed this study?** Approval must be given by the UCC Research & Ethics Committee.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact the researcher.

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.
Consent Form

I………………………………………agree to participate in the research study entitled ‘Elite Male Youth Gaelic footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

- I am participating voluntarily.
- I give permission for my interview with the researcher to be recorded.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of completion of data collection, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications if I give permission below:

(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews  

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews

Signed…………………………………….   Date……………….
Information Sheet

**Title of the Study:** Elite Male Youth Gaelic footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how elite male youth Gaelic footballers are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and dispositions in elite Gaelic football academies on the island of Ireland.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked to participate as you are one of the key persons at the centre of this study, i.e. a parent of a squad member.

**Do you have to take part?** No, the participation is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study before it commences or discontinuing after data collection has started.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes. The identity of research participants will remain anonymous.

**What will happen to the information which you give?** The data will be kept confidential in a secure password protected location for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the project, they will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** The results will be presented in the research study; participant identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms in the write-up. The study may be published in a research journal and at international conferences.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don’t envisage any negative consequences for participation in this study.
Who has reviewed this study? Approval must be given by the UCC Research & Ethics Committee.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact the researcher

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.
Consent Form

I………………………………………agree to participate in the research study entitled ‘Elite Male Youth Gaelic footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

- I am participating voluntarily.
- I give permission for my interview with the researcher to be recorded.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.
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Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked to participate as you are one of the key persons at the centre of this study; i.e. an administrator.

Do you have to take part? No, the participation is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study before it commences or discontinuing after data collection has started.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. The identity of research participants will remain anonymous.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the project, they will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the research study; participant identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms in the write-up. The study may be published in a research journal.

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(Please tick one box:)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews ☐

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews ☐

Signed…………………………………….   Date………………..

**Young Persons Consent Letter**

Dear Parent/ Guardian,
My name is Brian Cuthbert and I am a PhD student in University College Cork. I am also the principal of Scoil an Spioraid Naoimh Boys school in Bishopstown in Cork. As a doctoral student, I will be undertaking a research study this academic year. My research study concerns your son’s experience in his county football academy and in particular his perceptions of support within the academy environment. I write to you to seek your permission to include your son in my research sample.

If you agree to your son’s participation in this study, he will be asked to participate in a brief online survey surrounding his experiences thus far with his county academy. There may be a possibility that your son could be asked to participate in a follow up one to one interview that would take place at the training venue. The focus of this interview would be similar to the questionnaire but will allow for opportunity for more in depth questioning and discussion.

Both the questionnaire and the interview are confidential and will be used only as part of the study outlined above. Your son will never be identified and can withdraw from participating at any stage throughout the process. Interviews will be recorded so as to ensure accuracy.

If you consent to your son’s participation, both you and your son need to sign the consent form overleaf. If at any stage you have questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. This study should give a valuable insight into the levels of support youths receive during their academy experience and your son’s participation in this research is hugely appreciated. I congratulate you on supporting your son’s achievements thus far in his life and I wish you and your family every success in future years.

Brian Cuthbert

Email: cuthbert-brian@hotmail.com
Information Sheet

**Title of the Study:** Elite Male Youth Gaelic footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how elite male youth Gaelic footballers are supported to develop their knowledge, skills and dispositions in elite Gaelic football academies on the island of Ireland.

**Why have you been asked to take part?** You have been asked to participate as you are one of the key persons at the centre of this study; i.e. a player

**Do you have to take part?** No, the participation is voluntary. You also have the right to withdraw from the study before it commences or discontinuing after data collection has started.

**Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?** Yes. The identity of research participants will remain anonymous.

**What will happen to the information which you give?** The data will be kept confidential and stored in a secure location for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the project, they will be retained for a further seven years and then destroyed.

**What will happen to the results?** The results will be presented in the research study; participant identities will be safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms in the write-up. The study may be published in a research journal and international conferences.

**What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?** I don’t envisage any negative consequences for participation in this study. If participation in this study identifies young persons who are overly affected by stress or worry the following will be the protocol - parents will be contacted and made aware of the researcher's concerns regarding issues
raised regarding their son. If deemed necessary the researcher will provide parents with the contact details of a recognised sports psychologist within the county.

**Who has reviewed this study?** Approval must be given by the UCC Research & Ethics Committee.

**Any further queries?** If you need any further information, you can contact the researcher

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.
Informed Consent Form for Players

Consent Form

Please read below and tick each box as appropriate

- I am participating voluntarily
- I give permission for my interview with the researcher to be recorded
- I understand that I can do not have to take part in this study and that I can stop if I want to
- I understand that I cannot be identified in this research
- I want to take part in this study

(Please tick one box only from these two.)
I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interviews

NAME OF YOUNG PERSON…………………………………………

DATE OF BIRTH……/…../………

Age of young person:………….

