

'We don't need no education'? Exploring the educational experiences of young footballers

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Abstract

Drawing upon data generated by 303 young male footballers employed in 21 professional clubs in England and Wales, this paper explores some key aspects of players' masculinities, identities and engagement with education. Although many players described their educational experiences in largely negative terms, some aspired towards average-ness, or middling, which are often central to working-class identifications with education. Other players found education 'easy', engaged in effortless achievement and had begun to internalize elements of the neo-liberal achievement ideology. The propensity for players to engage in copying and pasting from the work of others, and to regard their courses as being almost impossible to fail, were consistent with neo-liberal ideologies of credentialism and performativity. The findings suggest that a more nuanced understanding of young footballers' education is warranted, and their aspirations and experiences can at least be partly understood as responses to the prevailing neoliberal learning environments which they inhabit.

Keywords: Football, Neoliberal, Masculinity, Performativity, Young Males

Introduction

Inequalities in educational performance and participation have long been studied by sociologists of education in the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere (e.g. Ball 1981; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977), but ‘during the 1990s the under-achievement of boys became something of a “moral panic”, spurred by media attention’ (Ball 2013, 186), with particular political concern in the UK being expressed about the under-achievement of white working-class boys (e.g. Ball 2013; Francis and Skelton 2005; House of Commons Education Committee 2014; Stahl 2015, 2016). Among UK policy-makers and politicians, the educational under-achievement of white working-class boys has most recently been explained *inter alia* in terms of the cultures of ‘low aspiration’ and anti-social behaviour said to be common among those groups, broader concerns about stagnating social mobility, and the pathologisation and responsabilisation of working-class families (particularly by the political right) (Ball 2013; Stahl 2015, 2016; Stahl and Dale 2013). These explanations are part of the neo-liberal ideologies which increasingly dominate policy and approaches in education (Stahl 2015, 2016; Stahl and Dale 2013) and related fields, including professional sport in which the lives of athletes are frequently ‘celebrated, sensationalized, mortified, dehumanized, and commodified’ (Roderick and Gibbons 2015, 153) in the often highly individualized pursuit of success, which involves the almost constant monitoring observation, self-regulation and modification of working bodies (see Hoberman 1992; Roderick 2006; Roderick et al. 2017).

In this paper, we examine the intersection of neoliberal ideologies in education and professional football and how the practices underpinned by them shaped the educational experiences of 303 young males (16-18-years-old) seeking to earn a full-time contract with professional clubs in England and Wales. More specifically, we draw upon new evidence on

the experiences of young footballers – who are traditionally and disproportionately drawn from working-class backgrounds (Magrath 2017; McGillivray et al. 2005; Parker 1996) – to explore: (i) the links between players’ masculinities, identities and engagement in education which resembled those commonly expressed by working-class males; (ii) the dominance of neoliberal values which underpinned players’ educational experiences; and (iii) players’ relationships with tutors and tutors’ everyday practice.

Neoliberal ideology, education and working-class identities

The growth of neo-liberal education has been examined in detail elsewhere (e.g. Davies and Bansel 2007; Francis 2006; Stahl 2015), but a central concern of sociologists of education has been with what Francis (2006, 190) refers to as the ‘policy obsession with achievement’ in which ‘achievement is extraordinarily narrowly conceived – almost exclusively in terms of academic attainment’. As in other areas of social life, much of the current neoliberal discourse in education emphasizes individual responsibility, choice, independence, status competition, and economic productivity as important mechanisms for addressing educational inequalities (e.g. Davies and Bansel 2007; Francis 2006; Stahl 2015), including in relation to the under-achievement of white working-class boys (Stahl 2015, 2016; Stahl and Dale 2013). Of particular significance, however, is the now routine use by politicians and policy-makers of the rather one-sided, simplistic but often emotionally attractive ‘aspiration’ rhetoric which suffuses much educational policy (Ball 2013; Davies and Banshel, 2007; Stahl; 2015). In this regard, Stahl (2016, 665) has argued that ‘the “aspiration problem” has become increasingly individualized as aspiration itself is regarded as a personal character trait’, where the aspirational are regarded as being responsible, worthy and committed to self-advancement, whilst those felt to be lacking aspiration are presented as deficient, having a poor attitude, and

lacking sufficient self-responsibility, motivation and willingness to succeed (Francis 2006; Stahl 2015, 2016).

