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Designing talent development in football – a document analysis of the Norwegian academy classification model

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ABSTRACT

Norwegian football has recently witnessed a surge in the professionalization of talent management, marked by the launch of the Academy Classification Model (ACM) in 2017. The model aims to enhance player development and national performance through improved efficiency and professionalization within top clubs. However, research has raised concerns about the long-term consequences of the increased professionalization of youth football on players' personal development and well-being, emphasizing the need for future programmes to include pedagogical and ethical considerations. To understand how the ACM incorporates such considerations for players within the context of performance development, we analysed how the model is designed to support talent development using Biesta's critical pedagogical framework. Our deductive thematic analysis indicates that the ACM primarily focuses on academy structure and performance output rather than on the process of players' practice, personal development, and well-being. These findings differ from what Biesta emphasizes as crucial pedagogical process components.

Introduction

How to develop talented football players into professionals is a topic of significant interest within the sports talent research field,[1] where various perspectives and ideas on how to facilitate talent development (TD) are extensively explored.[2] Understanding how to develop and nurture talent best has become crucial for nations and clubs engaged in designing and delivering TD, leading countries to revise their national programmes to meet new demands and enhance academy quality.[3] However, the absence of a shared understanding of talent has affected programmes, research design, and practices, making it challenging to identify the best ways to develop talent.[4] Although recognizing that formal talent identification and development (TID) programmes are crucial for achieving success in elite sports and football,[5] a scarcity of studies systematically analyse key documents in this domain from a macro-perspective viewpoint.[6]

Moreover, a dearth of research includes ethical aspects of TD in youth football. With the academy system playing a crucial role in the professionalization of young players,[7] where ethical issues transcend all TID processes and can profoundly impact players' personal development and well-being,[8] it underscores the necessity for research focusing on such aspects.

While entry into the academy system varies globally, for example, with talent selection commencing as early as 6–7 years old in top European academies[9] and from 12 years old in Australia[10] and Norway,[11] concerns persist regarding talent identification (TI) and selection

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processes.[12] These concerns primarily revolve around early specialization,[13] biases in selecting early matured players,[14] and the inherent risks of self-fulfilling prophecies when resources and positive attention are distributed unequally among developing athletes.[15] Even if de-selection is a natural process in team sports, research shows that the earlier a player is selected into an academy, the greater the chance of getting de-selected before reaching the senior level,[16] which relates to the difficulty of predicting the development of the complex and multidisciplinary football competence.[17]

Additionally, concerns about the long-term consequences of de-selection processes are expressed.[18] Although research indicates great player satisfaction within top club academies,[19] studies also express concerns about stressful environments, demands, and expectations within the academy settings, impacting young players' mental health and well-being.[20] The consequences of increased professionalization of young players are questioned, emphasizing the necessity for researchers and practitioners to assess the worth and value of TID systems, focusing more on positive youth development and personal development rather than solely on performance outcomes.[21]

As such, the academy environment plays a key role, contributing to athletes' skill enhancement and facilitating transferable benefits to other aspects of their lives, thereby enhancing their present and future well-being and social contribution.[22] Mills et al.[23] emphasized the need for a 'balanced approach' to player development, where performance excellence co-exists with personal excellence, preparing players for life outside football. Research on TD has shifted towards holistic approaches, recognizing the significance of supporting personal development and psychological well-being throughout skill development.[24] Approximations of this can be providing dual career pathways opportunities[25] or emphasizing the acquisition of transferable skills.[26] Within the football context, increasing studies include perspectives extending beyond the sole focus on developing football skills within academies,[27] acknowledging that only a few players become professionals. National programmes in established football nations require a holistic focus on TD, also integrating staff responsibility for player welfare and dual careers.[28]

As national TID programmes intend to influence and reshape practices, they garner significant research interest. Combined with research underscoring the importance of future studies providing evidence for optimizing academy environments to ethically enhance selected players' lives, personal development, performance outcomes, and progression,[29] these are all aspects to include when examining TD document design.

Based on this background, this study aims to understand how a national TID programme, the Norwegian Academy Classification Model (ACM), is designed considering pedagogical aspects that may impact young football players' development.