…………………..…………………..…../...../………
Signature of Parent/Guardian Date

…………………..…………………..…../...../………
Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix 3: In-depth Interview Questionnaire (Guiding Questions)

Interview Guide for administrators/managers/coaches (all of these questions are adapted from Henriksen, Stambulova & Roessler, 2010a)
| Interviewee’s background | **Tell me about yourself and your association to this environment**  
| | • How long have you been involved with this team?  
| | • What is your role/task in the academy?  
| | • Tell me the story of how you started in the academy. |
| Introduction | **• How do you feel about being a part of this environment?**  
| | **Tell me how you think the academy’s environment is a successful in developing talent?**  
| | • What tells you that it is successful?  
| | • What do you consider the secrets of its success? |
| Description of the environment based on the ATDE model | **In terms of people and institutions around the athletes, what are the important resources in your efforts to develop the athletes?**  
| Microenvironment | **And what are the barriers?**  
| | **In terms of the junior elite athletes’ athletic development, what can be said about the role of:**  
| | • The coach?  
| | • The club’s elite athletes?  
| | • Experts?  
| | • Younger athletes?  
| | • Friends inside and outside sport?  
| | • Family?  
| | • School? |
| Macro environment | **Let’s take a look at the wider environment. In relation to the athletes’ athletic development and chances of making it to the elite level, what can be said about the role of:**  
| | • The educational system – does it support the athletes’ sport careers?  
| | • The federation?  
| | • The media?  
| | **In terms of being a barrier or a resource in the athletes’ athletic development, how would you describe:**  
| | • The national culture?  
| | • The predominant youth culture?  
| | • The culture of your specific sport?  
| | • The general sporting culture? |
| Relations within the environment | Which of these cultures is most visible in the daily routines in the environment? How do you see the way in which the club interacts with the environment around it? Please provide examples of the club’s working relations with: • School • Parents/family • Related team or clubs • Federation What do you do to maintain good working relations? |
| Success factors based on the ESF model Preconditions | Please, tell about the history and current structure of the club/team. How would you describe the club’s or team’s main resources? • Facilities • Coach education level • Other staff • Financial resources • Other? |
| Organizational culture | What characterizes the culture [predominant values] in this environment? If I was to invite another [coach or manager] from your sport to be a part of the club – what would he/she find to be most different? Please tell me [a story] about specific episodes that you feel describe the team’s values. Tell me about any specific logos, mottos or symbols you may use with your team • What do they symbolize? What are your team traditions? What is the specific motto/vision/mission statement? • Please describe the efforts you undertake to live in accordance with these visions and values? What do you do to maintain this culture? |
| Individual development | How does being a part of this particular environment affect the talented athletes? • Sport-specific skills • Attitude towards training • Skills that could be of use for the athletes outside sport |
| Time frame | What future challenges do you foresee for this team? |
What can be done to make this environment even more successful? What traditions would be wise to hold on to?
## Appendix 4: Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group Questions</th>
<th>Associated Theory from the Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) How do you think your son feels about being part of the academy? How central is the academy structure for your son’s sporting development and personal development? How does the academy support him?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) What do you believe to be the strengths of the academy?</td>
<td>ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) In terms of your son’s involvement with the academy, can you see any barriers?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Explain the demand on your son’s life due to his participation in the academy</td>
<td>Bronfenbrenner’ bio-ecological model of human development (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) How supportive are your son’s school or club of his involvement with the academy?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) How often does the academy communicate with you? What is the nature of the communication? What is the typical topic of conversation?</td>
<td>ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) How might the GAA further support your son’s sporting career?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) In your opinion, what are the values of the academy? On what do you base such an opinion?</td>
<td>ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) What impact does the academy have on your son’s life outside sport?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Would you like to see any changes to the type of support the academy offers your son at present?</td>
<td>ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5: Example of Open Coding of an Interview Transcript

Okay, [Kevin 00:00:14] [transcriber 00:00:24] by the way, Kevin, can you tell me how long you’ve been involved in your role in the County Board, what it involves, and I suppose, more especially your role in terms of the development [transcriber 00:00:34]?

RESP.

