Ollscoil na hÉireann, Corcaigh

National University of Ireland, Cork

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

Thesis presented by

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For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University College Cork,

School of Education

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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."

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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

Cuthbert, B. (2018) ‘Modelling Best Practice in Talent Academies,’ GAA National Games Development Conference, Croke Park, Dublin, January 2018.

Cuthbert, B. (2017) ‘Elite Youth Gaelic Footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’, International Council for Coaching Excellence Global Conference, John Moores University, Liverpool, July 2017.

Cuthbert, B. (2017) ‘Elite Youth Gaelic Footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’, Leinster GAA Coaching Conference, Croke Park, Dublin, February 2017.

Cuthbert, B. (2016) ‘Elite Youth Gaelic Footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’, European Conference on Educational Research, Emerging Researchers Conference, University College Dublin, August 2016.

Cuthbert, B. (2016) ‘Elite Youth Gaelic Footballers and their Holistic Development: The Academy Experience’, Doctoral Conference in Education, ‘’Concepts, Contexts and Change", Queens University, Belfast, June 2016

Book Chapters

Cuthbert, B., Vaugh, T., & Chambers, F. (2018) What is Design Thinking? A Case Study of Design Thinking in a Sports Coaching Context. In F. Chambers (Ed), Learning to Mentor in Sports Coaching, A Design Thinking Approach.

O’ Brien, W., & Cuthbert, B. (2018) An Irish Case Study Conversation: Mentorship in Gaelic Games, In F. Chambers (Ed), Learning to Mentor in Sports Coaching, A Design Thinking Approach.

List of Acronyms

ATDE	Athletic Talent Development Environment
CGTM	Constructed Grounded Theory Method
DMGT	Development Model of Giftedness and Talent
EPE	Elite Performance Environment
ESF	Environment Success Factors
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GDA	Games Development Administrator
GNP	Grassroots to National Programme
GPA	Gaelic Players Association
GPO	Games Promotion Officer
HEA	Holistic Ecological Approach
NGB	National Governing Body
PAF	Personal Assets Framework
PPCT Model	Process, Person, Context and Time Model
PYD	Positive Youth Development
TDEs	Talent Development Environments
TDP	Talent Development Pathway
TID	Talent Identification

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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.

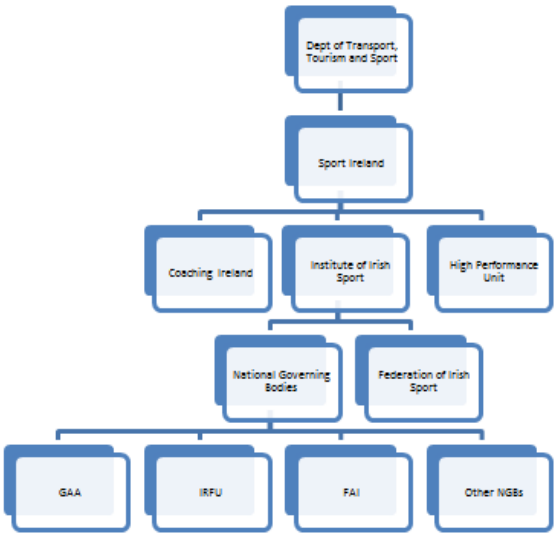

Figure 1: **Framework for the provision of Sport in the Republic of Ireland**

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´Caoimh:

> 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 members[5], 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 parish[6] 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.

	YTD Rent €	YTD Basic Distribution €	YTD Competition Distribution €	YTD Team Expenses €	YTD Games Development €	YTD Administration & Other Grants €	YTD Capital Grants €	YTD Total Outlay €
Ulster	-	350,000	-	15,000	457,949	56,148	525,743	1,404,840
Connacht	-	350,000	-	22,000	207,940	316,824	460,333	1,357,097
Munster	-	350,000	-	9,000	283,404	78,508	540,000	1,260,912
Leinster	-	350,000	-	12,000	435,606	107,515	752,950	1,658,071
Britain	-	50,000	-	22,000	478,128	-	-	550,128
Antrim	3,213	175,000	47,227	49,398	191,400	129,889	-	596,127
Armagh	16,118	175,000	46,927	46,432	109,276	30,000	163,275	587,028
Carlow	15,128	175,000	45,367	40,793	180,846	-	-	457,134
Cavan	24,844	175,000	111,152	39,720	147,988	34,675	250,000	783,379
Clare	50,511	175,000	93,296	55,986	148,417	-	237,000	760,210
Cork	155,127	175,000	112,964	94,586	249,000	18,835	1,333,333	2,138,845
Derry	4,519	175,000	46,867	118,294	210,800	30,000	-	585,480
Donegal	22,778	175,000	103,642	46,510	130,200	-	35,000	513,130
Down	9,394	170,000	54,595	28,762	112,600	35,500	296,180	707,031
Dublin	8,679	175,000	213,892	251,854	1,298,630	30,000	-	1,978,055
Fermanagh	9,364	175,000	49,447	31,728	107,500	35,500	-	408,539
Galway	29,891	175,000	154,538	271,480	178,452	34,810	304,132	1,148,303
Kerry	14,478	175,000	157,220	145,420	197,600	34,600	630,529	1,354,847
Kildare	14,511	175,000	68,832	24,935	226,428	35,500	-	545,206
Kilkenny	38,771	175,000	99,785	64,508	108,600	29,648	-	516,312
Laois	10,866	175,000	45,367	25,380	182,000	36,000	74,484	549,097
Leitrim	5,295	175,000	56,367	44,180	132,144	30,000	25,000	467,986
Limerick	51,413	175,000	87,151	23,998	156,035	50,000	-	543,597
London	718	175,000	69,618	30,000	-	8,425	-	283,761
Longford	2,476	175,000	46,867	16,932	126,500	41,023	-	408,798
Louth	8,077	175,000	46,987	22,318	241,457	50,471	-	544,310
Mayo	48,393	175,000	143,805	370,284	127,998	30,000	-	895,480
Meath	40,704	175,000	52,237	37,136	267,046	-	65,000	637,123
Monaghan	15,261	175,000	96,224	39,294	120,532	35,000	160,000	641,311
New York	-	105,000	-	-	13,000	-	-	118,000
Offaly	28,199	175,000	53,901	10,000	193,970	31,476	1,110,480	1,603,026
Roscommon	12,509	175,000	94,165	36,980	144,162	30,000	290,129	782,945
Sligo	22,732	175,000	59,391	58,206	146,666	30,000	183,000	674,995
Tipperary	110,394	175,000	193,535	48,070	183,800	35,500	50,000	796,299
Tyrone	17,575	175,000	82,996	57,008	119,000	60,000	-	511,579
Waterford	12,894	175,000	103,745	193,956	158,800	65,730	-	710,125
Westmeath	6,826	175,000	47,179	10,496	153,045	26,606	-	419,152
Wexford	16,754	175,000	131,298	24,212	154,797	35,500	-	537,561
Wicklow	4,271	175,000	49,327	25,740	231,100	18,125	-	503,563
Warwickshire	3,312	30,000	15,732	33,100	-	-	-	82,144
Lancashire	1,500	-	-	22,000	-	-	-	23,500
Croke Park	8,435,264	-	-	-	-	-	-	8,435,264
Overseas	-	-	-	-	687,546	-	564,904	1,252,450

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.[7] 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).

[7] 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.

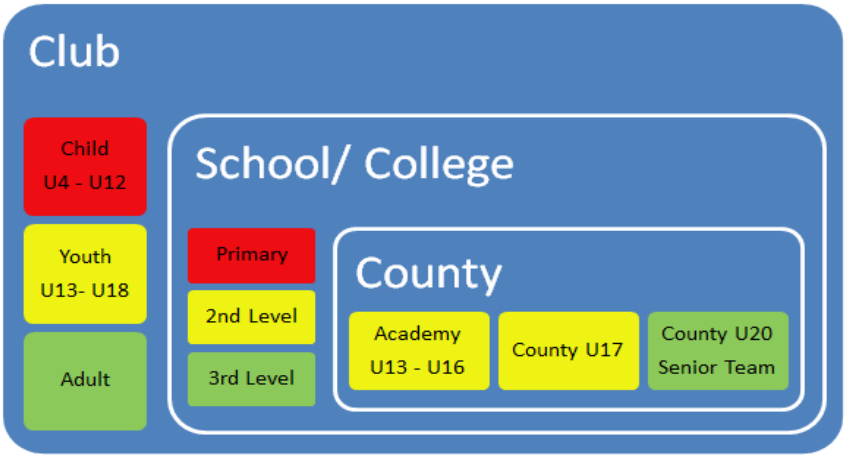

Figure 3: The Player Development Pathway in Gaelic Games

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[8], pay per view television deals,[9] and the commodification of the GAA. These examples are all associated with a developing a 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).

[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).

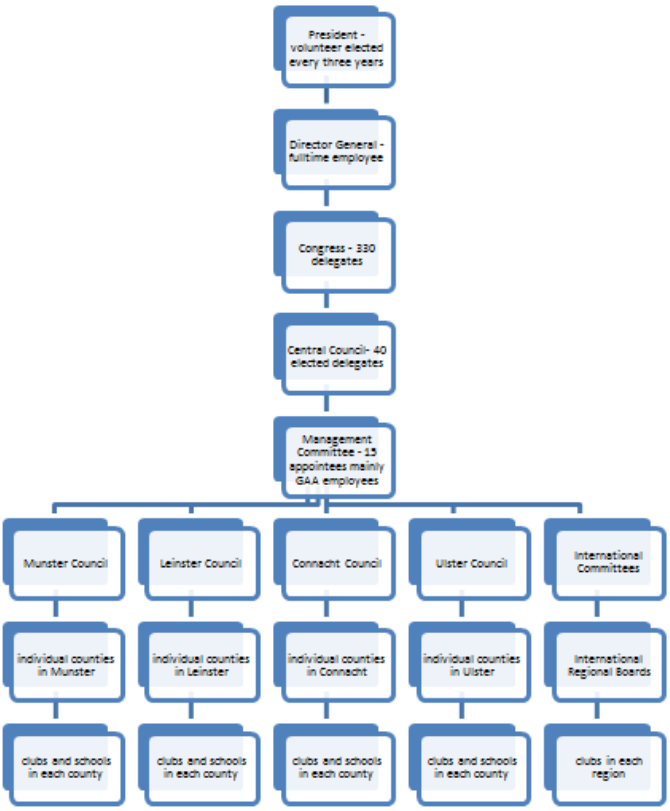

Figure 4: **Governance Model of the GAA**

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, Cavichiolli, & 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 an 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, Cavichiolli, & 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 predictor of performance (Chase & Simon, 1973; Ericsson, 2007, 2009; Howe et al., 1998). 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 (Starkes & 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 Pietá 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, Mesquita, & 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 & Neuenschwander, 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.

Macro Level Features

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; Turnnidge, 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 grabbling 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 development[10] (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

[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 Bronnfenbrenner, 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 (Bronnfenbrenner, 1994).

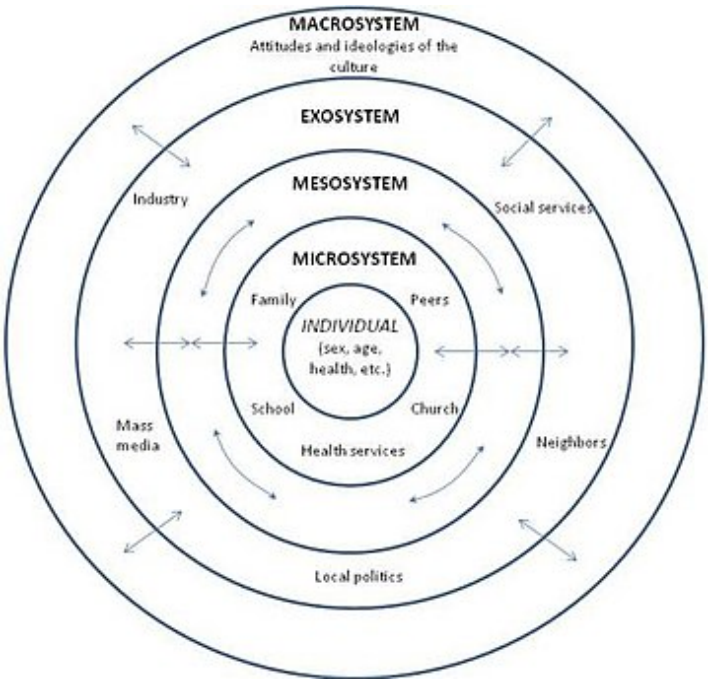

Figure 5: Bronfenbrenner's (1951) Ecological Model of Human Development

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).

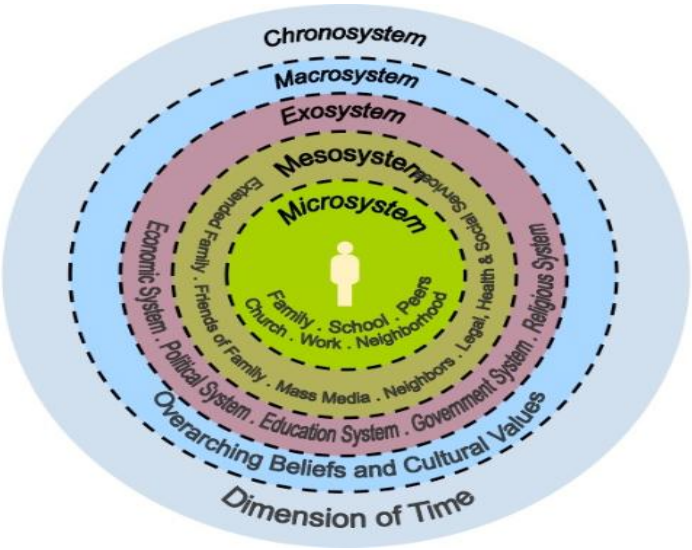

Figure 6: Bronfenbrenner's (2005) PPCT Model

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.

Figure 7: Schein (1992) Model of Organisational Culture

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).

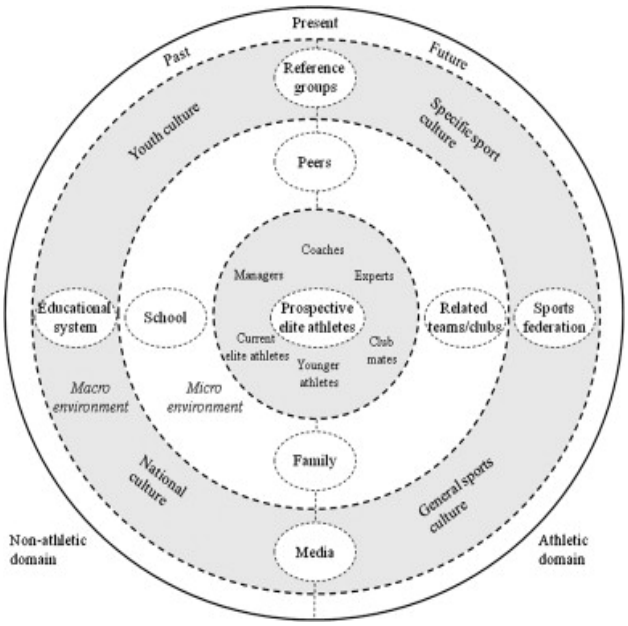

Figure 8: ATDE model, adapted from Henriksen et al. (2010a).

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).

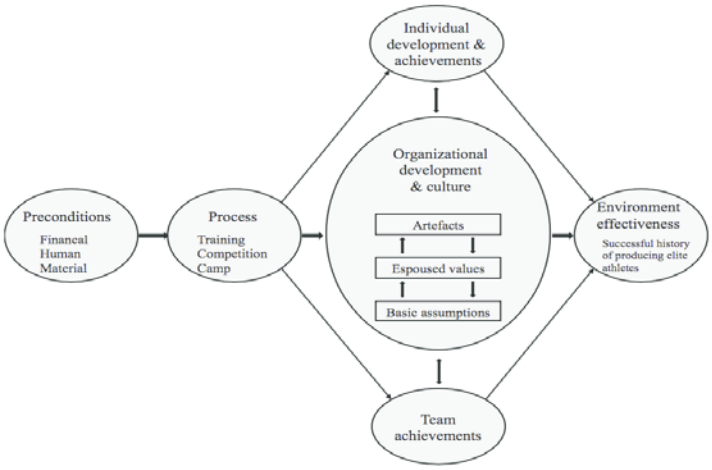

Figure 9: ESF model, adapted from Henriksen et al. (2010a).

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 straight forward 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).

Stake (2000) labelled three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective.

- **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 ones position and manage potential bias through reflexive practice. As Jenkins (2002, p.376) suggests, in 'double distancing' oneself from their research (reflexively), 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 hypothesises 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.

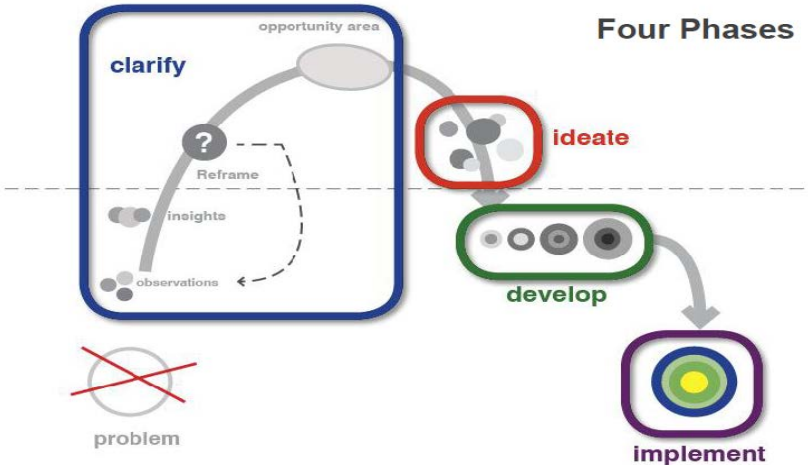

Figure 10: Four stages of Design Thinking (Goligorsky, 2012)

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).

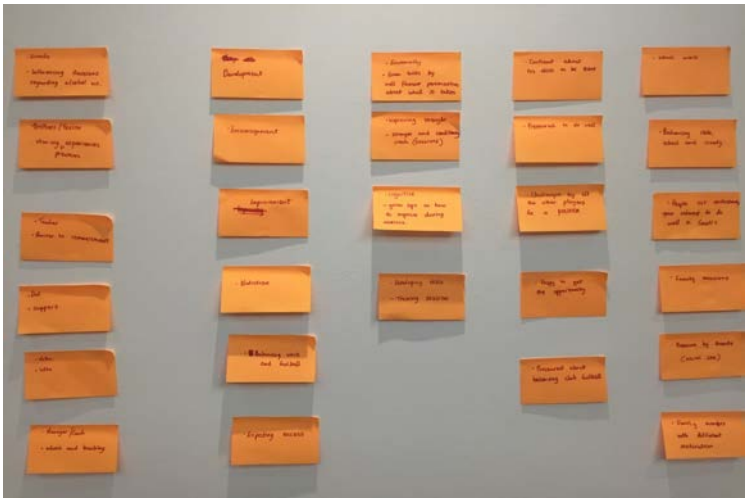

Figure 11: Design Thinking, Stage 2, Ideation Wall Chart

Figure 12: Design Thinking, Stage 2, Ideation Storyboard

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.

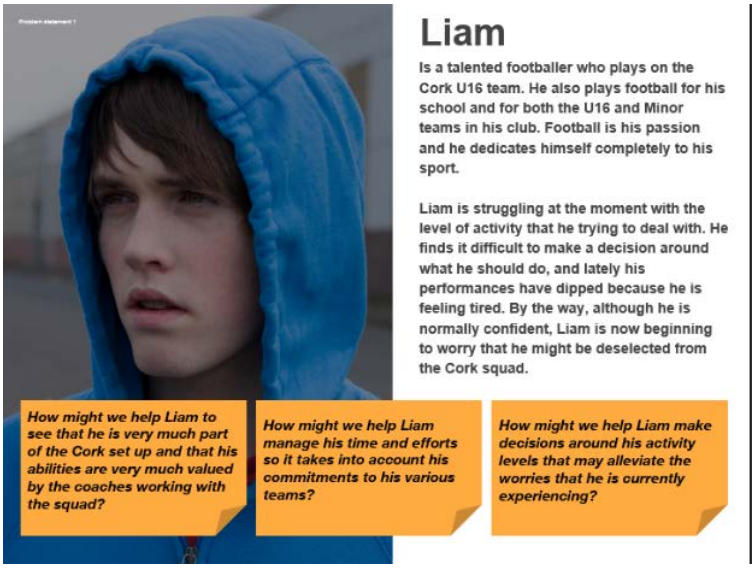

Figure 13: Example of Problem Statement presented at a Design Thinking Workshop

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.

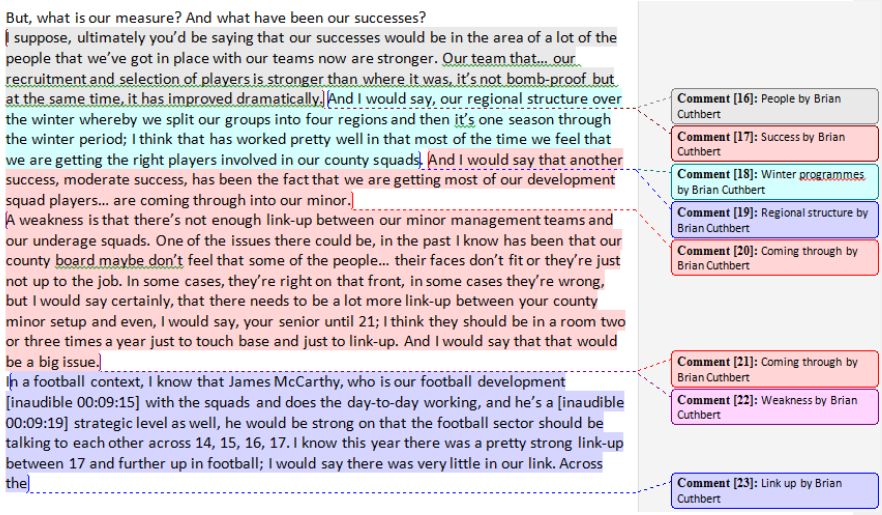

Figure 14: Example of Open Coding Process in Quirkos Software

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.

”

What happens after the Buncrana Cup finishes?

R: That's only the first weekend. You continue on coaching.
I: It's not blitz format?
R: No it's championship style. So the first day you play in the tournament if you win your section that's you through to the semi-final and then there's three spots and then you train for another couple of months to prepare for the last final blitz where all the runner-up teams of the other six counties are competing for the last semi-final and then you have the final and stuff. It's a good set up. It's run by Ulster Council, Ulster GAA, I obviously work for them. Tony Scullion runs it.

Source: academy tyrone

Memo – Development!! – this is pure competition – 3 spots, winning, competing – the language is clear – this is about winning and nothing else.

”

You have six weeks now to get your panel sorted and away you go then training. You're training them basically to get ready for the Buncrana Cup, that's the way it is.
R: We're not looking any further than that.

Source: academy tyrone

Memo – Buncrana Cup is the goal – we are not looking any further than that – this is a mini Minor Ulster Championship.

”

I think they had a bit of both. At the start, the challenge games, they'd give everyone a fair shot and then when it started to get to the cup and you got to the group stages and harder games they went for "we want to win this". They wanted to pick up the profile of Tyrone GAA.

Source: u21 tyrone

Memo – Winning U16 games – associated with picking up the profile of Tyrone GAA – is this what was fed to the underage players – we need to win???

Figure 15: Example of Report from Quirkos on Category Barriers, 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-constructor 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)

Research Decisions	**Items to Consider**	**Decision Taken**
Ontology, Epistemology	*Select philosophical perspective consistent with variant of GTM.*	Relativist Ontology Subjectivist Epistemology
Research Question	*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.*	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?
Selection of GTM Variant	*Select variant of GTM consistent with philosophical perspective.*	Strauss and Corbin (1998), constructivist approach – variant of same – Harry et al. (2005)
Participants	*Identify appropriate population and settings to be sampled. Purposeful sampling*	Stakeholders of Gaelic Games Academies in Ireland

Research Decisions	Items to Consider	Decision Taken
	may be established to define initial sample.	
Sample Size	*Use principle of theoretical saturation, make estimates based on previous studies, use guidelines in literature.*	6 cases were chosen as the sample
Planning for Interaction of Data Collection and Analysis	*Engage in analysis as soon as first data are collected.*	Data collection and data analysis ran concurrently
Data-Collection Methods	*Consider interviews, observations, documentary analysis (specific decisions will be based on variant of GTM selected).*	Interviews, focus groups, documentation, observations and design thinking methodology
Data-Analysis Methods	*Use coding techniques and other theory-generating techniques based on variant of GTM selected.*	6 level grounded theory approach from Harry et al. (2005)
Final Product	*Know what type of theory will be created (e.g., substantive or more formal).*	Theory is both formal and substantive

Chapter 4: Case Study One – Donegal

In the following chapters, the writer presents the results from each case, which are then summarised in empirical versions of the two working models ('ATDE' and 'ESF'). From this, a holistic description of each environment will be made. This will be structured into both a macro-environment and a micro-environment (for both athletic and non-athletic domains). For the sake of conciseness, the term *'athletic talent development environment'* will be referred to as *'environment'*, *'young talented athletes'* as *'prospects'*, and *'the county's senior elite team athletes'* as *'elite athletes'*.

4.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

The county in this case is based in the north-west of the country and is the fourth biggest in Ireland. Despite being one of the larger political areas in the country, Donegal is one of three counties in Ireland experiencing rural depopulation (Census, 2016). Notwithstanding such demographical issues, Donegal GAA has, in recent years, tasted unprecedented success at adult level Gaelic football. This success was viewed from the outside as a form of revolution whereby one coach changed the perspective and psychology of all Donegal GAA stakeholders over the space of three years. This new outlook has permeated down to the youth teams of the county and recently, these teams have become very competitive at both provincial and All-Ireland level. There exists a strong desire from all stakeholders within the county to prolong this period of success. Despite this all-consuming quest for continued success, historical and geographical issues somewhat impede any approaches to player development in this case. Said issues are very evident to all stakeholders, but the county is attempting to circumnavigate some of these issues with some novel approaches to their academy practices.

Table 2: Biography of Donegal GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 footballers in the county
10 years	30	One coach supported	63	26	686

		by a manager			

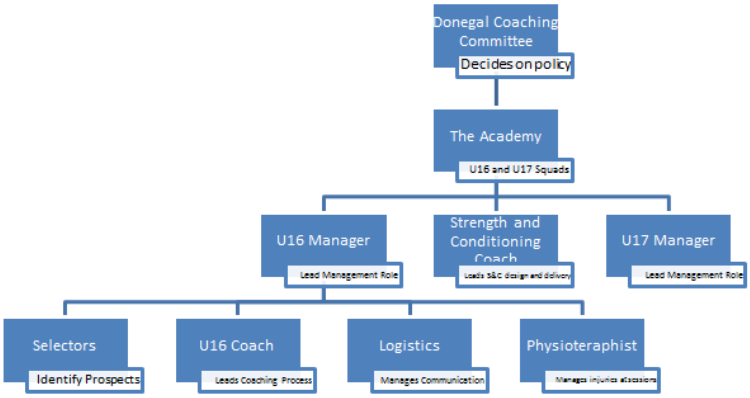

Figure 16: **Academy Management Structure of Donegal U16 Academy Personnel**

4.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

Prospects: At the centre of the model is the group of prospects who are members of the academy squad. These prospects are highly motivated and view the academy as a gateway to play at more elite levels in the future with Donegal. Thirty boys make up the U16 squad and these players are selected from 143 boys, who attended trials[11] at the beginning of the season. The squad trained once a week up to March and from then onwards twice a week. Prospects are brought by bus to and from sessions. Some prospects are collected soon after school finishes and do not arrive home until 11pm. This affects schoolwork, as they have no time to complete homework. Willingness to make these sacrifices is not uncommon amongst prospects and there exists an acceptance from some within the squad that such sacrifices are necessary in order for them to succeed.

[11] Clubs within the county send their best players to trial matches organised by the academy. From these matches, prospects are selected for the squad.

Coach: The lead person associated with the group is classified as a squad manager rather than a coach. He has previous experience as a coach at development squad level and also has coached at adult club level. This year, he returned to the development squad system having been appointed as manager of the u16 group. Given that the relationship between the squad manager and the prospects was at very early stage at the time of the data collection, prospects cited their main influencers as their club coaches and families.