By incorporating a pedagogical perspective, we introduce a new aspect to the analysis of TID programmes. While pedagogy is generally understood as the structuring of teaching and learning to ensure learning,[30] Biesta's critical pedagogical perspective emphasize that pedagogy transcends a mere technical process of knowledge and skill transmission, involving a complex and relational engagement. Applying his theory on how to design holistic educational processes also invites us to examine ethical aspects of TD in document design, particularly pertaining to TI and selection processes and the general well-being of players throughout the TD pathway, as these processes all involve ethical considerations that may influence player performance and well-being.

Other reasons for examining the ACM from a pedagogical perspective are that the ACM provides pedagogical and educational value when designed to facilitate future player performance, and concepts used in the ACM closely relate to pedagogy. Additionally, sports policy increasingly emphasizes 'joined-up' policies between schools and sports organizations, with sports pedagogy focusing on shared practice settings rather than what sets them apart.[31]

Our decision to draw on Biesta is motivated by the applicability of concepts from his critical educational theory to elaborate on the study's aim, and his approach provides tools to analyse and discuss pedagogical considerations in the programme. Although Biesta is an influential voice in the

school context, his theory is about young people's education, which has encouraged us to explore some of his thoughts in a new context.

Before elaborating on Biesta's concepts relevant to this study, we briefly overview the ACM and Norwegian youth football to contextualize the study.

The Norwegian context and the ACM

The Norwegian sports system is characterized by voluntarism, idealism, social democracy, and equality, where youth elite and recreational football are based on these values and are primarily driven and organized within the same structure.[32] The Norwegian Football Association (Norwegian FA or NFF) is responsible for the formalized TID programme, aligning with a general attitude against an early selection of players before the age of 12.[33] Compared to many other European countries, Norway places issues on values higher in the TD debate.[34]

However, changes in youth professionalization across national borders and the national team's poor performance have influenced the nation's TD debate,[35] with criticism directed towards the system's reliance on voluntary participation and inadequate competence requirements for youth coaches.[36] Despite Norway's small population compared to the established football nations, it boasts rich football traditions and sets high expectations for its national teams to participate in European and World championships.

Regardless of changes made by the NFF to improve the TD system, it continued to face criticism, especially from stakeholders associated with elite football.[37] Based on many years of work, the ACM was introduced in 2017 by The Norwegian Top Football (NTF[38]), the top clubs' interest organization. Launched within a TD system, contrasting to European top football academies,[39] the ACM was developed to assist top clubs in meeting international academy standards to enhance player development and national performance through financing and improving efficiency and professionalization.[40] The ACM comprises 11 interconnected 'Skill Areas',[41] each consisting of criteria or objectives expressed as relevant to the training process. Similar to other talent programmes within football, the areas represent a scoring system where a specific point score is associated with a star level, with five stars indicating the highest classification level.[42]

Notably, some areas and objectives are more valuable and essential than others when provided with higher point scores and more economic incentives. The model distinguishes between 'Threshold Areas', 'Drivers', and 'Scoring Areas'. 'Threshold Areas' (Anchoring, Competence, and Finance and Facilities) are based on absolute requirements, implying that a club must meet all the requirements connected to these areas to attain academy classification. 'Drivers' (Training Process, Cooperation Models, and Productivity) are areas with higher point values than the 'Scoring Areas', which constitute the rest of the ACM areas.

Thus, the ACM represents a significant shift in Norwegian football, receiving both a positive reception and becoming subject to critical public debate. Critics express concern about a potential negative impact on Norwegian grassroots football and its values,[43] as well as the lack of collaboration between the NTF and NFF, contrasting to collaborative approaches in countries like England and Germany.[44]

Theoretical perspective–Biesta's critical pedagogy

In his critical pedagogy, Biesta emphasizes the role of education in cultivating individuals who can engage meaningfully with the world's complexities. He underscores that education is a holistic process, emphasizing its emotional, social, and ethical dimensions, not just intellectual or academic development, and educators should *design* and deliver practices that develop individuals as a whole.[45]

In his educational theory, the *design* is about planning and creating a pedagogical programme that guides teaching and learning,[46] and *delivery* refers to the actual implementation of the

programme, including the instructor's actions and the strategies and methods used to engage individuals in the learning process.[47] Both are essential to the educational process and for realizing meaningful and achievable educational outcomes. Our study seeks to understand pedagogical practice *design*, as expressed in the ACM documents.

