Stepping stones? An exploration of internal football player migration in the Republic of Ireland

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ABSTRACT
The football spatial landscape is a key consideration for the equity of any football association and its constituent members. Organizational processes can shape these landscapes and influence player development. Analysing migratory patterns of youth footballers can provide an insight into such processes. This paper investigates the migratory patterns of underage footballers within the Republic of Ireland development pathway. The sample consisted of $n = 1937$ youth footballers who had been selected onto the Football Association of Ireland’s primary talent development programme, the Emerging Talent Programme (ETP), between 2006 and 2012. Analysis shows clear migratory patterns towards the Dublin District Schoolboy League (DDSL), primarily from a double-tiered level of migration around Dublin. Clubs that had developed reciprocal relationships with clubs in the UK and were more prominent at underage level were the most common location for internally migrating footballers. Research has historically neglected internal patterns of migration, focusing on transnational football migration. Internal patterns of migration demonstrate inequity across the football development pathway and may result in potential sources of talent being neglected or improperly developed which is a cause of concern within smaller national associations.

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INTRODUCTION
Differences in sport systems, societal norms, cultural traditions, sociological and organizational issues can influence an athlete’s career development journey (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; Richardson, Relvas, & Littlewood, 2013; Stambulova, 2009). Spatial patterns of talent production have been examined (cf. Hancock, Coutinho, Côté, & Mesquita, 2018; MacDonald, King, Cote, & Abernathy, 2006), which appears to be an important environmental characteristic for elite performance (Côté, MacDonald, Baker, & Abernathy, 2006). The spatial dimensions of sport include: the distribution of players and clubs, the availability of facilities, league competitions, community affiliations and the effects of socio-spatial processes, the location of successful
underage clubs and competitions (McGowin, 2010; Rossing, Stentoft, Flattum, Côté, & Karbing, 2018). The perception within grassroots’ football in the Republic of Ireland is that to continue their development, a relatively high volume of youth footballers (estimates of 50 per year) must move from Ireland to British football academies (Bourke, 2003). Certain Irish schoolboy league clubs (particularly from the Dublin District Schoolboy League – DDSL) have developed mutually beneficial relationships with British clubs, offering increased access for these Irish players to trials whilst boosting the attractiveness of the Irish club to elite nationwide players (Curran, 2014). The present study will investigate whether internal migratory patterns exist within the youth football development pathway in the Republic of Ireland, thus providing an insight into player development patterns for policy-makers in youth football.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Research on player migration has traditionally concentrated on global patterns, including theories such as: world system and resource dependency, focusing on structural historical relationships between footballing countries of varying stature, with one holding a pattern of domination over the other (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2011). Within-country movement has received minimal attention within sport academia, with research on migration patterns of athletes focused on the transnational element of migration (cf. Darby, 2011; Nolasco, 2018; Ryba & Stambulova, 2013), even though migration involves the movement of players both within and between nations and continents (Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti, & Benstead, 2012).

This paper uses Wallerstein’s (1974, 1979) world system theory as its underlying conceptual framework, using a world system integrated through a market rather than a political centre in which two or more regions are interdependent with respect to necessities, and two or more centres compete for dominance. World systems theory highlights a power hierarchy between core and periphery; powerful and wealthy core countries exploit and dominate weak and poor periphery societies (Sorinel, 2010) with advancement of the core being at the expense of the periphery (Bergesen, 2015). Semi-periphery states act as a buffer zone between the core and periphery zones; it is dualistic in nature as it can find itself exploited by the core, yet in tandem is often an exploiter of the peripheries themselves. The semi-periphery can serve as a linkage between the core and periphery, avoiding polarization between the two (Wallerstein, 1979).

Poli (2010) argues that the study of football migration based purely on financial inequities is limited. Advantages are also socially constructed according to the profiles of the players, who are the epicentre of the development of their own transfer network intermediary relationships (i.e., with club officials, managers, scouts) with individual characteristics (i.e., biographies, linguistic skills) determining the formation of migratory channels (or transfer networks) (Bale, 1991; Poli, 2010). It is not only economics that influence migration but also history, geography, athletic development, politics and cultural similarity (Elliott, 2014; Molnar & Maguire, 2008). McGovern (2000) argues that the underdevelopment of Irish football is partly due to the recruitment patterns of English clubs and the status of Irish clubs as sellers of labour (in terms of training compensation and solidarity payments).

‘Feet drain’

Labour is a critical resource in the football industry. McGovern (2000) suggests that less powerful clubs in donor leagues are trapped in a vicious cycle, losing players to more powerful clubs and leagues, which has been referred to as the ‘brawn drain’ (Bale, 1991) or a ‘feet drain’ (Elliott & Weedon, 2010). The outcome is that their product remains poor, thus reducing their chances of developing a spectacle to entice fans, and cyclically losing out on finance which could lead to the betterment of the donor club/league. Youth players within these ‘deskilled’ leagues subsequently are exposed to fewer role models to facilitate and enhance development.
Geographical mobility has become an important part of career development (Vertovec, 2001). Teoldo, Cardoso, and Garganta (2013) noted a mass migration of young footballing talent from areas of origin to avail of enhanced facilities and resources at key development stages, with increased social visibility and selection for the national team being the main motivators for such migration during early training years.