The deficit model evident in much current neoliberal ideology downplays the significance of structural and economic inequalities as explanations of educational under-achievement and other social problems, and instead focuses disproportionate attention on the cultural and moral deficiencies of individuals (Ball 2013; Davis and Banshel 2007). The dominance of such individualism in educational policy is thought to present a series of identity-based challenges to many working-class pupils, especially males (e.g. Reay 2001; Stahl 2016). For example, in a study of white working-class 14-16-year-old males in South London, Stahl (2015, 2016) noted that his participants engaged in an internal process of sense-making where their identity work became centred around egalitarianism, which he referred to as the working-class view that 'no one is better than anyone else' or 'above their station' (Stahl 2016, 669). For Stahl, egalitarianism formed part of the working-class boys' habitus and desire to resist 'the neoliberal process of "best" and "worst"' by achieving a "'standard" level of education'.

The emphasis on egalitarianism, it is claimed, also captures the prominence of 'ordinariness', 'average-ness' or 'middling' (Phoenix 2004; Stahl 2016) as values underpinning some working-class identifications, and as part of the 'uncool to work' and 'effortless achievement' discourses identified in other studies (e.g. Jackson and Dempster 2009). Indeed, for Jackson and Dempster (2009, 342), while many working-class males do wish to be educationally successful, 'for the achievement to be most impressive the effort expended must appear to be minimal' and, in so doing, 'must generally avoid displays of overt hard work'. Average-ness, ordinariness and middling have thus been regarded as playing important roles in how many

working-class males perceive themselves as learners, how they negotiate neoliberal aspiration discourses and practices, and the strategies they adopt towards resisting and making sense of neo-liberal achievement ideologies (Stahl 2016).

Becoming a 'lad' in education: average-ness and masculine identity construction

The emphasis on average-ness has also been claimed to be a component of masculine identity construction in education (Phoenix 2004; Stahl 2015, 2016); that is to say, a process in which boys can 'balance their working-class masculine identity with a prevailing neoliberal learner identity' (Stahl 2016, 676). For example, in her study of 11-14-year-old males in London schools, Phoenix (2004, 228) noted that the 'boys were well aware that to gain future success they needed to get qualifications if they were to optimize their future chances', but that the pursuit of educational qualifications was something that had to be balanced simultaneously with demands to develop socially valued and appropriate forms of masculinity. For the boys in Phoenix's (2004) study, masculinity was often regarded as being about the development of toughness, style, sporting ability, and not being seen to get on with school work – a characteristic perceived to be associated with girls. In this regard, such was the 'pervasiveness of a fear of failure in not being considered masculine enough and, hence, of being considered feminine' (Phoenix 2004, 233), many of the boys in the sample 'spent a great deal of time negotiating a middle position for themselves in which they could manage what they saw as the demands of masculinities while still getting some schoolwork done' (Phoenix 2004, 234). Those boys for whom academic achievement was an important priority, however, were often considered effeminate by other boys despite their routine enactment of strategies which helped 'them both to fit the expectations of masculinity and the demands of schoolwork' (Phoenix 2004, 236).

Although multiple masculinities exist, and each are dynamic and constructed contextually and relationally (Stahl 2015), it is the dominant expression of so-called laddish cultures or behaviours which have been regularly shown to impact upon working-class males' enactment of masculine identities in education (Smith 2007; Stahl and Dale 2013; Willis 1977). As a form of social validation which is often linked to conceptions of self-esteem, self-confidence, and fear and status anxiety, expressions of laddishness (e.g. via toughness, physicality, having a laugh, opposing authority, promiscuity) (Francis 2006; Stahl 2015; Willis 1977) and hyper-masculinity can exacerbate 'anti-educational stances and often creates a particular barrier to the creation of legitimate working-class masculinities' (Stahl and Dale 2013, 358). For Francis (2009), the enactment of laddish performances of masculinity is accorded high status in state schools and are performances to which many boys frequently aspire and often adopt. These laddish constructions, it is claimed, are based upon 'performances of rebellion, irresponsibility and hedonism' and thus 'sit in opposition both to school practices (which demand obedience and conformity), and to learning (as learning requires diligence, care and reflection)' (Francis 2009, 646). However, in increasingly neoliberal times where the activities and behaviours of working-class males are the subject of particular scrutiny, Smith (2007) has argued that this can constrain school teachers to establish 'friendly' relations with these groups to maintain academic engagement and minimize behavior management and control problems. This results, Smith (2007, 181) suggests, in schools often becoming 'an institutional environment characterized by aggressive confrontation and authoritarian forms of control predicated on physical domination', and where some activities such as 'footballing prowess represented *the* prestige resource in signifying "successful" masculinity' (Smith 2007, 186; original emphasis).