The squad manager involved other people of experience in the academy processes by appointing them to various positions within a management team including team selections, IT and Logistics, player welfare and coaching. The squad coach has the most prominent role in the coaching process and he has responsibility for delivering the training sessions that occur on the pitch. In this instance, the coach had considerable experience of working with elite teams in other counties. However, the Donegal Coaching Committee is very involved in the planning of what work this coach needs to undertake.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes: Despite this co-ordinated approach to planning, there is little integration between the prospects and the elite athletes. Recent success at elite level has helped bring to prominence the role models which prospects wish to emulate. However, positive relationships between elite players and prospects are thwarted, as the elite team never shares the training venue with prospects. This is in spite of the availability of four pitches within the Donegal Centre of Excellence. This lack of integration is simply accepted by the academy administrators and does not seem important to them. What is surprising is that coaches made constant reference to the importance of the elite players as role models for prospects, but did not actively encourage them to forge meaningful athlete relationships. When looking closely at the academy, the fact that there are no younger teams within the academy (the U14s and U15s operate at regional level only) means that coaches pay lip service to the notion of expert-novice relationships but do not create opportunities for these to flourish. The U16s and U17s travel to sessions together on the one bus and train in the same location. This affords huge opportunity for younger players to learn from their older counterparts and it is a valuable component in player development.

Experts: One other component deemed to be vital to player development by the academy is the relationship between the academy and Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)[12].

[12] The LYIT and Donegal GAA have entered a formal agreement whereby the college provides sport science expertise and facilities to Donegal GAA teams.

This college is seen as a hub for the sports science elements of the academy programme. The sport science programme is overseen by an LYIT-based sport scientist. Interestingly, this person is also a highly respected former Donegal elite footballer. Many academy stakeholders believe this particular role is a *'real plus for the academy'* (Academy Parents, Interview, January, 2017) and provides the *'next level'* (Administrator, Interview, January, 2017) in the delivery of talent development to the prospects. LYIT provides workshops on nutrition, injury management, and player welfare. Educating players is crucial since they do not spend the majority of their training time in the academy environment.

Related Teams and Clubs: Due to the structure of Gaelic Games, the academy has to have relations with the prospect's clubs and school teams. GAA clubs are generally supportive of the academy, as having representation within the academy teams is viewed as being very important at local club level. This sense of importance is very much part of local identity. This is fuelled by parish rivalries within the GAA and the associated pride when local club players transition to prospects at county level. Prospects spoke about *'feeling supported by their clubs'* and *'their club making it easier for them'* in terms of understanding that they have extra commitments with their academy involvement. However, in reality, prospects play for multiple teams at club level (most play at U18 level with their club as well as U16, some also play hurling). This implies more games for each prospect and less time for recovery between training and matches. It also implies that there is less available time for individual conditioning work as prescribed by the sport scientist. In addition, scheduling at a macro level within the county is not aligned i.e. clubs are affiliated to one of three regions and each region arranges games on different nights at the various age grades. Despite recent attempts to co-ordinate and streamline fixtures across the county, the academy coaches described scheduling as their greatest constraint. It seems clubs move arranged fixtures without consideration of the academy schedule and this behaviour has implications for prospects' availability for academy activities.

At schools level, there were a range of different issues presented. Firstly, many schools have little tradition in Gaelic Games (the region dictates loyalty to particular sports i.e. GAA or soccer). Recent success at elite GAA level is helping Donegal GAA make progress with their school programme. However, county administrators see progress as a *'slow burner'* (Administrator, Interview, January 2017). Schools who do participate in GAA competitions are competing at lower grades within the province of Ulster. The county administrators have attempted to form amalgamations of school teams within regions in

order to be able to compete at a higher level at provincial level. However, this has been vetoed by the Schools GAA Committee within the county. At individual schools level, there is a perception from some teachers that winning top level Ulster Schools GAA competitions is not possible for stand-alone schools. This in turn leads to teacher apathy, which prospects identified as a reason for not fully engaging in school GAA. Prospects openly spoke about *'not training with the school', 'only playing the games'* and *'it doesn't really matter here'* (Prospect, Field note, March 2017). This lack of commitment to school football within Donegal impedes prospects' development, as they have less opportunity to play high standard football for more sustained periods during their development.

4.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: Parents have little direct involvement with the academy. They are invited to attend information evenings annually that focus on nutrition, scheduling, and the welfare of the prospects. Unlike any other of the county cases studied, Donegal GAA provides transport to all training sessions for the prospects. While helpful to parents, this has implications for the development of relationships between parents and coaches, as parents invariably do not attend sessions. This situation is very unusual and particular to this case. Parents also felt that the chance of developing a relationship is hindered by the fact that all communication from the academy bypasses them and goes directly to prospects by means of a WhatsApp[13] group. Parents are concerned regarding the level of pressure prospects are under, especially around squad selection periods. Some parents spoke of how they often have to remind prospects that they *'should try to enjoy it'* and *'if it doesn't work out for them this time that maybe it will happen in the future'* (Parent, Focus Group, January, 2017). Parents also spoke of how they acted as regulators with regard to the levels of GAA activity prospects were engaged in on a weekly basis.

Peers: Prospects mostly have friends within GAA, but it is not uncommon for prospects to have friends outside sport also. The prospects spoke of these friends *'nagging them'* and *'doing different things'* (Prospect, Design Thinking Workshop, March 2017). This presents a dilemma for prospects when their non-prospects friends pressurise prospects to engage in teenage activities and seem ambivalent to the commitments that prospects face on a daily basis. Interestingly, the opportunity to make new friends within the academy

[13] WhatsApp is a free to download messenger app for smartphones. WhatsApp uses the internet to send messages, images, audio or video. The service is very similar to text messaging services. Groups are formed within the app by an administrator who then sends one text which they all can see.

appealed to prospects. This may imply that prospects want to befriend like-minded individuals who share their desire to become elite senior athletes.

School: Some of the prospects outlined how they struggle with their commitment to their education. They spoke of how they cannot complete homework tasks and how they are reprimanded in school by their teachers. This struggle is not helped by the travel times associated with attending squad sessions and the activity loads that prospects endure. In some instances, these issues have forced prospects to develop planning skills and prioritise study on nights they are not training. Some prospects struggle with these organisational skills and the academy administrators have attempted to provide assistance where necessary. This has included individual tuition for prospects, study notes for school subjects, as well as basic career guidance. The coaches understand these solutions *'are not ideal'* but seem somewhat content that *'there is an effort made to help'* (Academy Coach, Interview, January, 2017).

4.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

Sports Culture: The sports culture within the county is quite peculiar for a county in the Republic of Ireland. Donegal has sporting strongholds divided between soccer and Gaelic Football. These strongholds relate very much to the history of the county and especially the influence of the Scottish culture prevalent in parts of the county since The Plantations[14] introduced by the English government in 1607. As a means of promoting the Protestant culture within individual regions within the county, an allegiance to British games such as soccer was fostered. Conversely, regions predominated by the Irish culture have aligned themselves to Gaelic football. Despite this cultural effect and the associated battle for players between both sports, academy stakeholders believe that the GAA in Donegal has circumnavigated these impediments. The most significant factor overcoming impediments has undoubtedly been the recent success the county has achieved at All-Ireland senior level. These achievements are hugely attributed to one man in particular: Jim McGuinness. Jim was coach to the Donegal senior team from 2011 to 2014. In this time, he led Donegal to unprecedented success in Ulster and to All-Ireland honours in 2012. This success has changed the status of Gaelic Football and also how the county prepares for competition:

[14] Plantations in 16th- and 17th-century Ireland involved the confiscation of land by the English crown and the colonisation of this land with settlers from the island of Great Britain. The Plantations changed the demography of Ireland by creating large communities with a British and Protestant identity. The ruling classes of these communities replaced the older Catholic ruling class, which had shared with the general population a common Irish identity and set of political attitudes.

> *The tradition was always there but our mind-set was not always there and this mind-set that came from Jim McGuinness, that we can achieve this, we can go on to All Ireland Finals, we can be the next Dublin or Kerry. We can go and win All Irelands if we put our minds to it. They're no different from a 16 year old from Donegal, Dublin or Kerry. It's just that we do not believe in ourselves enough (Academy Coach, Interview, January, 2017).*

Youth Culture: The culture of youth prevalent within the county is very similar to the other counties studied. The academy is very much aware of youth issues through its Player Welfare Officers. As a result, it educates the prospects and their parents regarding drug and alcohol misuse and how abusing these substances are not conducive to inter-county football. These education programmes are informed by The Code of Best Practice for Youth (GAA, 2015). Stakeholders demonstrated an understanding of the issues faced by youth and the pressures they face in their lives. The coaches felt that prospects face real difficulties trying to find a balance in their lives and that they encounter many distractions to their athletic development. Prospects themselves cited *'pressure from friends'* and *'social media pressures'* as major impediments to development as a Gaelic footballer. However, they believed the academy also afforded them positive opportunities e.g. making like-minded friends.

The culture within the academy is one of that promotes long term development, with the focus very much on creating a larger pool of players who will eventually be ready to play at senior level with Donegal. There is a sense of self-sufficiency and marginalisation amongst stakeholders; that Donegal will succeed despite the perceived lack of financial or infrastructural support from the GAA as a federation. Donegal, as is the case with all other counties, receives a €30,000 grant from GAA headquarters in Dublin to fund all academy activities. The administrators within the county feel that there exists little empathy and understanding of the issues within the county from the GAA federation (i.e. weather, access to finance, size and geography of the county) and that more support should be forthcoming. This self-imposed feeling of marginalisation appears to intensify the sense of pride within the academy. Such pride is evident when prospects are constantly reminded that this is their opportunity to become an elite player and experience the successes that the current role models have recently experienced. This sense of marginalisation also promotes a much inward facing approach to all academy activities.

4.1.4 The Environment in the Time-Frame

This description of the environment is at a particular point in time and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Donegal GAA have begun to develop their own Centre of Excellence, whereby their teams are performing at the top end of the rankings at all levels in the country. As a result, Donegal people are proud to be associated with the newly successful Donegal GAA. Some clubs have become very powerful focal points within their local community also. However, there are environmental issues that somewhat negate these positives. These issues centre on geography and history and how they especially relate to the delivery of Gaelic sport at schools level in Donegal. This is the major environmental issue within the county and one that must see change in the near future if players are to reach their full potential.

4.1.5 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

Figure 17 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in this specific county. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

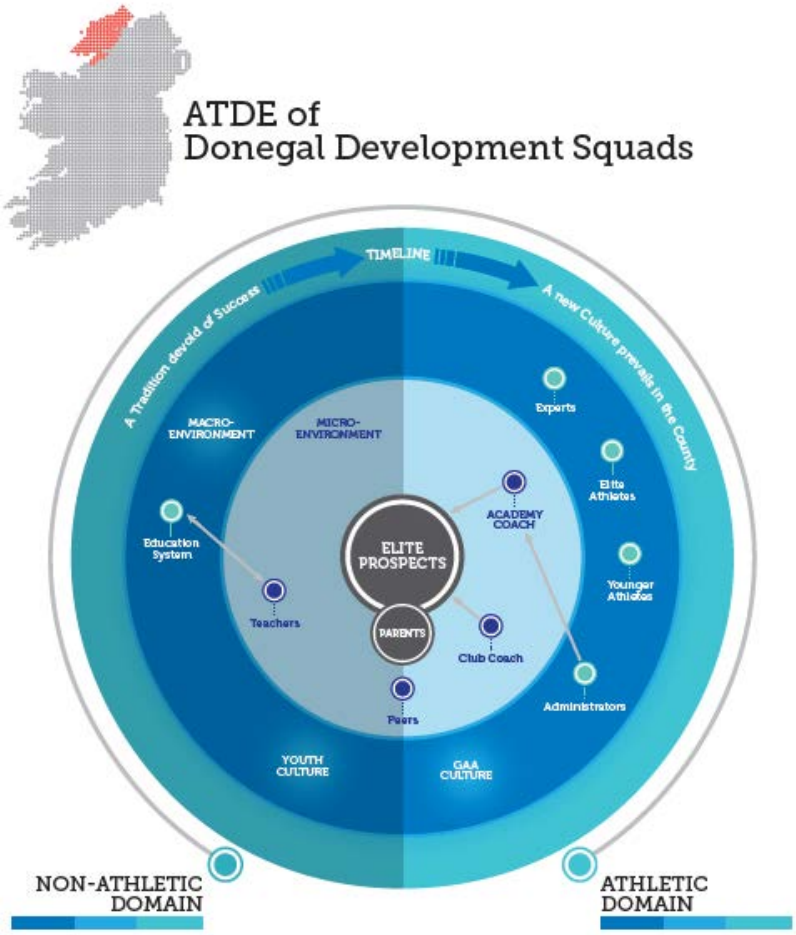

Figure 17: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Donegal GAA Academies**

4.2 Environment Success Factor (ESF) Working Model

4.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

4.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: All stakeholders were in agreement that there are many constraints within the county with regard to providing funding for the operation of the academy. Despite these constraints, stakeholders felt that Donegal GAA was doing all it could to resource the academy properly. Transport, the cost of feeding the prospects after training, and medical costs (a physiotherapist attends training sessions) are the significant items of expenditure. These expenses consume the majority of the academy budget; outside of the grant received from the GAA federation (€30,000), there is no other avenue of funding activities. Donegal GAA is somewhat constrained by the associated costs of preparing the elite teams, as well as the ongoing efforts of developing a Centre of Excellence for all county teams. There is an acceptance from stakeholders that these are not 'normal times' for Donegal GAA and that progress comes at a price:

> *It's impacting too on expenditure and funding at the academy, a lot of funding going into both the centre and the seniors that should have been, what could be if it was normal times, going into other teams and purely football (Teacher, Interview, January, 2017).*

Material: The Centre of Excellence (COE) compliments the wonderful facilities available to prospects at club level in many areas. These club facilities are still utilised by the academy since the COE cannot tolerate the demands placed upon during the extreme weather that the region often experiences. The facility contains four standard GAA pitches and prefabricated buildings. This development is a long-term project for the county, but some coaches admitted that the county simply cannot compete with the financial support some counties receive. Reference was made to the counties in Northern Ireland and the support they receive from the British Sports Council and to the financial power that Dublin GAA possesses:

> *I think facilities are a huge thing, when you look at Dublin, out there in Abbotstown, just a wee short route out the road. This is the heart of those places. Even the money that was pumped into Northern counties that came in through the British Sports Council, we don't have them here and we do need facilities (Administrator, Interview, January, 2017).*

Human: Despite these limitations, the academy has a number of influential figureheads that have an impact within the environment. These include the County Games Manager, the Coaching Officer, and the expert sport scientist in LYIT. However, the greatest human resource is the number of volunteers who want to give their time to help Donegal GAA, which relates hugely to the sense of pride that Donegal people have for their county. It was

interesting to note that a number of ex-elite players are looking to work at the academy and begin their coaching careers at this level.

4.2.3 Processes

According to every stakeholder, the following processes occur within the academy system: talent identification, team training sessions, and prospect education. The following is an account of each process in the Donegal GAA Academy:

Talent Identification: Players are selected for entry to the squad through a trial system. This consists of a series of matches over a number of weeks during which 143 players seek to be selected into the squad of 32 available prospect spaces. There are no set criteria for selection. However, stakeholders described how selection for the squad is based on prospect performance during the trials. Parents described the system as *'crude'* and *'harsh'* and identified the scene at the end of each game as being particularly tough:

> *Well going by the trials it was just harsh, players are put on the line, name out five or six boys and the other boys were out, best of luck. That was that (Parent, Focus Group, January, 2017).*

Deselection[15] is an issue within the talent identification process in the Donegal academy. When deselected, prospects are released from the squad, with little understanding of where they went wrong, where those on the periphery of the squad now feel huge pressure in terms of winning the last few spaces available on the panel. One parent felt that this was extremely difficult for the prospects and last season something similar occurred with regard to his own son. He described how his son did not know from week to week if he was on the squad or not and had to await a text the night before each session to confirm he was still to attend.

> *You would get a text the night beforehand. The players didn't know what was happening and then the players were being told that they're being dropped and were going every week and thinking they were being dropped…My son wouldn't have been sure of where he stood. There was a mental impact on him because every day they went they thought I'm being dropped now, under 15s.*

Commented [AU1]: Is this okay? Does this identify the parents?

Team Training Sessions: Prospects train with the squad on Mondays and Saturdays. Mondays are more focused on strength and conditioning, whereas Saturday's sessions are

[15] Deselection in this instance denotes a process whereby players are informed after a trial game that they have not advanced to the next stage of the selection process. They are not invited to any further trials or academy activities.

on a pitch and focused on team play. After the initial selection process is completed, the squad prepares for an Ulster competition known as the Buncrana Cup. These squad sessions focus on skill development, team play, and game understanding in preparation for the competition. The team coach leads these sessions and is supported by other members of the management team. On observation by the researcher, it was apparent that the format of the session served two main purposes: 1) identifying the playing capability of prospects and 2) team formation and preparation for competition. It was also noted that the skill development component of the session was very much disproportionate to team play and game understanding. Whether this follows the plans laid out by the Coaching Committee is unclear, since the researcher never saw that document, despite requesting it.

Prospect Education: There is much work going on in Donegal around prospect education. The major strands focus on nutrition, player welfare, and strength and conditioning. All stakeholders spoke of the impact that these lectures have on the daily routines of the prospects. There is a genuine attempt to develop within the prospects the capability to manage some of the elements of their own development.

4.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Donegal GAA Academy.

Artefacts: There is a distinct lack of visible artefacts within the Donegal GAA academy i.e. crests, symbols, signs, and uniforms. This is mainly because a home for the squads is in its infancy and buildings are very much at a planning stage. Training venues change frequently and a proportion of training is completed in the LYIT. Despite this lack of a home as such, there is something very much tangible and real in terms of artefacts that is understood by all stakeholders. This artefact is a discourse artefact that is presently extant amongst Donegal GAA people. This discourse is very powerful and centres on two elements; value and motivation. Value refers to the value that stakeholders place on the squads in ensuring Donegal continues to produce players of the standard of their current senior elite team. There exists the recognition that the academy is the bedrock of the future of Donegal GAA and that much must be done to support and assist the work done at this level. Thus, the squads are hugely valued.

The second element refers to motivation, described as drive by stakeholders. This is somewhat related to value but independent in some ways. Recent success has awoken the county and has ignited the desire in Donegal people to compete against the very best. This drive could be classified as a form of motivation. Stakeholders are highly motivated and driven. There is a huge quest for more success. This quest supports aspirations towards excellence and these aspirations in many ways drive behaviour within the academy.

Espoused Values: The academy is very clear in what it wants to do in terms of developing prospects. Above all else, stakeholders want to instil in all prospects the desire to represent Donegal:

> *We say to our young team "your next goal is to make the county minors, that gives you a chance to make your under 20 team now and make your senior team and that's what you're trying to aspire to. You will play in county football, people look at you then as a role model, you have career prospects, you have education prospects that will be falling on your lap and you'll have good life choices to make and you could be the next Karl Lacey from Donegal or Neil McGee or Michael Murphy (Academy Manager, Interview, January, 2017).*

Contained within this desire is a level of dedication and commitment that is focused on prospects maximising their potential. Outside of this ultimate goal, stakeholders held a common viewpoint that the academy was much more than just a football factory. There was a sense that involvement with the academy should lead to the development of many other elements in the lives of prospects. One coach alluded to this approach:

> *I think you would see a lot of good qualities like honesty and respect and truthfulness and a good rounded individual, a good rounded character. That's what we're trying to build as well (Academy Manager, Interview, January, 2017).*

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. The organisational culture within this case destabilises the environment somewhat due to the basic assumptions prevalent within it. Artefacts and espoused values are very much coherent and consistent, but basic assumptions are not aligned to stated values. Other elements have more control within the culture. These include uncoordinated scheduling, the life imbalances created due to the levels of necessary commitment, and the pressure and uncertainty associated with the selection policy.

The lack of alignment between the layers of culture ultimately has an effect on the environment's success in supporting athlete and team development. This is the focus of

the next section where the outcomes of the interactions between academy processes and organisational culture are developed and discussed.

4.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: Most stakeholders spoke around developing well rounded individuals who will not only contribute to the success of Donegal GAA at elite level but who would also have the capacity to bring lessons learnt back to the club level so as to further strengthen the county. Elements of the approach are certainly holistic and prospects are provided with the opportunity to become educated in many of the elements associated with elite player development. This approach is enveloped within a framework that has the desire for excellence at its core. Added to this framework is the very tangible atmosphere now prevalent within the county that *'making it'* as a Donegal footballer is something that youths aspire to. However, in terms of individual development, issues are arising. For some prospects, the level of commitment necessary to operate within the current system is creating problems for other areas within their lives.

These individual problems were not referenced by the academy personnel but have obvious consequences on the development of prospects and indirectly, on the development of the Donegal U16 team. What follows is a brief description of the team development process.

Team Development: There was little mention of team development from stakeholders; the focus was more to do with player development. However, much time is spent on deselecting players from the system and identifying who the perceived best players are. This approach is very much based on a survival of the fittest mentality. Sessions have elements of skill development included in them but are more focused on team play and game understanding. In terms of the competition phase of the season, the emphasis is on having the best players playing on the starting team. It is at this stage of the season that the academy bends itself away from individual development and moves much more towards team development. The quality of such development is determined by the amalgam of the environment's preconditions and associated processes, socialised through organisational culture. Ultimately, it is this interaction which regulates the success or otherwise of the

academy's environment. What follows is a synopsis of the effectiveness of the development environment of the Donegal GAA Academy.

Environment's Success: Donegal GAA, over the last number of years, has won the hearts and minds of the people of Donegal. The Jim McGuinness effect has taken a grip of the county and there is a desire that Donegal will continue to compete with the very best teams within the country. In terms of fulfilling this desire, stakeholders have placed a real sense of value on the academy within the county and want to drive a culture of excellence within the prospects of Donegal. This desire is the most prevalent factor in terms of the effectiveness of the academy environment. From administrators to prospects, a fire has been lit and nobody wants it to extinguish. Stakeholders now want to play their part and there exists a willingness for involvement so that the new found culture of the county can be developed and strengthened.

Despite this desire and new found belief, a number of issues present and skew the effectiveness somewhat. Chief amongst these are the political issues in relation to the playing of Gaelic Games at schools level. Without a more nuanced approach, prospects will not be able to compete with the experiences afforded to prospects within other rival counties. Programming of games between various regions is another issue that is thwarting prospect development. This lack of coordination is creating administrative issues for squad stakeholders and is also putting prospects under pressure in relation to training load.

Finally, there is now an acute omnipresent desire within the GAA communities of the county for a sustainment of the recent success that Donegal GAA has enjoyed. This desire may have a direct correlation with prospect behaviour whereby they forgo other elements of development within their lives in favour of attempting to become an elite footballer. The amount of time prospects are committing to Donegal is unrivalled in any other county and, in some cases, is having an effect on the holistic development of the youths involved. It actually seems that, despite the holistic outlook of the academy itself, its arrangements and structure create an imbalance in the actual daily lives of the prospects.

4.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

Figure 18 presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Donegal Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential.

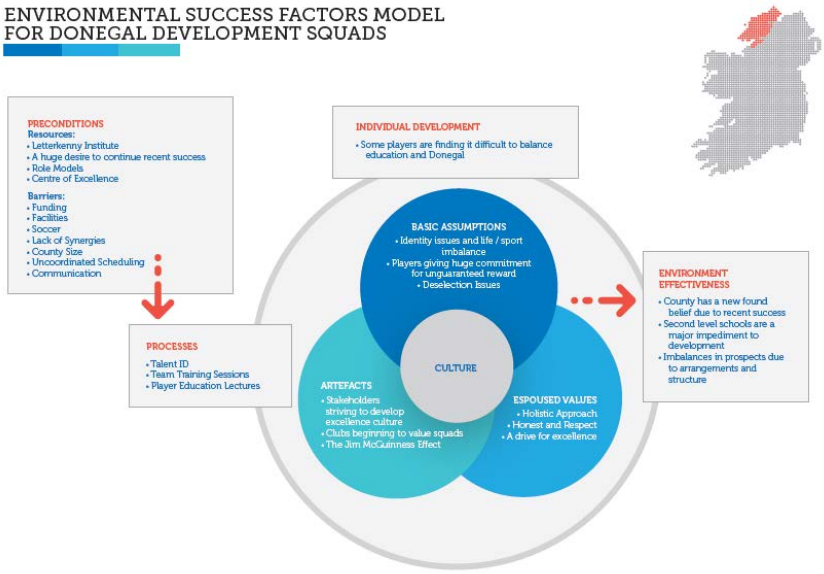

Figure 18: **The ESF Empirical Model of the Donegal GAA Academy**

4.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Donegal GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. Recent success at elite level has infused in all Donegal GAA stakeholders the belief that they can be successful. This infusion of belief has coincided with the development of a COE, as well as the formalisation of a service agreement between LYIT and Donegal GAA. These progressions signal the intent of the administration to support development and attempt to sustain success. At academy level, such support includes elements of a holistic approach to prospect development. However, this support is diluted and constrained by a number of social and political factors inherent within the county. These include the popularity of soccer in certain regions, the autonomous decision making power of the second-level schools body and dysfunctional scheduling between regional governing bodies. Encumbering the combination of these factors is the heightened level of motivation within prospects to become an elite Donegal footballer. It seems the more the academy

demands of the prospects, the more the prospects are willing to give to Donegal GAA in order to fulfil this desire.

Chapter 5: Case Study Two – Mayo

5.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

This case relates to a county in the west of Ireland who have a marvellous tradition in Gaelic Football stretching back over many decades. In recent years, this county has produced some of the best football players in the country and have been successful at u18 and u21 levels in national competitions. Despite these successes, the elite senior team has of yet, not managed to annex a senior All-Ireland title in the last 60 years. However, Mayo GAA has won the hearts of all in Ireland with their heroic displays; the last decade has seen the senior elite team compete annually at the apex of the All-Ireland series but unfortunately come up short in final after final.

Table 3: Biography of Mayo GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 players in the county
10 years	60	5, mainly fulltime staff	50	23	531

5.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

Prospects: The target population in this study are prospects who are members of the county u16 academy. This implies that they must be born in 2001. Prospects are selected from the 49 football clubs within the county. These clubs are each associated with a divisional geographical region within the GAA structure of Mayo (i.e. North, South, East and West). Clubs nominate prospects who they believe to be of sufficient standard for participation at the academy. The academy operates on a regional basis only at u14 and u15 level; a regional team is selected for each of the four regions through the means of trial games. Towards the endpoint of the u15 year, the North and South region amalgamate as one unit whilst the East and West amalgamate as another. Thus, there are two teams within the u16 academy, which implies 60 plus prospects. Most of these prospects would have originated from the u15 squad the previous season, but there is an avenue through the trial

system for new prospects to enter the academy. Prospects are also identified by the Games Promotion Officers (GPOs, employees of the County Board) through the daily work they undertake in the schools and the clubs.

U16 club games are fixed for Tuesday nights in all divisions within the county, whilst academy sessions are held on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Squad camps are held over a number of days during the school holidays at midterms and Easter. These sessions consist of individual skill work, team presentations, and team play. Prospects are selected on perceived ability and according to one coach selection decisions have little concern with a long term view:

> *I remember the first 14 squad I was involved with, I asked "what are we looking for and the man involved with the 14s said "we'll go for now and let everyone else look after themselves (Academy Coach, Interview, January, 2017).*

In terms of selection, it also seems that there is a perceived bias within the county to select players that are of good physique and more athletic than other players. One coach described how this is a move away from the practices of the past:

> *Maybe there should be a bit of long-term planning. The lads would have a fair bit of physique that you could maybe put a bit of polish in, they have a good attitude. Some of them down the years in Mayo tend to go for the more skilful player, maybe not thinking the long-term. Maybe now with all the continuity from the 14s, 15s and 16s there is a bit of joined up thinking, maybe going for a bigger frame and more athletic kind of person but maybe down the years it was maybe looking at the skilful full packet and maybe long-term he stayed 5' 8" and didn't push on (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

At the end of the u16 year, there are 30 prospects selected to represent Mayo at u17 level in the minor All-Ireland competition.

The Coach: Each squad within the academy is assigned a coaching team by the County Games Manager. This coaching team is a mixture of volunteer coaches and members of the GPO staff who are employees of the County Board.

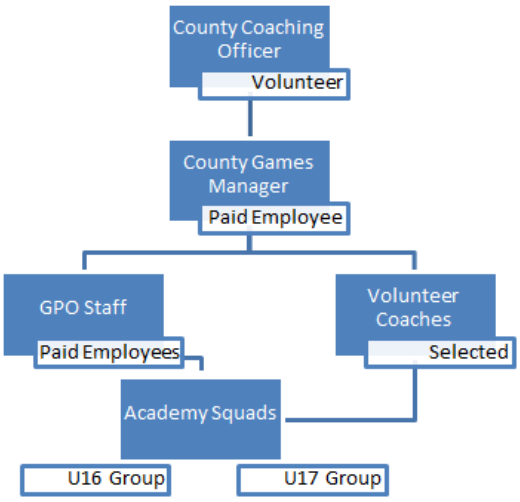

Figure 19: **Mayo GAA Academy Structure**

There is a distinct weighting in terms of influence towards the GPO staff within these management teams. However, there is a feeling amongst the employed staff that they are the neutral components within the system, in terms of not having any club bias when selecting prospects. They also contend that they provide a certain level of accountability due to their associated position within the county GAA structure.