According to Biesta, the design of pedagogical practice must consider the critical areas of *purpose*, *content*, and *relations*.[48] *Purpose* refers to desired outcomes and aims of education and *why* certain content is taught or learned. *Content* refers to *what* is being taught and learned and how to organize and present it, while *relation* refers to *how* the content and purpose are related to the context and experiences of the student. Biesta[49] argues that the selection and organization of content must be oriented towards the broader purpose of education, and for education to be successful, the content must be presented in ways that foster productive and collaborative relationships between learners and teachers and between learners themselves because education is a social and relational activity, not purely an individualistic endeavour. The content should also be presented in ways that encourage learners to engage in meaningful dialogue, recognizing the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

To meet the holistic understanding of education, Biesta argues that the question of *purpose* should include three primary purposes: *qualification*, *socialization*, and *subjectification*.[50] The qualification function or domain[51] involves providing students with knowledge, skills, and abilities essential for schooling and specific societal roles and functions. Socialization involves learning and internalizing cultural norms, values, and beliefs while developing social skills and forming personal and cultural identities. Subjectification refers to becoming an active and responsible subject with self-awareness, autonomy, and agency rather than passive objects in education.[52] Regardless of intention, the socialization and subjectification functions impact students as individuals in education, enhancing or restricting their capacities and capabilities. Therefore, both should be included with the qualification domain in purpose justification to fully address the holistic perspective in discussions about what constitutes a good and meaningful education.[53]

However, most educational systems focus on the qualification function, reflecting a trend that Biesta refers to as the 'learnification' of education.[54] This trend places too much emphasis on measurable outcomes and accountability and risks reducing education to achieving quantifiable goals at the expense of its broader social and cultural purposes.[55] While acknowledging effective learning, Biesta cautions that it can be perceived as a value. Focusing solely on effectiveness and the qualification function may lead to valuing what is easily measurable or of *instrumental value* over what is truly valuable in education, which is the *ultimate value* and the wider formation of individuals.[56]

The three interrelated concepts of purpose, content, and relations delineate critical areas of inquiry for pedagogical managers when *designing* educational practices. Therefore, we incorporated these concepts into our ACM analysis, specifying the research questions accordingly:

What are the purposes, content, and relations expressed in the ACM?

How does the expression of these three dimensions in ACM align with Biesta's holistic approach when *designing* an educational programme for TD?

Method and methodological reflections

A qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the ACM, which allowed us to distinguish repeated patterns of meaning across the dataset selected to answer our research question.[57] The choice of the theoretical framework and a deductive approach was derived from a continuous and iterative process of reading and annotating, where new aspects within the documents influencing our hypothesis and understanding were discovered.[58]

Our deductive analysis utilized theoretical categories, where patterns were predetermined through a theoretical framework[59] based on Biesta's concepts of purpose, content, and relation.

Table 1. Operationalization of the concept's purpose, content, and relation.

Concepts:	Examples of codes:
Purpose	How is the purpose expressed and justified?
The important functions/	Do values and theory justify the model?
domains:	Does the justification of purpose include all three domains related to educational purposes?
Qualification	*Qualification function*: What knowledge and skills are necessary for players to succeed?
Socialisation	*Socialisation function*: What norms and values are expressed about the educational process? Are
Subjectification	the players seen as members of a group?
	Subjectification function: What are the reflections about the player's agency and autonomy, and
	how are they addressed concerning well-being and personal development?
Content	What is essential for players to learn?
	What skills are players going to develop?
	What are the learning objectives for player learning?
	Is learning theory or learning methods explicit?
	What is the justification for the content?
Relation	How are the relationships between players, players and coaches, and the wider community
	described?
	How does the educational experience connect to the students' lives, and how can it be
	meaningful to them?

We conducted the thematic analysis following the methodological guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke[60] and Braun et al.,[61] adhering to their recommended six-phase approach. An iterative, systematic, and reflexive approach was guided by the principles of this framework when aiming to generate in-depth insights into the data.