A behavioural model to explain internal migration (within country borders) was suggested by Lowry (1966), its central tenant being that individuals and families weigh the costs and benefits of their options and migrate when the benefits outweigh the migration costs. Individuals will migrate from areas where return on their individual skill level is relatively low to markets where the return is relatively higher (Borjas, 1987), with internal migration becoming a form of human capital investment (Molloy, Smith, & Wozniak, 2011). This has received minimal attention within sport academia, with research on migration patterns of athletes focused on the transnational element of migration, even though migration involves the movement of players both within and between nations and continents (Richardson et al., 2012).

Using the constructs of world systems theory, this paper hypothesizes that the DDSL acts as a semi-periphery region for the organization of football talent within the Republic of Ireland, serving as a link mechanism between the periphery regions and potential mobility to a core footballing region (i.e., British professional clubs). This hypothesis would suggest that Dublin would experience greater levels of inward migration than other counties.

FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT PATHWAY IN THE IRISH CONTEXT

The Emerging Talent Pathway (ETP) is the primary talent development pathway for elite youth footballers in Ireland. It consists of 12 regional centres (which are fed by 32 league centres, spread over 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland). Two of the ETP centres are based in Dublin, which is due to the presence of three feeder schoolboy leagues within the county. The DDSL is the largest schoolboy league in the country in terms of participation (Bourke, 2007). According to its website, 149 clubs are affiliated to the DDSL, with other leagues averaging 30 clubs (although teams may not enter each age group). It provides the majority of players for the Irish international team (Maher, 2015) and migration from the DDSL to UK academies is a common career development pathway from this league (Bourke, 2002).

The ETP is the primary FAI development mechanism for elite youth footballers between the ages of 14 and 17 years. The ETP has the stated purpose of providing emerging talent with a more challenging level of training and development, by providing players with the opportunity to train within their own region in a structured and quality environment (FAI, 2009). Players continue to play for their schoolboy league club and avail of additional training in an ETP centre if selected.

External player migration

British football clubs have a long history of recruiting young Irish football players (Curran & Kelly, 2018), going back as far as the 1890s (Scally, 1998). Bourke (2002) found that 45% of Irish migrating footballers joined an English club at the ages of 15 or 16 years. A total of 85% of the footballers on the 2018 Under-17 Republic of Ireland squad play their football outside of Ireland, predominately in the UK. Bourke (2003) found that 65% of the Irish youth footballers who went to England were from Dublin and that the leading feeder clubs were all based in Dublin. In his examination of motivations for young Irish footballers to migrate to England, Elliott (2014) identified the ambition of the players to pursue and develop professional careers, geographical proximity, migrant networks and cultural proximity as the primary migration drivers and perceived inadequacies in the Irish system.
Internal player migration
Examining the results of the Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland (SFAI) National Kennedy Cup at Under-14, which often formed the basis for ETP selections, the DDSL has won the tournament 32 out of the 42 years it has been running. Underage tournaments often act as a ‘meat market’ for Dublin-based clubs and scouts of UK clubs (O’Sullivan, 2015, para. 3). One prominent scout revealed that he gave 70–80% of his focus to the six prominent schoolboy clubs in Dublin because ‘if you want the best, you have to shop at the best place’ (Maher, 2015, para. 17). A trend has emerged wherein larger DDSL clubs form alliances with UK-based clubs. The benefit for the Irish club being that the professional club would provide trials and increased exposure for their elite youth players and the professional clubs hold coaching courses and training camps within the Irish club, which increase the attractiveness of these clubs to Irish youth footballers, while also availing of development fees for those players if they are sold (Bourke, 2002). This can lead to a movement of players from outside the boundary of the DDSL into the league and in some cases of clubs relocating from their own schoolboy league into the DDSL competition structures.

In an attempt to reduce the overrepresentation by DDSL clubs on underage player development, the FAI recently established Under-13, Under-15 and Under-17 development pathways into the senior League of Ireland (to complement the existing Under-19 league). The Under-15 national league began in 2017; the Under-13 league began in 2019. The FAI High Performance Director stated that ‘having the Under-15 League in place further develops the pathway to elite football for the country’s most talented footballers’ (FAI, 2017, para. 3). These leagues have seen traditionally strong DDSL clubs linking up with senior League of Ireland clubs to become their academy mechanism.