Education, masculinity and professional football

Another setting in which the routine expression of dominant forms of masculinity and laddishness impact upon the educational engagement of working-class young men in highly neoliberal contexts is professional football, specifically when young players (at least in the UK) are signed (usually aged 16) by clubs on a two-year scholarship in the hope of securing a professional contract. In his ethnographic study of youth trainees in a professional club in the 1990s, Parker (1996, 199) noted that ‘a dominant masculinity presides at all times’ and that this dominant culture is characterized by a

whirlpool of informal workplace relations predominantly comprising; a strict male chauvinism, a “breadwinner”/manual production mentality, and a coarse sexist humour manufactured around practical jokes, gestures and racist/homophobic connotation. (Parker 1996, 223)

Parker (1996, 1) added that professional football is a ‘distinctively working-class occupational domain [which] revolves primarily around a strict diet of authoritarianism, ruthlessness and hyper-masculine work-place practice’ in which one prominent expression of laddish behaviour is through ‘banter’ (see also, Kelly and Waddington 2006; Platts 2012; Roderick 2006). Such was the centrality of banter to the masculine identity work he observed, Parker (1996, 224) noted that ‘to accumulate any kind of peer-group credibility, individuals were not only required to “take” the insults of others, but to “give” as good as they got, thereby proving their masculine worth’ within a broader ‘working class shop-floor culture’ (Parker 1996, 67) which characterizes the game.

The enactment of players' masculine identities through banter pervades many aspects of young footballers' lives, including their educational experiences, though these are often regarded by players as being less important than securing a professional contract and career in the game. Indeed, the belief among many young players that to do well academically and to consider alternative occupations whilst pursuing a professional contract is to accept they may have no future in football (Parker 1996; Platts 2012; Roderick 2006). The players in Parker's (2000, 62) study expressed clear "disaffection" towards academic achievement', had already begun to disassociate themselves from education during the secondary school years, and typically regarded education as 'just one of a host of relatively "trivial" occupational obligations which, together with the day-to-day fulfillment of domestic duties, epitomised the symbolic inferiority of trainee status within the context of club life' (Parker 2000, 62). Similarly, in their study of Scottish professional footballers, McGillivray, Fern and McIntosh (2005, 113) noted that young players were not 'devoid of academic potential' but rather their academic abilities were often sidelined in favour of what was described as players' 'immersion in the footballing dream world where the game shapes the attitudes, behaviors, and responses of its young recruits to the detriment of formal educational attainment' (McGillivray et al. 2005, 113).

Notwithstanding the social, cultural and economic significance of professional football as a global sport, it remains a largely under-researched area academically in which there remains a tendency to ignore the everyday realities of working in such highly neoliberal spaces (Roderick 2006; Roderick et al. 2017). One consequence of this is the continued production of often one-sided, overly romanticized and glorified media-led presentation of the apparent luxuries of pursuing a career in professional football, particularly among aspiring young players. In this paper, we report some of the findings of what is to our knowledge the largest

study of its kind – since the publication of Parker’s (1996, 2000) classic works – a brief outline of which is provided next.

Research methods

Participants

The data reported in this paper are taken from a broader study involving 303 young heterosexual male footballers (16-18-years-old) who worked in 21 professional clubs in England and Wales (Platts 2012). The clubs were recruited from all tiers of the English football league, and included five teams from the Premier League (PL, the highest tier), eight were from the next tier (known as the ‘Championship’), three were from League One (the third tier), and the remaining five teams were from the lowest tier (known as ‘League Two’) (Table 1). A total of 161 players were contracted to a club with an Academy (79 PL; 82 Championship) and a further 142 players (27 Championship; 45 League One; 70 League Two) attended a club with a Centre of Excellence.¹

With the exception of four non-British players, all of the players were studying for some kind of educational qualification for an average of 7-9 hours spread across 2-3 days each week. Vocational qualifications such as the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) National Certificate (114 players) or National Diploma (82 players) were most commonly provided for players, a pattern which is also observed among males (especially those from more working-class backgrounds) elsewhere in the state education system. Just eight players were following an Advanced Subsidiary (AS)- or Advanced (A)-Level (three and five players, respectively) qualification (Table 2). Seven clubs provided players with education ‘in-house’ at the club’s stadium or training complex, and teachers or Education and Welfare Officers employed by the club delivered the sessions to players. A further four clubs

outsourced responsibility for the delivery of education to a local sixth-form college where players were educated alongside, but not with, other students attending the college. The remaining 11 clubs adopted both these approaches to its education provision, where some aspects of their courses (typically a football-related National Vocational Qualification) were conducted ‘in-house’ at the club and the remaining components (usually the BTEC element) were completed at a local partner college.

