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Retrospective Respect for Education - Male Australian Footballers retrospectively appreciate education post-matriculation

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Abstract

Introduction and Purpose: Males who excel at sport whilst still at school trivialize education in favour of sport. This study of 12 male Australian footballers aims to examine the hierarchy between education and sport of Australian footballers. **Material and Method:** Four rugby league, four rugby union and four Australian Rules footballers underwent life history interviews and showed clear prioritisation of sport during school. **Results:** However, the importance of education post-secondary school was recognized by these footballers. This change in perspective supports current research and extends the research by describing perspectives of Australian Footballers post-secondary school. **Discussion/Conclusion:** These findings are interesting in that they demonstrate the initial ascendancy of sport and the retrospective significance of education over sport.

Key words: Education, Sport, Matriculation, Pedagogical, Australian sportspeople

Background

This paper consists of 4 parts. Firstly, the current literature surrounding males' construction of education and sport. Second, the details of the methodology employed in this research. Third, the data analysis of life histories is elucidated and finally, the findings and implications of these revelations are discussed.

The early literature reflect anti-intellectual/educational disposition of males beyond sport. For instance, Willis's(1977) seminal tome "Learning to Labour" ethnographic fieldwork of a dozen British male student revealed an aversion for education. Additionally, several studies show negative attitudes towards academic study and education by males in school (e.g. Ding and Hall, 2007;West 2002; Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002). The majority of research indicates that males underscore sport and the use of body in the physical arena as prevailing over education achievements (Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002). Education achievement is denigrated and diminished by young males. Existing research canvassed males in school but did not specifically focus on footballers; or students who excel in the sport arena during primary and secondary school. The current research canvassed 12 males in the Australian context with achievements in the sport arena. These footballers displayed affinity for sporting achievements in school, however a significant change in perception regarding the duality of education to sporting achievement was apparent. This research details the notable shift from the importance of sporting achievement and illuminates the prioritization of education. This article provides unique insights into Australian footballers with respect to educational attitudes post-secondary school compared to attitudes during school.

Hegemonic masculinities is rather anachronistic but not non-existent within Western modernity. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) both affirm masculinities is dynamic, ever-changing or contextual. The tractability of hegemonic masculinities, which is also referred to as orthodox masculinities, is evinced by the emergence of the ascendant inclusiveness masculinities (Anderson 2008). Additionally, the supplementation of the binary conceptualization (hegemonic and subordinate) with ancillary concepts such as marginalised masculinities and complicit masculinities as well as hegemonic femininity evinces the current heterogeneity of the theoretical framework. Accordingly, the temporal fluidity of masculinities is palpable and further reinforced in this research.

Various phenomena in education from primary, secondary and tertiary levels have been examined using the theoretical framework of masculinities. Literature in this area shows early constructions of hegemonic masculinity within educational discourses, specifically rationale for poor

educational achievement by boys, the experience of gay fraternities with other hegemonic fraternities and the displays of masculinities within the student pub setting (Webb 1998; Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Yeung, Stomblor and Wharton 2006; Epstein et al. 2001; Clemens 2005; Connell et al. 1983).

A discourse analysis of four award winning picture books from the Children's Book Council of Australia's 1997 shortlist was conducted (Webb 1998). The findings suggested that primary school children's picture books demonstrated that hegemonic forms of masculinity were promoted. Males rather than females were considered as physically stronger, more competent, diligent workers, adventurous, competitive and knowledgeable (Webb 1998, 27). The analysis suggests that young boys are not actively encouraged to construct their own versions of masculinity and hegemonic masculinity is cultivated and indoctrinated from a young age. In addition, it is argued that co-educated, adolescent males who excel at sport, rather than academic achievement, perpetuate the desired hegemonic masculine identity (Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that academic achievement is linked to 'femininity' and girls, rather than young boys in primary and secondary schools (Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002). It has been suggested that masculinities should be reconstructed so that academic achievement, rather than sporting pursuits, in school are endorsed for boys and viewed less as an endeavour purely for girls (Swain 2006, 336). It is apparent, however, that hegemonic masculinity within the educational setting favours sporting excellence, such as being a 'jock' or good sportsman, whether it is soccer or rugby (both league and union), including other constructs such as physical and athletic skill, strength, fitness, control, competitiveness, discipline, courage, self-reliance and adventurousness (Swain 2006, 336). Essentially it was found by observing ten and eleven-year-old boys from three different elementary schools in the United Kingdom that the use of the body, physicality and athleticism were the most cherished and extensively used resources to achieve hegemony by young boys in school and sport was an instrument used to marginalise less athletic boys and maintain hegemonic exclusivity (Swain 2006, 336).

