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Developing 'whole people': a case-study of a sports-friendly school

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this current study was to explore how a whole person approach was conceptualised and supported within a sports-friendly school in the United Kingdom. A holistic, single case study methodology was used. Data collection occurred over an eleven-month period through observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews with 64 individuals (37 males, 27 females). Data were analysed following guidance by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019). Analysis led to the identification of a desire from participants for a whole person approach to encompass more than acknowledging individuals as whole people, to proactively targeting the development of the whole person. Three factors were seen to influence such development: quality social interaction, exposure to opportunities and people, and having autonomy and responsibility over development. Findings illustrated that the sport-school fostered social interaction through exposing adolescents to a range of settings, such as small class sizes and shared living. Staff's expertise and connections, along with varied extracurricular activities, enabled tailored learning experiences. Although developing whole persons was seen as important, factors were perceived to both support and hinder across the sports-friendly school environment.

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Introduction

Sport can be perceived as having many competing agendas (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2017). For example, for many the emphasis is on talent development and a focus on producing successful senior athletes from juniors (Henriksen, Knight, and Araújo 2020). Meanwhile, others emphasise the role of sport in supporting young people's personal development through, for instance, developing life skills (Harwood and Johnston 2016; Pierce, Gould, and Camiré 2017). Specifically, sport has been suggested as an avenue for Positive Youth Development (PYD), which is a strength-based approach to development that aims to promote positive outcomes in young people such as life skills (Bruner et al. 2021), that may be transferable beyond sport to other areas of life (Bean et al. 2018; Pierce, Gould, and Camiré 2017).

Although the increased professionalisation of youth sport may be perceived to inhibit a PYD approach, favouring talent development (Camiré and Santos 2019), there are suggestions that these

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differing agendas should not be dichotomous (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2017). In fact, successful attempts have been made to unite the outcomes of talent development and PYD through interventions (Pierce et al. 2016). Additionally, concepts such as psychosocial development, personal development and personal assets are increasingly being incorporated within talent development research and practice (Côté et al. 2020; Rongen et al. 2021). Such examples suggest there is 'room for optimism' when it comes to integrating talent development and PYD (Camiré and Santos 2019, 31).

One area in which an emphasis on *both* talent development and personal development is particularly pertinent is regarding dual careers. Dual careers are 'a career with two major foci on sport and studies or work' (Stambulova and Wylleman 2015, 1), and for individuals to succeed in both areas, there is a need to emphasise both personal and sporting development (Stambulova et al. 2015). Research suggests that athletes who maintain a dual career can gain a range of benefits while also developing their sporting talent, including a sense of life balance, positive socialisation effects, and enhanced future career prospects (e.g. Aquilina 2013). However, it is not always easy, and athlete can encounter a range of challenges. These include issues with balancing competing demands and an over-emphasis being placed on one element of the dual career to the detriment of the other (Stambulova et al. 2015).

Recognising the potential sporting and personal benefits athletes may gain from engaging in a dual career, increasing attention has been given to understanding athletes' dual career experiences (Li and Sum 2017). For instance, consideration has been given to identifying how to support dual-career athletes (Defruyt et al. 2021) and exploring the quality of different types of Dual Career Development Environments (DCDEs). To provide a clearer framework for policy development, highlight gaps in dual career research, and identify areas for improvement in practice within specific types of DCDEs, a taxonomy of DCDEs was developed (Morris et al. 2021). One specific type of DCDE in the taxonomy is sports-friendly schools (Morris et al. 2021). Sports-friendly schools are defined as regional secondary educational institutions, who permit elite sport or align themselves with elite sport to provide academic flexibility for athletes to train and compete in their own sporting environment (Morris et al. 2021). Since the distinction between sports-friendly schools and other types of DCDEs was made, research exploring sports-friendly schools specifically has developed, but is still in its infancy and warrants further attention (Jiang, Guo, and Chen 2024; Thompson et al. 2022, 2023).

Recently, drawing on the Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA; Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010), Henriksen et al. (2020) developed the DCDE and Dual Career-Environment Success Factor (DC-ESF) working models to help researchers identify structures, features, and processes within DCDEs, like sports-friendly schools, that may contribute to, or hinder, their effectiveness in helping individuals navigate a dual career (Henriksen et al. 2020). Research utilising these models has demonstrated that while DCDEs are different, successful environments share some commonalities. These commonalities include but are not limited to, access to expert support and care for individuals' mental health and wellbeing (Hauser et al. 2022).

Through a multiple case study of European DCDEs, Storm et al. (2021) sought to identify the essential features of DCDEs based on DCDE and DC-ESF working models. A range of features were identified including an integration of efforts across the whole environment, role models and mentorship, and flexible dual career solutions (Storm et al. 2021). A further key feature identified was an emphasis on a 'whole person approach', in which it is recognised that all domains influence a student-athlete's life and so they should be viewed as *whole people*, not just athletes or students (Storm et al. 2021). This focus on a whole person approach aligns with the earlier developed EU dual career guidelines, which stipulated that talented athletes should not have to choose between sport and education or work; rather, they should be viewed as 'whole persons' who can pursue both paths while also developing life skills (European Commission 2012, 13).

Although the idea of viewing athletes as 'whole persons', who are balancing and influenced by a range of different life domains, has recently gained consideration within the dual career literature, such an approach has been of interest to sport psychology practitioners for several years. In fact, it

has been over 20 years since it was proposed that sport psychologist should understand, assist, and support the development of the whole person and not just the athlete (Bond 2002). Nevertheless, despite many applied sport psychology practitioners advocating for the adoption of a whole person approach (Friesen and Orlick 2010), research examining how sport environments and practitioners can support or implement such an approach, is limited. Some consideration has been given with the PYD literature which has, for instance, considered how life skills can be developed and supported within school sport contexts (Camiré, Trudel, and Bernard 2013; Carrière et al. 2023, however, to our knowledge little research exploring a whole person approach specifically exists. If a whole person approach is key to enabling athletes to have successful dual careers, in which there is an awareness of how personal, academic/work, and sport impacts on an individual, then there is a need for a greater understanding of what a whole person approach is and how it can be promoted. Thus, the aim of the current study was to develop a detailed understanding of how a whole person approach is conceptualised and supported within a DCDE, namely a sports-friendly school in the United Kingdom (UK).