While we did not follow the phases rigidly,[62] we included them all in the process. Commencing with step one, which involves familiarizing oneself with the data through comprehensive reading and rereading for a thorough understanding, ultimately led us to adopt this theoretical deductive approach. In step two, we employed Biesta's predetermined concepts as initial codes when coding the relevant information in the data. Table 1 outlines the criteria for identifying and coding each concept to ensure sufficient analysis. We attempted to operationalize them as closely to Biesta's conceptualization as we interpreted it. We then coded the data based on the presence or absence of predefined codes or themes relevant to the research question. In this deductive analysis, these codes also served as themes, that shaped the presentation of the findings. Furthermore, searching for and reviewing potential themes, which involves checking whether the themes make sense with the coding and the entire dataset, connects to steps three and four in the thematic analysis. Steps two to five are also informed by research knowledge on TD. Corresponding to step five, the overarching themes presented in the discussion result from this former organization and the pattern recognition process. In alignment with step six, which is about ensuring a coherent and trustworthy presentation of the themes, the majority are presented as textual summaries with reference to specific documents.

Throughout the research process, we strived for reflexivity, acknowledging the inherent subjectivity in qualitative analysis.[63] We collectively engaged in member reflections,[64] reading, and discussing document content to enhance reliability and foster competence and creativity.[65] Additionally, presuppositions unavoidably bias our interpretations, as subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research. However, the researchers strived for reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process, including discussions and member reflections.

ACM documents

We analysed six documents for this research: The *Academy Classification Reports* (ACRs) from 2017, 2019, and 2022,[66] and the ACMs *Sets of Criteria* (SCs), SC 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0.[67] These documents encompass about 400 pages of text, tables, and figures and are essential to understanding the ACM and addressing the research question. They are considered valid and trustworthy, as they are published on the NTF website and referred to by reputable sources.[68]

The reports/ACRs and SCs serve different purposes. The reports provide an overview of the ACM's background, description, justifications, individual presentations of each classified academy club and its star level, and a total quality summary of all the classified clubs compared to the five-star level. The SCs encompass the model's objectives and criteria, and serve as benchmarks for clubs during the classification application process. All the ACRs and SCs share the same structure and purpose, with minor variations, except for one significant change between SC 1.0 and 3.0, with the model expanding from 10 to 11 areas. When incorporating the area, 'The Player's Development Year', the criteria and requirements that followed enhanced the individualized follow-up of the presumed best players, incentivized by economic reward upon meeting these objectives. Our analysis of the documents focuses on the rationale of purpose, content, and relation, and if changes lead to incongruences or deviations between the documents relevant to the research questions, it is explicitly addressed in the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were followed throughout the research process, adhering to the ethical guidelines from The Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH, 2019).[69] Specifically, when using theory from another context, one can potentially neglect themes and content considered essential to the document authors, which underscores the importance of being transparent and thoughtful in our interpretations and conclusions (NESH, 2019).[70] We did not need approval from an ethical committee as personal data are excluded when using public documents.

Analysis and findings

The analysis and findings are structured into sub-headings aligned with Biesta's concepts of purpose, content, and relation. Importantly, when applying concepts from one context to another, it is necessary to consider the specific nuances and characteristics of the new context.[71] Therefore, the meanings and indicators of concepts may vary depending on the context. Despite these differences, operationalizing Biesta's generic concepts allows us to analyse and discuss the applicability and relevance of various indicators within a TD context, which is commented or elaborated upon in the findings and discussion.

Purpose

Biesta argues that the question of purpose and justification should be the primary focus of educational discussions. The educational purpose is forefronted in the ACRs with the model's main purpose, which is to '(...) significantly enhance the performance of the football nation by developing more and better players at a high national and international level' (e.g. ACR, 2017, p. 5).[72] The purpose is justified by the poor performance of players, clubs, and the national team, depicted through extensive statistical data compared to other nations' better performances. It is argued in the ACRs that different cultural traditions and demographic conditions between countries are considered in the model design without providing further details.

Additionally, the model's validation is grounded in visits to multiple successful sports and non-sport environments worldwide, the analysis of world-class players, and the study of top development clubs in Europe, including their classification models (e.g. ACR 2019, p. 10–18). Thus, the justification for the model is primarily based on 'best practice' and the absence of performance rather than a well-developed knowledge base supporting different choices, which is desirable from Biesta's perspective. Moreover, the model's purpose and justification do not stem from a broader political discussion but rather from the work of NTF and representatives from the top clubs.