All of the coaching personnel are highly qualified; some have recently completed the GAA Award 2 coach education modules. There has been a decided approach recently within the county to appoint young and upcoming volunteer coaches to work with the GPOs staff at academy level. A number of these younger coaches are teachers or other professionals and some have gone on to manage the county minor squad. From observation at the camp days, it was obvious that the GPOs lead the coaching and administrative approach across the academy. Accordingly, they are attempting to instil in the prospects certain behaviours whilst simultaneously using their experience to identify weaknesses prospects can work on between sessions. However, it was evident from the focus group interviews with the parents of prospects that identifying weaknesses and advising on solutions on the coaches' part was very much aspirational and does not often occur, or if it does, prospects and their parents have not recognised this as an overt approach from the coaches:

> *Well, you could say, individual parents would say with their weaknesses, we'd say… I'd say…I don't see it improving and I think when you come back here that those things should be pinpointed, and that's the way I feel about it anyway. And they should be encouraged more to get on with their practice and work on their weaknesses (Parent, Focus Group, January 2017).*

The focus from a coaching viewpoint is very much related to creating an environment in which the prospects feel that they are part of something very nuanced and on a different level to their experiences to date. There is a slight concern from the GPO coaches that, if prospects were not to feel such a difference, they might be tempted to play on other representative teams in different sports:

> *The biggest thing, we have to create an environment for them, that when they step in the doors that they want to play for Mayo football, not Connacht rugby, not Mayo soccer, not League of Ireland soccer, and by doing that it means that we have to give them time (GPO, Interview, March 2017).*

Such an approach has led in some instances to mechanistic principles being adopted, most especially when prospects attend camp sessions over a number of days. These camps in some ways attempt to be somewhat holistic, but in truth they are very much aligned to an approach that is far removed from same. This in some ways can be related to a lack of a definition of what success looks like for the coaches of the academy. Many of the stakeholders continuously spoke of the u16 competition in Connacht (The Ted Webb Cup); it obviously is very much engrained in the psyche of those involved with the academy and is the end goal of many prospects and coaches alike.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes: There is limited integration between teams within Mayo GAA. Up to now, any integration has been on an ad hoc basis and is dependent on somebody knowing somebody else and calling in a favour as such. The senior team have their own dressing room in McHale Park and nobody other than senior players can enter it. Academy squads are similarly forbidden from using the main pitch at the stadium. In some ways, one could suggest it may develop a sense of desire within prospects to one day gain entry to these bastions of elite Mayo GAA but in many other ways, these are powerful images of a huge divide between the elite senior players and the rest of the Mayo family. One u21 player felt that the lack of integration was a standout memory for him during his time in the academy. He outlined how valuable such interactions would be, especially in terms of developing and maintaining confidence:

> *Maybe getting a few established seniors and inter-county players to give them a talk and say "if ye don't make this it's not the be all and end all", keep them*

> *confident, because not making a team, it does affect your confidence. I think if you got a player, a senior or inter-county player to go and give talks and get more involved, I think it would encourage them to work harder as well (Elite Player, Interview, March 2017).*

There is a similar lack of integration between prospects and younger members of the academy. The squads train on different days since there is often only one pitch available at the back of McHale Park. This is a major issue in terms of creating an appropriate level of integration between prospects of varying ages. It should also not be underestimated that there is a possibility that some families may have children on two different age group squads and this has obvious effects in terms of a time commitment and travel. Again, it may be an issue at present due to the lack of a real facility that can house the full academy at once, but the issue could be remedied somewhat if the main pitch in McHale Park was available to the academy at certain times of the year.

Experts: There are a number of different people who have expertise in various areas that have some dealings with the squad. As already alluded to, the most overt group of professionals associated with the academy is the GPO staff. Their role includes identifying players, organising divisional teams, identifying coaches at divisional level, tracking players through school programmes and coaching prospects at the academy sessions. Their role is hugely linked with the workings of the academy and the staff certainly has a detailed knowledge of each of the prospects within their division. This knowledge confers on them a big advantage over volunteer coaches and there is little that the group does not know about youth football in Mayo.

In the winter, prospects receive advice on strength and conditioning from an employee of the Connacht GAA Council. The council provides a similar service to the other four counties of Connacht. This service involves the provision of generic movement programmes to the prospects and a number of visits to the county from the provincial S&C team. The prospects in turn have to log their levels of activity on a Smartabase[16] player monitoring system. This detail is analysed by the S&C team. However, there is a feeling amongst the stakeholders of the Mayo academy that the intervention from Connaught is too sporadic and there would be a preference for the acquisition of an exclusive S&C coach, or at the very least, access to the S&C team from the senior squad.

[16] Smartabase is an online monitoring tool used by sports organisations to monitor the physical and psychological well-being of their athletes.

Other specialists attend the camp days, but, again, these are favours called in by the Mayo Coaching Officer. These visits include a nutritionist and a psychologist. On observation, it was not really clear where these interventions fit into the overall approach of the academy, especially when one considers how infrequent the visits of these professionals occur. Outside of delivering a presentation to the group, there is little more interaction between the professionals and the prospects. In fact, the inclusion of these experts gives a mechanistic feel to the academy in Mayo. This impression is very much in line with the thinking of some of the GPO staff and their desire to have prospects believe that the experience is as 'professional' as possible:

> *It's about the professional set-up. You want them to come in, that was good, and if you have that and they go home and they tell their parents, and then the knock-on effect of that… they also go home and tell their buddies. And so, some of the buddies might be a good footballer, maybe he's leaning toward some other sport, but if he hears and sees what's being done, then the knock-on effect of that (GPO, Interview, March 2017)*

Related Teams and Clubs: As already outlined earlier in this case, each prospect is a representative of one of the 49 clubs within the county. Prospects also play football with their school team; there are 23 post-primary schools in Mayo. From the outset, it is obvious that there is little synergy between these three strands of the prospect's environment. This may in some way be related to the standing afforded to the academy by some of these related teams. One stakeholder alluded to this issue when asked about the perception clubs and schools hold with regard to the academy:

> *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. In terms of teachers, I'd be big on the player welfare point of view but I know for a fact a lot of school and club managers would easily ask a lad to train on a Tuesday evening. He might have played a game with the school during the day but they have no problem flogging lads and there's no place for that (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

This negativity manifests itself in a lack of co-operation between related teams and prospects face scheduling that in fact acts as a major barrier to development. Elite players have testified as to how this phenomenon created huge tensions for them at a younger age but with experience, they learnt to extricate themselves from issues by putting responsibility back on their various managers. One elite player described his approach to this problem:

> *I just tried to fix it by 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 (Elite Player, Interview, March 2017).*

However, this approach is a skill in itself and many prospects will take time to develop such a level of self-management. Most prospects attempt to appease all of their managers and play all of the games that are scheduled. However, the prospect's parents have a huge issue with this. It is a cause for huge concern for them and they really worry for the welfare of their children, especially when one considers that prospects play on numerous club and school teams as well as playing other sports:

> *It's an absolute disaster. There's isn't a connection, there's no sense in what's happening. It's a nightmare. The games are clashing with each other, so there's a school match during the day, they're playing for their club that evening and playing the school's match during the day. And then they have the academy programme to do at home (Parent, Focus Group, January 2017)*

At club level, there have been numerous attempts to streamline activities so that both the clubs and the academy can operate in unison and support each other. One such approach involves the scheduling of u16 matches to Tuesday nights across the county. That leaves the academy free to train on Wednesday and Saturdays. However, in practice, this is not the way the schedule transpires. One academy coach described the happenings at an operational level:

> *We set our stall out very clear at the beginning of the year. We go Wednesdays and Saturday mornings. The county board have set games for Tuesdays. That's fair enough but then you'll get clubs who'll fix a game for Wednesday or for Saturday morning so clubs themselves are a huge obstacle and it's the player that suffers (Academy Administrator, January 2017).*

Building a relationship between clubs and the academy is vital since the club ultimately is the strongest powerbroker in the GAA hierarchy at youth level in this county. The prospects really are at the call of their clubs and it is the club that will decide how much leeway they will provide the prospects in their interactions with the academy. This level of leeway varies within the county and is completely dependent on the mind-sets of coaches working at club level. The academy is adamant that it must be seen to facilitate club activity, since without compromise, clubs and the academy will be in opposition to each other. In this case, it is even more pertinent that there is co-operation since most of the clubs are from a rural background and are relying on players from younger ages playing up on older age group teams. This has obvious ramifications for the academy because in the past, sessions are fixed on different nights for the various academy squads i.e.

Thursday, u15; Friday, u16 etc. Thus, there were clashes since the academy has activity on a night, which invariably cuts across some club activity involving prospects.

At schools level, the situation is even bleaker and there is a distinct lack of synergy between the academy, the school's organising body, as well as the teachers themselves. Firstly, there are major issues between schools and clubs according to prospect's parents. One parent, who is also a club coach, described the issues they face in dealing with the school. Despite attempts at dialogue, the issue still remains:

> *the school system is a disaster because you could be down… you could be down to play a club game, our games would be played on a Thursday and the next thing you'll be told, we want the kids to come over, we have a school game today, and the schools wouldn't tell you about it, like. Our chairman, he was supposed to go in and have talks with them, he was going to talk to them and it still hasn't worked out. To me, it's a complete and utter disaster (Parent, Focus Group, January 2017).*

Added to this lack of communication, stakeholders mentioned that there is a disparity within the county with regard to the school football environment that prospects experience. In some instances, the GPO staff are trying to build football structures within schools with little tradition. When asked about the standard of school football within the county, one stakeholder remarked:

> *It could be better in terms of development and skill, but I suppose the whole… some schools are great, they're really… their football has… but others are not. And that's the same across every county, I would imagine. But unfortunately, the fellow who doesn't get good quality football at school is at a disadvantage (GPO, Interview, March 2017).*

Recently, Mayo schools have begun to experience more success and, in 2017, one school won an All-Ireland title. However, there is little policy supporting synergy within the county and there is no mention from any of the stakeholders of linkage between the academy and the schools. At present, the academy will excuse prospects from training sessions if they are after playing that day in school already. It is not uncommon to have prospects attend training sessions but not take part. However, when asked how the academy could help to solve the issues around scheduling, one stakeholder responded by indicating that Mayo GAA should make the academy so attractive that the prospects would prioritise it over all other activities:

> *Well they've a lot going on there. There's their school, they have their club, they have their academy, you have soccer, you have junior cert for those guys; so they're really being pulled and dragged around all over the place. What I would like to*

> *see, and maybe to answer the question, but for it to be… to make them want to come here. So if they see a professional setup here, then they will want to come here and prioritise it (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Thus, the school, club, academy triad is not really functioning in this case. Attempted synergies are on a localised, ad hoc basis and the academy does its best to work around issues as they present themselves. Many stakeholders are frustrated and have attempted to create bridges between the various realms but up to now, these attempts have achieved very little success. It seems that, as described by elite players within the county, prospects will have to learn to manage themselves and develop the ability to make personal decisions around what they can and can't play. This lack of orchestration has obvious ramifications for the development of prospect's potential and if the level of disconnect and acceptance is left to continue by Mayo GAA authorities, then progress will be very much stymied in the future

5.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: When the subject of the role of the parents in the development of prospects is broached with the various stakeholders, all agree that they play an important role. One coach in particular was very overt regarding the influence parents can have:

> *The parents are crucial. These are 16 year old kids, but they're still kids. It's important that you have a good relationship with the parents because just as a positive relationship with parents is really the trick to underage teams, a negative relationship with parents could destroy a year's work (Club Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

This role at a basic level is very much aligned to providing prospects with the resources necessary to participate at academy level, which include elements such as nutrition, transport, and playing gear. However, the most vital element that families provide for prospects is emotional support. One elite player succinctly outlined his experiences in football and how his family provided the necessary support for him at the appropriate moments:

> *To be honest I think it's just... every player is going to get knocks. I'm lucky enough that I had a good family around me as well, always pushing me on. Whenever I was ever dropped or anything or things weren't going too well for me, my Dad would be massive, so would my Mam and they'd always be there for me when I needed to talk or if I wanted to see how well I played. They were just always there for me (Elite Player, Interview, March 2017).*

The academy runs an annual parent's night whereby the philosophy related to the overall approach is explained and parents are given an opportunity to ask questions regarding any part of the programme. A number of presentations are delivered on the night regarding strength and conditioning and the issue of training load that the prospects encounter. In general, parents find it very easy to chat and talk to the coaching staff associated with the academy and express any concerns that they may have. This openness lends itself to GPOs and coaches finding out important information regarding the lives of the prospects.

Despite this sense of openness, parents receive no advice on their role and how they should communicate with prospects. In many instances, parents discuss football at a very superficial level with prospects; outside of the provision of resources, their role is never developed. There is a need for clarity around what the role of the parent is and how parents can best support prospects.

Peers: Stakeholders spoke around the influence of the prospect's peers and how there seems to be two levels of friends: friends from the academy and friends from the prospects' own club. There was little discussion around friends from outside sport. However, one prospect spoke around the pressure he faces from non-prospects in terms of socialising and doing the things that teenagers do. One coach who works in schools also, has experience of prospects receiving this pressure from non-sports orientated youngsters. He attributes such behaviour to jealousy:

> *We try to say sometimes, the guy that's slagging you, there's a bit of the green-eyed monster there. If they are going to be elite, then there is going to be some… and it's hard to deal with. It's nothing to be ashamed of, but it's how you deal with it, and I suppose sometimes… well, it doesn't matter if you're older or not, it's difficult to deal with (Club Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

Stakeholders felt that the academy inspires prospects to select friends with similar interests and not become involved in social behaviours that would have a negative effect on their sporting development. The positive effect of the academy was mentioned by many stakeholders. Parents are especially keen that prospects would form friendships with other prospects within the academy. It seems that these are the type of friendships that they think will be helpful for their child's holistic development. Parents mention how prospects gravitate towards each other when they socialise and how there has been a great bond formed between the members of the squad:

> *And the good thing too is like when you're all out, they all meet, go to a disco, whatever it is, the next thing, they meet the lads, they're in academy and they're together. The lads have a bit of a chat and all that, and they make great friends through it (Parent, Focus Group, January 2017).*

School: Most stakeholders believed that some prospects had difficulties balancing their dual commitments and that many coaches lacked empathy in terms of the pressure that prospects were actually under. One teacher described what he has encountered in terms of managing this pressure:

> *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" (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

One elite player described how he managed his time when he was a youth player and how study had to be balanced with football commitments:

> *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 (Elite Player, Interview, March 2017).*

Both these viewpoints are indicative of the education pressures prospects face as they move along the developmental pathway in GAA. However, there was limited understanding from the academy personnel regarding these pressures and thus, they were rarely mentioned by any stakeholders as impediments to prospect development.

5.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

The GAA: The GAA as a federation has little input into the processes of the academy in this case. Funding comes through the Association, on to the Connacht Council and then directly to the County Committee. It is up to the County Committee to utilise these funds appropriately in terms of the needs of the academy. This funding is conditional on participation in the provincial tournaments and co-operation with guidelines laid down by the GAA at the beginning of each year. All activities of the academy are reported to the Provincial Council so as to ensure all counties operate within these outlined guidelines. Outside of these indirect interactions, the academy has no dealings with the central tenet of the GAA organisation in Croke Park in Dublin.

Culture: Gaelic football is the number one sport in Mayo. Mayo people express their culture passionately through their connection with Gaelic Games. Winning an All-Ireland senior title has become an obsession for the people of Mayo in recent years. One teacher alluded to the fact that talented youth have little option within the county at excelling at any other sport and it really didn't matter what approach the academy adopted, the prospects will not look for opportunities elsewhere:

> *On the face of it, Mayo is a football mad county. It's the only real sport in Mayo. I know there's hurling and soccer and things like that as well but what drives young lads. It's in the DNA really of Mayo people in general. It's just there (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

5.1.4 The Environment in the Time-Frame

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Mayo GAA has an inherent passion and tradition that is unrivalled in Connacht and on an equal footing with some of the most successful counties in Ireland. Moving forward, it would be worthwhile if success for the academy could be defined so that coaches could develop a greater understanding of what it is they are expected to achieve. At present, winning competitions seems overly valued within the environment. Integration is also a major issue. The level of interaction between the academy and other Mayo teams is non-existent which denies prospects the opportunity to learn from the elite athletes. Schools within the county also need to be integrated into the development system if the full potential of the county is going to be realised.

5.1.5 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

Figure 20 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in this specific county. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

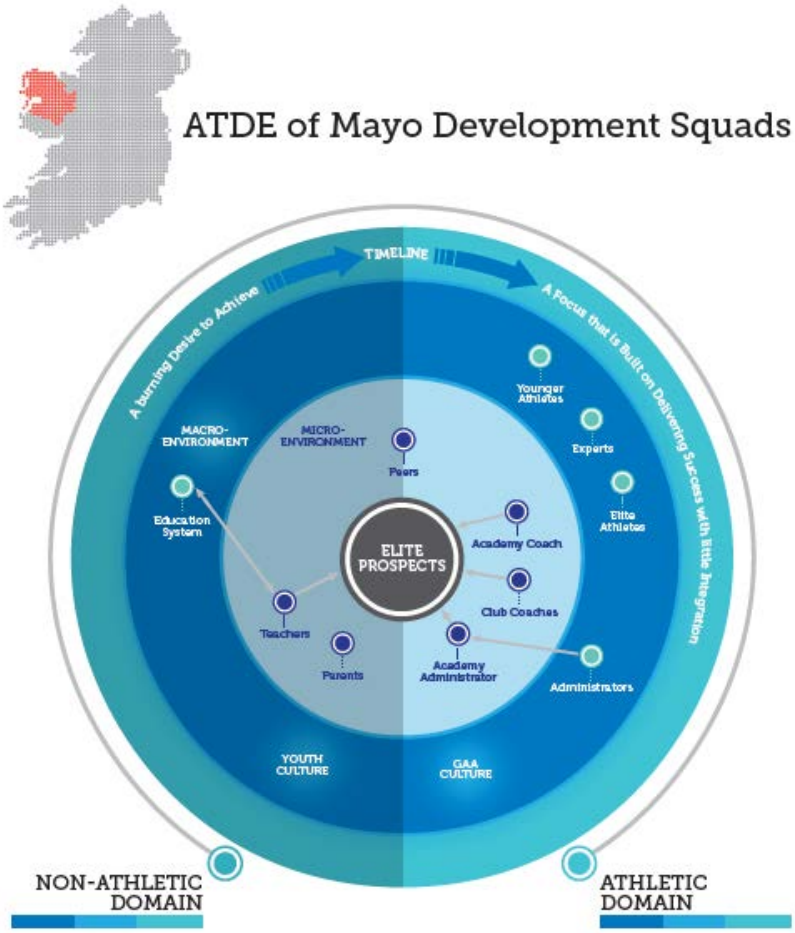

Figure 20: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Mayo GAA Academies**

5.2 Environment Success Factor (ESF) Working Model

5.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment, including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

5.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: The GAA provides equal assistance to each county in terms of supporting their academies. In total, this amounts to a grant of €30,000, which is shared between hurling and football teams within the academy. This finance comes directly from Croke Park to each individual County Board where is then filtered down to the academy. However, many stakeholders involved in the Mayo Academy spoke about issues within the academy with regard to funding. It was observed that all of the prospects brought their own football to each session and these were utilised within the training sessions. All other equipment was supplied by the GPOs working with the academy. Coaches outlined that they were waiting over nine months to be paid their expenses and remarked how the county senior team had a spend of over €1.5 million in 2017. These types of anomalies were the source of huge frustration when added to difficulties with sourcing venues for training and with the provision of transport to play other counties in friendly games. One coach pointed his frustrations in the direction of the County Board and claimed that they had no real interest in football:

> *I suppose I've been around GAA since 2005. I've seen chairmen come and go, chairmen and treasurers. This new crowd that has come in, they're not pro football. They talk about everything else but the O' Neills [17](Club Coach, Interview, March 2017)*

Human: In terms of human capital, the academy is supported mainly by coaches employed by the County Board. The GPOs work under the direction of the County Games Manager. His brief includes schools, coach education, as well as the academy. He assigns each GPO a region that they must manage including all elements of elite development. When the prospects come together for camps and other group activities, all of the GPOs work together as one group. Other coaches, who are not employed by the Board, also are invited to work alongside the GPOs with the various age grade teams. However, work commitments precluded them from attending the camp days, which are held during holidays from school.

Material: In terms of facilities, most stakeholders raised the lack of a permanent home for the squads as an issue. The academy has use of McHale Park (Mayo's home stadium) from time to time, but facilities here are not designed for the large numbers in the squads. The academy is also not permitted to access the main pitch in the stadium and must make do

[17] O'Neills are the official supplier and manufacturer of the GAA ball for games.

with a smaller pitch on the perimeter. There are plans to build a Centre of Excellence within the county but that is a number of years away from completion. In general, stakeholders described the availability of appropriate facilities as *'hit and miss'*.

5.2.3 Processes

The major processes mentioned by all stakeholders within the academy system were talent identification, team training sessions, and winning competitions. The following is an account of each process in the Mayo GAA Academy:

At present, the focus within the academy is on *'talent identification'*, training the talented, and attempting to win competitions. The goal for a Mayo U16 player is to be selected for the Ted Webb tournament (Connacht U16 competition) and be a member of a winning group in that competition. One squad coach questioned whether the competition focus actually creates pressure on players who are struggling with other parts of their development:

> *They're so immature. They haven't developed. Some of them even from 14 to 15 have put on nearly 6 inches and they haven't grown in the body, their coordination is all over the place and different things. You'd wonder are they heaping too much because the Ted Webb competition*

Training sessions focus on team development and performance. There was little evidence of individual coaching and feedback. According to the parents, it is very clear that, at U16, the focus of the academy is performing well in the Ted Webb Cup.

5.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Mayo GAA Academy.

Artefacts: Outside of the county jersey, there were very few artefacts on display in the training environment of the prospects. Training was often held in the county stadium (McHale Park) but prospects were only allowed to get changed in the away dressing room which does not contain any symbolism with regard to Mayo GAA. The home dressing room belongs to the senior team and does contain many symbols and references to the Mayo GAA tradition. However, the doors remain closed to all academy members and they must make do with training within the environs of the stadium. Despite this, prospects

understand what they are attempting to achieve and the history attached to the environment that they are part of. However, this is very much part of a prevalent verbal culture surrounding the academy since there is very little by way of artefacts within the training environment.

Espoused Values: Within the academy, coaches value prospects who work hard, have a good sense of humility, and who have a real sense of pride in playing for Mayo. Stakeholders including parents and coaches, spoke around this county pride and that despite the senior team not winning an All-Ireland, the people of Mayo do not suffer from '*any inferiority complex*'. One teacher spoke around the importance of attitude and how sometimes the coaching is not reflective enough, in terms of placing importance on the mind-set of the prospects. He believed that the appropriate attitude is paramount to development and fulfilling potential but the environment doesn't focus enough on promoting this type of attitude continuously. An academy coach spoke about how he would like to see more elements of fun introduced into the academy operations and how a senior elite player highlighted the lack of fun in elite football when he recently addressed the academy:

> *The word "fun" was mentioned the other day, he said the one regret he has about the game, is that probably the fun was going out of it. At an elite level, he's probably right. It's all pressure. It's all win (Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. At present, the academy acts as if it is an adjunct to the development process within the county. Due to limited integration between schools, clubs and the academy itself, many prospects are attempting to forge their own pathway through the myriad of transitions they face through their developmental journey. With the help of their parents especially, they continuously have to make decisions surrounding their scheduling and as one coach described, they are coming to sessions '*with their knees already dirty*'. This analogy conveys a distinct lack of co-ordination between the clubs of the county, the associated school, and the academy. The academy decides its days at the beginning of the year and expects that there will be little interruptions to its schedule by other stakeholders. Academy coaches spoke about '*setting out their stall at the start*' (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017) and clubs '*being a huge obstacle to development*' (Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017). Until co-ordination between all units within Mayo is addressed, each unit will continue to be an obstacle to individual development of prospects.

A second basic assumption is also prevalent within the environment in Mayo. The transition between the regionalised approach at U15 and the selection of the *'most talented'* 60 players is causing prospects issue. There is a lack of criteria surrounding selection and deselection and stakeholders believed that the spectre of deselection is causing many prospects anxieties. One academy coach described his experiences:

> *They're initially brought together at under 14 level, so the fellows in Mayo would be comfortable enough with each other. But when they're brought together, there's a lot of… it's not tension there, but they know, you see, they know people are going to be released from… and there's a lot… there's a fair bit of anxiety there. Some deal with it fine, some don't deal with it too well at all, but that's across the board (Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

Dealing with the deselected players must be prioritised since many are given opportunity at a later stage to re-enter the academy structure.

5.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: The coaches have attempted to instil in prospects the desire for self-improvement. Prospects arrive at sessions with their own football and some of the sessions involve individual physical development as well as skill development. It was also noteworthy that individuals had to log all their physical activity on an online monitoring tool called Smartabase. Despite these elements, parents still felt that a focus on individual skill development was lacking and that the academy was more aligned to development of strength and conditioning rather than football skills. Other aspects such as nutrition and hydration were also addressed, but some coaches felt that there was a necessity for more follow through on these elements.

Team Development: There was an overriding feeling from stakeholders including teachers, parents, and prospects themselves that the emphasis at academy U16 level was on identifying the best players and readying them so as to participate in the Ted Webb provincial competition. The academy is pyramided in its approach to identifying the most talented and almost two thirds of those prospects who begin at U14 are deselected from the process over a two year period. Coaches spoke about '*blowing away'* opponents in friendly games and how moving minor to U17 in 2018 was '*going to increase the pressure*

on everybody to be even more ready at U16'. It seemed that the U16 tournament was a gateway into becoming an elite intercounty player in Mayo, with stakeholders very salient in their support of such an opinion.

Environment's Success: One teacher summed very succinctly the level of environmental success in the Mayo GAA academy. When asked about where he felt the academy was presently in terms of strengths and weaknesses, he claimed that:

> *There are a lot of very good things happening for Mayo GAA, lots of very positive stuff happening in terms of competition and school structures and the Academy structure. Maybe work needed in terms of embedding a synergy between the three, maybe work needed in terms of educating the coaching group around the county about what's best for kids and understanding it isn't all about them. There is also a necessity for more funding, more coach education, more opportunity for engagement as such between the education that's out there and maybe the reinforcement that's going on in the county (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

5.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

The following Figure 21 presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Mayo Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential.

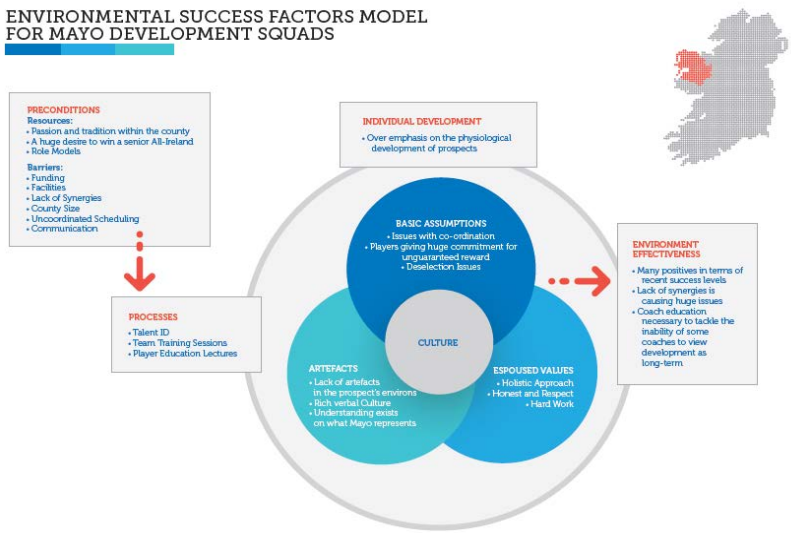

Figure 21: **The ESF Empirical Model of the Mayo GAA Academy**

5.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Mayo GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. Without a doubt, Gaelic football holds the preeminent sporting and cultural position within the county; Mayo people are intensely passionate about their sense of place and the relationship between football and their culture. This passion manifests itself in terms of the efforts of those involved at academy level, both paid employees and volunteers. However, these efforts are thwarted by numerous organisational barriers within the academy environment. Most notably, the lack of integration between schools, clubs, and the academy itself is causing prospects to struggle with their various GAA demands. This has obvious implications for, not only their athletic development, but also their academic education. Furthermore, there are many elements of individual development present within the environment, but they are mechanistic in their delivery and lack a coordinated unified approach that would aid overall individual holistic development. This is related to the lack of funding and the necessity for the academy administration to improvise in relation to accessing the inputs of experts. Ultimately, the focus within the academy was very much weighted towards finding the “talented”, training them, and then developing a team to win the U16 provincial competition.