Yes. Started at the GDA in 2007 along with... working above two GDOs, and I suppose, there was very primitive structures in terms... in place at the time. No managerial, and people there weren’t open to too much change. In 2009 [transcriber 00:00:37] Manager position became up for grabs, so I got that and there were five GDA positions created in 2009 as well. So they were divided up geographically into divisions along the county, and they were given responsibility for primary schools, post-primary schools, clubs development in their area and I suppose we’re, in the last two years, we’ve increased the number of GDA.

We’ve now seven GDA working off base of clubs, a cop of clubs, as opposed to any specific divisional boundaries. And just in the last couple of months since last... I think, September, we’ve started to put in place two [transcriber 00:00:13] 00:12 to cater for the obvious [transcriber 00:01:22] issues that are prevailing in [transcriber 00:01:25] Cork City 00:01:30.

In terms of my overall role, I’m responsible for the rural [transcriber 00:01:40] national programmes. So, the key areas that we’re working in primary schools, post-primary schools, clubs, games programmes, nursery 00:01:44] and coach education, they’d be the main areas we’d work in. And also, then, regional and county development squads.

Development squads’ course has been involved, from 2007, the first thing we set about doing was excluding parental involvement at development squad level, because there was a bias towards the sectional players, or perceived bias. The other issues, cultural issues, that we had to try and overcome with the fact that you could have a selection from one geographical area. Coming in, and the main model would be to push the players from their own geographical area.

So, that’s where started out, and the squads were primarily run by the county boards involved in the time, and it was common place that you’d meet up maybe three to four weeks in advance to competitions, have a couple of training sessions, they’d get [transcriber 00:02:14] going down on the bus the tournament, they’d play the tournament, and that’d be the honour of it, basically. In a situation where we’re, in 2015, I tried to put a programme of dates together for development squads, and put a calendar of activity in place, that also put templates in terms of what we expected out of training sessions and skills to be developed. And we also linked in with Mark MacManus in leisure work for a while, trying to get back SCC workshops going with kids. It worked okay for a while, but one of the biggest stumbling blocks at the time was probably finance, in that we were running six six-week programmes followed by two follow-ups with Mark MacManus over the winter period.
Six-week programmes in regional basic worked quite well when they were ongoing, but unfortunately, afterwards, it was the follow-up into the pitch season, playing season for [Maidstone 0:00.30:42] was an issue in that there wasn’t a follow-up on our end. I suppose, in that context then, the last two to three years, what we’ve probably tried to do is we’ve tried to pick up on getting appointments, meetings with players or those familiar with basic strength conditioning and might have qualifications in that area, to keep the work ongoing while the pitch work is in full swing. And that has, I would say, pretty average success to be honest; it hasn’t really worked that well.

INTV: RESP: INTV;

Last winter we ran, again, a six-week programme through November, early December. We brought in 15 to 16 coaches, six-week programmes linked in to the [Maidstone 0:00.30:28] students. Again, when it was ongoing, it was very, very good, but just, question mark over continuity afterwards. And I suppose you’d have to question the value of doing six weeks, I suppose. There is one thing, one definite value I think there’s a player education going on. That is important, that it pays off. Basic mobility, exercises and stuff that they learn hours to do more easily probably in their education in that context. And I suppose, they are given a programme to do in a sense that the number of reps and sets and stuff that they should be doing, and how to build that up to do, it’s not a complete loss on them, but at the same time, could’ve been better. 100%, it could have been better.

All right. And well, that leads me into the question: looking at the position that you’re in, in terms of that you’re the main administrator from 18 down to 30, I suppose, in the county, you’re the games manager, you have ultimate responsibility for how the academy works as such, would you be happy with… number 1, would you be happy with the current approach? And number 2, you mentioned success a moment ago, do you think our academy’s a successful? And if so, why? And if not, why not?

I think they’re a bit hit and miss, to be honest. In terms of success. I don’t think we’re consciously competent, we might be academically adequate at times, but we’re not competitive in that. I suppose, there is a couple of factors involved in that. That nobody in the country is in the development squads, that’s an issue.

What barriers are you seeing?

RESP: INTV: RESP;

As coaches thinking that work is a nuisance to them in their club programme. They just try to stick to their club programme and they only work their boy training with them. The time. I would see conflict in terms of [Maidstone 0:00.30:28], think that there’s, every week there’s a development squad session that there’s a phone call coming from one board or another saying that there’s development squad on Saturday and we’ve got games to play, can we get the games played, and at the time they’re trying to push them into, maybe Tuesday night, Friday night, the boys are trying to go out and play with the squads on Saturday. I think that’s a huge issue as well, I think one of the barriers is, that there’s an effect on our programme too, is that the club fixture programme is [Maidstone 0:00.30:28] at the moment. And there’s games being called off, right and wrong, and the structure isn’t strong enough, and the people running the
structure probably aren't strong enough to enforce the structure that they're putting in place at the start of the year.