To address the study purpose, the HEA combined with the holistic developmental perspective provided a theoretical scaffold for the study, due to its emphasis on the interaction between individuals and their environments. Specifically, the HEA provides a structured framework that allows for an examination of the dynamic interplay between the personal and environmental factors influencing individuals' development. This makes it particularly well suited for exploring all aspects of a whole person approach within a sports-friendly school and facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how personal development, life skills and talent development can be integrated in sports-friendly schools.

Method

Methodology and philosophical underpinning

A holistic, single case study methodology was used for the current study (Yin 2018). This approach enables the examination of a contemporary phenomenon within the bounds of a specific time and place. Specifically, the methodology was deemed appropriate because the research question centred on *'how'* a whole person approach is promoted in an environment (Yin 2018). To trace processes within the environment over time, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) qualitative data analysis method was used within the case study. This method enables researchers to organise coded data into 'causal chains' that illustrate possible explanations of *how* a whole person approach might occur within a sports-friendly school environment (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019).

The study was approached from a pragmatic realist perspective which emphasises moving beyond the description of social phenomena towards investigating their meaning and practicalities (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019). By adopting this approach, it is acknowledged that the warranted assumptions made about the practicalities and meanings of social phenomena in the sports-friendly school environment were not developed wholly initially, rather shaped over the course of the case study (Sayer 1992).

The research team

The lead author had previously spent three months conducting research in the specific sports-friendly school environment. Further, he had experience competing against the sports-friendly school as a late adolescent, in two sports. Other members of the research team (three women and two men) had diverse experience as sport psychology practitioners and researchers in youth sports environments, both in the UK and internationally, but no direct connections to the case study environment. The second author is a white, female located in the UK. She has a young child who has yet to start youth sport, she, grew up playing and

coaching tennis. Her research expertise is in the area of youth sport, and she is also a practicing sport psychologist. The third author is also a white female located in the UK. She has multiple young children who are involved in youth sport. Her research expertise is in the area of developmental psychology. The fourth author is a white, female located in the UK. She is a competitive golfer and practicing sport psychologist. Her research expertise is in the area of sport and performance psychology as well as youth sport. The fifth author is a white, male located in the U.K. He has two young children who participate in youth sport. He grew up playing tennis and still plays competitively. His research expertise is in the area of youth sport, and he is also a practicing sport psychologist. The final author is a white, male located in Denmark. He has young children who participated in youth sport. He grew up playing multiple sports. His research expertise is in the area of talent development, and he is also a practicing sport psychologist.

Study context

The case study was conducted in a sports-friendly school[1] that is aligned with elite sport and provides academic flexibility for athletes to train and compete at a cost of around £40,000 - per year, without a scholarship (a scholarship programme is available to lower-income student-athletes). Evergreen offers participation in over 25 sports from recreational to international level, over 30 academic subjects, and onsite living facilities for students aged 13–18 years. For the purposes of this study, the focus was on the Evergreen environment experienced by late adolescents (16–18-year-olds). Late adolescence was selected because: i) it is a period of development associated with challenges such as the exploration of social roles, planning and pursuing ambitions, as well as developing skills and values needed for the future (Zarrett and Eccles 2006); ii) in a sporting context, late adolescents might be striving for sporting excellence while trying to maintain balance with other life domains (Stambulova, Ryba, and Henriksen 2021); iii) additional developmental and transitional challenges including preparing for higher levels of competition and training in senior sport (Stambulova et al. 2015) and experimenting with non-sporting role identities (Gledhill and Harwood 2015) typically occurs; and iv) most late adolescents who are part of a sporting/talent development environment or DCDE will not achieve a career in their sport beyond late adolescence (Gullich et al. 2023). Therefore, regardless of an individual's level of attainment in sport at age 16–18 years, their experience within a youth sport environment should provide developmental opportunities within and beyond their sport (Rongen et al. 2018).

Seventy-five percent of all students at Evergreen live in single sex, mixed age group, accommodation during term time (thirty weeks per year). The accommodation is referred to as a 'boarding house' which students share with approximately sixty other peers (both British and international). Students in each boarding house are under the care of a Houseparent as well as an Assistant Houseparent.[2] The school timetable structure means there is school-wide designated time for sporting, academic and extracurricular activity.

Participants

Prior to recruiting participants, institutional ethical approval was obtained. Subsequently, 64 participants (Male = 37, Female = 27) were recruited for interviews (See Table 1), with representation from across 13 major sports (sport with a full-time head coach). Over an eleven-month period, the lead author also spent over 1000 hours observing the environment, thus seeing and interacting with many other individuals within the context.

Table 1. Table of interview sample demographic information.

	Gender				
Role	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total (n)	Sports Represented	Sport Level
Current Students	14	13	27	Athletics Basketball Cricket Field Hockey Football Golf Netball Rugby Tennis Triathlon	Regional to Junior International
Sports Head Coaches	10	3	13	Athletics Basketball Cricket Equestrian Football Golf Netball Rugby Squash Strength & Conditioning Swimming Tennis Triathlon	
Teaching Staff & Houseparents	7	2	9		
Director of Sport	1	0	1		
Alumni	5	9	14	Athletics Cycling Dance Field Hockey Golf Netball Rugby Swimming Triathlon	UK University 1st Team, US Division I and II College, U20 International, Senior Club Professional, Senior International
Total	37	27	64		

Data collection

Direct observations

Direct observations (recorded as field notes) were made by the lead researcher when observing the environment without actively participating in the setting or in an activity. For example, in settings such as the dining hall or sport facilities while watching training sessions. Direct observations focused on relevant environmental conditions, guided by the DCDE and DC-ESF working models (Henriksen et al. 2020). For instance, observing preconditions like facilities and environment processes that included the sporting and academic activities, as well as the interaction across different domains. Field notes from these observations were converted into typed form (approx. 150 pages) making them amenable to textual analysis.