Procedure

Following receipt of institutional ethical approval, the study incorporated a mixed-methods design involving self-completion questionnaires and focus groups with all players (see Platts 2012). The questionnaires – which were conducted immediately preceding the focus groups – generated data on the types of activities players engaged in during their daily work, the amount of time they spent doing them, and with whom they did them. Once the questionnaires had been completed, the players were invited to take part in a 45-60-minute focus group discussion. 41 focus groups were conducted with between 4 and 10 players in a variety of public spaces at each club. For the most part, two focus groups were held: one with a group of first-year players (aged 16-17), and one with players in the second year of their scholarship (aged 17-18). In two clubs (1 Championship; 1 League Two) first-year players were unavailable to participate in the study, and in one PL club the high number of players meant that three focus groups were organized over two separate visits.

In this paper, we focus on the data generated by the focus groups which, as we have examined in greater detail elsewhere (Platts and Smith 2017), consisted of a relatively homogenous sample of players who had experienced some ‘particular concrete situation’ (i.e. were seeking to secure a professional football contract) (Merton and Kendall 1946, 541) and

were part of 'groups in the sociological sense of having a common identity or continuing unity, shared norms, and goals' (Merton 1987, 555). The construction of our focus groups in this way was intended to help illuminate the complex networks of social relations of which players were a part, and to identify patterns of behaviour (including the enactment of particular working-class masculine identities) which were not peculiar to a single individual player, but which were shared, to a greater or lesser degree, by groups of players who shared common situations. The focus groups were also intended to help replicate the collective social contexts in which players formed their impressions of their everyday experiences in education and other performative contexts (i.e. training and playing matches), and how they engaged in processes of interaction, negotiation and identity construction in those contexts (Morgan 2010).

Since the focus groups were held with pre-existing groups in club settings, we were especially concerned with emphasizing the importance of group confidentiality to players since 'what participants tell the researcher is inherently shared with other group participants as well' (Morgan 1997, 32) and this can raise concerns about the invasion of privacy and limit the range of topics discussed (Morgan 1997). In particular, before the focus groups began and, where necessary, during the discussions (e.g. when exploring issues including contractual concerns, home sickness, personal relations), players were reminded of the importance of not disclosing the experiences their peers recalled outside of the group. While players appeared to recognize the importance of group confidentiality, we cannot be sure they disclosed anything about what was said after we had left. Nor can we be certain that some players deliberately withheld information during the focus groups for fear that others might subsequently reveal sensitive information to peers or significant others (e.g. managers and coaches), or that the staged presentations of self and identities were authentic representations

of players' daily lives. Nonetheless, as Roderick (2006, 7) observed in relation to his study of professional players, it was important to reassure players that 'their comments, whether positive or negative, would not be traceable to them. If they had not received this type of assurance they may not have responded to questions so unguardedly'. Thus, in the next section, we refer only to players using a numerical identifier which precedes the comments made.

Findings and discussion

Educational 'disinterest', 'middling' and 'effortless achievement'

The views players expressed about their educational experiences in school and when undertaking their scholarship were consistent with those articulated by working-class males in other studies and could be divided broadly into three groups: (i) those for whom education was of little interest; (ii) those who could be defined as 'middling'; and (iii) a group for whom education involved 'effortless achievement'. Players in the first – and largest – group typically described their educational experiences in largely negative, hostile and critical terms (Parker 1996, 2000), as in the following extract taken from a discussion about school with players at a PL club:

2. When you go school, there can be days when you are not on it and you just like glide through school
 5. [Interrupts] You can just not give a shit.
 2. But here [football club] you have to be on it [focused on football] every single day.
 3. Yeah, you have to be on it every day, but it has gone quick since we've been here ...
 2. School was so boring ... Boring as; I hated school.
 7. The only good thing was like seeing your mates every day.
- (Year 1, Club 20)

In addition to having poor experiences of education prior to undertaking their scholarship, players in this group expressed similar views about the educational courses they received

(whether delivered at a sixth-form college or at their clubs), something which they commonly described as ‘boring’ and did not particularly enjoy. When asked to describe their present-day experiences of college, players from a Championship club said:

- 6. Shit.
 - 2. Boring.
 - Q. Why do you say that?
 - 4. College is just shit and boring
 - 3. Boring, it is literally the worst college ever
 - ...
 - 4. It’s like we’ve done school already.
 - 6. The facilities are crap in there.
 - 2. I just miss breaks and go.
- (Year 2, Club 14)

Other players expressed concern about the ‘boring’ nature of the education they received, including those at a League Two club, who described their experiences as follows:

- 7. It is boring.
 - 5. It’s a ball ache
 - ...
 - 6. It is boring.
 - 2. We want to go into a classroom.
 - 3. If we went to proper college it would be better, but it is just us in a room on our own.
 - 1. No one wants to be there.
- (Year 2, Club 1)

While players in this group were generally critical about their former and present-day educational experiences as those in Parker’s study (1996, 2000) did, they were not necessarily highly disengaged from formal education. Many of their comments related instead to the unstimulating and unsatisfying contexts in which their learning was perceived to take place, and in which they were expected to conform to conventional methods of teaching and education which evidently clashed with their preferred learner identities and strategies (Stahl 2015, 2016). In this regard, the schools and clubs which players in this group attended appeared to shape significantly their learner identities and habituses (Reay 2001; Stahl 2015,

2016), and contributed to the processes through which players often came ‘to see the aspiration toward academic success as a symbolically legitimated form that not only [fell] largely beyond their grasp but also beyond their desire’ (Stahl 2016, 667). In contrast, and for reasons we shall explain later, players who were more able to ‘have a laugh’ with their education tutors and to enact their preferred masculine identities (revolving especially around the regular and systematic use of ‘banter’) in more relaxed, informal and social settings than those encountered in more formal learning spaces (Stahl and Dale 2013; Willis 1977), were more likely to comment positively upon their present-day experiences of education.

A second cluster of players, who could be categorized as the ‘middling’ group (Phoenix 2004; Stahl 2016), were less critical of the education they received during their scholarship and expressed a range of views about the supposed worth of their courses in the immediate term, and for the future. For example, for some players at a League 2 club, education was something which they ‘didn’t mind’ doing and which provided ‘another option’ to playing, while for others the courses they were following were perceived as relevant only if they prepared players for a future non-playing career in sport, or as a break from the demands of training and competing. They said:

4. It’s quite difficult.
 5. I don’t mind going.
 3. It just gives you another option if you don’t succeed in football so.
 5. It’s better going there than seeing this place [football club] every day.
 2. Well it’s ok if you wanna do something in sports if you don’t get a contract, say like a physio or something like that ... but if you don’t, then it’s hard to go there and put effort in, if you know what I mean? ...
 5. But, to be honest, if they’d made us do something like business, I don’t think half of us would wanna turn up.
- (Year 2, Club 21)

Further evidence that players’ dispositions towards average-ness or middling, as part of their egalitarianism (Stahl 2016), were contextually- and temporally-specific was revealed in the

comments of one group of Championship players which drew attention to the greater time needed to complete their work, and the opportunities education presented to rest from the physical and mental pressures of training. When asked about their experiences of education, the group replied:

4. It's alright but I think the work ... is not hard, it's just long.
1. I think we could get a bit more time to finish off the work.
- ALL. Yeah.
5. I think the work is really rushed, it's quite rushed.
2. Yeah, because we get one day [for education] and we have to finish some long thing and next week if you haven't finished it you have to go to something else so it don't really give us time to finish most of the things.
3. I think there are days when we would rather just be playing football, but then there's other days when we have just had a really hard week and we think 'yeah, it's Wednesday and we can have a day off because it's college and we can rest and stuff'.
(Year 1, Club 8)

The rather ambivalent attitude players expressed towards their education appeared consistent with other studies which have concluded that average-ness, or middling, is often central to working-class identifications with education where aspiring to be 'average' or 'ordinary' dominates conceptions of one's habitus and learner identity (Reay 2001; Stahl 2015, 2016). It was thus possible to identify in these players' comments 'an anti-aspirant egalitarianism' (Stahl 2016, 675) grounded in their apparent resistance to neo-liberal values of 'best' and 'worst' and concern with enacting their preferred identities in the company of peers. This having been said, there was a third (and the smallest) group of players who, far from aspiring to be average or middling, explained that they found their education courses 'easy' and something in which they had to invest minimal effort (Jackson and Dempster 2009). Reflecting some of the features of what Jackson and Dempster (2009) regard as 'effortless achievement', one group of second-year players at a League Two club claimed that their assessments were:

- 2. Quite easy.
 - 4. Easy.
 - 1. They're alright.
 - 6. Get like a page at the start and it tells you what to do to get what grade.
 - 3. It tells you more or less what to put.
 - ...
 - 1. You still got to work.
 - 2. You got to word it in your own ways.
 - 1. We still know what we're putting about.
 - 6. It says like 'to get a distinction you need to explain how to do this', and then you obviously just explain how to do it.
 - ...
 - 5. It's quite easy.
 - 1. Some of the stuff you do.
 - 4. It's not dead easy.
 - 7. Some of it's quite long, but it's quite easy.
- (Year 2, Club 12)

A group of second year players at a Championship club also felt that the education they received was 'boring' and 'easy':

- 1. It's boring.
 - 2. It's far too boring, it doesn't test you at all.
 - ...
 - 1. It does.
 - 3. It's like we're doing the hardest level, and it's just, it's easy. It's just boring, it's just crap.
 - Q. What's boring about it?
 - 2. It's just repetitive, like the same thing. Like there's like different sections, you do the same work just a tiny bit different ... the B-TEC ...
 - 6. It's like that for everything though, isn't it?
- (Year 2, Club 16)

For the players in this group, the apparent easiness of their courses was part of a more open-minded approach to education and a willingness to consider higher education (HE) as a potential post-career option should they not be offered a professional contract, a view which was notably absent from the player narratives recalled by Parker (1996, 2000). Indeed, the pursuit of HE was far from taboo in some – albeit limited – group discussions held with players about life after football if they were not awarded a contract, including in the following example:

1. Yeah, I think about it every day ...
 5. Yeah, I just looked at unis and that.
 1. To be fair, you are smart as though.
 4. Look for a contract first then uni.
 2. America.
 3. Yeah, America.
 5. I like the sound of America.
 2. I have had quite a few offers through the post from universities in America.
 5. Because with an Apprenticeship over there ... to get the grades to go there you can do your SATs, but here universities look at A-Levels and B-TECs and that. Here obviously, there are loads of people who want ... higher grades with what you get on going to school on one day a week, so America is the next best thing.
- (Year 2, Club 2)

Although all participants were centrally concerned with securing a playing contract at the end of their scholarship, the players in this group had begun to ‘internalize elements of the neo-liberal achievement ideology’ (Stahl 2016, 675) by at least considering the possibility, and the potential benefits, of pursuing education in the UK or overseas should they need to do so.

Copying, pasting and academic attainment

Although there were important variations in players’ educational experiences, all players recalled how they relied upon copying work to complete their written assessments. Whether they were able to copy work without being caught, or were simply instructed or encouraged to do by their tutors, players regularly copied work from various sources so that they could complete their courses successfully. One group of first-year players at a Championship club explained that when they completed their assignments they typically searched the internet before copying and pasting the relevant information they had found into their work without really ‘learning anything’:

6. You don’t really learn a lot. It’s just sort of ‘Go and do it’. You’ve just got to find it on the internet and text books and that.
5. It’s not really education; it’s just like copy and paste.
6. Copy and paste.

4. That's what I'm saying, I don't think we are learning from that ... 'cos it is just getting sources off the internet not using your own brains.

...

2. I don't really mind that 'cos this ain't school no more innit? I am done with secondary school, I don't mind just copy and pasting everything, but sometimes it gets really boring. Like him just sitting there.

1. No, the only thing why it is bothering me 'cos like I thought I was going to learn something through it, but I am not really learning anything. I'm just copy, paste, change words.

(Year 1, Club 8)

Although it was difficult to determine whether players' tutors were aware of the tendency to copy and paste material from the internet, it was clear that players were occasionally instructed to copy out work verbatim from textbooks and associated material. As one group of players from a League One club put it:

5. Because it's all computer-based, you can either copy out of the textbook ... (Or) they say 'Just copy this page', so you just type it out.

4. [Interrupts] They literally say 'Copy it'.

2. Or like 'Define these words' or something.

5. [Interrupts] Yeah, and then you just go on Wikipedia and get it ...

7. Our teacher just writes on the board and we just write in the book and that's our lesson done.

4. Yeah, he just writes it on the board and we got to copy it.

(Year 2, Club 3)

The claimed tendency for players to copy large parts of their work from different sources and gain assistance from their tutors on a regular basis was closely associated with the parallel tendency for players to be exposed to processes of learned helplessness by their tutors who encouraged them to adhere to their preferred learning styles. Commenting upon how they were not constrained to study in a relatively independent way, players at one Championship club explained how they were routinely told by their tutors what to write down and also encouraged to copy from a whiteboard at the front of the classroom:

5. (The) teacher (stands) at the front telling us what to say and then telling us to write down something.