In a New Zealand study observations of the behaviours of tertiary students in a student pub known as the Captain Cook Tavern noted competition and conformity amongst males, attention seeking, mateship and the sexual objectification and sexual domination of women as the important behaviours common to this group. It concluded that these were the desired hegemonic patterns in this context (Law, Campbell and Dolan 1999, 155-162). For example, this ethnographic research over a three-month period in 1996 found that male students with long hair were ridiculed as being feminine or homosexual (Law, Campbell and Dolan 1999, 155-162). Evidently, in a variety of contexts there are nuanced, but similar, perspectives pertaining to masculinities and education.

In summary, masculinities have been used to examine educational and social phenomena and have also been applied to sports, the latter forming the focus of this study. It is apparent that educational institutions promote sport and are cultural spheres that endorse hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, sport is regarded as a leading definer of masculinity in Western society (Connell 1995, 54; Pringle 2005; Colling 1992, 134). However, the majority of research in this area has occurred outside of Australia (Benwell 2003).

The aim of this research was to address the gap in the literature detailing shifting attitudes by Australian sportsmen with regards sport and education. Evidently, the research illuminates the positions of male cohort in regards to education, however, is devoid of the metaphorisation of opinions. This research elucidates the antithetical transformation of sentiments. This research is

unique in that it covers Australian footballers' perspectives in 3 separate codes around education and sport. In addition, it uses unique methodology to uncover the shift in perspective of the sportsmen.

Methods

The research method draws from Messerschmidt's (2000) study and involves interviewing 12 subjects extensively about their life. This is known as the theorised life history methodology (Messerschmidt 2000, 22). By scrutinising the life history of the players we can determine the social processes and constructions of masculinities leading to their choice of education and work trajectories and attitudes associated with these. Messerschmidt (2000) is a major proponent of this research approach and his methodology and study of adolescent males and masculinities was heavily relied upon for this study.

The life history methodology follows a theorised life history approach by avoiding skeletal biographies from participants. Instead, this method involves in-depth discussions with participants about their life events (Messerschmidt 2000, 22), enabling the researcher to discover how individual social actions and interactions with others are embedded in social structural constraints. The theorised life history methodology helps to record patterns in lives that other methodologies would not otherwise be able to determine. Evidently, this methodology is apropos to glean the change of both historical and contemporary perspectives pertinent to education. Alternative research techniques, merely procure cross sectional data and prevent garnering the developments of perceptions.

The life history method thoroughly documents personal experiences and transformations. Connell (1995, 89) simply defines the methodology as the relation between social conditions that determine practice and the future social world that practice brings into being. It has been labelled as the 'perfect type of sociological information' (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927. Open-ended questions elicit profound emotions, such as feelings, anecdotes and perspectives, that quantitative methods fail to achieve.

The study design included probe concepts such as "education" or "school" which elicited responses from the participants about these concepts. Further, the third phase of the interview process obtained autobiographical details. This phase gave participants the opportunity to speak about their life history, illuminating important events or occurrences deemed significant by the participant. Several key areas were explored, including division of labour and power dynamics within the household, school and peer groups. These key themes were discussed via Messerschmidt's interview guide and elucidated a wider examination of life histories. Jamshed(2014) extols the use of interview guides optimally utilize of interview time since interview guides facilitate the exploring the respondents systematically and comprehensively. This paper, however, focuses on sport and education. The data was analysed to answer the following research question: What attitudes do elite Australian footballers have towards sports and education?

Participants

Twelve players from rugby league, rugby union and Australian rules football were interviewed with four from each code. All participants played at a competitive, representative or professional level.

A convenient purposive sampling strategy was used for this research and all participants had attended and matriculated secondary school in Australia (Messerschmidt 2000, 17). Four footballers, aged between 18 and 31, were selected from each of the three aforementioned body contact codes, specifically those who were currently playing or had played their respective sports no more than 10 years before the date of the interview (Messerschmidt 2000, 17–18). This requirement was to ensure that the participants were up-to-date sources of information regarding each football code. Players are referred to as sport code and number pseudonyms to uphold anonymity and confidentiality (e.g. Union 1, AFL 2).

ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis was adopted to examine the 12 life histories. (Clarke and Braun 2006, 77). A thematic analysis can be simply denoted as a method that is used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data (Clarke and Braun 2006, 78). This analysis helped determine the masculinity themes within the life histories of the 12 footballers. A theme capture is something that is considered significant and pertinent to the research question, namely, what are the attitudes towards sports and education and reflects a clear patterned response or meaning within the 12 interviews (Clarke and Braun 2006, 82). The thematic analysis involved 4 main phases.

Phase 1: Transcription (Familiarizing yourself with Data)

The first step in the thematic analysis was to transcribe the audio tapes. This assisted in the coding of themes. NVivo 9.0, a qualitative coding software package, was used to code the major topics and store the interview transcripts (Richards 2005).

Phase 2: Coding Preliminary Masculinities Themes/Generating Initial Codes

The eight preliminary keys themes that were created into nodes, and thus were the preliminary themes that the data was initially categorised into They were:

- division of labour
- power dynamics
- sexual awakening
- masculinity and femininity
- violence
- crises
- body
- off-field violence.

Phase 3: Distinguishing, Grouping and Merging Sub-themes (Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme)

In this step sub-themes were noted, combined, linked or catalogued under the broader, aforementioned themes. Firstly, sub-themes were created under division of labour and power dynamics, based on the compartmentalisation in the interview guides, namely household, other households, parents' workplace, peer group and school. Patterns emerged which were labelled as a new theme or merged into an existing theme, or a sub-theme was created and catalogued. Similar sub-themes were grouped together. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

Phase 4: Conclusion of Masculinities Themes (Reviewing, Defining and Naming Themes)

The broader themes of division of labour, power dynamic, sexual awakening, etc. were categorised under the masculinities framework. Specifically, for this paper, hegemonic and subordinate themes were categorised. Consequently, the results of the data are presented entirely thematically, namely anxiety in Sport and school is important retrospectively over sport.

Results and Discussion

The life histories data within this project included extensive details about numerous topics related to the lives of the footballers. However, the following sections describe and discuss the data specifically related to the research question: ‘what attitudes do elite Australian footballers have towards sports and education? The first section describes the footballer perception of sport performance, followed by how footballers value education post-secondary schooling. Sport performance, still the height of hegemonic masculinity

“If you wanted to be a boy you had to play rugby”

It was evident from sitting with the players that sport, and in particular their body contact sport, was significant to their construction of masculinities, supporting Connell’s (1995, 54) claim that sport is the “leading definer of masculinity in Western contemporary civilizations”. Messner (1989) revealed that young athletes gain conditional self-worth from sport; it was a reflection of the dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, with the latter being denigrated and the former elevated. In particular violent sports and combat were viewed as a terrain that can only be traversed by men and not by women. Due to its pain-inducing nature, sport thus serves as a cultural symbol to elevate a structure of domination of men and oppression of women (Messner 1990). A plethora of research has stated “sport is still considered one of the central shapers of masculinity in present day Western society” (Aitchison 2007, 140).

Players from all codes noted the importance of participating in sport generally, such as Union 2 who also found the need to fit-in during school. He was a very successful athlete and sportsman, which gave him superlative power and made him popular. He detailed the hierarchy: boys and male students who studied were labelled as nerds; average Caucasian “party boys” and sportsmen, who were at the top, had massive powers and cited rugby as his main sport to attain his hegemony. He reiterated that he was the school captain and a very successful athlete and sportsman, which gave him superlative power in his school. Union 3 concurred by asserting he felt that “jocks” (the sporting males) forced their dominance but he resisted and fought this; however, he conceded that those males who excelled in sports had power. Union 1 also alluded to the popularity of sport in school:

So my final year we went from, we played badminton, we played squash, we played Rugby League, we played Rugby Union, we played Field Hockey, played Touch Football, we played Football or Soccer. You name it, we played it, just because we were sporting school, we wanted to play sport and we wanted to be the best in our region.