Chapter 6: Case Study Three – Cork

This case is a county situated in the very south of the country. Cork is the largest county in Ireland geographically and has an unrivalled history in terms of its successes and influence across the GAA organisation. In recent times, Cork's level of success has slowed and there have been many political issues between the elite players and the administration within the county. Prompted in some ways by these historical issues, the county academy has in recent times re-invented itself. Success has recently returned to Cork at youth level and there now exists a firm believe from many stakeholders that these associated green shoots are a precursor to a period of dominance for the county once again.

Table 4: Biography of Cork GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 footballers in the county
10 years	50	One coach supported by a manager and selectors	260	85	1505

6.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

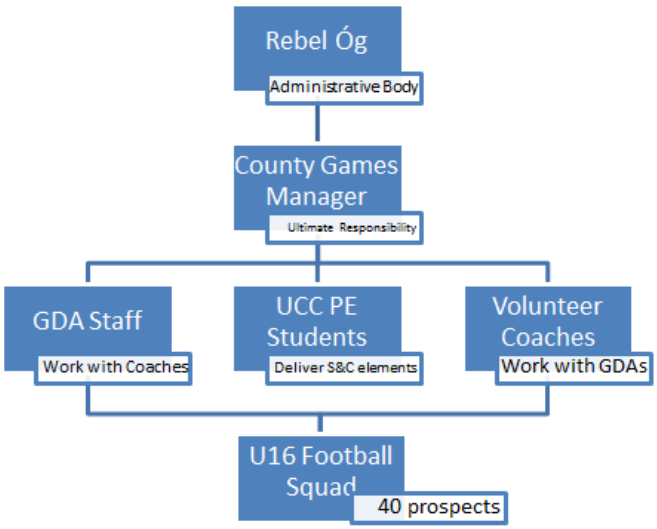

Figure 22: **Academy Management Structure of Cork GAA Academy**

6.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

Prospects: The target population in this study are prospects who are members of the county U16 academy. This implies that they must be born in 2001. These prospects are representative of the 260 GAA clubs within the county. At the end of the previous season (November, 2016), clubs were requested to send nominated players to regional training sessions. These sessions were delivered by students from University College Cork and were weighted towards physical development. Prospects were then selected from regional trial games in the following February and invited to become members of the academy. A number of these prospects were not members of the academy at U15 or U14 levels in the previous years. The academy U16 group trained and played games on pre-determined designated days in the County Fixtures Calendar. Sessions initially were sporadic but became weekly activities as the competition neared in July.

Coach: The academy coach has worked with this group since U14 level. He has had involvement at all levels with both club and county teams in Cork and is assisted by four other mentors who undertake various management roles. This year, the coach moved more

into a management role within the group and brought another coach in to deliver the football elements of the training sessions. This he felt was necessary since the administrative part of his role had begun to dominate his involvement:

> *Administration is a huge part of it. If it was less it would be better because that's a huge amount of time. I don't think people realise the amount of time needed; typing out stuff, computer, keeping roles, liaising with people (Administrator, Interview, February, 2017).*

Much of this administrative time was dedicated to securing venues for training sessions; the academy did not have a centralised venue and had to rely on the generosity of clubs in the provision of facilities. According to the coach, this nomadic existence causes '*young adolescent athletes to not feel part of a Cork football environment* (Coach, Interview, February, 2017). He felt that opportunity and accruing benefits were lost within the academy of integrating prospects with both younger and the elite athletes. Other stakeholders, whilst appreciating the effect the lack of facilities had on player integration, believed fragmentation was more aligned to a mind-set of independence and ignorance. They felt that each group within the academy saw themselves as individual entities and were not really concerned about other groups within the environment.

However, all stakeholders were in agreement that quality of coaching was suffering within the academy due to the intrusions of the many administrative elements associated with the coaches' role in Cork. In the past, a fulltime employee of Cork GAA acted as an administrator to all academy teams. This position has been left vacant since the appointee resigned a number of years ago. Now, the coaches' time is diluted to a large degree by the amount of time spent on non-coaching tasks; inferences were made by some stakeholders that experienced coaches were reluctant to become involved in the academy because of the scale of the role. One administrator outlined how the absence of a fulltime employee has caused problems for coaching appointments:

> *The problem is when Kevin was in the role he was able to take everything else away, dropping out water bottles, footballs, texting, washing jerseys, he took everything away. You didn't have to worry about any of that stuff. Then you don't need administrators on management teams and then you have less people. This makes it more pure in terms of coaching, the more you can take the support staff out and get the admin done for the real coaches, then you're only looking for coaches on management teams and then you get good people (Administrator, Interview, February, 2017).*

Currently, the lack of time coaches are experiencing has other implications for prospects. When asked about the relationship with their coach, prospects spoke about limited interactions and their coach '*having little influence on them'* (Prospect, Design Thinking Workshop, March 2017). According to the one administrator, this stems from the lack of time that coaches possess:

> *Maybe as a coach-athletic relationship. That kind of stuff. Developing the person. Do they get that opportunity? Because…They probably don't get the time to develop that stuff at present, I would say (Administrator, Interview, February, 2017).*

This has obvious connotations for the actual essence of what stakeholders envisage development to entail. The viewpoint portrayed above indicates that some may believe development and coaching are non-humanistic activities and transition to elite level may occur in the absence of appropriate relationships.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes: Within the environment, there was no interaction between prospects, elite athletes, or younger athletes. The squad trained in venues separate from other teams, often in pitches far removed from where the elite players would train at. Younger groups would similarly train in venues where the manager could locate a pitch, thus there was rarely an opportunity for groups to work within the one environment. On rare occasions, elite players were asked to come and speak to the academy prospects formally. This according to one administrator was up to the management team to agree on and organise:

> *You might get someone in on an ad hoc basis I suppose, at best. From time to time the mentors might call in somebody to come in and do a separate session or just talk to the players about what it means to be competent, stuff like that. But it's not common practice, by any means, to be fair (Administrator, Interview, February 2017).*

Stakeholders referred to the value in having all academy prospects in the one environment and generating a feeling within them that they belong to something much bigger than just their team. One coach identified the advantages of such an approach:

> *If an under 16 player is playing there and he's finished earlier and he can be standing at the pitch and he's looking at the under 14s he feels he's part of something. When you have three hurling teams and three football teams all training in six different venues, it's crazy when you think about it (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Prospects themselves are not aware of the benefits of sharing their environment with younger and older athletes. In the past, for a number of years, the Cork Academy operated in one facility (belonging to the local university) during the school holidays. Prospects from the various academy teams attended the facility and trained. This was an opportunity to utilise the environment so that prospects could share stories and learn from each other. This did not occur. One elite athlete remembered back to their time in camp and remarked that '*you'd see a couple around the Mardyke when we were doing the camp but you wouldn't talk to them or anything* (Elite Player, Interview, February, 2017). Even now, it is questionable if this elite player could see the value in him sharing his experiences with younger players. This may be related to his lack of exposure to such situations in his own development.

Experts: The sense of fragmentation referred to above is mirrored in the provision of external expertise to the academy teams. All prospects underwent a six-week winter S&C programme at a regional squad level but there was little follow up once the programme was completed. In the past, the academy attempted to utilise the expertise of a private sports consultancy firm within the county to deliver discrete sports science elements to prospects but the squad coaches felt that this was eating into the limited available time they had with prospects. These service providers were dispensed with and replaced by an arrangement with Sports Studies students from University College Cork under the guidance of an expert in the area of fundamental movement. However, these same coaches were not overly supportive of the current protocols either because they believed that the prospects '*were not sweaty enough after the sessions'* (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).

Elite players, on reflection, were also critical of their exposure to expert advice and guidance throughout their time in the academy. One elite player recalled his experiences whilst in camp in the Mardyke:

> *We had one psychology talk and there were a few nutrition talks as well but realistically it was just a talk and you weren't given any handouts or anything to do at home…They were just time fillers to be honest (Elite Player, Interview, February 2017).*

One administrator recounted the history of the use of experts within the academy. He outlined his frustrations at the failure of each approach to meet the approval of the

volunteer coaches involved. His claims pinpoint that the volunteer coaches have the power to control how and when experts are to be used within the environment:

> *Sorry. I think I've tried four versions. We tried bringing them into camps. They said no but they're only coming in, they do nothing between, Okay so, we'll give you online videos that they can record on their phones with Cork players like Sean White and all the boys, Conor Dorman doing the videos…the mentor said "no we have to get him in, we need him in the field, we need him in a hall". Okay, we'll do the regional thing now and the same people are criticising the regional, the one we're currently doing saying "they're not sweaty enough", "they're going home, they're not tired enough". Lads, they had a game that day with the school. Our stuff is supposed to be rehab and prehab. I'm sorry. But isn't that how any other sporting organisation works (Administrator, Interview, March 2017).*

The worry from this administrator is that some volunteers do not fully understand the approach that the academy has adopted in terms of physical development. His fear is that academy sessions will simply become a training session:

> *If Cork training is just going to be another team with another training session we don't need it because the kids have that at home (Administrator, Interview, March, 2017).*

Much of this fear is a result of the resignation of the fulltime employee a number of years ago. This resignation led to limited supervision of the operation of the academy and this has led to coaches working as individual units within the academy environment.

Related Teams and Clubs: A lack of support for academy operations was also evident from coaches who functioned at schools and club level within the county. Schools coaches were not able to identify the academy coaches by name and spoke of a non-existent relationship between them and academy in general. They described how they garnered necessary information from the prospects themselves and did their best to work around the academy schedule. The relationship between schools and the academy is non-existent as described by one teacher:

> *The only reason I have a relationship with the minor manager is because I know him. As for the academy, I don't have any relationship with them and I couldn't tell you who are involved (Teacher, Interview, January 2017).*

School football was very important for some prospects and one elite player outlined how his teachers formed a special bond with him and helped drive his personal and athletic development. However, there was a feeling from some stakeholders that schools are very much under resourced and that the GAA must do more to support the development of

Gaelic Games within the schools of the county. Other stakeholders pointed out that sometimes the GAA meets resistance from school authorities when trying to broker entry into the school and deliver programmes. In general, there was effusive agreement from all stakeholders that schools in Cork are an ideal environment to develop talent and that a coordinated approach should be developed to promote synergies between clubs, school and the academy. This, according to one administrator, could only be achieved with changes to the governance structure within the county:

> *The only way you do that is if you have full leadership from the top over Rebel Óg and you have full control of finance and budgets. As you said before, this stuff doesn't cost a fortune because you make massive savings the minute you coordinate because he goes into one of the big schools and he's not going in to two Cork under 16s, he's going into 25, because there are U14s to U18s in the school (Administrator, Interview, March 2017).*

Club coaches experienced barriers with the academy and spoke of '*the nightmare'* of having to deal with some of the academy coaches and how they sometimes felt that *'their club would be better off not having anyone involved with the squads'* (Club coach, Interview, January, 2017). They also spoke about a lack of any relationship between themselves and the academy and described how the perception within clubs was '*that these squads are serving little function'* (Club coach, Interview, January, 2017). One club coach described how the lack of communication between the club and the academy has in the past led to many issues for prospects. The club, according to this coach, often found themselves in the middle trying to find a resolution that might suit everyone:

> *We never ever wanted to play the hard and fast card in Douglas and go "Brian you are playing with Douglas Friday night, end of. I don't care what happens to you with Cork on Saturday". We never once took that line. Never once. Having said that, some people in the club wanted to take that line and go "we have a code of conduct" and go "we can suspend him", which wasn't the way to go at all. The best thing to do is find happy ground. A couple of times down the years. And, of course, it depends on the nature of the beast you're dealing with in the Academies. There were a couple of beauties in my time dealing with them (Club coach, Interview, January, 2017).*

6.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: Parents were very visible within the academy environment, but they had limited involvement and remained on the peripheries. One administrator described how limited the interaction between the academy and the parent body was:

> *I would say we've very little interaction with them, to be honest. I would say we interact typically with them through just notifying them for training and stuff like that (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Despite this, prospects described their parents as the most influential figures in their development. However, some administrators felt that many parents were ignorant to how they could really support their child's development and, in some ways, their behaviour hindered the prospect's progression within the academy. One such administrator felt that the academy lacked an education element to support the parent body. This he believed would help eliminate the constant calls of complaint he received from club coaches relating to prospect's parents not permitting their sons playing club games because of upcoming academy activity:

> *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. For example, you'd often get calls that parents are pulling their players from club games, or that they're not playing the other code in their club because they concentrate on one code because they've made it to county U14, and they're more county players now than club players. So, there is a little bit of that. So, I think maybe that we need to do more in terms of parent education (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Peers: This administrator also felt that prospects would benefit from an education programme themselves around dealing with their peers and the pressure of conforming to societal norms. Other stakeholders such as teachers and academy coaches described how prospects '*hung around with people who shared their interests'* and '*the GAA fellas stick to themselves'*(Teacher, Interview, January 2017). This had connotations of a cocooning effect but was at odds with what the prospects themselves described. They very much felt that their involvement in the academy came at a cost to their ability to socialise as their peers did and at times created issues for them in terms of social events. Much of the academy activity was timetabled for holiday periods from school; this coincided with increased social activity opportunity for prospects and this, in turn, created an element of pressure for them in relation to their non-athletic peers.

School: Teachers within the environment alluded to the fact that prospects were under pressure in terms of balancing their school commitments with their GAA commitments. Much of the academy activities are at the weekends or during school holidays but prospects' commitments to their club and school cause academic pressures for some. In response, one school insisted that all footballers must undertake supervised study after

school. This has implications for some prospects. One teacher described how some prospects leave home at 7am and do not return until 9pm on some school nights due to school training and supervised study:

> *I said to them at the start of the year about the homework club and some of them were coming from the country saying "I could be up at 7am and not at home until 9"…But from our point of view it's just as important that they get a good education (Teacher, Interview, January 2017).*

6.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

The GAA: The GAA as a federation has little input into the processes of the academy in this case. Funding comes through the Association, on to the Munster Council and then directly to the County Committee. It is up to the County Committee to utilise these funds appropriately in terms of the needs of the academy. This funding is conditional on participation in the provincial tournaments and co-operation with guidelines laid down by the GAA at the beginning of each year. All activities of the academy are reported to the Provincial Council so as to ensure all counties operate within these outlined guidelines. Outside of these indirect interactions, the academy has no dealings with the central tenet of the GAA organisation in Croke Park in Dublin.

Youth Culture: Stakeholders spoke about two elements of the prevalent youth culture: social media and prospect's social lives. Social media was deemed by coaches and teachers to be important to prospects and stakeholders noticed how prospects continuously posted pictures of performing in academy activities such as matches on their social media sites. However, one elite player described how social media was an extra pressure on players and how one of his teammates was recently targeted for mistakes made in an important game:

> *I remember after the All Ireland final our keeper got a lot of abuse on Twitter for his performance, he was the best keeper I ever played with and he just had one bad game and he gets scarred for life really (Elite Player, Interview, February, 2017).*

Prospects themselves spoke about the pressure they faced in relation to being a normal teenager and how their football commitments created issues for them amongst their peers. One prospect outlined that he felt he had to make many sacrifices to be an academy player and how on occasions, he could not live his life as his peers do.

Sports Culture: As a GAA entity, Cork is very much self-sufficient. Its culture is based around a sense of self-reliance and the psyche of its people very much reflects this. In 2017, the administration of the county oversaw the development of a modern 45,000 seater stadium with an adjacent Centre of Excellence. This was representative of the capabilities and standing of the GAA in Cork that such a project could be delivered by an individual unit of the GAA. It was also representative of the hope that the people of Cork have for the future; the past decade has been one to forget in many ways but the future is bright. It is almost a sign to the rest of the country to take note; '*we haven't gone away'*. This sense of resilience permeates the academy and prospects understood that they are representing something that is extraordinarily huge in terms of tradition and history. One administrator used the Titanic as a metaphor to describe the level of scale in relation to the possibilities this tradition affords the GAA in Cork; '*just steer it in the right direction and she becomes unmatchable'* (Administrator, Interview, January 2017). The obvious inferences related to governance and the necessity for leadership to provide such direction.

6.1.4 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Figure 23 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in Cork. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

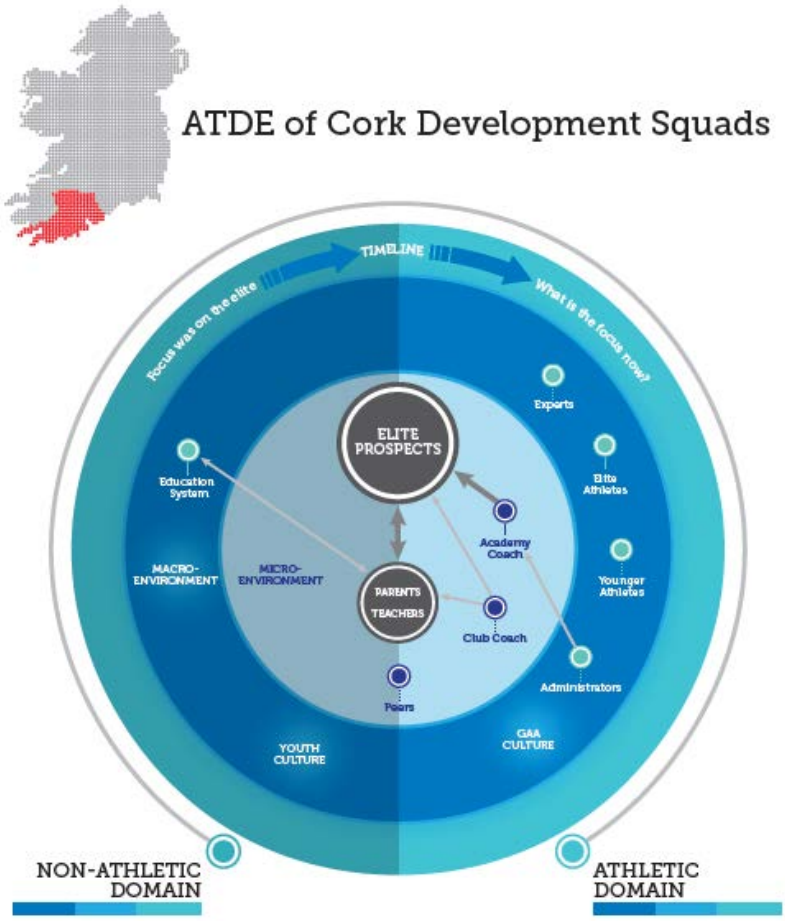

Figure 23: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Cork GAA Academies**

6.2 Environment Success Factor Working Model

6.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

6.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: The GAA provides equal assistance to each county in terms of supporting their academies. In total, this amounts to a grant of €30,000, which is shared between hurling and football teams within the academy. This finance comes directly from GAA headquarters in Dublin to each individual County Board where is then filtered down to the academy. In 2016, the academy costs amounted to €120,000; the shortfall was met through fundraising and other sources of income in Cork GAA. One administrator described how '*the squads get what they need',* but this was very much on an ad hoc basis. There was limited planning around budgeting and some identifiable economies of scale were not utilised in terms of spending within the academy.

Material: The county developed a new stadium and an associated Centre of Excellence in 2017. The Centre consists of one 4G pitch and some stakeholders were concerned that this was not sufficient to meet the demands of all Cork teams. One coach felt that the senior elite teams would have priority of usage on the facility. He asked the question as to '*where will the Cork under 15 hurling team train, where do they rank*?' (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017). The lack of a central base caused issues for academy personnel and had a major impact on the time demands placed on coaches. One administrator, whilst acknowledging this as a drawback on coaches' time, saw the lack of facilities as having a negative effect on the long-term vision portrayed by Cork GAA:

> *Our facilities, I've giving it zero because it's not just the facilities and the ringing clubs for the use of a pitch, it's the vision it gives you (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

This lack of a long-term vision was communicated by other stakeholders also. It was felt that the county was reliant on its past history for its survival in the future and that the scale and size of the county required a bespoke strategic plan focused on games development at youth level.

Human: The lack of stakeholder synergy already described also fed into this sense of fragmentation. One administrator outlined how he believed a fulltime administrator for youth activities within the county would create some of the synergies that are currently lacking:

> *I would bring that in now in the morning. What I would do is appoint a full-time county administrator for underage, they would do all the underage fixtures, liaise*

> *with the school boards, they would also do all communication of both squads and all logistical support for squads (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Creating this position within the county was suggested by numerous stakeholders as a response to the scheduling issues that are commonplace within the environment. It was felt that this was the biggest barrier to development within the county and this appointee would bring a necessary level of co-ordination to the various strands at youth level. However, one administrator believed that the political will for the creation of this position did not currently exist and that politics was actually stymieing the work within the academy:

> *At the moment I'm actually taking a…the less we do, the less we promise and the less we do at the minute the better until you can get... power is the wrong word, it's not power, it's that leadership can only come from a position of power…But in terms of the coordinated plan, keep asking me and I'm going to tell you it isn't there (Administrator, Interview, March 2017).*

6.2.3 Processes

The major processes mentioned by all stakeholders within the academy system were talent identification, team training sessions, and competitions. The following is an account of each process in the Cork GAA Academy:

The focus within the academy is on identifying and selecting the most talented players to play in a Munster competition in July. This involves a process that began at an inter-regional competition in January. It is during these games that prospects were selected for the Cork squad who commenced training in February. The focus for the selected prospects was on remaining within the squad until the competition or as described by one prospect, '*not getting cut'*. This focus had limiting effects on individual development. The focus of the training session was on team play. When asked about these sessions, one prospect recalled that '*we always did hard running at the end and our coach was always shouting at us'* (Prospect, Design Thinking Workshop, April 2017). Ultimately, the focus within the academy was on preparation for the competition in July. Training intensity reached a crescendo leading into this phase of the season and, once the competition was completed, there was limited activity until the winter programme recommenced.

6.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Cork GAA Academy.

Artefacts: Prospects were constantly reminded of what they were representing but there was little symbolism within their environment representative of the culture of Cork. This had obvious connection with the facility issue. The Cork jersey has a long tradition of success, but as pointed out by one administrator, its power has waned over the last decade or so:

> *Again, the climate that we're currently in… with the Cork jersey, before it was definitely a vision of heart, determination, and a winning mentality; whereas now, you would have to question those values. Is that what it is at the moment? (Administrator, Interview, January, 2017).*

One parent also alluded to this and identified within some Cork youths a level of disinterest that was not there in the past. It seems in the eyes of some stakeholders, that the lure of the Cork jersey is not the same as before:

> *We'll say 30, maybe 40 years ago when I was playing all you wanted and you dreamt of a red jersey. Nowadays you'd see fellas and they're actually leaving and going "I really don't want it" (Parent, Focus Group, February, 2017).*

The academy management took a decision a number of years ago that the red Cork jersey would not be used by the academy and, in its place, a white academy jersey would be designed. This was an attempt to place more value on winning a 'real' Cork jersey at U18 level but this practice was questioned by an elite player:

> *It kind of gives the impression you're actually not playing with Cork. You see the others, Kerry wearing the proper green and gold and Tipperary wearing their jerseys and we're there in a white-coloured jersey (Elite Player, Interview, February 2017).*

Espoused values: The coach valued hard work and he repeatedly informed the prospects that '*they were doing this for Cork and their work would pay off*' (Prospect, Design Thinking Workshop, April 2017). This sense of hard work was much spoken about within the environment and often aligned to the long tradition of success associated with the county i.e. once you work hard enough, the Cork tradition would take care of the rest. On observation, there was a sense of pressure evident amongst some stakeholders in relation to ensuring the Cork tradition would be upheld. This was related to a recent lack of success at senior level, which in one administrator's opinion creates a difficulty for the academy in promoting and espousing the values traditionally associated with the county:

> *I don't think we're strong enough in enforcing our values to epitomise them to their true extent (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Another administrator identified the associated values as being *'a bit higgledy piggedly'* (Administrator, Interview, March, 2017) but was adamant that the coaches involved in the squads represented the values the academy wished to promote. However, it seems that prospects had difficulty in determining what was valued within the academy outside of hard work and pride in representing Cork.

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. The environment in this instance is dominated by dysfunction. The interaction between various stakeholders is non-existent and prospects constantly attempt to juggle the various demands being placed upon them. There is a lack of coordination between various elements of the academy programme and this was not helped by the numerous variations to the academy system over the last number of seasons. There seems to be a lack of governance surrounding the squads and this vacuum has allowed some coaches to question the value in certain approaches adopted by the academy management. There is now also a dearth in available coaches to operate within the academy system. This may relate to the extent of the coaching role as described earlier in this chapter. One elite player summed it up well when he described how the academy had provided him with a very limited foundation and that it *'didn't really prepare him for what was coming'* (Elite Player, Interview, February, 2017). His memories were blighted by dysfunction and the related sense of chaos that surrounded his academy years.

6.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: In terms of individual development, stakeholders mainly spoke around the development of specific football skills development. Prospects, through their involvement with the academy, also develop other skills that are not sport specific. On analysis of the data, these skills include time management, work ethic, social skills, discipline, and dealing with setbacks. However, the focus from prospects is simply remaining involved. This would indicate that they are under some pressure to make the squad even when selected initially.

Team Development: The focus within the environment is on identifying the most talented prospects and selecting the strongest team to participate in the competition. Training

sessions focused on team plays, tactics, and physical conditioning with limited time devoted to developing individual skills. Prospects were very much aware that places within the squad were limited and only those who performed consistently would remain.

Environment's Success: As already alluded to, the environment within the Cork GAA Academy is blighted by dysfunction and is lacking coordination between its constituent stakeholders. Individual development is severely compromised by these deficiencies but stakeholders are powerless to instigate change. These stakeholders believe that the administrators are overly reliant on the past tradition of the county and that this alone will suffice in ensuring that Cork will be successful in the future. The administration has recently developed a state of the art facility but many academy personnel believe that this might only paper over the evident cracks. The environment, according to them, is completely stymied by the lack of synergy between schools, clubs and the academy, as well as a lack of coordination within the academy itself, causing Cork to operate well below its potential.

6.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

Figure 24 presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Cork Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential. It is important to note that the environment studied is complex and development processes are dynamic, so certain key elements have been highlighted to provide a summary of the case.

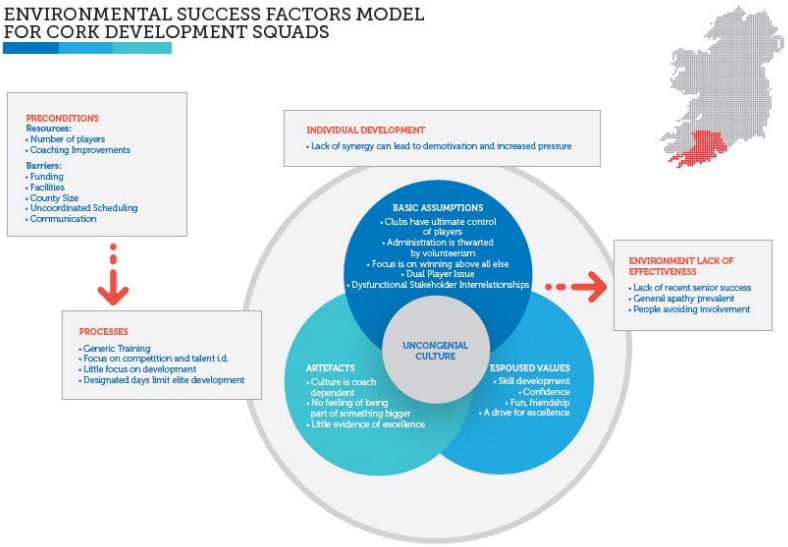

Figure 24: **The ESF Empirical Model of Cork GAA Academy Environment**

6.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Cork GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. Both models outline that the environment is one devoid of synergy, coordination, and orchestration. It seems that coaches on the ground are suffering from a system that does not meet the developmental needs of prospects. The county has many preconditions that should support success. These include the county's size, the number of clubs, as well as the rich tradition of sustained success over many years. However, these preconditions are currently viewed as barriers to development within the present system. The geography of the county requires a localised development system that takes travel into account; clubs schedules are uncoordinated which has an effect on the functioning of the academy whilst the tradition is weighing on academy stakeholders since in recent years All-Irelands at adult level have not been delivered. These issues need structural reconfiguration in order to bring about change for prospects, but stakeholders believe that such change will not be forthcoming within the current administrative climate.

Chapter 7: Case Study Four – Kerry

7.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

This case is a county in the south of the country that is steeped in the Gaelic Games tradition. In terms of football, this county would be perceived to be the doyens of the game in Ireland. They are by far the most successful footballing county in terms of All-Ireland titles won. This tradition stretches right back to the formation of the GAA and to this day, Kerry would be perceived to be the most insightful, inventive, and natural footballing stronghold in the country. Football is the heartbeat of Kerry; the calendar revolves around Sundays in September and All-Ireland finals.