Participant observation

The lead researcher conducted participant observations while actively participating in the environment in various roles, such as coach or trainee sport psychologist for various teams or sports, supervisor of evening activities for students and contributor to sport staff meetings. Observations were recorded as field notes in all roles aside from when the lead researcher was in the role of trainee

sport psychologist. Participant observations allowed the researcher to better understand norms, interactions and cultural elements (central to the DC-ESF) that might not be evident through direct observation alone. Being embedded in the environment through various roles also allowed the lead researcher to observe events and groups that would otherwise be inaccessible to the study, such as sport team talks, performance reviews and one-to-one coaching sessions (Yin 2018).

Recognising the potential ethical challenges associated with fulfilling multiple roles alongside that of a researcher, several measures were taken to ensure the ethical management of the lead researcher's various role: i) participants were informed that the lead researcher's primary role was as a researcher; ii) the researcher adhered to the ethical guidelines and code of conduct of their professional association (BASES); iii) research and professional practice records were kept entirely separate – focusing solely on delivering workshops in the practitioner role; and iv) participants had the opportunity to opt out of being included in observations and field notes.

Documentation and physical artefacts

A range of materials, including timetables, posters, and photographs of facilities and memorabilia, were collected to substantiate data from other sources (Yin 2018). Timetables provided insights into how the school integrated academic and sporting activities, while memorabilia, such as trophies, and alumni photographs, highlighted the developmental achievements valued by the school and prominently displayed to inspire students.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via video call. Lasting 40–86 minutes (mean = 58 minutes), interviews began with questions about participants' backgrounds and roles, followed by questions aligned with DCDE and DC-ESF constructs, such as environment structure, relations, preconditions, processes, and effectiveness. While question stems remained consistent, follow-ups varied by participant role. For instance, all participants were asked, 'How do different components of the Evergreen environment interact?' but follow-ups were tailored, students and alumni were asked, 'Which components help(ed)/hinder(ed) your development?' while staff were asked, 'Which components help/hinder students' development?' It is worth noting that it became apparent during initial data collection and analysis that there was a shift in focus from a whole person approach, towards whole person development. Interview scripts were adapted accordingly. For example, a question was changed from 'What does a whole person approach mean to you?' to 'What does whole person development mean to you?'

Data analysis

The study employed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) three-flow framework for analysis. In employing this framework, data collection and analysis was a concurrent and iterative process; however, for the purpose of clarity the analysis will be outlined sequentially (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019). The first flow, data condensation, involved two cycles. In the first cycle, interviews and field notes were transcribed, and artefacts reviewed to build familiarity with the data. Data segments were then coded using three types of codes: descriptive codes to summarise environmental details, process codes to capture actions and concepts, and causation codes to explore how and why outcomes occurred. Causation codes were particularly useful for identifying potential processes and influences on whole person development (e.g. 'Everything Is in One Place'). These were seen as a step towards the true and real cause but not necessarily the only or final cause. From a pragmatist perspective, this allowed us to better understand the actions that may need to be implemented or changed based on data, which is a core focus of our approach.

In the second cycle, first-cycle codes were grouped into broader categories, or pattern codes (e.g. 'Environment Structure Supports Development in Multiple Domains'). These pattern codes were further consolidated into causal fragments, which illustrated mechanisms such as how

environmental structure enabled access to whole person developmental opportunities. For example, the 'Environment Structure Supports Development in Multiple Domains', in turn enables 'Students to Access a Variety of Development Opportunities', and therefore 'Students can Develop in All Aspects of their Life'.

The second flow, data display, organised causal fragments into causal chains by adding directional arrows to represent cause-and-effect relationships. Quotes from interviews, field note excerpts, and artefacts associated with pattern codes were included to ground the inferences and verify the chains' narratives. For example, student timetables, a campus map of facilities (illustrating the physical and organisational environment structure), interview quotes, and field notes were included to bring life to the example above. The chains underwent review and refinement in collaboration with the research team and Evergreen partners. Finally, the third flow, drawing and verifying conclusions, identified patterns and themes across the causal chains, generating deeper insights into the processes and mechanisms underpinning whole person development. Contrasts were explored, and disconfirming evidence was considered, ensuring robust and comprehensive conclusions.

Research Quality and Judgement Criteria

To strive for research quality, five criteria by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) were applied throughout the study. Confirmability was supported through detailed descriptions of methods, from data collection to conclusions, allowing readers to assess the coherence and transparency of the research process. Reliability was strengthened with a clear articulation of the study's paradigm, question, design, and researcher's role. Internal validity was supported by context-rich descriptions and examining the extent to which different data sources reinforced one another. External transferability was facilitated through comprehensive descriptions of the sample, setting, and processes, enabling readers to judge the study's relevance to other contexts. Application was ensured by making the findings accessible and relevant to users.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how a whole person approach was conceptualised and supported within a sports-friendly school in the United Kingdom. Through this exploration, however, it became apparent that participants were advocating for more than simply viewing student-athletes are whole persons. This view – typically reflected in a 'whole person approach' used within dual career research – suggests that individuals should be seen as having multiple life domains to navigate and which impact upon their dual career engagement. In contrast, participants in the current study perceived that active steps to *develop* individuals as whole persons was preferable. Specifically, they emphasised the importance of supporting student-athletes to develop in such a way that they are able to grow and hopefully succeed across all these life domains. This approach was subsequently termed 'whole person development'. Whole person development aligns more closely with the emphasis on whole people from applied practice but requires clarification. Thus, prior to discussing how a whole person approach is supported at the school, a refined perception of whole person development is provided.