Similarly, Union 4, stated the:

...school I went to was very, very sport orientated, so that's where I really flourished in my Rugby, but I also played a lot of other sport so... Outside of class at school we were there before in the Gym, after training Rugby, Rowing, Volleyball, Basketball, all kind of stuff, so very labour intensive I think you could say.

This hegemony of sport was emphasised by League 2, who established the hegemony amongst male peers who were arrogant "footie boys" as they were the largest and the strongest and said, "no one is going to mess with you". To him, the rugby league players were "superior people". League 2 found the media very influential and his heroes were masculine, very strong and athletic (Holt and Thompson 2004). He regarded boys as sporty and occasionally belligerent. However, value as a man was based on "how good you are on the footie park". He reasoned there was great power associated with sporting prowess by illuminating, "...when you have or rather when anyone else intimidates more power over you, and on the football field and someone's better than you, and basically like lesser than a man and makes you want to like want to go further and stronger ..." He viewed success as being emphasised for males, with women as supplementary figures:

Males they are always kind of everything, and we don't really associate the word of success and women together; like to be successful was on the football field and whatever the men do and girls will be just kind of associated ... or not associated but you know tag along and that whatever was sung about it, it was for the men's achievements and not for the women.

He continued to state that the goals of boys are to "become football superstars".

Sportsmen such as football professionals or surfing professionals were lauded and deemed personifications of hegemonic masculinity; however, this is subject to change given the fluidity of the context as masculinities are relative and are culturally and historically malleable. However, the footballers in this sample didn't diverge from previous illustrations of hegemonic masculinity and perpetuated the reverence of footballers.

Similar to League 2, Union 1 even noted the urge to become a sportsperson was important; he didn't initially want to be a teacher but a sportsperson: "yeah I never really wanted to become a teacher to start with. When I was at school, mate, all I had my eyes on was becoming a professional sportsperson or someone who's working with professional athletes." Furthermore, League 3 viewed his dad as a paragon of masculinity due to his strength; he played professional rugby league at the highest national level and thus considered him, along with other people, a "star". Union 3 noted the influence of his biological father in relation to masculinity similar to other rugby players. He also revered his deceased grandfather although he had never met him: "...he was one of the greatest all-rounders, he had an education, he had sporting ability...". Additionally, League 3 viewed sports and body construction as 'masculine', particularly in terms of sports, as the majority of men partake in sports where women's equivalent participation in sports is portrayed—and even promoted—as inferior.

Furthermore, Union 2 stated that his activities at school were mainly sports-related, namely rugby, athletics and cross country. He noted jealousy and "backstabbing". He felt powerful at school because the school was a grammar-focused rugby union school and he excelled at rugby union. He succeeded in sports rather than academics and enjoyed the camaraderie, culture and bond in the historically old grammar school; however, he didn't like the expectation of being a sportsman: "Like

for example I think, we played a game one time or I had made the top... I had made the Australian School boys and week after that, we played a game in one of the private schools that were lower ranked than us, but at night played a very horrible game and the week after that, I got it from everyone for that game.” He lamented that his school deceived him about the work following his school achievement in sports:

I think after I finished high school, I like the same thing again; I thought everything is going to be done for me. I have already achieved everything in life, I need like a Reds contract or a Waratahs contract is waiting for me. I didn’t expect that after high school that you had to work ten times triple times harder to get those contracts unless you’re exceptionally talented like Mr Quade Cooper.

Union 3 also prioritized physical exercise and exertion over academic tasks. He only had positive academic relationships with the physical education and a wood work teacher and only had four trusted friends. He did well in sports and enjoyed school; however, he didn’t like reading. Furthermore, Union 4 continued this admiration for sport, stating he was friends with everyone but chose to reside in the rugby union player social group. He was a successful and a diligent student and consequently liked all the aspects of school: “I liked the subjects, the teachers, I liked the camaraderie and I loved the sport.” He continued the hegemony of “footie boys” that he fraternised with, so he considered himself powerful as he was popular and excelled in rugby. To summarize, all the union players expressed the significance of sports during their schooling. This is supported by Kian, Modello and Vincent’s study (2008) where they found that football is superlative, followed by basketball and that all other sports are the same. This hierarchy, with football being at the top, was evident from the footballers’ comments.