Table 5: Biography of Kerry GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 footballers in the county
10 years	60	Two coaches (one in each region) supported by 2/3 selectors	71	26	635

At youth level, the county is unrivalled in terms of its current level of success. In 2017, the U18 team completed a historic four All-Ireland titles in a row. This success can be attributed in some way to a similar feat realised by the senior school teams of Dingle C.B.S and St Brendans, Killarney over the same period. These successes are presumed to be a precursor for continued success for the county at adult elite level and are viewed by many as a very salient foundation for the progression of prospects onto their next stage of development. However, it is significant to note that elite success in the past was not always related to success at youth level; Kerry senior teams have had an innate ability to deliver success regardless of the prior experience of its players.

Much of this innateness can be traced to the culture of the county and the institutions that feed the culture. This culture is completely tangible and encompasses a lineage that other counties can only envy. Football is discussed and understood like in no other county. This

level of fascination is bred from a young age and fed completely by the social environment within the county. However, despite the many advantages such a tradition bestows on the prospects of Kerry GAA, it is only in the recent past that Kerry underage teams became the dominant force in the country. Prior to this, Kerry youth teams were being passed out by counties who would not ordinarily be considered as rivals. A high powered committee was formed in 2010 to examine the academy practices within the county and recommend change necessary to become competitive. This spawned a new dawn for Kerry; ex-players in-fluxed into the system and academy membership became the desire of any youth who considered himself talented.

7.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

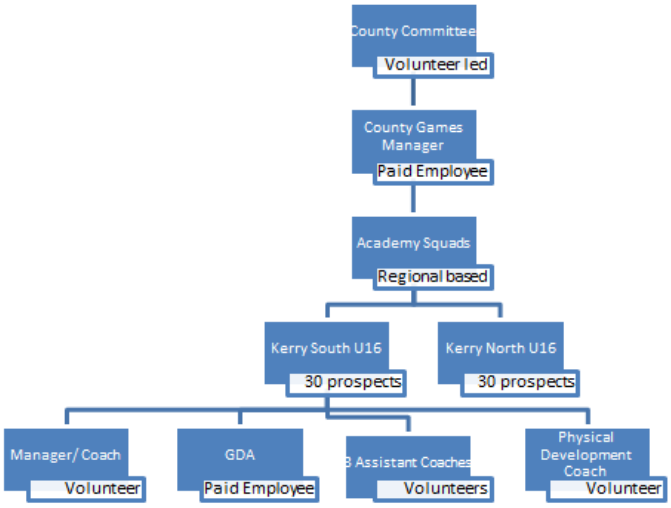

Figure 25: **Organisational Chart of Kerry Academy Structure**

Prospects: The target population in this study are prospects who are members of the county U16 academy. This implies that they must be born in 2001. The academy is split into two geographical regions; Kerry South and North. Each region selects 30 prospects. Both groups train separately and participate as individual teams in a Munster competition in July. Training has different elements depending on the time of year and is usually

arranged for a Friday night in the winter period. As the year progresses, sessions are scheduled for the weekend as well as another day during the week. At U17 level the following year, the regions amalgamate to form the Kerry U17 team and 30 prospects in total will be selected.

This case study focuses on prospects in the Kerry South region U16 football squad. Their pathway to squad selection moves from participation at club level, to selection for their divisional team and then onto the Kerry Development Squad. 23 of the prospects come from clubs close to Killarney; the other 7 are from clubs in the very south of the county close to Cahirciveen. This is not a very unusual phenomenon when one considers that some regions in South Kerry are suffering hugely from rural depopulation. All of the 23 prospects in the Killarney region attend St Brendan's secondary school. This has ramifications for prospects in some instances, since some academy prospects cannot win a starting berth on the school football team.

The Coach: The coach of this team is a former elite intercounty player who is the holder of four All-Ireland medals with Kerry. He is only recently retired from playing and has been involved in a number of teams at academy level over the last number of seasons. This is his second consecutive season involved with the U16 age group. He is well regarded by the parent stakeholders, as well as the other members of his management team. It is the remit of the coaching committee to appoint all of the management teams who work within the academy. Coaches from around the county with potential are identified and contacted by the County Games Manager to assess their level of interest. These identified coaches are then met face to face by the Games Manager and are invited to become part of the various management teams. Each coach is then supported by the football committee so that there is some level of uniformity in approach across the academy.

The committee makes all appointments with a view towards the future; the Kerry U17 manager position is the focus of all appointments. Coaches with ambition of becoming the Kerry U17 manager usually remain within the academy system until the position becomes vacant. However, there is no guarantee that coaches will be promoted to such a position since these appointments are made by the Kerry County Board and not the Football Committee. There have been instances of minor manager appointments from outside of the academy system. Such situations have obvious knock effects on the motivation levels of academy coaches and also add an element of pressure on management teams to produce successful teams in competition. Even without this pressure, coaches have a very overt

level of responsibility entrusted on them by the very fact they are operating in the environment that is Kerry football.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes: At present, there is no interaction between elite athletes, prospects and younger athletes within the academy. The elite athletes train and prepare in a standalone venue that is not open to other Kerry teams or members of the Kerry public. In fact, all other Kerry teams each train in different venues and rarely interact or socialise. This may change in the future when the Centre of Excellence opens in Currans. However, for the present, the environment does not lend itself to any interactions between squads. As a bridging point, interaction could be artificially promoted, but the County Games Manager, amongst other stakeholders, is reticent to seek any integration between the senior elite players and the academy squads:

> *We definitely look to get ex-players involved. That adds to the profile I think. Present guys, I never asked a guy really and I'd be slow enough. That's just my view. I think they have enough on their plate. I even think Fitzmaurice (senior team manager), I'd be slow to ask him to do something with the squads. but as regards working over a period of time with a group I wouldn't think… I'm slow to approach players. I think they have a lot on (County Games Manager, Interview, February, 2017).*

Some coaches have in the past approached elite players themselves and brought them in to talk to the squads. This is done on an ad hoc basis and is dependent on the relationship between the manager and the elite player. The focus of these meetings is sometimes based around deselection and providing prospects with a sense of hope prior to selection decisions being taken with a squad. The one situation whereby integration between older and younger prospects occurs is in St Brendan's school in Killarney. There are many students within the school who have been part of the successful U18 Kerry squads over the past few seasons and they provide much inspiration to the younger prospects within the school.

Experts: The academy does not involve huge teams of people in the development of prospects. The focus is very much on the pitch and the gym and preparing prospects to play football. In this regard, a management team consists of a coach/manager figure and two to three other assistants. Each squad also has a person responsible for strength and conditioning as an additional member of management. Some stakeholders see these S&C appointments as a direct response to a perception prevalent a number of years ago that Kerry teams could not compete physically, especially with teams from Ulster. This work

is done in the gym in the school and usually takes place on a Friday night. It is now considered a crucial piece of the developmental jigsaw in Kerry and stakeholders are extremely positive regarding the associated benefits. Much of the focus is put on prospects completing the programmes at home since the S&C session only occurs once a week. Prospects are also advised on nutrition and rest but this information comes through the S&C expert. The S&C element is concentrated into the six weeks before and after Christmas. Players are assessed and there is pressure on prospects to ensure that they follow the plan laid out for them. The sense of link up between the school and the academy is very strong; prospects are reminded at school training of the importance of doing the work the academy has prescribed for them. Teachers, it seems, play a crucial role in promoting the academy philosophy; this teacher outlines his understanding of the S&C element of the programme:

> *Yes six weeks before Christmas and six weeks afterwards and in the meantime then they're given their own home strength and conditioning programme and we'd press them to make sure that they're doing them. And I think when they come back after Christmas then as well they're assessed and you'd know very quickly who's who (Teacher, Interview, December, 2016).*

One other element of expertise that operates within the management team is one of the fulltime Kerry GAA employees. These are known as Games Development Administrators (GDAs) and they have a coaching role within the county. This role encompasses work in clubs, schools, and divisional regions. In terms of the academy, there is a purposeful attempt from the County Games Manager to utilise the strengths of the GDA team within the academy structure. He outlines his philosophy when explaining their role:

> *The coach has a coach's role. You'd have a GDA. A GDA would coordinate the age group. I have a GDA coordinating the 14s, the 15s, 16s, 17s, and then within each squad a GDA would act as a mentor. That's something new we're introducing this year so each team would have a GDA as a mentor so they're available for the coaches (County Games Manager, Interview, February, 2017).*

In terms of Kerry South u16 squad, the GDA is much more than a co-ordinator and mentor to the coach as outlined by the Games Manager. The GDA in this instance is the conduit between the school, the clubs, and the academy. He has managed a seamless integration between the three elements and manoeuvres himself between the triad, ensuring that prospects are not overburdened. This element of his role is described by one teacher who he works with very closely in St Brendan's:

> *Vince knows so much what's going on he knows if a fella's missing from training, he probably knows why he was missing. He knows that a fella is after picking up an injury and I suppose in particular what I found amazing is he'd nearly know what nights what clubs are training, what nights what clubs have games …whereas if I had to figure that out I'd make ten phone calls (Teacher, Interview, December, 2016).*

In a way, one could view the GDA role as one that allows the academy to control the schedule around the prospects. The school only trains one day a week from September to Christmas. Club fixtures obviously have to be played within this timeframe also but in this case, because the school does not overtax the 23 prospects, the academy can continue to function as it does. This alignment would not be possible but for the GDA. Stakeholders are very much content since prospects are available for all teams and schedules are co-ordinated as best as possible. By working in partnership with the school teacher and not interfering with the clubs, the GDA has created a powerful position for himself whereby he can hugely influence the developmental activities of all prospects in the Killarney region. This influence is very much amplified when one considers these thoughts from a games teacher in the school:

> *Vincent's very good for coordinating with the players, the school and the Academy to make sure that the players know that they have strength and conditioning training on a Friday night. I think it links them all well together. He has feedback coming back to him and he'll pass it on to the teachers here. Let's say "he's progressing in the Academy" or "he's regressing in the Academy" or maybe "he's showing promise" or maybe "he's not" (Teacher, Interview, December, 2016).*

Related Teams and Clubs: Some of the prevalent issues in other cases surrounding the interrelationships between prospect's related teams are not as pronounced in this case. Much of this can be attributed to the work of the GDA in the Killarney region and his ability to manage the relationships between the various academy stakeholders in his area. This manifests in a very concrete relationship between the school and the academy. The school is very keen in developing the linkage between itself and the academy and sees involvement of its students within the academy environment as being very beneficial. To this end, the school does not in any way impinge on the academy in terms of training days; in fact, it facilitates the operation of the academy by only training one day a week in the first school term.

Unlike other schools in other counties, St Brendan's is unique in terms of the number of teachers that want to give of their time to school football teams. It is being mooted at management level that a coaching rotation policy may have to be introduced within the

staff to facilitate the number of teachers who are willing to coach the school teams. It is obvious that the recent successes the school has enjoyed plays a role in developing such an interest from the staff, however two other elements are also important to note. Firstly, the teachers feel appreciated and supported most notably from the GDA. Secondly, teachers want to play their part in helping to move the Kerry tradition forward. They want to make a contribution and in doing so, they are happy to facilitate the academy in every way they can. This facilitation is very much part of their contribution. The school would be loath to cause any roadblocks in the development of future Kerry footballers but also see much sense in not overloading the prospects either.

This level of synergy is not completely reflected at club level within the county. Clubs, like the schools, contain a huge element of deference to the Kerry intercounty teams but some are somewhat hamstrung by depopulation in terms of providing prospects with an unobstructed involvement with the academy. They simply have to insist that prospects play on a number of club teams or else clubs would be in danger of not fielding teams at various age groups. One coach identified this as a major barrier to development especially when one considers that prospects still attempt to play other sports:

> *I suppose from my point of view it would be that there are 15 year olds and they're playing with their college, they could be playing in u16s with their club, they could play minor with their club if they're exceptionally good, then they could be playing – maybe they haven't specialised yet - soccer and basketball (Club Coach, Interview, December, 2016).*

From the academy's perspective, having prospects playing across age groups with their clubs is a very live issue to their own scheduling. It seems that there are a number of peak times within the year that crossover occurs. These most notably are February (the end of the school season and start of the club season), June (competition time for the academy and club), and October (finishing of club season and beginning of school season). The club is the common thread, but this can be related to the number and timing of club competitions and the fact that most clubs have little choice but to play talented prospects on more than one team.

7.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: There is little interaction between the parents of prospects and the academy personnel. In fact, one club coach commented how some parents would ask him for a

phone number of the academy coach when they needed to communicate with the academy:

> *Friends of mine who have fellas in development squads asked me for numbers, they wanted to talk to the coach and that's fair enough (Club Coach, Interview, December, 2016).*

This sums up the relationship really; parents are expected to act as the resource providers but will not really play any other designated role in supporting the prospects in their squad involvement. Parents were also seen to act as gatekeepers within their sons' development, especially when scheduling issues arise during the busy periods of activity. Without such intervention, some stakeholders believe that prospects will overload themselves and will not find a balance between football and other important areas of their lives. Other stakeholders contradicted these sentiments slightly by pointing out that some parents are inadvertently pressurising their sons by adopting a helicopter approach to monitoring and supporting their development. It is very obvious that many parents want their son to play with Kerry and are willing to offer extreme support to aid this desire. Changing schools just to play on a better school team is not uncommon within the county, and there is also a narrative developing regarding parents employing various types of coaches to train prospects on a one to one basis outside of group training sessions. A club coach was very open when discussing this new phenomenon:

> *I know some of the fellas I'd be involved with are actually paying fellas to train them, to make them better (Club Coach, Interview, December, 2017).*

What seemed lost on all stakeholders is that such behaviour is in fact putting more pressure on the prospects to play for the county and is doing little in terms of supporting them. Parents all spoke around the pride of playing for the county, representing their own townland and how important it was to give their sons every opportunity to 'make it'. The recent successes of the Kerry minor teams seems to be creating an even greater desire than ever amongst prospects and parents alike to represent the county at any level. This desire when aligned to some of the practices evidenced may lead to detrimental effects for some prospects.

Peers: Stakeholders are of the opinion that prospects tend to gravitate towards each other and friendships formed at the academy tend to last through the development process. This case differs hugely from other studied cases since so many of the prospects are in the same secondary school. At this school, prospects tend to stick together. One parent

commented how he could differentiate between prospects and non-prospects when he watched the students as they would leave the school grounds daily. Prospects tended to be in big groups and all of them seemed to be carrying a water bottle as they walked to their collection point. Interestingly, one of the teachers in the school noted that, as the students matured, they tended to make new friends again away from the academy:

> *Yes, they would hang around together, at the younger ages anyway I think. Maybe as they go up through the levels they, let's say, make their own friends again but they would, the lads at the Academy would bunch around together (Teacher, Interview, December, 2016).*

This is very remarkable and may suggest that there is a type of socialisation in existence at the initial selection stages and this phenomenon wanes with time.

School: There was a feeling from some stakeholders that prospects can struggle in relation to balancing school and football commitments. Teachers and parents, in particular, related to issues with finding this balance and are concerned that some prospects may be struggling:

> *I find the demands can be too much for them. Like I said, I know examples of students who are able to balance it, balance it well, but even at that it's tough going. It's very very tough going (Parent, Focus Group, January, 2017).*

A number of stakeholders made reference to the fact that some prospects move schools to play on better football school teams. These decisions have little to do with education and denote an unbalance in some prospects lives in relation to a weighting completely towards football. Other teachers mentioned that football is a wonderful outlet for some prospects since some struggle with schoolwork regardless of their sporting commitments or not. It was also suggested by some teachers that regardless of the time prospects devote to football, it was unknown what commitment they would give to education even if they had more time available to give. One teacher admitted that he had to make allowances for prospects within his class so that they could complete as much homework as their classmates. He operates a different schedule for prospects than non-prospects. It is no coincidence that he is also one of the coaches on the school football teams. When asked does this create resentment amongst non-prospects he mentioned that there seemed to be a simple level of acceptance that prospects simply have to be treated differently:

> *To be honest with you I haven't really spoken to other teachers about it. I'd imagine if you're more involved in football they'd be more understanding about it. That's not to say I leave them off with homework. I'd make the exception that they could*

> *do, let's say they have question 1 to 5 on a Wednesday night and they have training and then they have question 6 to 10 the next night, they have to have 1 to 10 done by Friday (Teacher, Interview, December, 2016).*

Schools operate supervised study for all students in the evening time. Some stakeholders suggested that this time could be better structured around football commitments so that prospects would have a better balance to their lives. This is especially doable when one considers that both academy and school training occur in the same location for a large part of the year i.e. the school gym or pitch. Clubs are located within a short commute to the school, thus there was an opinion that club training should also be structured around study in exam years and prospects could return to school in the evening to receive supported study.

7.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

The GAA: The GAA as a federation has little input into the processes of the academy in this case. Funding comes through the Association, on to the Munster Council and then directly to the County Committee. It is up to the County Committee to utilise these funds appropriately in terms of the needs of the academy. This funding is conditional on participation in the provincial tournaments and co-operation with guidelines laid down by the GAA at the beginning of each year. All activities of the academy are reported to the Provincial Council so as to ensure all counties operate within these outlined guidelines. Outside of these indirect interactions, the academy has no dealings with the central tenet of the GAA organisation in Croke Park in Dublin.

Youth Culture: The youth culture within the county mirrors very much the prevalent culture in the other cases. Social media and alcohol consumption are the most frequently mentioned components of the culture according to academy stakeholders. Social media was viewed in many instances as being a positive in promoting the desire and want to play for Kerry within the prospects. This was most obvious in the environs of the school and teachers are very clear regarding the central role it plays in feeding the want within prospects:

> *Especially with the younger lads, I think that they see the social media of the older lads in particular and they see them with their cup up in Croke Park…that definitely has an effect on younger lads. They'd say "I want that". They see how many likes those other lads and maybe how popular they are on social media (Teacher, Interview, December 2016).*

Sports Culture: Within Kerry, there is a unique association between Gaelic football and the natives of the county. This association has been developed on a tradition of winning All-Ireland titles. The sports culture within the county transcends into the everyday living of Kerry people and has given them an affinity for football that is unrivalled on the island of Ireland. To play for the county team is the highest accolade one can be bestowed within the county and carries with it a certain prestige for both the player and his family that cannot be matched in other walks of life. Simply put, Kerry people are fanatical about football. With such fanaticism, it is not surprising to find a complete deference to Kerry teams from all GAA stakeholders within the county. This deference manifests itself in clubs and schools all over the county, examples of which have been alluded to already in this case study. This love of one's county seems to be very much part of the Kerry DNA. It is this very ingredient that allows the Kerry development system to contain the synergies that is possesses; Kerry comes before all else.

Such fanaticism also brings with it a huge element of pressure for all stakeholders involved in Kerry GAA. There is an expectancy that Kerry teams will be successful and this expectancy places huge demands on coaches, players, and the county administration group. However, stakeholders have a willingness to accept such responsibility and perceive it as a privilege to be involved with such talented players. It is also obvious that stakeholders believe the pressure is worthwhile since there is a high probability of success across all competitions. One coach explicitly relayed how he perceives the associated pressure:

> *It could bother you but you just need to get on with it and you're in the very good position that you want to have pressure on you and it would be a lot worse if you weren't expected to win and you had to deal with counties that didn't have as good players as you (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Academy Culture: The focus of the academy is to help produce more elite Kerry players and to provide an outlet for the most talented players so that they are challenged. However, it says much for the standards within the county that some stakeholders are ambiguous in relation to the contribution of the academy towards the sustained success of the Kerry minor football team over the last number of years. One coach was completely unsure whether there was a direct correlation between these successes and the foundations the prospects receive at the academy:

> *You'd ask yourself and I'd love to know, if the squads weren't there would Kerry have won three minor All-Irelands. Maybe they would have. Maybe the schools would have driven that. Maybe the clubs would have driven that. You asked me is*

> *it worth putting fellas through that kind of pressures, that you're crushing guys along the way. Are the elite fellas still getting enough out of it to justify it? I am not sur e. (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Despite this, the culture within the academy is one of hard work, self-discipline and doing all that you can to hold your place in the squad. It must be remembered that at the end of the U16 season, Kerry North and Kerry South combine to form the Kerry U17 team which only has 30 squad members. Prospects understand that only those with the right attitude will survive within the system.

7.1.4 The Environment in the Time-Frame

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Stakeholders are very proud of their heritage and the football tradition that defines the culture of the county. This culture demands success. These demands have obvious knock on effects on those involved with developing the game within the county. At present, Kerry underage teams are the envy of every county in the country due to their record haul of four All-Ireland minor titles in a row. However, this success has created an issue in some ways for academy stakeholders. Despite wonderful synergies between clubs, schools and the academy, prospects in many instances are struggling with the demands placed on them. These demands are developing unbalanced young people who are committing hugely to a dream of playing with Kerry. Unfortunately, there is not a place for all prospects; 50% of them are deselected at the end of their u16 year. This in a way sums up the GAA culture of the county; it is very much Darwinian in its approach - only the strongest survive.

7.1.5 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

Figure 26 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in this specific county. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

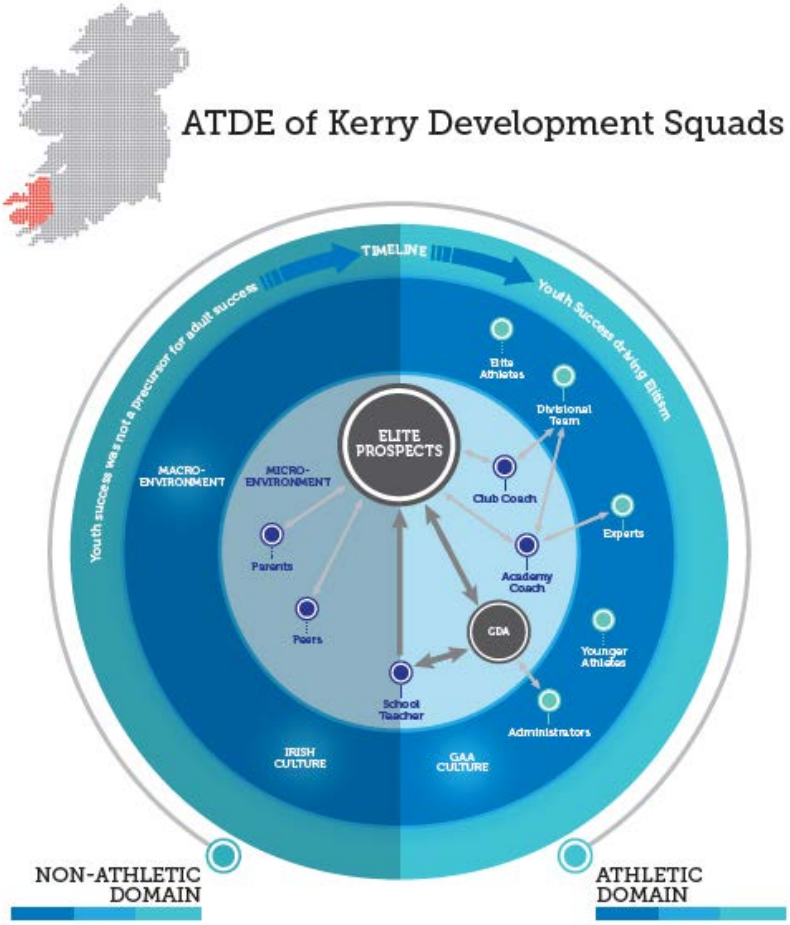

Figure 26: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Kerry GAA Academies**

7.2 Environment Success Factor (ESF) Working Model

7.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

7.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: The GAA provides equal assistance to each county in terms of supporting their academies. In total, this amounts to a grant of €30,000, which is shared between hurling and football teams within the academy. This finance comes directly from Croke Park to each individual County Board where is then filtered down to the academy. Budgets are developed between the Games Manager and the County Treasurer for each squad. Stakeholders rarely mentioned finance as a barrier to development but there is only a finite amount of funding available to the squad administrators. A number of stakeholders mentioned that they would wish to have more prospects involved in the squad system than are there currently. Club coaches and teachers mentioned that there is an abundance of talent in existence outside the academy system who just cannot break into the squads. They mention that the number of prospects should be increased but funding would not allow for it:

> *As for barriers for their development, I would say myself that, as good as the Academy is, it's only taking 30 young fellas ... I suppose it would be nice to include a larger number of them but again with resources and personnel and funding (Club Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Overall, the sense is that Kerry GAA support their prospects well. Every detail is in place from a financial viewpoint to aid development. Players receive gear year on year and are given snacks after each session in terms of recovery. Stakeholders in other cases had concerns regarding funding of squads; in Kerry it is never really mentioned. Parents spoke about instilling the right attitude in the prospects and not giving them too much too soon. This feeds into the psyche of the county and the understanding that there is a long road to travel to get to the elite level.

Human: Stakeholders were steadfast in their appreciation of the efforts of the people involved at academy level in Kerry. There is a stream of quality coaches wanting to get involved with the squads annually. These coaches operate within a well organised system which allows for them to focus completely on player improvement and coaching. It could also be said that the system functions due to the qualities of the people within it. The Games Manager is the conduit between the academy and the County Board and it is very clear to all stakeholders that he is the person responsible for steering policy and making sure that the academy functions to its maximum. He is often seen at sessions and is very much in contact with what is happening around the county. He has designed the structure in Kerry around the academy and he now manages the people within it. There is presently a demand

from volunteer coaches around the county to be involved with the academy. Some see this as an opportunity to build their coaching portfolio and as a stepping stone onto becoming the minor manager. This is not a guarantee for any of the coaches but the academy will endeavour to promote their quality people onto the county teams. Since there is such an abundance of good coaches, the perception from stakeholders is that the delivery of coaching to prospects is of a high standard. This perception is validated when one considers the successes of academy and minor teams in competition in recent seasons.

Material: In terms of a facility, the Kerry County Board have developed a Centre of Excellence in Currans, near Farranfore. This is located between the two major centres of population: Killarney and Tralee. This facility has cost over €8 million to develop and much of this has been self-financed through the fundraising efforts of the Kerry GAA. Such is the strength of the Kerry brand, fundraising dinners over one week in New York, Chicago, and Boston raised over €1 million towards the cost of the development.

This facility is certainly a statement that Kerry is very proud of its past but is keen to safeguard its future. It will be the home to all Kerry teams and includes a gymnasium, 10 dressing rooms, medical suites, video analysis room, and a player's lounge/kitchen area. Prior to this development, the Kerry South team had to ask clubs and schools for a loan of their facilities so as to train. In one way, in terms of the school facility, it only added to the level of synergy that is visible within the system. Currans will no doubt become the home of Kerry football and the provision available there will alleviate much of the administration that currently occupies GDAs time with regard to locating venues for training sessions. One stakeholder succinctly summarised the feeling within the county regarding relocating to Currans:

> *I'm looking forward to it. I think it will be a great option and great motivation for the kids that when they come to 16 or 17 or when they come to minor they'll come in as one group and they'll be training Saturday mornings and they'll see the Kerry seniors training. They'll feel part of the Kerry structure (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Added to this new development, the Kerry County Board are contributing €1.5 million into a sports science development in the Tralee Institute of Technology. This will be a hub for research, testing and scientific elements involved in preparing Kerry teams. Again, this would indicate a substantial desire by the Board to move Kerry GAA forward and promote a level of preparation that is unrivalled in most other counties. These developments are far

beyond what was delivered previously in terms of facility provision. The Board does own a training facility in the north of the county, but it is not of the scale of these developments.

7.2.3 Processes

The major processes mentioned by all stakeholders within the academy system were stakeholder synergy, skill development, and transition to elite level. The following is an account of each process in the Kerry GAA Academy:

Stakeholder Synergy: As already outlined, the academy system in Kerry is unique. This uniqueness stems for the fact that 23 prospects attend one school. This allows Kerry GAA to manage the prospects environment in a more structured manner than in the other cases studied. The alignment between the school and the academy is seamless but in some ways, somewhat unbalanced in favour of the academy. This very much relates to the deference referred to earlier in this chapter. The relationship between clubs and the academy is not as seamless but nevertheless, stakeholders contribute to ensuring that the load on the prospects is not overly complex. One club coach outlined how it works in the East Kerry region:

> *They're all driving the one way really. You probably know yourself trying to organise games, school, football, around this and in fairness they're very good that way. Even as a club coach I'd get a phone call saying they might be playing the Frewen Cup (schools competition) tomorrow, could we change that game. The East Kerry Board are very good to us. They will, especially if two clubs have the same players involved (Club Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Skill Development: There is much mention of the prioritisation of skill over all other elements of performance in Kerry football teams. Strength and Conditioning is the major component during the winter season but prospects still practice skills in the ball alleys at lunch break in the school. Much of this strength and conditioning is focused on injury prevention but some stakeholders believe it a necessary reaction to the perceived physical dominance of Ulster teams at the beginning of the century. However, Kerry teams still pride themselves on skill and being perceived as the most skilful players in the country. This is very much part of the DNA of the county and one club coach was very clear in his head on what must be prioritised in player development:

> *Development squads, what do they promote? Lifestyle is huge. Teamwork is huge. Probably in Kerry star player you have to be a team player. The guy that's an individual, you're not going to last too long. Discipline I suppose. Physicality isn't a huge think in Kerry, it's skill(Club Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Transition to Elite Level: The view of all stakeholders within the Kerry academy system is somewhat long-term. In the past, the focus of any prospect was to become a Kerry senior footballer. This could be related to the fact that Kerry teams were not successful at minor level but were still transitioning quality players to the senior team. These teams were winning senior All-Irelands despite the lack of underage success, thus the focus was on making these teams. Currently, the focus of all prospects is to get as far as the minor team. Kerry have just completed a record 4 All-Ireland minor titles in a row and this level of success has shifted the focus of prospects to a more immediate position of transition.