Defining whole person development

Participants suggested whole person development occurred through ongoing and continuous change, as one participant summarised, 'I don't think you ever stop developing … you are constantly adding traits, adding characteristics, taking stuff in, learning … that development doesn't stop' (Sport Student 2). In addition, whole person development was said to be

future orientated. Teacher 1 explained this future orientation when describing their role in the whole person development of students as being 'somebody who enhances and progresses students ... teaching about future aspirations, career pathways, opportunities'. Similarly, Head Coach 6 said that central to whole person development is developing 'awareness of what good looks like in terms of behaviours at the next levels that you are aspiring to'. This was further illustrated by Student 15 who said, whole person development is 'trying to better yourself for that later on experience'. Furthermore, development in all aspects of a person's life was seen to be a central feature of whole person development. Student 12 described whole person development as 'developing in all aspects of life, in the academic side, in the sport side, music, also the mental side and the physical side'. Consequently, drawing together the participants' insights and following detailed discussion across the research team, the following definition was created: '*Whole person development is the deliberate, ongoing, and future oriented development of an individual, in all aspects of their life*'. This definition was used throughout the analysis and subsequent sections of this manuscript and is conceptualised in Figure 1.

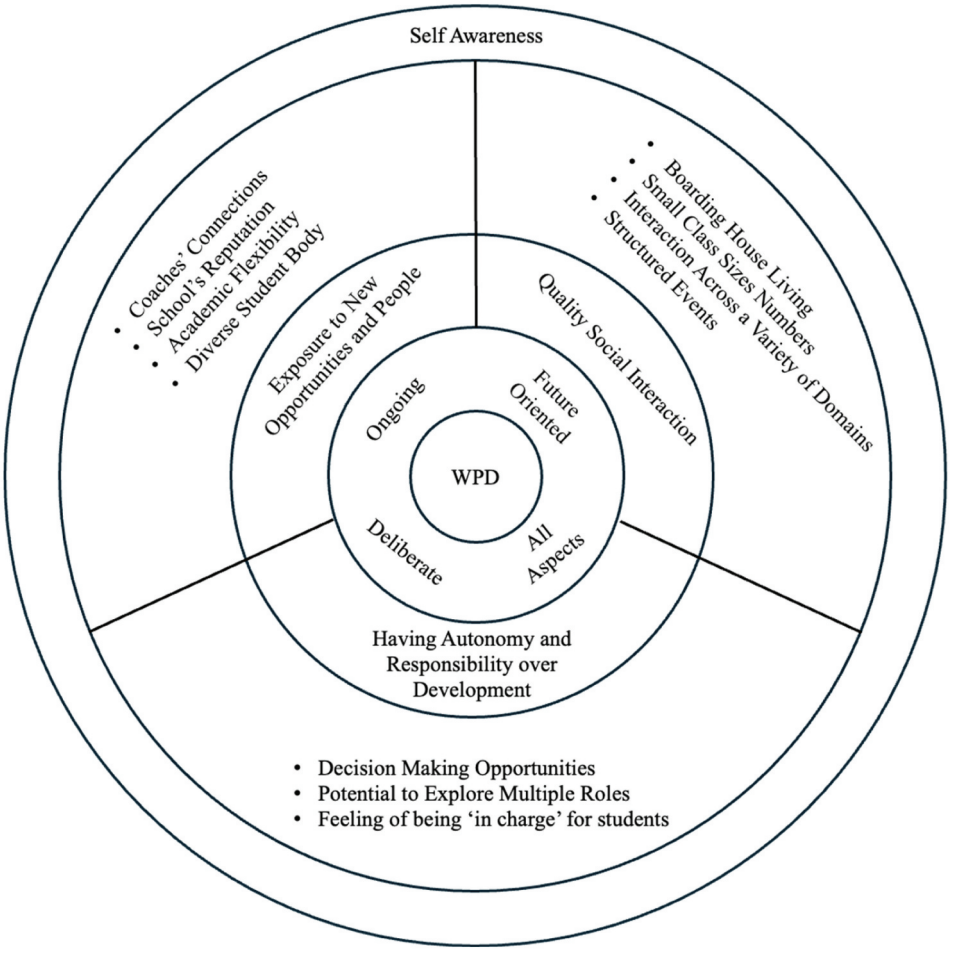

Figure 1. Factors influencing whole person development.

Factors influencing whole person development

In considering how whole person development occurred, it appeared that three factors were pertinent: 1) exposure to new opportunities and people, 2) opportunities for quality social interaction and 3) having autonomy and responsibility over development. When reflecting on the presence of these factors within the case study, participants suggested that some were present and well enacted, while others were not (see Table 2).

Exposure to new opportunities and people

Discussions with participants highlighted that exposure to new opportunities and people was key to developing as a whole person, particularly through external sporting environments. Experience in these external environments exposed students to a level of sport similar to that which may be encountered as senior athletes. In other words, this feature of Evergreen facilitated athletes to develop in a future-oriented manner, in turn enhancing their whole person development.

The school supported this deliberately in various ways. The school's *strong reputation* among national governing body pathways, universities, and professional clubs was frequently cited as facilitating new opportunities, 'The respect of those external parties for … the Evergreen environment and Evergreen coaching staff, that's often acknowledged as being quite a powerful' (Head Coach 4). When discussing the impact of Evergreen's reputation on a particular student's exposure to representative academy level sport, Head Coach 8 said, 'He's probably on the fringe of their U18s

Table 2. Summary of results.