Although the purpose is broad, allowing for various interpretations, statements and justifications, the documents focus solely on the qualification function and the development of skills and knowledge connected to football performance. While the report includes statements related to Biesta's conception of socialization and subjectification functions, the indicators do not align with his holistic understanding but connect to a multidisciplinary approach to football skills development. For example, the reports emphasize the significance of focusing on the football mentality, with specific attention to self-regulation as a crucial attribute for players to develop. However, this attribute is only mentioned in relation to effective learning and football skills and performance. If self-regulation were to align with Biesta's subjectification function, the model's purpose should address players' agency (autonomy), well-being, and personal growth. On the contrary, they are more likely to be seen as 'passive objects' in the education of others when described in conjunction with words such as effectiveness, competitiveness, and productivity, with player sales expressed as being an 'important indicator of the quality of a club and a nation's player development work' (e.g. ACR, 2022, p. 11).[73]

Concerning the justification of purpose, the focus is on the qualification domain, results and end products rather than on the educational process.[74] In the talent context, indicators regarding the latter could emphasize the importance of acquiring transferable skills, fostering autonomy in the development process, and addressing various aspects connected to personal development.

Content

Considering the model's one-sided focus on the qualification domain in its purpose, the content is expected to focus solely on developing knowledge and skills related to football performance. While explicitly addressing football skills through a multidisciplinary approach, the documents do not include specific content descriptions, learning objectives connected to player development, specifications for learning methods, or guidance on presenting and organizing content. Instead, the responsibility for defining the learning goals, content and methods for player development lies with the clubs at the local level, designed and justified as a deliberate strategy to provide academies with significant autonomy to preserve cultural identity, maintain competitive advantages, and foster distinctiveness among academy locations.

Through the area of 'Planning' in the model, it is recommended to develop 'Educational Plans' that describe goals and content regarding how the academy teams should play and train. An example of criteria formulated in this area is: 'The clubs have a plan with clear learning goals and goal-directed activity for the players in age group 6–12, 13–16 and 17–19' (SC 3.0, p. 11).[75] This example illustrates the clubs' vast local autonomy and how the SC objectives are generally formulated, mostly reduced to measurable outcomes. While a multidisciplinary approach to skill learning is emphasized and recommended, there are no requirements for clubs at the lower levels to follow these recommendations.

Instead, the overall design of the ACM involves establishing clear standards, rules, regulations, and mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating, and reporting performance related to the academy structure and the organization of player development rather than how to influence player practice directly. When provided with higher point scores, some areas in the model are more valuable and essential than others. Thus, the most valued areas (the 'Threshold Areas' and the 'Drivers') can influence the club priorities, specifically for the lowest classification levels, as the clubs do not need to score in all ACM areas except for the 'Threshold Areas'. The lower the classification level, the more valued objectives are connected to structural aspects of academy practice and focus on the best players. In contrast, for the highest classification levels, higher standards of all academy practice aspects are required for all players.

Further, the emphasis on 'best practice' in the ACM justification of purpose does not explicitly address how to apply it to content and academy training. Additionally, while the documents are not

specific about learning theory, the concept is pervasive throughout them, highlighting the significance of the relationship between learning goals, content, and assessment for successful and effective learning in the 'Training Process' area. Learning is also commonly associated with words such as effectiveness, systematics and outcomes concerning player performance and output.

Relation

Regarding Biesta's critical area of relation in the design of pedagogical practice, the documents contain recommendations and descriptions of the relationships between players, coaches, and the wider community. For example, the 'School and Football' and 'Cooperation Model' areas emphasize the significance of partnerships between various stakeholders in player development, including schools, clubs, parents, and local/national FAs. However, the emphasis in these areas is primarily on collaboration to ensure high-quality training associated with the qualification function and does not explicitly include the subjectification and socialization functions. Additionally, there are no requirements for pedagogical design that establish a connection between the content, purpose, and players' experiences for the lower classification levels. Consistent with our research findings on the model's content, the relational conditions also predominantly focus on academy structure.

While the reports highlight the significance of positive coach-player relationships in enhancing performance, the SCs primarily focus on structural aspects and staff employment requirements at each classification level. The SCs do not address coach-player relations, the connection between learners and the learning environment, or how to create meaningful and relevant player experiences. However, with the area of 'Competence' as a 'Threshold Area' in the ACM, it is emphasized that coach qualifications are essential to quality training and learning.