7.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Kerry GAA Academy.

Artefacts: Two artefacts dominate the landscape in the academy; 1) the surrounding institutions and 2) the symbolism associated with the Kerry jersey. The schools and clubs feeding into the squad are hugely influential in terms of what they represent. St Brendan's, Killarney has a wonderful tradition in Gaelic football and this tradition seeps from the history decorating its corridor's walls into the students of the school on a daily basis. It is no accident that the school has dominated the national football landscape for the last number of years. Similarly, the clubs of East and South Kerry bring with them a huge tradition of feeding some of the most brilliant players in the history of the game into famous Kerry teams. The Dr. Crokes club in Killarney is one such club; they were All-Ireland club champions in 2017 and have in their ranks, Colm Cooper, the greatest player of his generation. These legacies have been built around practice and skill development and these artefacts implant these facets of player development to the very front of the prospects heads.

The Kerry jersey is an artefact in its own right within the environment. Prospects understand almost innately the responsibility that comes with wearing it and how they should covet the fact that many aspire to it but few are chosen. It represents a football tradition in how the game should be played, a huge level of success and a sense of belonging to a most powerful dynasty. This is framed by academy coaches so that prospects are uplifted by wearing the jersey and don't feel burdened in any way. It is interesting to note that unlike other counties, Kerry prospects wear the real county jersey

and not an academy jersey as such. This again carries with it a sense of prestige, a sense that we are thrusting this responsibility onto you, a sense that we believe that you are good enough. As one club coach described, the symbolism of getting the jersey is an extremely powerful and motivating component of player development within the county:

> *When you grow up in Kerry every father is wanting this for their son. It's there. The prestige of being in the development squad as well, you're putting on the Kerry jersey, even if it's u14 and even if it's South Kerry, you're still putting on the jersey. It's a huge thing. It's always been a huge thing in Kerry (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

Espoused Values: There are numerous values espoused by the academy stakeholders but a small number are prominent. These include self-discipline, a sense of fun, and the drive for excellence. When asked what it is the academy gives their children through their involvement, the parent group were unequivocal in identifying the key value – discipline. Accordingly, one prospect attributes this sense of discipline to the facilitation of interaction between all prospects. Prospects share a structure in their lives and adopt common lifestyle practices that promote interaction and development. This sense of discipline is reinforced by the associated culture that requires all prospects to wear the Kerry training gear to all training sessions. A sense of enjoyment and fun is also very important to stakeholders within the environment. Fun games, fun warm ups and a jovial atmosphere before and after sessions between coaches and prospects are all visible elements of the associated culture. However, there is also an understanding, from all, that sessions are serious and prospects are challenged to improve and develop themselves through their involvement. As one coach proclaims, there can only be so much fun:

> *I suppose it's very driven but then again the personality of the coaches makes it feel very relaxed. It's hugely driven but his personality supports the kids. They love him, the jokes and they enjoy coming in, there's a smile on their faces. But having said that, it's entirely focussed on getting results as well and doing things properly (Coach Assistant, Interview, March 2017).*

Doing things properly corresponds hugely to a drive for excellence across the academy. Stakeholders are continuously looking for a better way so that Kerry GAA can push ahead of all of its competitors. Much of this approach aligns very much with simplicity. The focus is around skill development and lifestyle management. Prospects are reminded continuously about minding themselves and ensuring that they approach their club and school activity in the same manner as they approach work at the academy.

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. Two basic assumptions dominate the environment; 1) lack of real synergy between clubs within the county and the academy and 2) the naissance of an extreme elitist annex of Kerry underage GAA. The clubs of the county are in no doubt that it's an honour to have one of your members represent Kerry at any level. They look upon as a positive for the club since involvement brings about player improvement and thus more opportunity for success for the club in the longer run.

Despite the associated positives, clubs in many areas of Kerry are not in a position to provide prospects with an unobstructed passage with regard to their academy experience. Depopulation especially, is causing serious issues for these clubs in filling teams. Prospects are asked to play up age grades and this has led to issues with club scheduling and prospect's training load. Managing the synergy between these clubs and the schedule of the academy is proven problematic, especially around the peak times in February, June, and September. This lack of synergy is creating issues for prospects since they want to play on all teams they are selected for.

The second assumption within the environment concerns the widening gap between prospects and their club peers. Despite claims to the contrary, the perception of the academy is that it is becoming more elitist in terms of what it represents. Prospects are expected to behave a certain way in terms of their lifestyle. Teachers spoke about the highly nutritious lunches that prospects bring and consume at school, coaches spoke about parents employing private coaches to provide individual prospects with extra training, and parents spoke about how they could differentiate between prospects and non-prospects on their exit from school by the accompanying water bottle in their hand. Prospects and their families are doing all that they can to 'make it'. However, only 50% of prospects will be selected to represent Kerry at minor level.

7.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: It is without question that prospects expedite their development through their involvement with the academy. All stakeholders spoke of the pluses that come about in individual development through prospect involvement. However, the advantages that prospects are endowed with through academy selection also come with a caveat. Prospects are under pressure continuously and most especially when they are playing games with their club teams. One parent remarked how a non-prospect who makes incremental improvements as a player may in fact be better off than those who actually are selected for the academy squads:

> *It depends on the boys but the pressure comes too from being on the development squad…People have this idea that "he's in development squads, he's some player" but realistically I find that the guy, like I was saying at the start, the guy that's moving up a small bit at a time is the guy that could be really the top fella (Parent, Focus Group, January 2017).*

Despite this caveat, prospects, through their involvement with the academy, also develop other skills that are not sport specific. On analysis of the data, these skills include time management, work ethic, social skills, discipline, and dealing with setbacks. One notable characteristic in this case was the courage necessary for prospects to focus on elite Gaelic football despite the social costs incurred with one's peers.

Team Development: There is little mention of team development from any of the stakeholders. The focus is very much on Kerry and producing players for the future. Coaches spoke of player development and lifestyle management as the major tenets of the academy. Within this focus, there is little mention of winning competitions. The approach is much more nuanced than that and more aligned to developing game understanding within a team context. However, the Kerry GAA website annually uploads pictures of the victorious Kerry academy teams following success at competitions. It is very important in some ways that the work being done at the academy is acclaimed. This in turn provides the GAA fraternity within the county with an assurance that the supply of talented players to the elite ranks is not in decline.

Environment's Success: In terms of the environment's success, one could automatically suggest that Kerry seem to have so much right in terms of developing quality players and teams. 2017 saw the products of the academy win an unprecedented 4 All-Ireland minor titles in a row. The schools of the county have been similarly successful on a national level over the same period. Coaches from within the county are clamouring to play a part in preparing players at the academy, thus there is a strong element of quality control in terms

of coach selection. At schools level, there is anecdotal evidence that in one very successful school, the principal may have to introduce a rotation policy amongst the staff with regard to who gets to manage the school teams, such is the level of teacher interest. All of these elements feed into a coherent and well organised structure that is loaded with quality, experienced and driven people. Kerry GAA people have an innate knowledge of how to get things done properly and all of the evidence suggests that there is currently much being done at a structural level that has a direct association with the recent levels of success.

7.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

Figure 27 presents the empirical version of the SF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Kerry Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential. It is important to note that the environment studied is complex and development processes are dynamic, so certain key elements have been highlighted to provide a summary of the case.

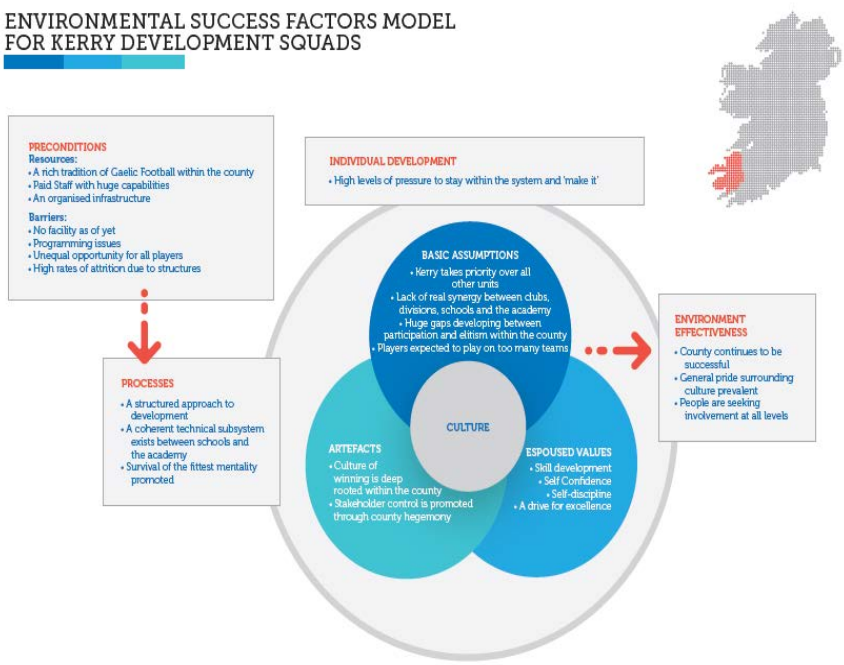

Figure 27: **The ESF Empirical Model of the Kerry GAA Academy**

7.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Kerry GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. Recent success at youth level would suggest that Kerry GAA has a very coherent youth structure in place within the county. There is a large cohort of quality people both managing and operating within the academy system in Kerry whilst there are many quality coaches waiting to gain entry into the academy system. In the near future, the opening of a new training facility will allow for the development of a Community of Practice for both coaches and players, which is currently lacking. Such practices will add greatly to the levels of synergy already present within the academy system. These synergies are most evident in the relationships between second level schools and the U16 academy squad. Some prospects are struggling with the demands placed upon them, yet they remain highly motivated to transition to elite level GAA. The environment, in some ways, leads to an unbalance in the lives of some prospects. Their focus can be completely around football, with other elements such as school given little time or sense of importance in their lives.

Chapter 8: Case Study Five – Dublin

8.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

Dublin is viewed by all in the world of Gaelic Games as being different. As the capital city of Ireland, Dublin provides the GAA with an abundance of participants, resources, and revenue. In many ways, as a county, it is treated as an independent entity within the association and enjoys an unrivalled level of funding and grant-aid from both the Irish Sports Council and the GAA. This support only increases the sense of disparity in other counties, but it is legitimised on the basis of the cultural and commercial importance of having a strong GAA presence in the capital city. This level of investment has resulted in an upsurge in standards at local club level and this has coincided with an unprecedented level of success at senior and U21 elite level. Dublin GAA is now perceived to be the market leader in Ireland from many viewpoints; commercially, financially, and structurally. The Dublin Academy is anecdotally viewed from a very similar standpoint and is believed to afford the underage prospects with the county every opportunity of developing their potential.

Table 6: Biography of Dublin GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 footballers in the county
10 years	60	A manager supported by 2/3 coaches	134	26	1752

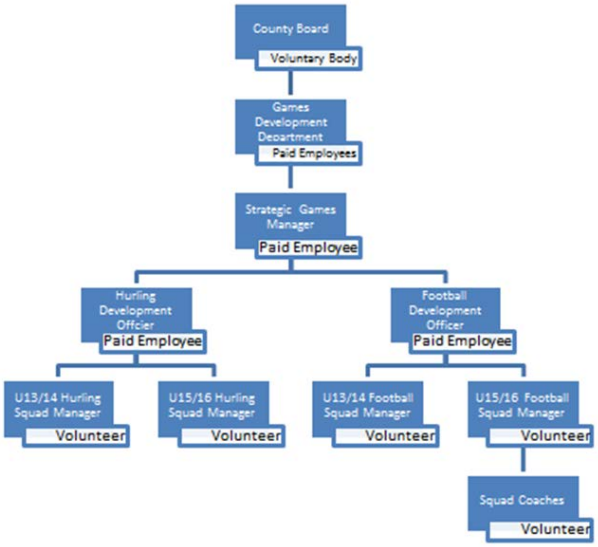

Figure 28: Academy Management Structure within Dublin GAA

8.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

Prospects: The target population in this study are prospects who are members of the county U16 academy. This implies that they must be born in 2001. There are 60 prospects within the training group. Training takes place in various venues over the course of the year. Each session is scheduled on the Activity Calendar, which is developed in the previous November. This calendar includes dates for all club games within the county, as well as the dates for academy activities. The squad normally trains on every second Sunday of each month. A number of matches against other counties were arranged throughout the season. The squad also participated in a Leinster U16 competition in July.

The Coach: The management team consists of a manager and a number of coaches. This group had responsibility for both the U15 and U16 groups. This was their fourth year working in the academy and they have had this group since they were U13. The manager acts as the lead coach of both groups and consults with the Football Development Officer in terms of planning of sessions and administration. He is a former elite player and is currently a coach with the senior elite Dublin football team. He described his coaching philosophy as being holistic, with a focus on creating an appropriate environment:

> *In my head the first priority was to develop the individual and not the player so we put our focus on putting together a mission statement, the values that we're looking for, very broad but they are applicable to non-football and football in life. That's what we started with and then, based on that, we spent a lot of time working on what we wanted our environment to look like (Academy Coach, Interview, April 2017).*

The team of coaches was heavily populated with some of his former elite playing colleagues who shared this philosophy. The manager identified traits in each of them that he wanted modelled within the academy and was very cognisant of the importance of having such quality people working with him:

> *I looked at them and, with my own sons, if they worked out like them and have their traits as human beings, then I would be proud. I was very fortunate that these guys were willing to give their time (Academy Coach, Interview, April 2017).*

The coach described how he operated within the guidelines prescribed by the Football Development Officer and rigidly stuck to the agreed calendar. All administrative duties were undertaken by this officer so that the manager could focus on the coaching process. The manager viewed himself as a tool for '*empowering*' the other coaches and the prospects within the group. He describes his role as that of *'a middle manager'*, with his responsibilities aligned both towards the structures of Dublin GAA and the prospects within the academy. His focus was very much on developing an environment in which prospects could understand the values associated with Dublin GAA and the feeling that they could play a role once they had the appropriate work ethic and character.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes: There was limited interaction between the elite players and the prospects. Academy personnel spoke about the advantages that these type of interactions would bring but suggested that the senior players are *'lacking in time'*. Both groups train in separate venues or at different times, so all interactions were orchestrated by the academy. Elite players, who are students, work in the academy summer camps during the summer months. This offers prospects an opportunity to form relationships with the elite players and learn from their experiences. The Football Development Officer described how the camps operate:

> *The idea is that they do interact with the players so what I do is I break them up into groups of 10. I have 10 coaches there who are senior players who are on the senior squad and their objective is to mentor these guys for the week and then sit down and basically just have a chat to them about what they do themselves (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Other individual players have been invited in to speak to the prospects on different occasions. The manager described how the elite players '*are keen to kind of give something back and part of that is, and they've looked at it themselves, is kind of buddying up with development squads'* (Administrator, Interview, January 2017). This, however, had its limitations, especially in relation to their availability.

Experts: It is only in the last two years that the academy has introduced a Strength and Conditioning element to its practices. Prior to this, the work at the academy was exclusively football based. Presently, the County High Performance Manager has a number of interns working with him and he delegates these personnel to work with the academy squads. Their focus is on warm ups, running technique, and body weight exercises. Finding a balance between this work and football practice is one that the squad manager was acutely aware of:

> *I'm aware, if you look at our first phase, the majority of the time is in that S&C space. I suppose it's a reality of how GAA has gone but it's something I will be keeping an eye on, that it doesn't become the focus, that ultimately it comes down to enjoyment and the fun and the ball (Academy Coach, Interview, April 2017).*

Outside of the work of the interns, there are no other external experts involved in the academy environment.

Related Teams and Clubs: There is a limited relationship between the prospect's club coach and the coaches at the academy. Clubs feel that they have little function in the work at the academy once they initially supply prospects to the trial system at the beginning of each year. Dates are laid down in the fixtures calendar that outline the club and academy schedule and this is communicated to all stakeholders at the beginning of each season. Since the academy can operate in isolation from the clubs, there is limited communication between both. Club coaches outlined how they had no idea of what actually happened at squad sessions and in some instances, felt alienated from the whole academy process. This led some coaches to actually question the worth of the academy and proclaim that, what they had on offer in the club was of equal standard to what was available with the county. These coaches were from the top clubs in Dublin; they agreed that this would not be the case with the smaller clubs of the county.

This lack of synergy was also evident between the academy and the school. This was seen as a 'big issue' by the academy administration and as '*something that has been previously identified'*. Very few schools have a GAA culture whilst a number of prospects attended

schools that play other sports such as rugby. A number of prospects play such sports at the top level within their school and combine this with their commitment with the academy. This was very much supported by the squad manager.

Most schools were not participating at elite level in Leinster GAA competitions. One teacher outlined how some schools just do not have the interest in promoting football properly and how this has a knock on effect at the academy:

> *Then there just might not be the interest in the school as well. It is very sporadic. That's why male teachers in Dublin are really highly sought after in that sense but we see, we get very little, in terms of football; we get very little development happening at school (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

In some ways, the fact that prospects have little school football may act as an aid to their development. One club coach remarked how the school football issue meant that prospects could focus on club and academy activities and did not have the added burden of school teams.

8.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: The squad manager was adamant that parents would be informed along the development process of what was planned over the coming months. The year is divided into three phases and it is outlined to parents of what each phase involves. Parents were often observed speaking informally to the manager at the beginning of squad sessions. In this case, parents seemed to be well informed of schedules and the associated approach and were very supportive of the work of the academy. However, as described by one club coach, some parents, especially those from non-GAA backgrounds, are putting undue pressure on prospects to prioritise the academy over all other activities:

> *The other issue is where parents who wouldn't have a major GAA background just see the lights of Dublin and see everything is about Dublin…that their son can't miss a Dublin development squad session but yet if that's your third of fourth session in a week he needs a rest for a club session…the club gets further away and there would be a disconnect sometimes between a player coming back from development squads and the players who never got picked in the first place (Club Coach, Interview, April, 2017).*

This coach also felt that parents exert a large influence on prospects and that the academy itself exerts a large influence on the parent body:

> *I do think that the parents do influence boys. They see the Dublin jersey, the see the crest, they see the kid getting a top at the end of the year or whatever it is and*

don't really see the fact that 89 other kids got the same top at the same age (Club Coach, Interview, April, 2017).

This sense of influence may be magnified in this case since Dublin football is at present enjoying its most glorious moments in its history. Parents simply want their children to experience what is happening for Dublin GAA at present.

Peers: Prospects identified that many of their friends at different commitments to them and this caused them issues at times. The Academy management were also aware that prospects have friends with many different interests and that these friends played a role in their development. Interestingly, the Academy Manager recalled one session in particular where the influence of socialising was an issue:

> *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. Again, it's not core to what we're doing but it's certainly something that we understand that they have a life outside of it (Academy Manager, Interview, April 2017).*

School: As already outlined, the academy does not have any relationship with the schools that prospects attend. This does not imply that those involved in the academy do not understand the academic pressures that prospects face. Most of the prospects were at least a year away from their Leaving Cert[18], but education was viewed by the squad manager as an important element in the holistic development of the prospects:

> *It's something again that we can only control with what we have but certainly our first session we did speak about non-sport stuff so we planted the seed that if you look at inter county teams the majority have gone through college. So if you see S&C or skills are an important part of playing for your county, so is education. Like diet and lifestyle we've spoken about in the past (Academy Manager, Interview, April 2017).*

However, despite these musings being delivered to the prospects, the academic development of prospects is not seen by the academy as part of their responsibility remit.

[18] The Leaving Certificate Examinations, which is commonly referred to as the Leaving Cert is the final examination in the Irish secondary school system.

8.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

The GAA: The GAA as a federation has little input into the processes of the academy in this case. Funding comes through the Association, on to the Leinster Council and then directly to the County Committee. It is up to the County Committee to utilise these funds appropriately in terms of the needs of the academy. This funding is conditional on participation in the provincial tournaments and co-operation with guidelines laid down by the GAA at the beginning of each year. All activities of the academy are reported to the Provincial Council so as to ensure all counties operate within these outlined guidelines. Outside of these indirect interactions, the academy has no dealings with the central tenet of the GAA organisation in Croke Park in Dublin. An academy coach outlined how he felt the GAA at a central level should be more involved:

> *If you look at the running of the academy and how it's operated, there is no major connection between the two (i.e. The GAA and the academies). They're separate identities. The development squad will run and operate its own way(Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

Youth Culture: The youth culture within the county is very much similar to the culture observed in the other cases. Prospects spoke about the effect their involvement in the academy had on their social lives and how they had different priorities than many of their friends. In fact, prospects mentioned that their football commitments severely limited their spare time and they could little else outside of football in comparison to the friends. There was little mention from stakeholders of the effects of social media on prospects in this case.

Sports Culture: The sports culture within this county is one that permeates a number of different sports. At present, Dublin football is enjoying its most successful period in its history and it dominates the sport culture of the county. However, there are many areas of the county where GAA has yet to really infiltrate. Soccer dominates many areas, most especially those areas of social disadvantage. Rugby is the dominant sport in some schools, especially in the more affluent areas of Dublin. However, it is noteworthy that there were a number of prospects who play rugby in school and Gaelic football with a club and who were deemed talented enough to be selected for the academy. The Academy Manager openly supported such levels of diversification.

8.1.4 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. Figure 29 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in Dublin. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

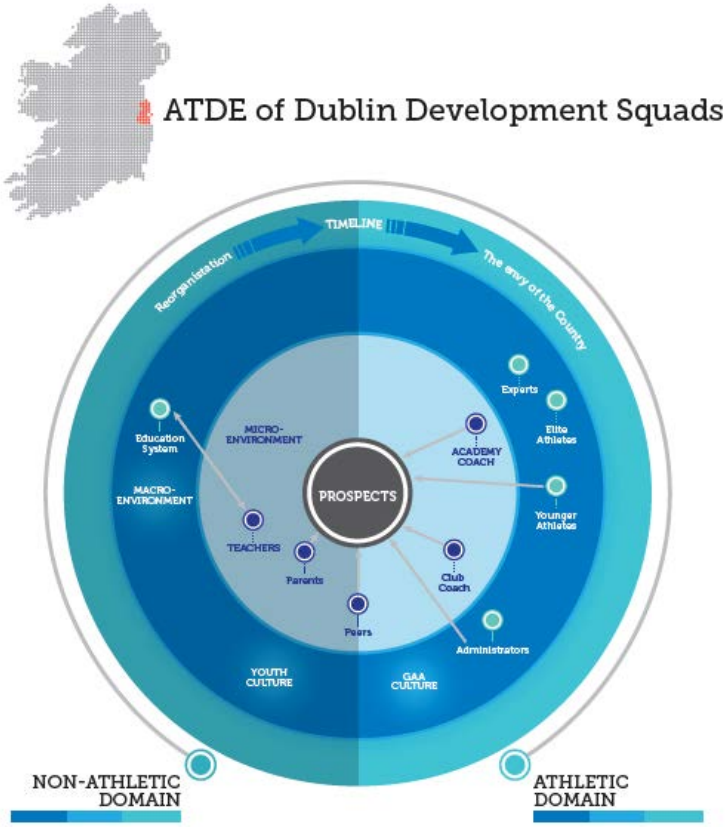

Figure 29: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Dublin GAA Academies**

8.2 Environment Success Factor Working Model

8.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

8.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: The GAA provides equal assistance to each county in terms of supporting their academies. In total, this amounts to a grant of €30,000, which is shared between hurling and football teams within the academy. This finance comes directly from GAA headquarters in Dublin to each individual County Board, where is then filtered down to the academy. The academy operates within a budget but stakeholders had little complaints regarding how well or otherwise it is resourced. Dublin GAA was seen by other cases as being extremely well funded due to its preeminent commercial positioning, driven hugely by recent elite level success and population. However, an opulence associated with such perspectives was not observed within the environment. Stakeholders were not overly concerned with material items such as leisure wear or clothing and all remarked that they had everything they needed to function properly. However, there was one distinct difference between this and other cases, namely, the organisational structure surrounding the academy. The Games Development Unit within the county is populated by fulltime personnel, some of whom are employed solely with a focus on the organisation of development squads. Similarly, many of the clubs of Dublin GAA are part funded by the GAA to employ fulltime coaching staff as a means of promoting Gaelic Games within the capital. This has many advantages for player development that cannot be replicated in other counties.

Material: Despite the many commercial advantages that Dublin GAA has over other counties, it has struggled hugely in terms of providing facilities for the academy and its other elite teams. At present, much of the academy activity occurs in the sports grounds of University College Dublin or Dublin City University. However, these facilities are not always available to Dublin GAA and, in these instances, the Squad Administrator must locate a facility elsewhere. A club coach outlined what happens on such occasions:

> *They're in the laps of the gods of the council and clubs. He'd often text me on Thursday night saying any chance of using our club grounds for a session. 9 times out of 10 it wouldn't be, it wouldn't be his first text, he'd go off somewhere else (Club Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

A teacher who is also an academy coach identified that a lack of a facility was a huge issue for Dublin, but he was willing to locate the academy practices in his own school:

> *I'd be hoping to use my own school as a base for working because normally one of the difficulties in Dublin is we don't have a home, we don't have a base. We're jumping from here to there, we're going from UCD to DCU to Abbotstown to somewhere else so you never have somewhere where you can actually bring in and work, you'll only ever have a dressing room or a container, if even. That's where the schools could come in. There definitely is an area for more there (Teacher, Interview, March 2017).*

Stakeholders felt that the lack of a permanent home had other implications for Dublin GAA outside of the provision of accommodation. One coach identified how a home for Dublin GAA could add hugely to the development of a Dublin culture within the academy:

> *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 Augero at the exact time where he scores the goal. In terms of developing culture and identity I think it would be massive (Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

It was observed that all prospects arrived to training sessions already changed for practice and simply put on their boots at the side of the pitch. This practice has obvious implications for social interaction within the confines of a dressing room before and after training sessions. Many stakeholders felt that this is a common practice in Dublin GAA, but the provision of a training centre may allow for such interaction amongst prospects.

Human: The most influential precondition prevalent within the environment is the academy personnel. The appointed coaches are of a very high calibre and have vast experience of coaching at elite level Gaelic football. They operate within a structure that allows them to focus completely on coaching prospects and not having to worry about other organisational issues. These issues are the responsibility of a fulltime employee, the Squad Administrator. It is his function to ensure that all operational arrangements are in place for all football squads in the academy. He too, is a former elite player and possesses a real understanding of what is involved in the development of elite footballers. Finally, both the coaches and the administrators are very much aware that they are part of the

macro-environment of Dublin football. Dates for squad activities are decided by a fulltime employee of the Dublin GAA Board and these fit around the club schedule. A calendar is produced in November annually and all activities are scheduled centrally. This is a slight departure from the experiences observed in other cases, whereby regional boards operate as independent bodies within individual counties.

8.2.3 Processes

The major processes mentioned by all stakeholders within the academy system were talent identification and long-term development. The following is an account of each process in the Dublin GAA Academy:

Talent Identification: Within the academy, prospects are deselected year after year. 500 prospects attend for trial games at U13 level and are whittled down to 110 prospects by U14. The process involves inter-club 10-a-side games where there is a focus on fun but also on selecting the best performers. By time the prospects reach U16, only 45 remain in the academy. According to the Squad Administrator, the criterion for selection comes down to two elements; '*performance and talent*' (Squad Administrator, Interview, January, 2017). Both elements are identified by the coaches. The U16 management have developed a unique method for identifying the late developers within the county. In April every year, prospects outside the academy are invited to 'try out' and be selected. The manager outlined their approach:

> *We don't use the word 'trial, I just don't like the word – for players. Instead of going to the clubs and saying "bring three guys out" and the club mentor going "Johnny, Billy and Jack", we put a questionnaire together with some simple questions, "why do you think this player should be at development squad level?", "what are his strengths?", "what could he improve on?" We wanted the clubs to be proactive in terms of, okay, well if you feel this player is at the level you show us. As much as we want to see other players we don't want to just be a PR exercise as well (Academy Manager, Interview, March, 2017).*

Long-term Development: The approach within the Dublin Academy differs hugely to other cases studied. There was no mention of competition but, instead, a large emphasis on long-term development and bilateral skill development. One academy coach succinctly described the aim of the academy programme:

> *Success to me is if we have a number of those players playing, one, senior inter county but, secondly, club football or social, whatever it is, that there's a longevity, a sustainable approach to it and I don't know for definite but I'm sure there are times where certain development squads have looked at winning a minor title or*

> *an under 16 title as the focus. Again, we never preached results and we never will. I hope I don't get into that position. We've played against teams that were certainly outcome-based based on the feedback they've given players and referees. So we see our approach as something that will get them to that level (Academy Coach, Interview, March 2017).*

This aim is supported by the actions of the squad management since all prospects receive equal game time in both competitive and non-competitive games. The squad is continuously rotated for these games and there is little indication of who management perceive to be the 'best' players. In addition, management are insistent that the academy will be a good experience for all prospects. One coach outlined the approach at training sessions:

> *From under 13 to under 15 we've never played competitively in training. We've never kept score. We have a silence sideline policy both in terms of the mentors and for any parents that are there. That was a real eye opener for us when we started that policy and getting the feedback from the kids and bringing club mentors and parents in and saying "what did you notice about today?" "Nobody was shouting at me" and "did you enjoy that?" "Yes, it was great".*

8.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Dublin GAA Academy.