Now look, the [inaudible 00:05:30] and it's getting better, but at the same time, it could be a lot better. And I know from [inaudible 00:05:39] coming down the tracks to try and perform in terms of the [inaudible 00:05:19], next year again, so that we'd be meaningful programming again.

In terms of the advances, as you can tell, or successes that we've had over the last four or five years, and some define success in terms of winning competitions, but I think from my... from this conversation with you, that would not be... probably what you believe.

No, that wouldn't be our measure.

INTV: RESP,

But, what is our measure? And what have been our successes?

I suppose, ultimately you'd be saying that our successes would be in the area of a lot of the people that we've got in place with our teams now are stronger... Our team that, our recruitment and selection of players is stronger than where we were, it's not been...look at the same time, it has improved dramatically... And I would say, our regional structure over the winter whereby we split our groups into four regions and then it's one season through the winter period. I think that has worked pretty well in that most of the time we feel that we are getting the right players involved in our county squads... And I would say that another success, moderate success, has been the fact that we are getting most of our development squad players... are coming through into our minor.

A weakness is that there's not enough link-up between our minor management teams and our under-age squads. One of the issues there could be, in the past I know has been that our country [inaudible 00:07:29] and [inaudible 00:07:32]. I think that some of the people... their faces don't fit or they're just not up to the job. In some cases, they're right on the front, in some cases they're wrong, but I would say certainly, that there needs to be a lot more link-up between your county minor setup and even, I would say, your senior until 14. I think they should be in a room now... or three times a year just to touch base and just to link-up, and I would say that that would be a big issue.

INTV: RESP,

I know that Sean McCarthy, who is the football development... [inaudible 00:08:15] with the squads and does the day-to-day working, and he's a [inaudible 00:08:19] strategic level as well, he would be strong on that the football sector should be talking to each other across 14, 15, 16, 17. I know this year there was a pretty strong link-up between 17 and further up in football. I would say there was very little in our link. Across 16, 15, 14.

INTV: RESP,

board they seem to... their culture seems to be different in that they don't link up as much. Okay, in terms of the people, and say these institutions around the athletes... so you're thinking of the boys under 16 in football, you're thinking about institutions around them, what important resources do we access in terms of developing these guys?

I suppose the boys have access, at under 16 football level, they would have access to the [inaudible 00:10:04]. In terms of basic physique, conditioning programmes, and other than that... it's just... I suppose, at school's level, there needs to be a lot more link-up there. I suppose between our post-primary schools, our teachers... our teacher education... think is an issue,
Appendix 6: Constructed Conceptual Categories

The following table delineates the construction of the core theoretical categories with regards to the Grounded Theory Process. It should be noted that the list of open codes is not exhaustive, instead providing an overview of those identified within the data analysis process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 3 and 6 - Interrelating the Explanations</th>
<th>Dysfunctional Stakeholder Relationships (245)</th>
<th>Limiting Structural Impediments to Development (313)</th>
<th>Socio-Cultural Influences on Development (238)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 4 – Testing the themes</td>
<td>Coach-Athlete Relationships</td>
<td>Programming Funding, Facilities and Politics</td>
<td>Social pressures from non-athlete peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Academy and Club Coaches</td>
<td>Coach Education Mechanistic Approaches</td>
<td>Balancing Sport and School</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Role of Parents</td>
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<td>Psychosocial Skill Development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Relationship with Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td>County Pride, Engagement and Rivalry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3 – Developing Themes</td>
<td>stakeholder relationships</td>
<td>environmental factors</td>
<td>cultural issues and the GAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>considering personal development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2 – Conceptual Categories</td>
<td>Institutions around the player</td>
<td>Barriers to Development</td>
<td>Wider Environment and History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>The Player</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>The Player</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1 – Open Codes</td>
<td>Schools, communicating with schools, resourcing schools, connection with school, parents, bad situations, role of the coach, club coach, elite athlete, experts, other staff, younger athletes, friends, GDAs</td>
<td>Coaches’ Thinking, programming, access, funding, coach education, county board, GAA politics, facilities, clubs, communication, dual players, other sports, getting coaches, squad structures, competition, camps</td>
<td>Education system, GAA, culture, the want, social media, understanding, overall role, cultural issues, DNA, values, the jersey, challenges, competition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>The Player</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Approach to training, player improvements, making it, interest, late developers, deselection, player education, selection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 6: Eight Features of Successful ATDEs