AFL 1 considered men to be manly if they participated in activities such as “rough contact sports” and that both boys and men should participate in competitive sports whilst girls ought to play with dolls, toys, dance and undertake art or dress up. League 4 also established the definitive activity for all was sport. This mantra was summed up eloquently by Union 2. As a boy, his primary activity was to play rugby union and he starkly stated, “If you wanted to be a boy you had to play rugby”. This supports the previous literature that states boys need to excel at sport and be jocks to maintain hegemonic exclusivity and masculinities. As Swain (2006) details, sport in school was used by young boys as an instrument to marginalise other boys and maintain hegemony. Lastly, there was a study in New Zealand where rugby union, being the most popular sport, revealed that school sport, physical ability and masculinities are very significant for young men, for their sense of well-being, mental health and social relationships (Pringle 2008, 232). The current research replicated the findings of these other studies (Swain 2006; Pringle 2008).

The predominance of sport and its facilitation of learning and socialisation during adolescence were detailed by AFL players as well. AFL 3 noted that his school had a major rugby league base, but he didn’t feel anything to any for other peer groups. However, he did not find that its highly populated school made him feel powerless as it was “a massive school and no [sic] really you heard.” Viewing it retrospectively he noted that school was very important. He felt that being good at sports is the acme for men as it increases opportunities, money and girls.

This also aligned with the studies into the military and masculinities. Anderson (2008) noted that having a sports nature is a precursor for military vocation; as such sport and the military are

similar. As previously noted, it is clear here also that sport re-enforced the gender dominance of sport and men:

1. The 'language games' of sport and war are shared and generated by the rules of a common categorical 'deep structure';
 1. This deep structure is homologous with, as well as an artefact of, the sex gender system of American society; and
 2. This structure preserves and amplifies male dominance in several important theatres for public performance and myth making in American society including politics, sports and the military (Jansen and Sabo 1994, 7-8).

Thus, it has been argued that sport is used in the same way as the military and politics to re-enforce and celebrate a domain for the elite hegemonic man. Clearly, "sport is war" (Messner, Dunbar and Hunt 2000, 382).

AFL 4 noted his school work was "professional" and "work-oriented" with exceptional health and physical teachers or coaches. He was friendly with students, successful as a Sports Captain, an AFL state representative and performed well academically. He liked the social aspect of school; however, he disliked being isolated in that environment with people he didn't want to see. He saw sports people as being the most powerful in school, particularly in his sport-oriented school. He felt "a bit of power" with extra facilities afforded to them for being excellent in school cricket. He uttered the importance of sport for developing long last social relationships: "growing up within sports orientated [sic], so I think you develop friends and relationships that I guess for a long term [sic] will always be there".

What is apparent and discussed in the literature review is that masculinities are constructed, rather than biological, which supports Butler's (1990) concept that gender is performed rather than innate. Thus gender, in particular the male gender, achieves masculinity via socially-constructed performance in the sporting realm. Individual behaviours, sport and ancillary socially hegemonic activities related to sport evince masculinity and thus being a man.

AFL 4 noted, like AFL 1 and 3, the nexus between gym, sports, strength and being a man:

Yeah so definitely you have I guess the jock group where everyone was looking to get stronger, go to the gym and train and stuff and that ways you get the girls to be more so orientated [sic] with being a pretty and socialising.

He summarised that his peer group was a masculine group and that they endeavoured to be more athletic. He idolised football players due to their physical prowess or size: "a football player had bigger shoulders or like could run a distance within a certain time, I wanted to do that as well so, I guess that's within the masculinity thing." This AFL player informed the interviewer that such aforementioned exaltation of football players at an early age led him to be an athlete.

Union 4 felt that learning to be competitive, playing sport, watching masculine movies and thriving socially were important for men. This private school rugby union player summed up being the nexus to being a man and excelling in rugby union as "...doing very well in the Rugby field, I think that really does help you feel more manly, makes you feel sort of more an alpha male when you know when you're doing well, as opposed to if you're not." He continued to tie sporting achievement

intrinsically to gender success as a male: “Okay, so I think gender success for me would be an accomplishing what I want in terms of being a man. So you know making that rugby team”. League 3 ironically stated that he was “more focus[ed] on sports in school...goals...sexuality then sort of come seconds [sic]”, but it was apparent from participants that the goal was sport and it was inherently linked to their sex or gender as a man. League 4 professed: “Yeah those boys that fucked the most girls were definitely most powerful, also if there was a footie and stuff if you were a footie they will respect you.” League 4 crudely informed that other than “sex tallies”, a male’s “ability at sport” also gained importance and stated, “You played better, then they’ll have more respect for you.”