Artefacts: Since Dublin GAA does not have a venue they can classify as their own, there is a marked absence of physical artefacts in the prospect's training environment. Training moves from one venue to the next, which does not allow for integration of symbolism or the physical representation of the Dublin GAA culture. The academy also does not use the Dublin GAA jersey or crest. Instead, all playing and training gear is branded with the Dublin GAA academy crest. One coach outlined why this has become policy within the academy:

> *You see it in other counties as well, that you're not necessarily a Dublin footballer yet. Where you are at the moment is you're on a Dublin development squad and the crest would be development coaching and games crest. I can see the mentality behind it, if you want to get that jersey you work on it continuously to achieve that (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

The academy has also taken the view that prospects will only receive a very limited amount of gear annually. The Squad Administrator felt that in the past, prospects had received a substantial amount of gear and this led to issues:

> *There was lot more of that kind of gear floating around and actually would have seen psychological issues there where young fellas at the age of 14 or 15 thought they had made it. All of a sudden there was an arrogance and then you would hear a club mentor complaining about this guy is coming back here and he's not really engaged, so it was to break down that as well (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Despite the lack of physical artefacts within the environment, the verbal artefact is very much present. Prospects are very aware of what it is they are representing and the level of expectation that comes with being part of the academy. This is related to the high standards demanded of prospects by the academy coaches, but it is also connected to the level of competition both within and outside the squad. Elements such as gear are perceived to be of limited importance within the academy. Instead, prospects develop an understanding that the academy involvement is something to be cherished on a much greater scale than material items such as playing gear. The Squad Administrator alluded to this:

> *I think they have an understanding after a while, that hang on a second, there is something bigger on offer here. It's nice to have the Dublin gear going into school and playing in it back in the club but there is something, I am getting more out of this (Administrator, Interview, January 2017).*

Espoused Values: The Academy has a sense of fun and positivity as its central tenets overriding all its activities. Its aim is to inspire young boys to play for Dublin by creating a special academy environment in which they enjoy being part of. From the elite team down to the U13 group, there is an emphasis on simply letting players play whilst working things out for themselves and learning from their own mistakes. It is believed by the academy personnel that such an approach develops prospects that are self-motivated and are driven to develop the necessary skillsets even while they are away from the academy environment. On another level, certain values permeate the language and actions within the environment. These values include humility, respect, and responsibility. The squad manager outlined how he and the management actually drew up a mission statement at the beginning of their involvement with the academy and how this drives their behaviour:

> *Then we got together and we put together what we say our environment is to provide. So, enjoyment, skills-based, open to other sports, comfortable nurturing environment, not afraid to make mistakes, provide drills that are games specific, we are coaching kids, not adults, to take feedback from kids, it's a process, you're*

> *not on trial, and respect yourself, teammates and opposition. So that's our values, that is our core, so if you ask me what success is. It's if we can retain our environment and retain our values. That's success (Squad Manager, Interview, January 2017).*

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. In this case, there was a large correlation between espoused values and stakeholder behaviour. Much of this correlation can be attributed to the quality of people involved allied to the organisational structures of Dublin GAA. However, one element within the environment that did not reflect these values is the issues surrounding deselection. The protocol surrounding deselection involves initial contact with the prospect's club manager so as to inform him of the deselection decision taken by academy management. This is followed by a letter to the prospects himself. However, according to a club coach, these protocols are not always followed and club managers are sometimes not sure if prospects are still involved with the academy or not. In addition, since the volume of potential prospects is so great, many players are rejected before they reach 14 years of age. One academy coach outlined the effects this can have on some youths:

> *So in terms of the group, we're great in Dublin and we've big numbers but I'll end up with a panel for this year of 90 kids effectively. I would have seen 600 kids at the start of the year. So in terms of where's that 510 kids going and what are they doing And what impact has it had on them going to a trial and being let go I have one fella from my own club and I got a phone call from the mother saying "look I'm not having a go at you but I just want to let you know that he won't get out of the bed, he won't go to soccer, he has just given up, what can I do?'' (Academy Coach, Interview, January 2017).*

This deselection issue is not congruent to the overall approach evident within the academy and is far removed from the actions and behaviours that are commonplace within the environment.

8.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: In terms of individual development, prospects and other stakeholders outlined the psychosocial benefits of involvement with the Dublin academy. Selection for the academy gave prospects a sense of confidence that was most evident

when they returned back to their club for games and training. There was also a focus within the academy of bi-lateral skill development and the necessity for prospects to develop these skills in their own time. It was observed at a number of sessions that prospects arrived early and worked in pairs practising kicking off both sides of the body without instruction from coaches. This sense of self-responsibility was evident in other actions such as picking up training equipment after training sessions, staying on after the session for extra kicking practice and making sure the facility was left the way it was found on arrival.

Team Development: The academy was not overly concerned about developing a team so as to be ready for the summer competitions. The focus was on creating an environment whereby development would occur and players could transition to the next levels of elite performance. As already outlined, prospects were continuously rotated on match days and management never outwardly portrayed any interest in results. Instead, the focus was very much centred on learning and developing values that would be useful later in life, both inside and outside sport. In this context, the approach could be classified as individualised and holistic. The Academy Manager describes this approach well:

> *Success to me is if we have a number of those players playing, one, senior inter county but, secondly, club football or social, whatever it is, that there's a longevity, a sustainable approach to it (Academy Manager, Interview, March 2017).*

Environment's Success: The environment of the Dublin GAA Academy is nuanced in comparison to the other cases within this study. There was little pressure on management to produce winning teams and win underage competitions. Instead, the focus was very much on long-term development and ensuring that prospects relished being a constituent in the academy environment. This focus has fun and enjoyment at its epicentre but prospects are highly motivated and driven to succeed. Presently, Dublin GAA needs little embellishment or promotion in the minds of young prospects. Prospects are provided with an environment that is highly organised and resourced to the point of necessity. It was very evident that prospects are flourishing in many ways from the approach adopted within Dublin. This approach is underpinned by the promotion of values such as respect, responsibility, and humility. These may be the unseen secrets of Dublin's success; most outsiders attribute recent success to population, playing numbers and the county's commercial ability. However, this analysis has seen the success of the environment only partially attributable to these elements.

8.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

Figure 30 presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Dublin Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential.

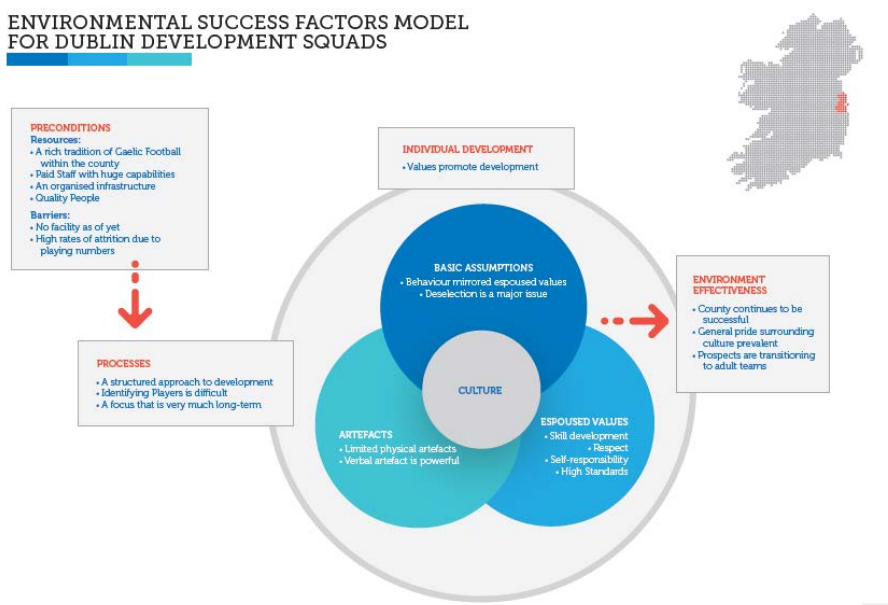

Figure 30: **The ESF Empirical Model of the Dublin GAA Academy**

8.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Dublin GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. These models describe the Dublin case as a highly organised and efficient organisation that is populated by quality people. This is the basis of their recent success. These unprecedented levels of success has seen many commentators suggest that Dublin is now too powerful as an individual GAA county unit and should be split in two. This suggestion is founded on the population and commercial advantage that the county has over other counties. However, this analysis highlights other elements that may be more

attributable to Dublin's success. The academy environment is driven by high standards by quality people that help promote a sense of responsibility in prospects. This sense of responsibility is also partially developed at club level across the county, where standards are also unquestionably high. It is the amalgam of the academy and club approaches that seem most responsible for the turn in Dublin's level of success over the last decade.

However, there are a number of barriers to development evident in the environment. The relationship between the club and academy environments is limited, whilst there is a complete lack of a relationship between the academy and the schools of the county. This absence of a relationship with schools has obvious ramifications for a synergised approach to prospect development. A relationship with schools may also address the facilities issue prevalent within the county. However, despite these limitations, prospects enjoy an academy experience that contains deep-rooted values enveloped in a vision that is geared towards the future. This approach prepares prospects for the transition to elite football and affords Dublin GAA opportunity for success in adult competition.

Chapter 9: Case Study Six – Tyrone

9.1 The Athletic Talent Development Environment

This case is a county that would be externally viewed as being very progressive at maximising its resources of talent. Situated in the northern part of the country, this academy has produced many players over the past decade that has helped to develop a recent winning tradition within the county. This success has been seen across all grades of competition; senior, U21, and minor (U18). Coinciding with, and proudly scaffolding this new level of status, was the development of a purpose built Centre of Excellence in 2011. Much of the finance necessary for this undertaking was raised by volunteer GAA members within the county. This centre is the hub of all GAA activity within the county from both an administrative and playing perspective. Despite the delivery of these milestones in terms of the development of games within this county, it was decided to rebrand and relaunch the academy in 2015 and appoint a fulltime administrator/ coach to oversee its organisational processes, as well as strengthening links with post primary schools.

Table 7: Biography of Tyrone GAA Academy

Years in operation	Number of u16 players involved	Number of Coaches involved	Number of clubs in the county	Number of second level schools in the county	Number of registered u16 players in the county
12 years	35	One coach supported by 2 other support personnel	68	24	523

9.1.1 Micro-Environment: Athletic Domain

Prospects: The target population in this study are prospects who are members of the county U16 academy. This implies that they must be born in 2001. There are 50 prospects in the initial group, but this number is reduced to 35, six weeks into the season. The group represents the best players from the 49 football clubs in the county and all players were members of the U15 academy from the previous season. Some prospects outside the system may be recommended to management through a countywide scouting system. This is

important in terms of providing an entry point for late developers. The group meets every Monday night from March onwards for a training session at the Centre of Excellence. Prior to this, they undertake a two-month S&C programme devised by the county S&C coach. These prospects are very motivated to represent their county; players who cannot train due to injury, still attend sessions.

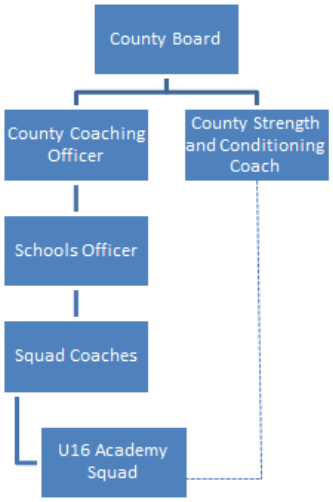

Figure 31: Tyrone GAA Academy Management Structure

The Coach: The group has two head coaches who are supported by a small number of assistants. The lead coach recently retired from playing with his club and has substantial coaching experience behind him. He is a fulltime employee of Ulster GAA and is qualified in many different facets of the GAA coach education pathway. This is his third year in a row coaching the under sixteen group at the academy. All coaches remain at a certain age grade for a number of years and are not guaranteed to retain a new position when this tenure is completed. However, many of the coaches are ambitious and some may look at their time in the academy as some form of coaching apprenticeship.

Academy coaches share ideas through a WhatsApp group forum, which is led by the S&C coach. The coach devotes most of his time to work on the pitch so as to serve two main purposes; 1) identify the 35 players who will make the under sixteen squad, and 2) develop

skills and tactics so as to be ready for the competition later in the season. The fact that minor competition in 2018 reverts to U17 instead of under eighteen has put added importance to being competitive in this season's U16 Ulster competition. The coach is cognisant of this and feels that in order for him to progress with the group, the performances this season must be of a certain standard.

Elite Athletes – Prospects – Younger Athletes:

Within this county and especially since the development of the Centre of Excellence, there is a lot of interaction between the younger and older athletes in the academy. In winter and spring, the 4G pitch becomes a valuable asset since all other pitches may be unplayable. This may mean that two teams may have to share the pitch for training since all teams train in single year groups across the academy, thus demand for the facility is high. Having the various team groupings sharing and using the facility at the same time allows for a degree of social interaction and the sharing of knowledge between the older and younger players. This interaction is extenuated after the training sessions when all the training groups sit together and eat a post training meal. One player identified this as a real positive:

> *Now with Tyrone this place is massive because all teams train here and you get to see other teams and you're passing them, maybe getting food after training and chatting to them. You'd be chatting to all the younger boys, even the seniors as well knocking about and stuff.*

The academy has attempted to link the most elite senior players back into the academy system, most especially players who have just retired. This system is in its infancy and as of yet has not proved to be overly beneficial. However, the academy wants to utilise its successful athletes from the past as a reference point and have them act as proximal role models for the prospects.

Experts: The relaunch of the academy has coincided with the introduction of a more structured approach to the involvement of experts within the system. The approach involves players and parents, professionals and volunteers, the GAA and the Ulster Council. It has three main arms: a) nutrition, b) strength and conditioning and c) player welfare. The nutritional element differs hugely with the past approach whereby the prospects are actually taught the practical skills of cooking for themselves instead of being given a handout with a suggested diet.

> *In terms of nutrition this year we adapted the Recipe for Success from Croke Park and it probably has been the most effective programme in the Academy to date, where the lads had been taken to three schools, an after-school and they did cooking where they learned how to cook proper food for before, during and after. They were taught how to make protein pancakes, chicken fajitas, healthy food you want them to have before games.*

The academy is also looking to use volunteers with experience in performance analysis and assign one of these volunteers to each group. It is hoped that this will help develop a database of information that will allow better decisions to be made by coaches, as well as allowing new coaches to access information when the players transition into new groups at the end of each season. However, there seems to be a disconnect between this overall approach from the academy and the actual understanding on the ground. One lead coach was very vague in his description of how these elements integrate into the overall plan that he has developed for the prospects. It seems his focus was on the skill and tactical development of the prospects, but he has little input into or knowledge of the other elements of the programme, as he couldn't comment on what these elements entailed.

Related Teams and Clubs:

The Academy has attempted, through the recent appointment of the Second Level Schools Officer, to create a greater liaison between itself and the 13 schools of the county. However, this liaison is a slow process in terms of bringing stakeholders together. The Schools Officer works with the squad players with their individual skill development after school but is also mandated to promote Gaelic Games within the second level schools. This, one can assume, will form the initial building blocks of relationships with the staff of the schools but at present, only tentative steps have been taken. However, simply knowing what is happening at schools level allows the Schools Officer to act as a gatekeeper within the academy and ensure that players are not overloaded between their school and the academy commitments.

Managing these situations was difficult since the schools GAA system is a separate system to both the club and the academy system. Co-ordination between them is difficult and prospects attempt to 'serve all masters' and participate in all scheduled activities. This is a concern to all stakeholders and an on-going issue with player development in Gaelic Games. Parents of prospects accept this phenomenon as a reality of becoming an elite athlete and insist that they have little control over the prospects in this regard, thus they have no choice but to stand back and ferry the prospects to the various activities they have:

The majority of prospects attend one of three schools, which are very well organised and structured in terms of the football experience received by their pupils. The other ten schools vary in their commitment to GAA and provide only a small percentage of prospects to the academy. Within the three strongest schools, there are a number of high profile teachers who have strong links to GAA within the county who are heavily involved with coaching school teams. Not only are these teachers role models for the pupils of their schools, but they are also conduits for the academy in terms of filtering information and messages through them.

Clubs and club coaches have required more convincing on the merits of prospect's interaction with the academy. Prior to the rebranding of the academy, there was much rancour between clubs and academy personnel over the merits of taking players from clubs on certain nights and denying clubs access to their players when they wanted them. This has continued with some clubs, but overall there seems to be an approval within the county of the work being done at academy level.

The academy administration understands that building good relationships with clubs is not easy but they are very cognisant of the necessity for proper communication and linkage between themselves and club coaches and secretaries. It is a work in progress it seems and despite many efforts from the academy's viewpoint, difficulties still arise with some people working at club level. It seems the process will continue to evolve and the squad administrator is hopeful that better relations can be developed:

> *We still want to build the link with the clubs. That's where we realise that you have to have a good relationship and it's something that we're continuously trying to work on.*

Building such a relationship is vital since the club ultimately is the strongest powerbroker in the GAA hierarchy at youth level in this county. The prospects really are at the call of their clubs and it is the club that will decide how much leeway they will provide the prospects in their interactions with the academy. This level of leeway varies within the county and is completely dependent on the mind-sets of coaches working at club level. As one stakeholder described:

> *Ultimately, it's up to the club coach how he reacts to selection of his players to the academy. He can react and say "that's fine, they're doing good work, I'm fully supportive of the Tyrone Academy and what they're trying to do and I'll grant them a bit of leeway to do that" or the club coach could say "feck this, I'm not being told what to do by them, I have an under 16 championship division three to win*

with these lads of which I have one player or two players up there, them lads will train with me because at the dinner dance at the end of the year we need silverware on the table".

This lack of orchestration between coaches at club and academy level leads to huge difficulties with scheduling and managing training for prospects. Nobody controls this constant demand on the prospect's time and abilities and this leads to uncertainty and conflict. As one club coach described, below, some coaches take an approach of just playing the prospect in games and allowing him skip training sessions because of the demands on him.

9.1.2 Micro-Environment: Non-Athletic Domain

Family: The prospects and elite athletes all mention the importance of family in terms of supporting development. Interestingly, it is not always fathers who are seen as the main influencers towards initial involvement in Gaelic Games. However, county success at senior level is seen as important in terms of embedding people into the GAA culture of a county. The academy realises that the parents are a crucial component in the child's development but only really from a practical viewpoint. Parents obviously provide resources for the prospects such as nutrition, transport, and gear. Outside of providing for these practical elements of the prospect's involvement in the academy, the parents have little input. They are not integrated into the academy system and are very much on the peripheries. In fact, many parents commented on feeling unwelcome at the training centre and feeling underappreciated. As alluded to by this parent, this is more a criticism of the Centre of Excellence itself and its ambience rather than a criticism of the academy personnel and their procedures:

Peers: Both the prospects and the elite athletes spoke of the importance of friends both inside and outside of the academy. Parents also spoke of qualities of the youths involved in the academy and the benefits associated with their son's involvement and interaction with like- minded people. Athletes explained how club rivalries are put aside and friendships are formed within the academy. These friendships are important since prospects can relate to each other's experiences and understand each other's issues in relation to their sport involvement. Prospects were overt when speaking about difficulties they encounter with their friends outside of sport. The social pressures exerted from these non-sporting friends were cited by a prospect in this case as his greatest barrier to development. When pressed on what these pressures included, the prospect spoke around

difficulties in negotiating membership of his peer group outside sport, along with pressures with alcohol and social media.

School: There was little mention from any stakeholders of conflict between school and the academy in terms of the education of the prospects. The academy sessions do not commence until March; at this point, school football really is finished. Notwithstanding the lack of crossover between school and the academy activities, prospects do encounter pressures with exams and assignments and their sporting commitments. Many of these pressures are felt at club level, but stakeholders would feel that, generally, prospects manage themselves regarding their studies and club coaches are more than understanding when prospects seek time for study.

School games are played during the school day and since school competition it at provincial level, it is possible that prospects miss out on large chunks of school on match days due to travel. Again, there was little mention of this being an issue for the prospects and their schooling. However, issue was made to the fact that games were during school time and not in the evening; prospects had opportunity to go out again with their club when they came home from school and train or play for the second time in the day:

> *You'd like to think that they'd tell their club but I know with my own cubs they would play a match during a day with school and if there's club training on they wouldn't want to miss it. They would be out again, putting themselves at risk. That's what cubs are like but that does need to be managed very well.*

9.1.3 Macro Environment and Related Contexts

The GAA: The GAA as a federation has little input into the processes of the academy in this case. Funding comes through the Association, on to the Ulster Council and then directly to the County Committee. It is up to the County Committee to utilise these funds appropriately in terms of the needs of the academy. This funding is conditional on participation in the provincial tournaments and co-operation with guidelines laid down by the GAA at the beginning of each year. All activities of the academy are reported to the Provincial Council so as to ensure all counties operate within these outlined guidelines. Outside of these indirect interactions, the academy has no dealings with the central tenet of the GAA organisation in Croke Park in Dublin.

Youth Culture: Most stakeholders mentioned incompatibilities between the existing youth culture and the objectives of the county academy and the demands of becoming an elite athlete. Alcohol was cited as a major vice for youths under the age of 16:

> *They have different pressures and different cultures. I see a big massive drink problem in the GAA young players. Even though they're dedicated to their sport there's anti-social behaviour.*

This was somewhat contradicted by other stakeholders who felt that prospects, because of their athletic status mainly, were somewhat exempt from these pressures and that there exists an understanding from their peers that prospects had different motivations and thus it is understandable why they made the choices they make. There was also reference to issues prevalent to social media and the role it plays in the lives of the youth in this country. Many of the stakeholders mentioned how important social media is to the identity of the prospects and have noticed that many of them change their profile picture to images of themselves when playing in the blitzes and wearing the county jersey.

Sports Culture: It is well documented about the struggles Nationalists have encountered in Northern Ireland over the last half a century. Gaelic Games became a real representation of who you were and what you represented throughout these struggles. One stakeholder succinctly outlined the effect the GAA had during these times on the culture within the county:

> *We're living in great times politically because we're not anymore in the minority but the minority didn't do us any harm and the troubles didn't do us any harm in terms of we showed them, we'll fly our flag and we'll build our club houses and we'll build our pitches and we'll do it to a good standard. A lot of clubs have benefitted from that sense of you're up against it.*

Prospects obviously have no recollection of living during The Troubles, but their parents certainly do. Preserving that sense of Irish culture through involvement in GAA is important to parents, but there exists a belief that maybe culture is being diluted, that the Unionist tradition is clinging on to their culture but Nationalists are not as fervent in hanging on to theirs. However, representing one's county has obvious manifestations in terms of maintaining the importance of one's Irish culture. Selection almost acts as a cultural preservation implement; an omnipresent awareness exists within the prospects of what it means to play for your county without anyone ever having to explain why to them. Stakeholders concurred that this was very important to them and one parent underscored this notion:

> *Representing Tyrone is a big part of that. To do that for their families and for where they're from, there's a big part of that going on in the background but they don't have to think about it often. It's just there. Maybe it's one of those things that if you don't recognise it you'll never get it. That's a strange thing to say but it's partly that. For them there's no other team in Tyrone, no other sport in Tyrone that pulls people together.*

Academy Culture: The culture within the academy focuses hugely on pride and attempting to deliver success for the county. The last fifteen years are unprecedented in terms of success at all levels and this has not been lost on prospects and elite players alike. As one elite player described the team talks received from coaches prior to games when he was involved at a younger level, that sense of pride is palpable:

> *At an early age the manager was giving a team talk before you'd got out and he'd say "look down and look what you're wearing, realise what you have on your back. You're representing your county here and it's not small, it's a big pride, take that with you", from 15/16 up.*

Pride, and its many derivatives, is the major driving forces within the county, with standards driven by the sense that they can be the best. The players have a complete understanding of what has gone before them and the responsibility that comes with representing the county:

> *It represents a lot of… the last 10-15 years, men that have went and put Tyrone really on the map, wins and even the under 21s success over the past years and stuff. It's just massive pride even to be training here.*

This sense of pride within the players and prospects is very much congruent to what other stakeholders would wish their outlook to be. Again, there was not any overt evidence present to suggest that this utility was learnt behaviour through the prospects involvement at the academy. As pointed out earlier, it seems this sense of engagement is nurtured through various components of the Nationalist society within the county. It would also seem that this component requires little work and that prospects are very much at one with the desired depiction, as described by one former player:

> *I'd like to think they're respectful, they do value it, they do appreciate it, they do know what it means, how important football is to people in Tyrone.*

With this understanding permeating all academy activities, it should not be lost that the end goal of the academy is to support the development of senior intercounty footballers. Long-term development is sometimes forgotten in the desire to maintain success and

ensuring that each team is competitive against its rivals in the various competitions and blitzes.

9.1.4 The Environment in the Time-Frame

This description of the environment was at the time of the study and must be understood in the perspective of the environment's history and its perceived future challenges. All participants spoke about how the county has built a new identity within the recent past, an identity based on foresight, success, and pride. However, the future holds a new challenge within the county – maintaining and developing this new found identity. Other counties have increased inputs into development, so this case study county has little choice but to improve on what has been done in the past. The modus operandi involves an extraction of all that was good and workable from past approaches and marrying them into a new approach for development within the county.

9.1.5 From the ATDE Working Model to the Empirical Model

Figure 32 presents the empirical model of the academy programme in Tyrone. It is important to note that all components of the environment are interconnected and affect one another. This empirical model illustrates the most important components and relationships within the environmental structure.

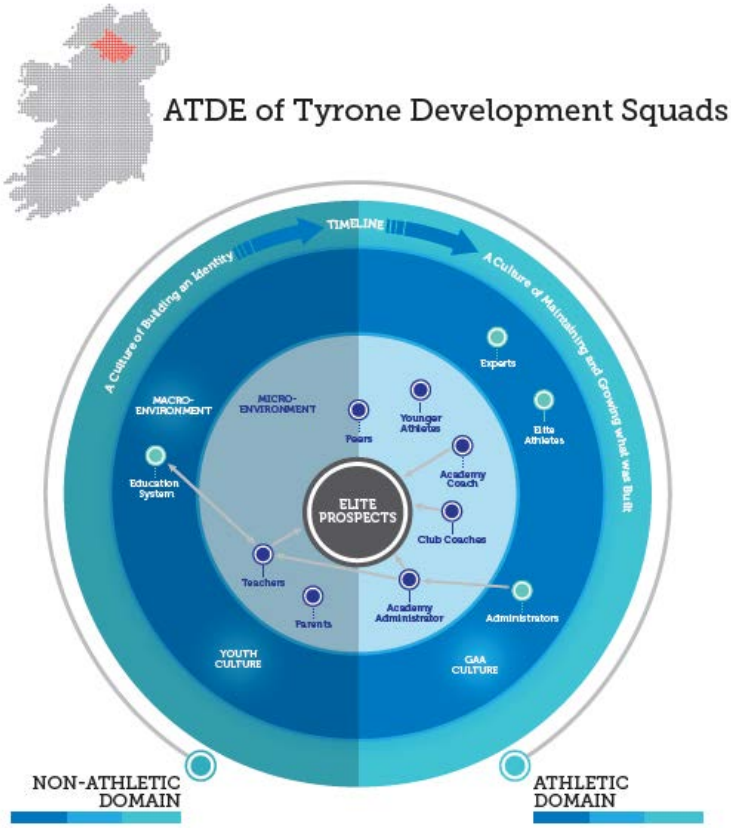

Figure 32: **The ATDE Empirical Model of Tyrone GAA Academies**

9.2 Environment Success Factor (ESF) Working Model

9.2.1 Factors Influencing Success of the Environment

The ATDE model was used to provide a thick description of the academy environment including components, interrelationships, and overall structure. The factors that contribute to the success of the environment are analysed following the logic of the ESF working model and will result in its empirical version.