Furthermore, valued objectives related to the 'Training Process' may negatively influence the coach-player relationship and relations between players. For example, the clubs will receive substantial scoring points by prioritizing the three best players in each age group between 13 and 19, providing them with exceptionally high follow-up standards compared to the rest of the academy players.

For Biesta, relations in educational processes also include political discussions, acknowledging that power relations may influence educational decisions. However, the ACM design process involved only the NTF, the top clubs and stakeholders connected to the NTF, not the Norwegian FA.

Discussion

Through our deductive analyses, we identified patterns of meaning that could illuminate our research questions, presented in two overarching themes, both reflecting an influential premise of vast local autonomy for academy TID design and practice.

The ACM focuses on the qualification function in the design of TD programmes

Based on our analytical tools, the ACM purpose represents a unilateral focus on the *qualification function*. Following Williams et al., the ACM includes recommendations for a multidimensional and holistic approach to developing football competence (including psychological, physiological, sociological, technical and tactical aspects).[76] While expecting a focus on the qualification function in both purpose and content when aiming to enhance player competence and performance, omitting 'Biesta's *subjectification* and *socialisation* functions leaves out reflections on *ultimate values*, encompassing ethics and values related to the TID process. By narrowly focusing on the qualification function and *instrumental values*, there is no emphasis on the significance of clubs prioritizing player well-being and personal development, which is crucial in designing holistic educational processes.[77]

Such a one-sided conception may even have a damaging impact on the other domains. Biesta[78] claims that the current emphasis on school achievement in the domain of qualification imposes excessive pressure on students to perform, which can negatively impact the domain of subjectification. Similarly, players face considerable pressure to perform within the academy system.[79] Given the significance of players' motivation and psychological well-being for skill learning and development,[80] academy practices also play a crucial role in shaping players' identities, akin to the school context. Thus, learning the norms and values of the academy practice (socialization) can profoundly influence how players see themselves (subjectification).

To ensure a holistic approach to academy practice, Biesta[81] emphasizes the need to be explicit about the subjectification and socialization domain within the model's overarching purpose, which entails dividing it into more specific learning goals for inclusion in local educational plans. For example, addressing value-loaded issues related to selection and de-selection processes is relevant because they inevitably influence the subjectification and socialization domains. Indicators of a holistic approach within the TD context, relevant to the conceptualization of educational purpose, include promoting the learning of transferable skills,[82] focusing on players' dual-career pathways,[83] and their psychological well-being and development apart from learning football skills.[84] When the ACM does not address these aspects, it deviates from current TD models and requirements observed in other top European nations' programmes.[85] Although national programmes may exhibit variations due to cultural differences,[86] holistic approaches to TD are demonstrated in top football academies.[87]

When our findings show a vast local responsibility for the clubs in designing 'Educational Plans' for the TID process, this may lead to significant variations between clubs in whether to incorporate a holistic educational approach into their pedagogical planning. Allowing for local adaptation is essential for implementing sustainable and innovative practices; however, too excessive space may result in unequal access to essential knowledge and practices for the learners.[88] Knowing that players experience stressful and demanding academy environments,[89] ensuring clubs address player well-being and personal development is crucial within the TD context. Creating requirements for the clubs to include a holistic educational approach to TD should not conflict with their competitive advantages related to their 'Educational Plans' connected to the qualification function.

Since Norway places the value debate in discussing TD programmes higher than many other European countries,[90] one might anticipate the inclusion of indicators related to subjectification and socialization domains in local plans by clubs. However, excluding these domains in document design, combined with the influence of plans shaped in other cultural traditions and the potential impact of unregulated market forces on TD's professionalization, can undermine Norwegian societal values.[91]

In this regard, criticism has been directed towards the lack of collaboration between the NFF and the NTF in the ACM design, contrasting with macro practices in other countries.[92] The success of the German programme is the establishment of a top-down network, where the government collaborates with all national football organizations and the national FA in shaping the premises for TID processes. Biesta emphasizes that involving the broader political community in discussing educational programmes indicates a necessary holistic understanding of relations at the macro level. To align with Biesta, the programme development process should involve both the NTF and the national FA to mitigate polarization between different interests, potentially hindering fruitful TD. Including the governmental level in the discourse on the design of TID programmes is also pertinent. 'The Norwegian Sports Model', on which all Norwegian sports values are based, is rooted in governmental work.