7. They will give us the task and they will just leave us for the whole lesson to do the task and that is it.

Q. Leave the class?

5. No, they will just sit down like and they will be there but they won't actually teach us the lesson. They will just tell us what to write ... We don't learn it, we just type. We see something and then we write it down. That is it.

All: Laugh.

5. That is what we do; we don't get taught it.

1. If we were taught it, we would learn it more.

(Year 2, Club 14)

In view of the strategies tutors were said to adopt, all players felt that it was almost impossible to fail the course they were following and, even if they began to fall behind with their work, they expected to receive the requisite help to pass the course. Indeed, aside from the apathy many players expressed towards the courses they were following, they rarely feared failing the coursework-based elements of the programme because of help they received from tutors. In this regard, most participants drew similar conclusions to those of a group of players from a League Two club who said:

3. You can't really fail it. It's like retard proof innit?

2. Because they help you, the teachers help you as much as they can to get you at least a pass, don't they?

1. Yeah, you get your money as well at the end of the day.

5. Even if you fall behind, they just focus on you so they can get you a pass.

(Year 2, Club 12)

The claimed practices of players' education tutors were consistent with increasingly dominant neo-liberal ideologies of credentialism and performativity which emphasize the importance of gaining qualifications, and other forms of certification, for current and future career success (Ball 2012, 2013; Davies and Banshel 2007; Stahl 2015). As in other marketized education sectors, the successful completion of players' courses appeared consistent with prevailing concerns about the provision of education as a means of responsabilizing young people and their behaviours, and of encouraging opportunities for

self-advancement and achievement. In this regard, tutors' practices were shaped partly by the relational constraints they experienced from being interdependent with others in a context of (global) educational policy making dominated by market concerns, managerialism and performativity (Ball 2012, 2013; Davies and Banshel 2007). Among other things, working within this neo-liberal educational policy climate constrained players' tutors to act in ways that enabled them to negotiate the pressures imposed by highly prescriptive systems of accountability and inspection, competition and standards, and cultures of target-hitting. They were, in effect, 'caught between the imperatives of prescription and the disciplines of performance. Their practice [was] both "steered" and "rowed"' (Ball, 2013: 173; original emphasis) by the neo-liberal imperatives which characterized their relational networks. In the context of professional football, however, their practices were also shaped by a longstanding occupational expectation that the central purpose of scholarship programmes is to maximize the likelihood of producing players for the first team (Roderick 2006). The tendency for tutors to deliver players' education in rather authoritarian and instructional ways was thus one way in which they could help ensure players completed their courses successfully and without impacting significantly on other aspects of their work.

Banter, masculinity enactment and tutors' acquiescence

We noted earlier that one strategy some (particularly male) educators adopt in relation to the increased pressure to respond to neo-liberal managerialist principles (e.g. improving educational attainment and results) is to develop with working-class male students 'friendly' relations in classroom settings (Phoenix 2004; Smith 2007) to achieve the desired outcomes. Many players in our study also explained that they preferred the more relaxed adult-like approach adopted by some tutors during their education, as indicated in the following discussion at a Championship club:

1. It's not like a classroom ... round a table, there's five of you, so if there are any questions then you can ask, and it's a lot more approachable with the coaches and a lot of one on one help if you need it.

5. I think in education you get treated more like an adult in here. Like we would be at school, you have got to raise your hand if you want to talk in school.

3. That's the good thing about it as well, it's not as if you are in school. When you are in school. You feel like you are locked in prison or something. Here you just get your head down and just do your work and then you are done.

(Year 1, Club 16)

The emphasis players placed upon the enjoyable social side of their education, and the importance they ascribed to the degree of informality which characterized their relations with tutors so that they were able to 'have a laugh' with mates, was evident in the comments of other players who described their current educational experiences thus:

1. Miles better.

6. A lot better.

Q. In what way?

1. It's not as strict I don't think.

2. It's more relaxed.

7. More relaxed 'cos you can have a laugh with t'coaches and that ...

3. Yeah, they don't make you do 'em (coursework tasks) though. They don't force it on you; you just do it.

2. You do it because you want to be a footballer.

7. They do have a laugh with you though.

(Year 1, Club 17)

The central value placed upon the informality of tutor relations was typically associated with the 'banter' players were able to engage in with peers, as the following footballers from a PL club explained:

3. You can just relax because, obviously, you are out of football and like you get your time to relax like after football all the time.