9.2.2 Preconditions

Financial: The GAA provides equal assistance to each county in terms of supporting their academies. In total, this amounts to a grant of €30,000, which is shared between hurling and football teams within the academy. This finance comes directly from GAA headquarters in Dublin to each individual County Board where is then filtered down to the academy. In this case, financial support also comes from a very strong and vibrant supporters club. There are two people in charge of academy funding and all requests for resources are made through the squad administrator to them.

In recent times, there has been some publicity in the media regarding funding issues at elite level within this county. Despite the utterances of the squad administrator, a number of other stakeholders substantiated these media revelations and had issue with funding of squads at various levels within the county. Some of these stakeholders believe that more could be done in terms of easing the burden on volunteers who were already under pressure trying to coach teams without having the added affliction of constantly battling for the provision of essential resources in the preparation of their squads. These participants spoke of how the '*administrators were detached and could do so much more for the volunteers'*. There is a perceived concern that this funding issue will stymie much good work being done on the ground and that the county will no longer be able to compete with the very best counties in the country. Stakeholders are convinced that administrators are creating roadblocks for the development of football within the county due to this issue and that the consequences will be far-reaching in terms of sustaining success.

Human: The main resource within the programme in this case is the squad administrator. He is seen by all stakeholders as an excellent appointment and crucial to the workings of the academy system within the county. As one parent describes, the appointment has been very viewed very positively due to the appointee's knowledge of the systems within the county and his proven ability to organise and coach within his own club. The administrator is not just a pen and paper type personality; he very much embodied good practice in the coaching elements of his role through his work in schools. In this role, the administrator provided opportunity to other players who have not made the squad as well as working with prospects from the academy. This, according to the squad coaches, is vital in terms of keeping the door open and providing players with hope and an avenue to make the academy after initial rejection.

To the uninitiated, the role of the administrator encompassed two tasks; administer the day to day activities of the academy and provide linkage between schools and Gaelic Games within the county. However, some stakeholders believed that the role needs greater autonomy for the appointee if it's to maximise its potential and that, in essence, the role is more concerned with firefighting day to day issues that arise within the academy than actually carrying out the roles laid out in the specifications associated with the position. One coach does not envy the administrator's position and pointed overtly to a lack of connection between employees of the Board and the administrators who have appointed them:

> *This man is knocking his head against the wall in regards to different things. The people working here, they're working here with one hand tied behind their back, they're looking over their shoulder…The morale here, it's not as good as it should be. It comes back to the people that are overseeing it, the administrators should be telling those people that they're the best in the world and encouraging them and giving them and saying "what can we do for you? What can we give you?"*

The other main human resource within the academy is the inputs from experts, most especially in the area of strength and conditioning. This has huge benefits at both squad and individual level and is very much seen as both a positive and progressive step within the county. The S&C coach is a fulltime appointment made by the County Board a number of years ago and he works with all teams in the county. He also has an intern S&C coach working with him. However, other stakeholders believe that this work is done in isolation of the clubs and there is an education element lacking within the county in terms of bringing club coaches up to speed on best practice. This has difficulties within the county according to one stakeholder since who delivers the message seems to have implications. Inter-club rivalry has reared its head in different elements associated with the academy but according to this club coach, it has a detrimental effect on allowing linkage between the work at academy level filtering back to clubs:

Material: Without a doubt, the building of a Centre of Excellence in 2013 was a major boost for the county in terms of providing a modern, purpose built home for Gaelic Games. The centre was one of the first centres built by any county in the country and was funded very much by club members from within the county. It initially cost £7 million to build and all county teams use it as their permanent training base. The squad administrator provides a description of how the centre functions, and the benefits it entails for him, in terms of providing a venue for all squad activities:

> *We've got a full size 3G and we have five grass pitches. The schedule is done at the start of the year and supplied to the county committee over the premises and there's never an issue. We've got a fantastic auditorium in next door. The auditorium is brilliant for coach education, for player welfare sessions.*

This centre would be looked on as being state of the art and other counties would see it as being another indication that this county is extremely autonomous, progressive, and able to deliver for its players. It really stands as a testament to the desire that all the stakeholders possess in terms of driving success within the county and being different to their competitors. However, the centre is not without its detractors. Some stakeholders believe that the centre is poorly designed and lacking in terms of the indoor facilities necessary, considering the climate within the region. It is also believed that the facility is not player centred and is much more of an administrative hub for the county rather than a centre for developing the high performance practices of inter-county teams.

9.2.3 Processes

The major processes mentioned by all stakeholders within the academy system were talent identification, team training sessions, and competitions. The following is an account of each process in the Tyrone GAA Academy:

Talent Identification: At U16 level, the coach has little to do with identifying which players are members of his squad initially. He inherits a squad from the previous year and must make decisions on who stays within the squad for the competition later in the year. All players are identified through a scouting system within the county or through the work of the squad administrator in the schools. The administrator's role is crucial as already outlined. He is not only tracking players already in the system but also is constantly looking for new players who might perform well at school's level. The academy is very particular in terms of what type of player it desires. It seeks players with the appropriate attitude and selection to the academy will involve extra work after school with the squad administrator. The school scouting system affords opportunity to players from clubs in lower divisions who may not be seen in the club games around the county. The academy would feel that they could use the school system to identify these players and see can they perform at that level prior to inviting them into the squad system.

Team Training Sessions: Squad players receive a variety of coaching sessions through their involvement with the academy. All squad players receive skill sessions after school from the squad administrator. These sessions work on identified skill deficiencies that

individual players may possess. At squad session on Monday nights, the emphasis is much more on team play and tactics and identifying what players are selected for both the team and the squad when competition commences. These sessions all take place in the Centre of Excellence and thus, the coach does not have anything else to consider except coaching the prospects. This is a huge burden he is relieved of, one that may be commonplace in other parts of the country. Coaches appreciate this fact and it is seen as a real plus for their squads, as the intention was that coaches focused on coaching.

There is a perception amongst stakeholders that the quality of coaching has improved greatly since the rebranding of the academy two years ago. However, coaches at club level would still have reservations regarding the actual balance between training and coaching prospects receive in their involvement with the academy. They believe that the focus is still very much on team preparation and winning a competition at the end of the year, rather than on player development.

Competitions: Most stakeholders spoke around the term development and how the focus of the squads was on developing players to play at an elite level for their county. However, this is not the reality of the prospects' involvement with the squad. It seems the focus of some key stakeholders was in fact on competition and making sure that the team is prepared to compete and that the best players are identified.

9.2.4 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture was examined across three distinct layers within this case: cultural artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. The following is an account of each of these facets of culture within the Tyrone GAA Academy.

Artefacts: In this environment, the major artefact that stood out was the Centre of Excellence. This represents the most visible token of culture within the environment. The walls are covered with images of the county's history, which is dominated by successes in the recent past. Such a dominant artefact allows for much interaction between the prospects from the various groups. This verbal artefact also stood out, especially after training sessions finished; many prospects stayed around and socialised in the lounge area and simply chatted. This was very informal and centred mainly around humorous incidents from school and training. It was also very apparent that the squad administrator was very much part of this culture and the prospects wanted to involve him in their conversations.

Espoused Values: Key values expressed by individuals within the environment are centred on the prospects having pride in their county. This value permeates all activities and the environment in general. This sense of respecting and understanding the past is very important to all stakeholders and is not lost on the prospects and older players. Players who have come through the academy system and are now operating at elite level are very much at one with the sense of responsibility that now rests with them. Aligned to this level of understanding and respect, the academy was adamant that selected prospects must possess the appropriate attitude that will ensure these values are upheld. The squad administrator has worked with all stakeholders in developing a particular player profile and the scouting system attempts to identify as many of this type of player as possible. This sense of an appropriate attitude is very much to the fore and is overt across the academy. Stakeholders were very clear that there were, in the past, numerous examples of players with talent who did not possess the correct attitude and were quickly removed from the squad.

Basic Assumptions: The basic assumptions within the organisational culture of the environment are derived from the analysis of actual behaviour. Two basic assumptions dominate the case. Firstly, due mainly to issues with stakeholder inter-relationships, prospects are struggling with activity loads. There does not seem to be a real synergy between the club, the school, and the academy. The academy sees itself sitting between the club and the school, attempting to influence practice in both realms. However, co-operation is completely dependent on relationships and perspective. Some club coaches do not value the work at the academy and thus issues arise in terms of communicating around the activity loads of prospects.

The academy is trying to build these relationships but educating club coaches around the aim of the programme within the academy has proven difficult. Club coaches in some instances have a sense that they are being dictated to by the academy and that they should be in control of their own player's development. Developing this sense of trust between the academy and other stakeholders is not made easy by the fact that scheduling between club, school and the academy is not co-ordinated. This results in conflict between stakeholders and ultimately overload for prospects.

Secondly, competition and winning dominates the culture and long term development is sometimes sacrificed over short term gain. The approach within the academy is also very much mechanistic. When you combine these two elements together, prospects receive a contradictory message. For example, prospects are educated regarding what to eat and how

to make it, on how they should stretch and warm up, on what body weight exercises they should be doing in their own time and how hydration is very important in terms of recovery. These are all very important elements of preparation for elite level Gaelic Games. However, these elements, despite being very much part of a long-term process, are somewhat thwarted by the culture of judging success on winning competitions and beating your rivals. It seems that stakeholders require education around what long-term development entails so that the academy is not judged on the immediate success of its graduates or the current success of its prospects.

Thus, the organisational culture within this case destabilises the environment somewhat due to the basic assumptions prevalent within it. Artefacts and espoused values are very much coherent and consistent, but basic assumptions are not aligned to stated values. Other elements have more control within the culture including the importance of winning competitions, administration issues and the power of personalities within club environments.

9.2.5 Process-culture-outcomes

According to the ESF working model, preconditions and process work through the organisational culture to produce outcomes such as individual/team development and achievements and the success of the environment.

Individual Development: In terms of individual development, stakeholders mainly spoke around the development of specific football skills development. Prospects, through their involvement with the academy, also develop other skills that are not sport specific. On analysis of the data, these skills include time management, work ethic, social skills, discipline, and dealing with setbacks. One notable characteristic in this case was the courage necessary for prospects to focus on elite Gaelic football despite the social costs incurred with one's peers.

Team Development: The focus within the environment is finding players that will fit into positions on a team and the team becoming successful in competition. Training is centred around tactical development and discovering which prospects will perform the various roles on the team. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to team play within the academy. This is dependent on the ideals of the coach and the profile of the players at his disposal. The squad administrator explains the rationale behind such an approach:

> *There is a debate every year – we don't believe in the one state of play because I think it leaves your teams more readable and I suppose the thing that some of the coaches would have agreed on is that you can't play a target full forward if you don't have a big full forward. So this craic of having a unique system for the full academy doesn't really work. I suppose you have to be able to be adaptable.*

Environment's Success: It is very clear that within the county academy, stakeholders are very cognisant of sense of importance that the Tyrone GAA fraternity attach to success. Recent achievements have ignited within the county the desire for continued success across all levels of the association. Founded on these historic victories, the GAA within the county has moved to a new standing. The development of the Centre of Excellence in Garvaghey is a representation of the new found ideals of the GAA in Tyrone. It expounds a confidence within the county that is tangible to anyone who sets foot through its doors. It sits as a beacon to all prospects and informs them that the men that have gone before them have shown them the way; just simply follow in their footsteps. It serves as a reminder to all that the county is not simply happy with past achievements; the people of Tyrone have now developed an unquenchable thirst for more.

In ensuring that this desire is met, the county academy has put in place a number of elements that are both worthwhile and laudable. Many of the components of long-term development are very much present in the approach within the academy, but the approach requires more cohesion. A more cohesive approach, when aligned to a dynamic education process for all stakeholders, will allow for a more holistic development process for all prospects. At present, there is disconnect between the administration, a number of dominant clubs and the activities at elite level within the county. This disconnect is creating divisions within the ecology of the academy and has obvious ramifications for the effectiveness of the environment.

9.2.6 The ESF Empirical Model

Figure 33 presents the empirical version of the ESF model, summarising the most important factors influencing the success of the Tyrone Academy environment as a context for helping talented youth prospects to develop their potential.

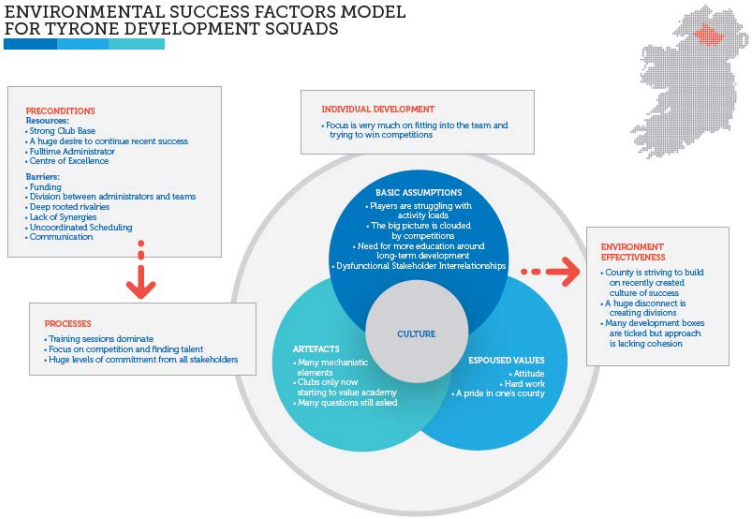

Figure 33: **The ESF Empirical Model of the Tyrone GAA Academy**

9.3 Conclusion

The ATDE and ESF empirical models of the Tyrone GAA Academy provide a window into the environment surrounding the developmental pathway of the prospects within the county. More pertinently than any other studied case, Gaelic football in Tyrone can, in many ways, be viewed as a vehicle for the promotion of the Irish identity and culture within the counties of Northern Ireland. Recent success has helped promote such associations and as such, academy stakeholders are extremely passionate about providing for prospect's development. This is evident at club and schools levels, whereby prospects are exposed to good youth structures and extremely committed coaches. Both of these strands provide an available base of talented prospects for the academy and are supported by the recent appointment of an academy administrator. This appointment has improved coordination between the academy and these other units but problems remain. Ultimately, long-term development is stymied since the espoused values within the organisational culture of the academy are consumed by a culture of winning competitions and defeating rival counties. This culture permeates down to club and school levels, leading to unmanageable demands being placed on the most talented players. Such culture is buttressed in this instance by a lack of communication between all stakeholders, as well as uncoordinated scheduling of

activities across the county. These factors combine to cause some prospects to struggle with their development.

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 identify, 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 coaches 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 of 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 an 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 influences[19], 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).

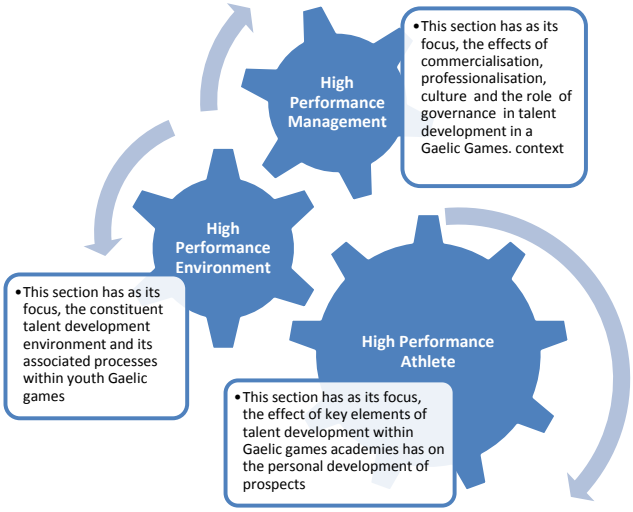

Figure 34: Organisational Framework for Findings (adapted from The Funnel of High Performance Sport Management Framework, Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013)

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[20] 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[21] 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.

and different countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom and Canada). 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**

Features of Successful ATDEs	Features of GAA ATDEs
Training groups with supportive relationships Opportunities for inclusion in a training community; supportive relationships and friendships within the group, despite performance level; good communication.	**Training groups devoid of supportive relationships** Performance was the ultimate criteria for inclusion within the group, thus prospects saw others as rivals. Limited communication.
Proximal role models 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.	**An absence of role models within the environment** 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.
Support of sporting goals by the wider community Opportunities to focus on the sport; school, family, friends and others acknowledge and accept the athletes' dedication to sport.	**Sporting goals not understood within the wider environment** Non-sport environment shows a lack of understanding of elite sport and the demands involved e.g. school, friends, family.
Support for the development of psychosocial skills 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'.	**Lack of consideration for the development of psychosocial skills** Focus not on personal improvement but on relative performance level. Focus is solely on sport.
Features of Successful ATDEs	**Features of GAA ATDEs**
Training that allows for diversification Opportunities to sample different sports during early phases; integration of	**Training that promotes specialisation** Early specialisation was promoted, focus solely on developing sport-specific skills,

different sports in the daily routines; appreciation of versatile sport profiles and basic sport skills	prospects interest in trying different sports was considered a potential threat
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 been 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 focussing 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 data-set, 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 synopsise, 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, Cavichiolli, & 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[22] 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.

[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.

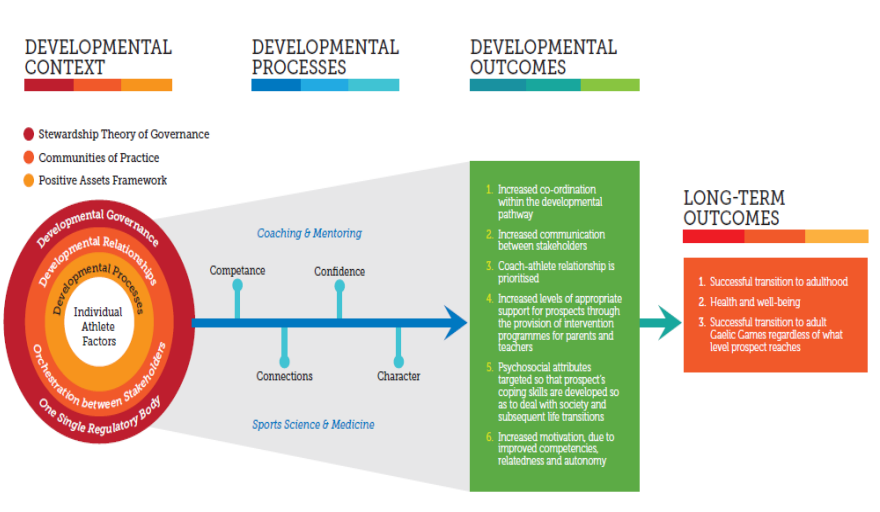

Figure 35: A model for Athletic Talent Development Environments in Sport

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
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Introduction

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.

Completed Application Checklist	✓
Completed Ethical Approval Self-Evaluation	✓
Completed Description of Project	✓
Information Sheet(s)	✓
Consent Sheet(s)	✓
Psychometric Instruments / Interview / Focus Group Schedules	✓
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

Name of applicant(s)	Brian Cuthbert	**Date**	1/6/2016
Department/School/Unit, & Supervisor's Name	School of Education Dr Fiona Chambers Prof. Bryan McCullick	**Phone**	0876942329
Correspondence Address	23 Elton Lawn Bishopstown Cork	**Email**	Cuthbert-brian@hotmail.com
Title of Project	Elite Youth Gaelic footballers and their holistic development: The Academy Experience.		

ETHICAL APPROVAL SELF-EVALUATION

		YES	NO
1	Do you consider that this project has significant ethical implications?		✓
2	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	✓	
3	Will participation be voluntary?	✓	
4	Will you obtain informed consent in writing from participants?	✓	
5	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason, and (where relevant) omit questionnaire items to which they do not wish to respond?	✓	
6	Will data be treated with full confidentiality / anonymity (as appropriate)?	✓	
7	Will data be securely held for a minimum period of seven years after the completion of a research project, in line with the University's Code of Research Conduct?	✓	
8	If results are published, will anonymity be maintained and participants not identified?	✓	
9	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?	✓	
10	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?		✓
11	Will your participants include children (under 18 years of age)?	✓	
12	Will your participants include people with learning or communication difficulties?		✓
13	Will your participants include patients?		✓
14	Will your participants include people in custody?		✓
15	Will your participants include people engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug taking; illegal Internet behaviour)?		✓

16	Is there a realistic risk of participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress?		✓
17	If yes to 16, has a proposed procedure, including the name of a contact person, been given? (see no 25)		
18	If yes to 11, is your research informed by the UCC Child Protection Policy? http://www.ucc.ie/en/ocla/policy/	✓	

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

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 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 (Domingues, Cavichiolli, & 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). 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/outsider' 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 date 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**

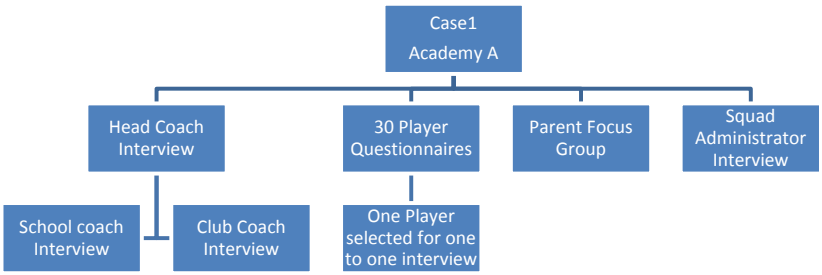
Parents will have opportunity to participate in focus groups in each case. Inclusion criteria will include signed consent, a voluntary wish to participate in the study and at least two years' experience of having a child involved with the academy. Exclusion criteria will be

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 to 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

<u>Compliance</u>

- 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.

<u>General</u>

- 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

Informed consent forms for Coaches

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.

Informed Consent Form for Coaches

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…….

Informed consent forms for Parents

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.

Informed Consent Form for Parents

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…….

Informed consent forms for Administrators

UCC
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh, Éire
University College Cork, Ireland

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. 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.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don't envisage any negative consequences for administrator 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.

Informed Consent Form for Administrators

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…….

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

Informed consent forms for Players

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 Microenvironment	In terms of people and institutions around the athletes, what are the important resources in your efforts to develop the athletes? 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

Focus group Questions	Associated Theory from the Literature
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?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)
2) What do you believe to be the strengths of the academy?	ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)
3) In terms of your son's involvement with the academy, can you see any barriers?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)
4) Explain the demand on your son's life due to his participation in the academy	Bronfenbrenner' bio-ecological model of human development (2005)
5) How supportive are your son's school or club of his involvement with the academy?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)
6) How often does the academy communicate with you? What is the nature of the communication? What is the typical topic of conversation?	ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)
7) How might the GAA further support your son's sporting career?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)
8) How well resourced is the academy?	ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)
9) In your opinion, what are the values of the academy? On what do you base such an opinion?	ESF model, Henriksen et al (2010)
10) What impact does the academy have on your son's life outside sport?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)
11) Would you like to see any changes to the type of support the academy offers your son at present?	ATDE model, Henriksen et al (2010)

Appendix 5: Example of Open Coding of an Interview Transcript

Okay, [Kevin O'... 00:00:03]. [Inaudible 00:00:04] by car, 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 [inaudible 00:14]?

RESP:

Yes. I started at the GDH 2007 along with... working above two GPOs, and I suppose, there was very primitive structures in terms... in place at the time. No manpower, and people there weren't open to too much change. In 2009 [games 00:00:37] Manager position became up for grabs, so I got that and there was five GDA positions created in 2009 as well. So they were divided up geographically into division units along the county, and they were given responsibility for primary schools, post-primary schools, club development in their area. And I suppose we've, in the last two years, we've increased the number of GDAs. We've now seven GDAs working off base of clubs, a co-op 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 [open 00:01:19] GDAs to cater for the obvious [Oban 00:01:22] issues that are prevailing in [Cork City 00:01:25].
In terms of my overall role, I'm responsible for the rural [inaudible 00:01:30] national programmes. So, the key areas that we're working in: primary schools, post-primary schools, clubs, club 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 involving, from 2007, the first thing we set about doing was excluding parental involvement at development squad level, because there was a certain 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 selector from one geographical area coming in, and his main model would be to push the players from his own geographical area.
So, that's where we started out, and the squads were primarily run by the county board involved at 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 [inaudible 00:02:40] going down on the bus to the tournament, they'd play the tournament, and that'd be the bones of it, basically. To a situation where we, in 2010, tried to put a programme of dates together for development squads, and put a calendar of activity in place, but also put in templates in terms of what we expected out of training sessions and skills to be developed, and we also linked in with Mark McManus in leisure work for a while, trying to get basic 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 McManus over the winter period.

Comment [1]: Primitive structures by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [2]: Overall role by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [3]: Excluding parental involvement by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [4]: Cultural issues by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [5]: Starting out by Brian Cuthbert

Six week programmes in regional basis worked quite well when they were ongoing, but unfortunately, afterwards it was the follow-up into the pitch season, playing season for [Maritime 00:03:41] was an issue in that there wasn't 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 put a push on getting... appointing mentors who are familiar with basic strength conditioning and might have qualifications in that area, to keep this work ongoing while the pitch work is in full-flight. And that has, I would say, pretty average success to be honest, it hasn't really worked overall.

Comment [6]: Winter programme by Sean Cuthbert

Comment [7]: mentors with qualifications by Sean Cuthbert

INTV: RESP: INTV:

Last winter we ran, again, a six-week programme through November, early December. We brought in 15, 16 squads, six-week programme linked in to the [inaudible 00:04:28] students, PE 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 is that there's player education going on. That is important; that if guys are doing basic mobility exercises and stuff, that they learn how to do exercises properly 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. So, 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 3 o 4, 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 academies are successful? And if so, why? And if not so, 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 accidentally adequate at times, but we're not consciously competent. I suppose, there is a couple of factors involved in that not everybody in the county is in to development squads; I think that is an issue.
What barriers are you seeing?

Comment [8]: Player education by Sean Cuthbert

Comment [9]: Winter programme by Sean Cuthbert

Comment [10]: Success by Sean Cuthbert

RESP:
INTV: RESP:

I see coaches thinking that Cork is a nuisance to them in their club programme. They just try to play out their club programme and they only want their boys training with them all the time. I would see conflict in terms of fixed programming; I think that there's... every week there's a development squad date scheduled that there's a phone call coming from one board or another saying that there's development squads on Saturday and we've games to play, can we get the games played, and a lot of the time what they're trying to do is they're trying to push them into, maybe Thursday night, Friday night, when the boys are trying to go out and play with the squads on Saturday. So I think that's a huge issue. I and I think one of the other barriers to... that have an effect on our programmes too, is that: the club fixture programme is [inaudible 00:06:57] at the moment. And there's games being called off left, right and centre, and the structure isn't strong enough, and the people running the

Comment [11]: Coaches thinking by Sean Cuthbert

Comment [12]: Programming by Sean Cuthbert

Comment [13]: Seniors by Sean Cuthbert

structure probably aren't strong enough to enforce the structure that they're putting in place at the start of the year.

Now look, there's been advances, and it is getting better-ish, but at the same time, it could be a lot better. And I know there's proposals coming down the tracks to try and perform [inaudible 07:19] next year again, so that there'd be meaningful programmes again.

In terms of the advances, as you call them, 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 it was, it's not bomb-proof but 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 underage squads. One of the issues there could be, in the past I know has been that our county board maybe don't feel 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 that 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 21; I think they should be in a room two 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.

In a football context, I know that James McCarthy, who is our football development [inaudible 00:09:15] with the squads and does the day-to-day working, and he's a [inaudible 00:09:19] 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 the

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 is 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 I think is an issue,

Comment [14]: Programming by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [15]: Seniors by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [16]: People by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [17]: Success by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [18]: Winter programme by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [19]: Regional structure by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [20]: Coming through by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [21]: Coming through by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [22]: Weakness by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [23]: Link up by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [24]: Link up by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [25]: Institutions around them by Brian Cuthbert

Comment [26]: Medical area by Brian Cuthbert

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.

Level 5 and 6 - Interrelating the Explanations	**Dysfunctional Stakeholder Relationships (245)**	**Limiting Structural Impediments to Development (313)**	**Socio-Cultural Influences on Development (238)**	
Level 4 – Testing the themes	Coach-Athlete Relationships The Academy and Club Coaches The Role of Parents The Relationship with Schools	Programming Funding, Facilities and Politics Coach Education Mechanistic Approaches	Social pressures from non-athlete peers Balancing Sport and School Psychosocial Skill Development County Pride, Engagement and Rivalry	
Level 3 – Developing Themes	stakeholder relationships	environmental factors	cultural issues and the GAA	considering personal development
Level 2 – Conceptual Categories	Institutions around the player	Barriers to Development	Wider Environment and History	The Player
Level 1 – Open Codes	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	Coaches' Thinking, programming, access, funding, coach education, county board, GAA politics, facilities, clubs, communication, dual players, other sports, getting coaches, squad structures, competition, camps	Education system, GAA, culture, the want, social media, understanding, overall role, cultural issues, DNA, values, the jersey, challenges, competition	Approach to training, player improvements, making it, interest, late developers, deselection, player education, selection

Appendix 6: Eight Features of Successful ATDEs