A classification system focusing on academy structure and the measurement of outcomes

Our findings indicate that the ACM resembles classification and incentive systems observed in national TD programmes of top-tier leagues.[93] This design, which includes clear expectations

through absolute requirements and incentives, serves as an accountability system where measuring and comparing clubs to standards is essential to identify and improve areas needing additional support. However, we suggest that the model reflects what Biesta considers a potential danger in such measurement systems, valuing what is easily measurable and not measuring what is truly valuable in education, such as the wider formation of the individual.[94] While the primary goal of academy practices is different from the school context as they serve different purposes, TD research emphasizes that fostering the overall well-being of players should be crucial in all academy practices,[95] recognizing that only a few will reach the professional level.

As emphasized in our analysis, the most valued areas ('Drivers' and 'Threshold Areas) primarily focus on the structural level of academy design rather than on player practice at the micro-level. For example, the 'Educational Plans', essential for the players in the TD process, are connected to 'Scoring Areas', less valued in the model, while the quality expectations for 'Threshold Areas' connect to finance, facilities and staff at the structural level. In such accountability systems, one likely prioritizes what is essential, understood as what provides the most incentives. Focusing on finance and facilities may also imply favouring clubs that already score high in these areas and not necessarily those that provide the best development opportunities.

While it is emphasized in the ACM that improving academy organization is the first step to professionalization, focusing measurement outcomes at the structural level of academies (e.g. finance and facilities) and narrowly focusing on end products (player productivity and sales), clubs may overlook the intricate processes involved in supporting players throughout their academy participation. Thus, the ACM design may even lead clubs to adopt practices inconsistent with their core values. For example, academy staff may not agree to provide preferential treatment to three players in each age cohort if this contradicts their understanding of talent, but they may feel compelled to do so because the scoring system rewards such practices. Coaches may also prioritize results and narrow their focus to the qualification domain, driven by player productivity as an efficiency measure for the club, even if they wish to include a more holistic TD focus. While Biesta accepts the concept of efficiency in educational design, he raises pertinent questions about: 'effective for what' and' effective for whom'?[96] In the context of the ACM, effectiveness appears to be linked to club productivity, bolstering the club's financial standing and the nation's performance (ends), rather than what is effective and meaningful for the player as part of the TD process (means).

Furthermore, ACM's promotion of the early selection and preferential treatment of certain players contradicts Biesta's perspective, emphasizing the significance of providing equal opportunities through equitable access to resources and learning opportunities for all individuals. Despite the model's assertion of personalized learning for all players in the academy, this preferential treatment may reinforce an emphasis on self-interest and individualism. Prioritizing individuality over equal opportunities in society can, according to Biesta,[97] undermine the importance of shared values and social responsibilities. Although selection is part of the TD system, equal opportunities for all players selected into a TD system align with Norwegian values and a dynamic perspective on talent. A dynamic perspective emphasizes developmental opportunities within the environment, giving less weight to selection and acknowledging that early performance may not reliably predict future performance.[98]

While unequal *treatment* is part of academy practice to individualize player development, unequal *opportunities* in academy settings can threaten Norwegian values and negatively impact player and coach relations and relationships between players. For example, focusing on player sales and productivity may reinforce competition and individualism within an already competitive performance environment, potentially compromising collective endeavours. There is also a risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy when resources, positive attention, and other incentives are distributed unequally among developing athletes.[99]

To answer our research questions, the ACM lacks consideration of holistic processes in its purpose, content, and relations. The model's one-sided focus on the qualification function, prioritizing means and ends over the TD process in club classification, deviates from Biesta's

foundational pedagogical and educational design principles. While this aligns with societal patterns and various school curricula designs,[100] the absence of ethical considerations concerning pertinent issues related to the TID processes in documents targeting an academy system increasingly driven by market interests[101] raises concerns both in the context of talent research[102] and from the perspective of Biesta.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to understand how the national TD programme, the Norwegian ACM, is designed considering pedagogical aspects that may impact young football players' development. Through deductive thematic analysis using concepts from Biesta's educational theory, we find that the ACM primarily focuses on developing skills and knowledge related to football and the qualification domain, with little attention given to holistic educational processes. The deliberate strategy to provide incentives for the improvement of academy structure, leaving the design of academy programmes to local autonomy, raises concerns about how the ACM may impede player development by limiting essential aspects of TID processes, such as considerations of players' well-being and personal development as part of the pedagogical practice.