		Whole Person Development			
		Deliberate	Ongoing	Future Oriented	All Aspects of Life
Influencing Factors	Exposure to New Opportunities and People	Academic flexibility allowed for new experiences	Coaches' connections and school reputation mean opportunities can be tailored to developmental stage	Exposure to sporting environments of similar level to those that students will encounter in the future	Diverse interests, nationalities, life experiences across student body Through exposure to new environments, students encounter new people
	Quality Social Interaction	Social skills valued and developed in sport Little done deliberately to ensure students interact with those different to them	Time spent with peers in teaching class size of 12, and large boarding houses	Student-Coach interaction about future aspirations and pathways	Boarding house and teaching staff encourage interacting with a variety of different students Time demands of sport involvement limits quality social interactions with those outside of sport
	Having Autonomy and Responsibility over Development	Limited examples of deliberate actions taken to provide autonomy and responsibility over development	Students resolve ongoing logistical clashes between domains. Notion that students are treated as adults from early on in their experience at Evergreen	Occasional emphasis on providing responsibility in line with future environments	Students felt they were 'in charge' of organising different aspects of life Limited autonomy in the social domain due to safeguarding constraints

[academy] but they've put him on because he's at Evergreen . . . they know he is going to get better here'.

Coaches' connections with external organisations facilitated new opportunities that were tailored to support individuals' evolving developmental needs, thereby supporting their ongoing growth and whole person development. Head Coach 3 noted, 'We always get kids on GB teams and all that kind of stuff . . . the coaches' personal connections mean opportunities can be directed'. The school also provided logistical support, such as transport to these opportunities and adjusted training programs around external commitments. As Alumnus 3 said, 'it made it easier for us to get to [academy] training' supporting whole person development through easier access to these experiences. In support of this, the lead researcher's field notes stated, 'It seems that travel to and from external sporting opportunities is well organised. Students and coaches liaise with the travel office and are often dressed in the kit of external sporting environments, waiting for transport'.

Teachers' indirectly supported students' engagement with new opportunities by being *flexible with academic deadlines and lesson attendance*. As Student 9 explained, 'If you talk to your teachers "like oh I've got a huge competition coming up, they're like, we can push back the work".' Houseparent 1 added that, 'we bend a little bit to support . . . and acknowledge that people are here for different reasons . . . they're out of so many academic lessons because . . . they might be away on international events'. However, sport programmes did not seem to offer the same reciprocal flexibility as the academic domain. It was frequently observed that there was an expectation students prioritised their 'main' sport over and above all other opportunities (be those other sports, hobbies, or academic commitments). Students who participated in multiple sports or extracurricular activities had a reputation of being 'overrun' and encountered some lack of understanding from staff, which limited their ability to develop *all* aspects of their life. Alumnus 4 illustrated this 'there's a concert at this time, but there's also a [. . .] match . . . it's not my fault I'm double booked. I think that was the difficulty, I never felt like there was a lot of understanding'. Thus, although external sporting experiences were well supported, they often came at the expense of *not* experiencing something else such as going for dinner, boarding house events, and other extra-curricular activities.

Through participation in activities, students also referenced the *opportunity to engage with a diverse group of people* within and beyond the school. For instance, experiences in external organisations enabled students to interact with different coaches, training partners, competitors, and teammates, potentially furthering their development in all or different aspects of their life. Within the school, there were also opportunities to interact with new people, Alumnus 6 said, 'different cultures, different nations, different aspects of life, sporty, not sporty, artsy, drama, whatever it is, Evergreen probably had it'. This variety of people enabled students to engage with, learn from, and about people from all aspects of life, in turn supporting their whole person development. While this opportunity was afforded to students, it was apparent through observations, that many students associated with people who were more similar to them than different (i.e. same gender, ethnicity, language, sport). In support of this Student 17 said, 'people that kind of commit themselves to tennis or football . . . they stay in their groups . . . I think it restricts them from maybe interacting with other people'.

There were various situations in academic and boarding house settings where students were obliged to interact with new people, such as group projects and house events. However, factors like number of students in each teaching class and boarding house, as well as their composition, limited the diversity of people students could interact with. Additionally, the structured nature of these interactions often meant that students engaged with peers within familiar roles or hierarchies, again limiting opportunities for more spontaneous or meaningful connections across diverse groups.

Seemingly key to whether individuals chose to engage with new people was whether they were aware of the developmental benefits of such exposure. Alumnus 10 explained that interacting with new people 'taught me how . . . to deal with lots of different people and to understand different people's perspectives and viewpoints and where they come from'.

Engagement with role models was also highlighted as important, 'I've learned a lot from watching … the […] captain, his dedication that he puts in, you are picking up good habits … because now I'm like yeah I should be doing what he is doing'. The researcher observed both inter- and intra-year group and sport role-modelling across the school, with students often watching each other train at lunch times. Researcher field notes stated:

> […] academy coaches (mostly ex-professional players) take a training session at lunchtime for a select group of Evergreen first team players. Twenty-or-so younger students who participate in the same sport watch on in school uniform, talking about the session and students taking part.

Opportunities for quality social interaction

Through exposure to new opportunities and environments, students were able to engage in quality social interactions with others, such as student peers, teachers, houseparents and coaches. Quality social interaction, characterised by conversational depth, openness and honesty, seemed to be central to influencing whole person development. Houseparent 6 said, 'whole person development is about understanding them (students) … the only way I think you can do that is to have those one-to-one … in-depth conversations'. Various settings across the Evergreen environment were seen to facilitate such in-depth conversations.