It was apparent that a hegemonic masculinity was to play sport and in particular football. This was intrinsically linked to being a man and being masculine. This was no surprise; sport is viewed as a leading definer of masculinity in Western society (Connell 1995, 54; Pringle 2005; Colling 1992, 134; Nauright and Chandler 1995). Excelling or participating in sport was correlated with acceptance by peers who were desired. This was eloquently stated by Union 2, who inferred that the only way to be accepted by a peer was to be competent in sport. There were a plethora of instances from various footballers that emphasised playing football was a significant behaviour to being a man and achieving hegemonic masculinity. This supports the literature surrounding sport that asserts sport has been used in schools to marginalise less sporty boys and attain hegemonic masculinity (Swain 2006, 338).

Furthermore, this hegemony of sport was also verified by Connell (cited in Hearn 2000, 50), who asserted the social significance of sport as “the central experience of the school years for many boys”. Messner (1990) initially found that sports, in particular violent and aggressive combat sport, united men and provided a mechanism to attain hegemonic masculinity. In the current study the importance of sport was overwhelmingly apparent throughout the life history of the footballers and evinced a “collective masculinity” that supports previous research linking sport and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1998, 4). Hutchins and Mikoza (1998, 259) summed up the influence of the sporting context in Australia eloquently, stating: “it is these contexts, and celebrated images such as that in League of the muscular, aggressive, sporting male, that play a significant role in legitimating and reproducing masculine hegemony in Australian society”. This was further supported with players citing footballers and sportspeople as their heroes, similar to parents.

ANXIETY IN SPORT PERFORMANCE

“...doing very well in the rugby field, I think that really does help you feel more manly...”

Similarly, the antithesis to excelling in sport was not performing in sport. AFL 3 was the first player to admit to feeling anxiety over performing in sports and realised that an injury that prevented him from playing sports caused him stress as well as deteriorated his life choices: “... distressing event was last year, I had to get ankle surgery, because there was like whole pre-season, the whole two years training that’s gone, was stressed with it yeah ... because you thought that your career’s over, you’re never going to play the high quality football ever again.” This even led him to lack control and seek masculinity or manliness in other deleterious ways:

Yeah like last year what I did my ankle, I sort of spread a bit wayward, started drinking lot more and stuff like that, because I was with a group of main set and all that stuff, so I didn't really feel in control then, I just thought I have to do it just because I’m not going to do anything else...Yeah. Because there was to [sic] my

ankle, I thought I was not going to train, I'm not going to pick [up] a football or anything I need to drink just to show that I'm a man because I drink all the time and stuff.

League 2 found two scenarios distressing—being raided by law enforcement and losing football matches—and spoke about them in a similar manner:

Cops running into your house, getting raided was distressing because you knew one of your family members won't be coming back. So that was always probably one of the hardest things. Losing football matches was probably a hard thing and ... because you always like to succeed and lot of pressure to succeed and yeah so great deal of anxiety even before matches; if you knew you were against one of the best teams and in the city or the state or the country, that like if you lose you're like a dickhead and yeah run this way yeah think like you had all the power and now if you didn't know you had it yeah...Yeah there's always times when you just lose control and because inevitably like people are going to be better than you, that what [sic] inevitably someone's always going to have I reckon more strength and bump you off or put a shoulder charge or [be] better than you, can sprint further than you and yeah so... rugby league you used to have this a lot. I suppose my determination for that not to happen was greater, than fight it."

League 4, similar to other footballers, felt anxiety regarding sport performances:

Yeah anxiety, I get lot of anxiety with my sport... big games, strong games, cause a lot of anxiety in my life yeah, because I've got pressure, not with family, friends and that, to make big make higher teams.

It is clear that the inability to be competent in sport raises questions about the masculinity of footballers, thus is considered a subordinate masculinity.

SCHOOL IS IMPORTANT RETROSPECTIVELY OVER SPORT

"In hindsight school's [the] most important thing..."