4. Just be yourself ...

6. Banter.

3. Yeah, a lot of banter. You'd just see everyone being happy and that ...

2. It's just banter; it is just football banter ... like you don't feel like you are at school ... you are around your teammates and you are thinking, 'I just can't be bothered to do any work'.

(Year 1, Club 20)

As an aspect of the laddish cultures commonly found in professional football, banter in educational settings was valued by players but it nevertheless impacted upon the range and kinds of masculine identity enactments permitted in those contexts (Smith 2007; Stahl and Dale 2013; Willis 1977). Engaging in education-based banter required players to invest considerable time in enacting, sustaining and performing particular socially-validated masculine identities which ensured they remained 'part of the group' whilst completing their work (Phoenix 2004). These particular, often limited, identities were reinforced by the prevailing tendency for tutors to act in rather authoritarian ways which not only maximised the chances of players passing their courses, but also conveyed the view that educational learning was unimportant. This view was articulated by players at a PL club who claimed that above anything else 'most' tutors simply wanted them to complete their education:

6. Most of them.

5. It's all about just getting it complete isn't it. They're not arsed if you learn anything

3. They're not bothered about teaching ya, they wanna just get the work out of ya.

Q. Why's that do you reckon?

3. 'Cos they know we're not motivated to do it, we don't wanna learn.

(Year 2, Club 11)

A group of League Two players also noted how passing their courses was financially important for their club and that this was why they needed to get their course 'done':

2. I think they like us to get it done. We've got to get it done 'cos the club gets some money for every person who passes and finishes all their [course].

4. Think [name] just says 'Yeah, get it done'.

2. But when it comes down to it, they are just ... for the football int' he [coach] really? He just makes sure we get that done.

3. Just makes sure we get there.

(Year 2, Club 6)

Overall, it was clear that the enactment of players' masculine identities was not only constrained by their own particular habituses, but also by the sense-making they ascribed to the actions of their tutors who were negotiating the conflicting pressures on them from the neoliberal achievement ideology which pervaded aspects of their professional work. Players were thus engaged in a process of balancing – in complex and perhaps contradictory ways – their multiple identities as males, as neoliberal learners, and as aspirant footballers in contexts where educational performativity was deemed necessary but dominated by a prevailing concern with fulfilling short-term goals where educational achievement was narrowly conceived as attainment (i.e. passing courses).

Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to illuminate how, in the context of professional football, the neoliberal ideologies which increasingly dominate policy and approaches in education (Ball 2013, Davies and Banshel 2007; Stahl 2015, 2016) shape the educational engagement and identities of working-class males who were at the time aspiring to secure a professional contract. As in earlier studies of young footballers (Parker 1996, 2000), education was for many players something in which they had little interest and about which they recalled numerous negative experiences, largely because of the conventional approaches clubs adopted towards education. However, our data also revealed that, for some players, aspiring to be 'average' or 'middling' dominated their habituses and egalitarian identifications with education (Reay 2001; Stahl 2015, 2016), while for others education was something in which they needed to invest only minimal effort to perform well (Jackson and Dempster 2009).

In this regard, our findings suggest that a more nuanced understanding of young footballers' educational aspirations is warranted, and that these aspirations and experiences can at least be

partly understood as responses to the prevailing neoliberal learning environments which they inhabit and in which they engage in performative practices of working-class masculinities. It should also be noted that while players did not conform to dominant values of individualism, competition and self-advancement in contexts of education, in other aspects of their work (i.e. in training and playing) these values (which we shall discuss elsewhere) were central to the strategies they routinely adopted to gain the respect, attention and acceptance of others (e.g. coaches, managers) who ultimately determined whether they were to be awarded a professional contract and who played a significant role in their future careers (Parker 1996; Roderick 2006). Thus, understanding players' engagement in, and identification with, education should not be seen in isolation from the strategies they adopted to manage the conflicting neoliberal ideologies and practices to which they were subject in their working lives, and more research is clearly needed on the intersections of these and other aspects of their wellbeing.

Notes

¹ At the time of the research, Academies and CoE were the terms used to differentiate clubs who were perceived to have better facilities, provisions and operations (Academies) and those who were more inferior in these areas (Centres of Excellence). Both recruited players on a professional scholarship from age 16 and a decision was made on whether a player was offered a full-time professional contract by age 18.

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