The *boarding house was perceived as a hub for student-to-student social interaction*. Student 10 said, 'living in a house with sixty girls, you have to be able to keep a conversation' highlighting how this environment necessitated active communication, and interpersonal skill development among a varied group of peers. Houseparents also facilitated quality social interactions by providing continuous opportunities for students to refine their social skills with different individuals, 'Mr […] encourages talking to everyone and doing things with different people' (Student 17). Participants perceived these social interactions to help them to learn about different aspects of life, 'being friends with people from pretty much all groups … you learn things about people that you can take away and use'. (Alumnus 6). However, whether participants acted upon encouragement from their houseparent to interact with 'different people' by varying who they interacted with in the boarding house, or even whether boarding houses, that were limited to sixty students per house, allowed for 'all groups' to be represented and accessible to socially interaction with must be considered.

Beyond the boarding house, small classes required active participation in discussion between student and teachers, "most of 'em have about 12 (students per class) … it's just really good because … there's a lot of back and forth" (Student 3). Teacher 1 explained their role in fostering engagement in quality social interactions to support student's ongoing growth and, in turn whole person development, 'as a teacher you are just providing growth in whatever interactions you have with them (students)'. The lead researcher also, stated in field notes, 'I am struck by the general level of students conversational skills, when I comment they often credit it to the necessity to engage with teachers and other students in class'

Through *quality social interaction with coaches*, students also engaged in a future-oriented conversation that supported whole person development. Student 3 said that this quality student-coach social interaction about the future, 'has actually made me realise I probably don't wanna be a professional tennis player'. Researcher field notes supported this, noting that future-oriented interaction was observed consistently:

> During travel and down time at competition many of the coaching staff speak to students from personal experiences of being in future environments that students want to transition to like professional clubs, American and UK universities, and national training centres.

However, aspects of the Evergreen environment, particularly in sport, appeared to have a detrimental influence on quality social interaction, Houseparent 8 explained, 'strength and conditioning, the number of times they're doing that … training, video analysis sessions … you start to see time being eroded away from maybe some social time'. Overall, it appeared that *the time required for sport reduced social interaction* with individuals who held different ideas, knowledge, and

experiences from other aspects of their life, potentially limiting whole person development. Recognising this, a coach noted a conscious effort within sport to help students develop interpersonal skills through 'allowing them to socialise and communicate and debate'. The researcher also stated in field notes, 'coaches frequently pose questions (relating to sport, academics, and social life) to teams and groups of athletes at training sessions, or post competition that aim to create discussion among the group'. The value placed on developing the ability to socially interact through sport was emphasised by Head Coach 7, 'we don't care how good you are at rugby … if you are unable to interact with your teammates … if you can learn anything from being a part of sport or rugby it is how to interact'.

Having autonomy and responsibility over development

A further influencing factor appeared to be the responsibility and autonomy individuals had over their own development. The Director of Sport said, whole person development is facilitated by, 'creating … environments … that create ownership and independence in young people. Our fundamental job through sport is to prepare people for their exit'. When exposed to new opportunities and people and provided with environments for quality social interactions, students were given the *autonomy and responsibility to make choices* about which areas of their life, opportunities, and relationships to invest in. By providing autonomy and responsibility, the Evergreen environment appeared to be preparing students for future environments – university, professional sport, or work – where they may need to take greater responsibility for their own development. Houseparent 6 summarised that within Evergreen students have opportunities to 'gain independence … learn skills, to work on their own, and communicate and organise themselves'. The lead researcher also observed students discussing transport arrangements with coaches, self-organising competition entries after training, and resolving timetable clashes with the staff. Alumnus 4 said, 'you'd find out there was a clash in something and then … it was partly on you to decide what's more important'; however, despite the potential benefits that resolving clashes might have on whole person development, observations and discussions with students and staff resulted in the lead researcher stating in field notes, 'logistical clashes between domains such as, training sessions being planned at the same time as revision sessions seem often to be caused by poor or absent communication'.

The Evergreen environment also allowed students a certain level of autonomy while simultaneously attempting to provide them with the *skills to manage this independence* effectively. As Alumnus 7 noted, 'you're kind of treated as adults from quite early … you are given so many different responsibilities and tasks'. This responsibility was balanced by efforts to ensure students were equipped to manage it, as Houseparent 9 explained, the goal is to provide 'students … the right tools to develop themselves'. Further details on the specific tools students were provided with were relatively limited; however, it was perceived that students needed to recognise that they were being given autonomy and responsibility to resolve issues themselves.

Having an *awareness of one's autonomy and responsibility*, and exercising this, was seen to interact with other influencing factors to further facilitate whole person development. For example, participants expressed that taking responsibility for one's own development led to increased exposure to new opportunities and people. Head Coach 4 illustrated, 'if you're really knocking on the door, searching for the opportunities, asking for feedback, asking for extra … those opportunities will come through'. Alumnus 11 encapsulated the experience of being provided with the autonomy and responsibility over their development in saying, 'you feel like you are in charge'.

However, this feeling of being in charge was tempered by the believe that autonomy in the social domain beyond the school boundaries was limited by safeguarding measures, 'students are given … the freedom to do what they wish within the confines of the out-of-bounds and all of the different safeguarding aspects' (Houseparent 1). This was not viewed as desirable by students, as Student 1

said, "for people our age you should get more freedom; I think going into [town] on a Sunday, I think we should be allowed all day . . . not just two 'til five.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore how a whole person approach is conceptualised and supported within a DCDE, namely a sports-friendly school in the United Kingdom. Overall, findings suggested a need to move beyond the typically accepted perspective of a whole person approach to proactively focusing on development. The primary criticism of a whole person approach was that students-athletes should not be 'merely' recognised as whole people with various domains of their life to consider, but rather an emphasis should be placed on supporting their development across all these domains. This emphasis on development rather than recognition, resulted in the proposal of a new conceptualisation – whole person development, defined as the deliberate, ongoing, and future-oriented development of an individual, in all aspects of their life. A whole person approach and whole person development do converge on two premises: first, that student-athletes undertaking a dual career have numerous life domains to contend with, and second, that a person is *more* than a student or an athlete.