It is apparent that although sport is prioritised over education, school is viewed as a hegemonic institution, despite several studies showing the disparaging of academic pursuits (Clayton and Humberstone 2006; Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002; Swain 2006; Hickey, Fitzclarence and Matthews). Participants were asked if school was important or not important and they unanimously stressed that it was very important. Although the footballers may have not felt school was important at the time of being in primary or secondary education they did value education following graduation when queried on the influence of school. League 2 summed this up as: "In hindsight school's [sic] most important thing..." which Union 3 concurred with, lamenting "At that time, I saw it as unimportant because I didn't feel like I was getting taught to the best of my ability, but I do think it's quite important". This influence of school also extended to teachers, where one footballer felt he would be incarcerated if not for the intervention of a particular teacher. This rugby league player, who is currently a law school student, saw his education as the best years of his life,

extolling his teacher with the statement: “Without that teacher, I’d be in jail and I wouldn’t be in the university.” One footballer, Union 1, loquaciously asserted that school was very important and now, in his role as a teacher, values education:

Very. I said that I was an educator, and told the kids, I say I wish I knew what I knew now when I was in your grade. I said... and I said, I say to my year 10 kids now in careers, the worst thing right now for you guys is you’ve got to tell me what you want to do in three years time when you want to leave school. Not year 11 or 12 what you want to do, but what you want to do in that following year. Do you want to go to University, do you want to get an apprenticeship and you ask the kid in year 10 that, they won’t have a clue. But I still wish I kind of had someone to tell me that because by the time I got to year 12 and I’ve done my half my subjects, I realized I shouldn’t have done half of those subjects. And so I explained to my kids and it is... it’s important like you might not value education, but what you want to do or where you want to get in life, it’s going to lead you to where you want to go. So you don’t want to be that kid that wants to be an electrician or whatever, you got to do those wet pathways or you got to do whatever you need to do. As I said with working, you’ve got to do what you have to do to get your way to the top. School’s kind of the same; you’ve got to get your way to where you want to go in life. Even if you don’t know where you want to go you’ve got to put your foot in the right places to start with.

AFL 3 noted that school taught him to be small then to become big and it was the same outside with work, where you “start small again and work your way to big”. Studies by Renold 2001; Toussaint 2005; Jefferson 2002; Swain 2006) asserted the educational process is feminised in the educational setting which was clearly evinced by the footballers’ prioritisation of sports over education. According to boys’ education advocates, the championing of education as found for girls should also be emphasised to young boys as currently there is an over-focus on physical power rather than academic achievement for school-age boys. A consensual epiphany is clear with the footballers canvassed in this study. However, retrospectively, all footballers praised education and extolled the influence of schools after graduation.

CONCLUSION

This study finds a clear preference of sporting performance over education for footballers whilst in school and supports the literature that describes the negative attitudes of boys about school and academic pursuits. Excelling in sport, particularly football, is a way for male school boys to be seen as masculine, dominant and important within the school environment as opposed to those with a more academic standing who tend to be perceived as being weak and as nerds or party boys. This attitude towards the deification of sport over education is heightened within the school environment.

This article further shows the evolution of men’s sentiments towards education and provides insight into the changing “masculinities” of footballers as well as men. Post school attitudes evolve and revert to extolling education and sporting achievement. As male footballers mature,

perceptions change, and school becomes regarded as a very important institution despite this importance not always being appreciated all the time.

These insights into the changing attitudes of Australian footballers are important as they help us to partially understand the context of school academic disengagement for boys and the social and emotional landscape that many boys are experiencing within the school environment. Such insights serve to aid educationalists to create favorable environments for boys who excel in sport and those who do not. Further, such insights are helpful for elite athletes to contextualise their sporting prowess and endeavor to plan for their future.

The study is limited to a relatively small sample restricted to the Australian context. There are limitations to conducting a study using the life history, in-depth interview methodology. A notable flaw of this method is that it cannot elicit a complete or entire story like longitudinal studies, as memories and individual recollections are not infallible (Short 1982, 135). However, this is a common criticism of most research techniques as different methods will have different effects. A methodology is yet to be created which is infallible. However, the use of life histories provides the ability to gain a full data set and all participants can be contacted to verify any vague or ambiguous recollections. Also, the veracity of the footballers' accounts comes into question regarding uncomfortable or controversial matters so ability to probe or clarify helps improve accuracy of accounts. Further research needs to be conducted to verify and explain the maturing insights and epiphanies elicited by men for his study.

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