To ensure that clubs address these considerations in the TID process, it is essential, from Biesta's perspective, to include holistic indicators in the macro-level document design. Biesta also emphasizes the inclusion of holistic indicators for the three interrelated concepts of purpose, content, and relation in both the design and delivery of educational practices, ensuring that the academy experience fosters players' overall formation and development, encompassing more than just their athletic abilities.

Although the school and football contexts serve different purposes, we find Biesta's concepts useful for critically analysing value-loaded issues and ethical considerations relevant to TD programmes in football. We suggest our findings can contribute to the ongoing discussions about the role of pedagogy in sports[103] and the importance of integrating holistic and ethical considerations into sports development programmes. Concerns about players' overall well-being and personal development are particularly pertinent, given the growing trend of professionalization and commercialization of youth football. Therefore, including the subjectification and socialization domain in the TD programme's purpose is pertinent from Biesta's perspective.

Limitations and future research

Due to the ACM complexity and many details about the classification system, our approach to the analysis may have resulted in overlooking essential elements from the authors' viewpoint. While strictly following established research procedures and ensuring transparency and reflexivity, potential biases from presuppositions and subjectivity may still have influenced our interpretations, as inherent in qualitative research.

Furthermore, we did not seek access to additional documents with information about the classification process available to the clubs, recognizing that this could have provided relevant information to our findings and interpretations. However, we intended to analyse accessible documents as they appear in public when discussing the purpose and content of the academy classification.

Concidering the broad autonomy of clubs in developing learning goals and content for player development, we suggest that future research examines the *design* and *delivery* of TD programmes and practices at the academy level, with a particular emphazis on including a pedagogical perspective.

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3. Csáki et al., 'The New System of the Talent Development Program in Hungarian Soccer', 711–24.; Halldorsson, 'The Black Swan of Elite Football: The Case of Iceland', 711–724; O'Gorman et al., 'Translation, Intensification and Fabrication', 309–25.; Pouyandekia and Memari, 'How Can Clubs Play an Essential Role'? 1–35.; Sweeney, MacNamara, and Horan, 'The Irish Football Player Pathway', 1–16.
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34. Lindsey et al., Two decades of youth sport policy research: an augmented scoping review and synthesis', 1–25.
35. Gammelsæter, Herskedal, and Egilsson, 'Commodification Spiralling Down to the Football's Grassroots', 1–17.
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41. The Skill Areas:1) Anchoring: The board, management, and employees 2) Player logistics 3) Planning work 4) Competence 5) The training process 6) The player's development year 7) Match platform 8) School-football 9) Cooperation models 10) Productivity 11) Finances and facilities.
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45. Biesta, 'What is Education for'? 75–87.
46. Ibid.
47. Biesta, 'Reclaming a future that has not yet been', 655–72.
48. Biesta, 'What is Education for'? 75–87.
49. Ibid.
50. Biesta, 'Risking Ourselves in Education', 89–104.
51. Biesta uses both the domain and function concepts.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. Biesta, 'Good Education in an Age of Measurement', 33–46.
55. Ibid.
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57. Joffe, 'Thematic Analysis', 209–23.
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60. Braun and Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', 77–101.
61. Braun, Clarke, and Weate, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Sport and Exercise research', 213–27.
62. Ibid.
63. Alvesson and Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology.*
64. Tracy and Hinrichs, 'Big Tent Criteria for Qualitative Quality', 1–10.
65. Braun and Clarke, 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', 589–597.
66. Olafsen, 'Akademiklassifiseringsrapporten (AKR) Olafsen (2017)'; 'AKR, 2019'; 'AKR, 2022'.
67. These documents are at the precent password protected, but public available when downloaded: The SC 1.0 and 2.0 was downloaded in December 2019, the SC 3.0 in January 2021. They are available on request to the first author.
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81. Biesta, 'Risking Ourselves in Education', 89–104.
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Data availability statement

The Academy Classification Reports (Akademiklassifiseringsrapportene, 2017, 2019, 2022) are publicly available and referred to under the bibliography. The models Sets of Criteria (1.0, 2.0, and 3.0) can be provided to the first author upon request.

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