PYD and particularly life skills literature might suggest that this *more* is expressed through dual career–related skills and competencies that student-athletes develop through deliberate teaching and active demonstration during dual careers (Allen and Rhind 2019). This aligns with participants' suggestion that whole person development should be deliberate. However, when exploring how the Evergreen environment develops students as whole people, there were limited examples of any deliberate teaching of skills or competencies. Rather, it appeared that development occurred through being embedded within the environment. It is worth considering this finding alongside the implicit/explicit continuum of life skill development and transfer (Bean et al. 2018). Bean et al. (2018) suggest that developmentally supportive elements of an environment fall on a spectrum where some elements are implicitly embedded in an environment, while others are more explicitly taught and reinforced. In this sense, the Evergreen environment appeared to support whole person development implicitly to some extent through its features, structure, and culture. This aligns with Ronkainen et al. (2021) proposal of existential learning that suggests development might be caught through lived experience, rather than explicitly taught. However, Bean and colleagues, caution against relying solely upon implicit approaches that might leave development 'being caught' to chance. This underscores that there may be benefit to Evergreen expanding their focus to be more explicit in their efforts to promote whole person development.

Such explicit approaches may benefit from drawing upon the three factors that appear to promote the proactive development of whole persons. One of these was autonomy and responsibility over development. In the case study environment, students were provided with both autonomy and responsibility through organising their own schedules, managing their time effectively, and negotiating potential conflicts between different domains. In the present study, aligned with PYD and HEA literature, the provision of autonomy and responsibility is generally perceived as a positive factor (Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010; Lee et al. 2021; Storm et al. 2021). Autonomy has been shown to be related to developmental outcomes in adolescents such as wellbeing, and healthy identity development (Luyckx et al. 2005).

Although participants suggested having of autonomy and responsibility over development was valuable within the current context, it did not appear that these were always provided purposefully or in the most beneficial manner. For instance, although participants were given autonomy and responsibility for organising their schedules and managing conflicts across domains, this was deemed to occur due to miscommunication between staff members, rather than being purposefully introduced. The communication between domains represents an area where 'integrated efforts' (an essential features of successful DCDEs, exemplified by effective communication and collaboration within and between domains (Hauser et al. 2022; Storm et al. 2021)) could be improved.

This raises a critical point: while autonomy and responsibility are generally perceived as positive and important factors in promoting whole person development – as supported by both our findings and broader PYD and HEA literature (Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010; Lee et al. 2021) – their effectiveness depends on how they are implemented within the environment. In this case, the autonomy granted to students was partly a consequence of environmental shortcomings rather than a deliberate strategy to foster whole person development. This suggests that elements supporting whole person development might emerge not only from intentional, positive features, but also as unintended responses to dysfunctional organisational dynamics. This provides support for Newman et al. (2021) findings that life skill development can emerge through navigating challenging or negative experiences. In such instances, it is important to reflect on whether this may, subsequently, also result in any negative unintentional consequences (e.g. undue stress). It is also essential to consider whether the necessary support from staff is available to ensure challenges experienced within the sports-friendly school are developmentally impactful (Newman et al. 2021).

Drawing together sports-friendly school, as well as life skills development and transfer literature, findings from this study give further support for the idea that for sports-friendly schools to be supportive of whole person development, intentional, integrated, and supportive efforts from staff across environment domains are needed (Jiang, Guo, and Chen 2024). This also perhaps suggests that influencing factors like autonomy and responsibility – regardless of organisation (dys)functionality or (un)intentionality – can contribute to students' whole person development when supported appropriately by environment members (Bean et al. 2018; Newman et al. 2021; Pierce, Gould, and Camiré 2017).

Another factor influencing whole person development in the present study was exposure to new opportunities and people. In the Evergreen environment teachers demonstrated flexibility with academic deadlines, and coaches adapted sport programmes to facilitate students' engagement in external sporting experiences. These actions promoted whole person development by allowing students to participate in new environments, like those to which they may transition, thereby fostering their future-oriented development. However, whether the features of academic flexibility and adapted sport programmes as deemed functional, supportive, or good, largely depends on the lens through which the environment is evaluated. When viewed through the lens of whole person development, the flexibility of teachers and adaptability of coaches are seemingly supportive features that enhance students' whole person development. From a talent development perspective, these actions align with the 'support of sporting goals by the wider environment', a key feature of successful talent development environment (Hauser et al. 2022). However, despite Evergreen being classified as a sports-friendly school and in turn a DCDE (Morris et al. 2021), our findings revealed a lack of reciprocal flexibility from the sport domain towards academics and other extracurricular activities. When examined through a dual career lens, this lack of mutual support suggests incomplete adherence to essential features of European DCDEs, which emphasise mutual understanding and support for both academic and sporting pursuits (Storm et al. 2021).

This discrepancy highlights that while flexibility in academics allows for exposure to new sporting experiences and supports the future-oriented aspect of whole person development, it does not necessarily support development in all aspects of students' lives as students are missing out on academic study, music, arts, and social activity. This 'athlete-centric' approach, seen in many sport schools (Jiang, Guo, and Chen 2024; Thompson et al. 2022) and existing models or definitions of holistic development (Wylleman, Reints, and De Knop 2013), demonstrates the reality and challenge of supporting the development of a whole person – not just an athlete holistically – when one domain of their development arguably takes precedence. As Richard, Cairney, and Woods (2023) highlight, when one domain takes precedence over another in sport environments, athlete's access to varied opportunities or affordances is limited. Drawing on ecological dynamics, Richard, Cairney, and Woods (2023) suggest that instead of narrowing opportunities or affordances available to athletes, sport environments should aim to create a better fit between individuals and their

environments, so that they are encouraged to explore a range of opportunities and affordances in their broader environment. Taken together, these findings emphasise the importance of creating sports-friendly schools where influencing factors such as exposure to new opportunities and people, are supported across all domains in ways that genuinely aim to foster the development of the whole person, not just the holistic development of athletes. This may ensure that future-oriented development and development in all aspects and domains can complement one another, rather than being prioritised at the expense of each other.

This study highlighted the key role of awareness in enabling students to fully engage with the influencing factors that support their whole person development. It was not merely the presence of new opportunities or people, but students' awareness of how this exposure to new opportunities and people could be utilised that seemed to enhance their development. For instance, students who were aware of how their exposure to new opportunities and people contributed to their future-oriented development were more proactive in seeking and maximising such opportunities. This finding resonates with experiential learning theory, which highlights the role of awareness in turning exposure to new opportunities and people into meaningful developmental experiences (Peterson and Kolb 2018). Similarly, awareness appeared to shape how the students approached having autonomy and responsibility over their own development. This perhaps suggests that awareness is not merely a passive facilitator but an active moderator that determines how effectively students can engage with the influencing factors on whole person development.

Critically, these findings suggest that an environment simply supporting exposure to new experiences and people, autonomy and responsibility, and quality social interaction may be insufficient. While these factors align with the Personal Asset Framework's (PAF) dynamic elements (Côté et al. 2020), the present study extends this perspective, emphasising that dynamic elements, positive features of sports-friendly schools identified in previous literature (Jiang, Guo, and Chen 2024; Thompson et al. 2022), or influencing factors on whole person development alone may be insufficient. Sports-friendly school environments and staff must be intentional in supporting influencing factors (Bean et al. 2018), and importantly also deliberate in fostering an awareness of the developmental potential within these influencing factors. Without this awareness, engagement in the influencing factors may be diminished and in turn the extent to which one develops as a whole person. This is particularly important in fee-paying environments such as the sports-friendly school examined in this study, where financial investment raises justifiable expectations from students and families regarding the quality and intentionality of developmental support. If such development is left to chance, it raises important questions about the value proposition of attending a fee-paying sports-friendly school. It is therefore essential that these environments intentionally cultivate students' understanding of how to engage with and utilise these influencing factors (Bean et al. 2018). This reinforces the need for integrated, intentional efforts to ensure that students not only develop within an environment that supports the influencing factors but are also equipped with the awareness needed to fully benefit from them.

Applied implications

Based on the findings of the current study, it is suggested that individuals working within sports-friendly schools should focus on explicit actions such as designing opportunities for staff and student-athletes to engage socially in a variety of settings and groups. Though varying class, and training group sizes, experience levels, sport representation and cultural backgrounds where possible. Attempts should be made also to actively recruit diverse student-athletes and staff to enhance social awareness, as well as establish relationships with external organisations to facilitate external opportunities for student-athletes. Implementation of flexible training and academic policies should also be considered to accommodate development in all aspects of life and the access to new experiences. To support autonomy and responsibility, coaches, teachers and practitioners should

consider using autonomy supportive acts of instruction in their environment, as well as frequently explaining the personal benefits of developing autonomy (Reeve and Halusic 2009).

In addition, practitioners should develop greater awareness of the implicit actions and environmental features that shape the day-to-day experience of student-athletes. Given the complexity of sports-friendly schools, not all elements can be explicitly controlled. However, increasing awareness of what is happening – both deliberately and incidentally – can help practitioners make informed choices about where to focus their time, energy, and resources. This may allow schools to better understand how whole person development-related outcomes are shaped by the full range of developmental experiences and ensure that valuable opportunities for whole person development are not overlooked.

Limitations

The current findings must be considered alongside the limitations of this study. The first being that the purpose of the study was to explore a whole person approach, but within the interviews and analysis it became apparent that development was key. Given that this was not the initial focus of the study, further examination of this remains warranted. Second, there were few negative examples provided by participants pertaining to the school. This might have been due to some elements of social desirability or participants hesitancy to criticise the environment they are a part of. However, the lead researcher's extended immersion in the environment allowed for sustained observation across multiple roles and settings, helping to observe and interpret everyday behaviours and interactions that may not have been openly discussed in interviews. That said, researcher immersion may also carry risks of researcher social desirability – namely, a reluctance to portray the environment negatively due to their time investment and the relationships built with participants. Furthermore, there was some difficult isolating the impact of Evergreen on whole person development. The study did not account for external factors that might contribute to whole person development. Students might have been engaged outside of Evergreen in other developmental activities that might have shaped their perception of whole person development but were not explored in depth.

Future directions

Future research could investigate how whole person development within sports-friendly schools influences the success of future transitions and expand on the identified factors – exposure to new opportunities and people, quality social interaction, and having autonomy and responsibility over development – through targeted interventions. These interventions could include altering environment structures and processes to encourage meaningful social interactions, establishing partnerships with external organisations to provide access to diverse opportunities, implementing autonomy-supportive teaching practices to foster independence, and involving individuals in designing personalised development strategies that promote their whole person growth.

Conclusion

The study highlighted the need to move beyond simply acknowledging individuals as whole people and instead focus on actively developing them. Whole person development was defined as 'the deliberate, ongoing and future-oriented development of an individual in all aspects of their life'. Key factors included the potential to interact with peers, teachers, coaches, and house parents across multiple environments, opportunities to train and compete in external sporting environments facilitated by coaches' connections and school support, and the importance of students having autonomy and responsibility over their development. These findings underscore the importance of sports-friendly schools actively and deliberately developing individuals as whole persons by

leveraging exposure to new opportunities and people, empowering students with autonomy, and fostering quality social interactions, thereby ensuring their deliberate, ongoing, and future-oriented development.

Notes

1. The school has been assigned a pseudonym – Evergreen.
2. Houseparents and Assistant Houseparents live at the school full time during term time. Alongside caring for students in the boarding house they have roles as Teachers or Coaches.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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