This paper makes an important contribution since no previous attempt has been made to track the spatial dimensions of internal migration in Irish football. Understanding the link between the developmental environment of sports and expertise can provide insights into best practice of sport system design and organization (MacDonald et al., 2009). These ‘when’ and ‘where’ contextual factors have a lasting effect on initial exposure to sport, commitment to the sport and chances of attaining elite levels of performance (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003). The notion of migration as a developmental transition has been lacking in research (Richardson et al., 2012).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY
The sample consisted of \( n = 1936 \) 14-year-old, male football players who had been selected onto one of the 12 regional ETP centres between 2006 and 2012. County address was used a proxy for the place of development for the athlete. It should be noted that this is not a comprehensive list of all players who migrated between counties; only the section of those who did so and progressed to get selected for their new county ETP centre. Owing to the absence of a national player registration system, there are no data currently available on the overall numbers of players who move clubs. The use of players selected for their new county ETP centre may mean there is selection bias, though data limitations prevent an analysis including all migrating players. Since the paper is focused on players potentially progressing to play at higher levels, the lack of data on non-selected migrating players is not a significant limitation. The primary geographical location of clubs is used to identify migration patterns, as some clubs are based in Dublin yet traditionally draw from another nearby county (i.e. St. Josephs). This analysis of player migration data into the DDSL is particularly complicated by the fact that some clubs that compete in the DDSL are based in a different county, thus their cohort of players are going to be drawn from outside the DDSL. For this reason, the DDSL analysis is broken down into ‘Dublin-based teams’ and ‘teams based outside Dublin’ to allow for further analysis.
Statistical analysis
Analyses were performed at the 95% level of significance. Descriptive statistics were generated to identify certain patterns of ETP representation. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p \leq 0.05$) and Levene test ($p \leq 0.05$) were used to test for normality. A Normal distribution was rejected, which suggested the use of non-parametric statistics. Data are presented using bar graphs and a geospatial analysis of talent migration via a choropleth graph.

The volume of players who originated from outside their respective schoolboy league county varied between schoolboy leagues (Table 1). The DDSL had 27.5% of players from outside Dublin, which was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) compared with the other schoolboy leagues. When analysed further, the DDSL teams who were based in Dublin (as opposed to those based in other counties) was higher at 28.7%. When the other urban centres were analysed, migration

| Schoolboy League (SBL) | Player origin from the county of the SBL, $n$ (%) | Player origin from outside the county of the SBL, $n$ (%) |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Athlone                | 38 (95%)                                          | 2 (5%)                                                 |
| Carlow                 | 23 (95.8%)                                        | 1 (4.2%)                                               |
| Cavan/Monaghan         | 30 (88.2%)                                        | 4 (11.8%)                                              |
| Clare                  | 38 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Cork                   | 128 (100%)                                        | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| DDSL (total)           | 277 (72.5%)                                       | 105 (27.5%)                                            |
| DDSL (Dublin-based teams) | 246 (71.3%)                                     | 99 (28.7%)                                             |
| DDSL (teams based outside Dublin) | 31 (83.8%)                               | 6 (16.2%)                                              |
| Donegal                | 87 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Drogheda               | 11 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Dundalk                | 46 (95.8%)                                        | 2 (4.2%)                                               |
| Galway                 | 132 (99.2%)                                       | 1 (0.8%)                                               |
| Inishowen              | 70 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Kerry                  | 109 (99.1%)                                       | 1 (0.9%)                                               |
| Kildare                | 20 (90.9%)                                        | 2 (9.1%)                                               |
| Kilkenny               | 38 (90.5%)                                        | 4 (9.5%)                                               |
| Limerick County        | 29 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Limerick Desmond       | 46 (95.8%)                                        | 2 (4.2%)                                               |
| Limerick District       | 54 (98.2%)                                        | 1 (1.8%)                                               |
| Longford               | 31 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Mayo                   | 84 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Midlands               | 44 (97.8%)                                        | 1 (2.2%)                                               |
| North Dublin           | 44 (91.7%)                                        | 4 (8.3%)                                               |
| North Eastern Counties  | 35 (97.2)                                         | 1 (2.8%)                                               |
| North Tipperary        | 27 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Roscommon              | 34 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| South Dublin           | 5 (71.4%)                                         | 2 (28.6%)                                              |
| Sligo/Leitrim          | 54 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| South Tipperary        | 39 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Waterford              | 74 (97.4%)                                        | 2 (2.6%)                                               |
| West Cork              | 20 (100%)                                         | 0 (0%)                                                 |
| Wexford                | 61 (98.4%)                                        | 1 (1.6%)                                               |
| Wicklow                | 55 (94.8%)                                        | 3 (5.2%)                                               |
| West Waterford/East Cork | 15 (100%)                              | 0 (0%)                                                 |
was not a significant feature (i.e., no players from outside country Cork played in the Cork schoolboy league; 4.2% players in Galway league lived outside of Galway; 2.6% of players in the Waterford league lived outside of Waterford). The hypothesis of Dublin experiencing a significantly higher level of internal migration than other Irish counties is accepted.

The 28.7% of players from a different county of origin migrating into Dublin-based DDSL clubs were analysed further (Figure 1).

These statistics were compiled into a choropleth graph to analyse internal migratory patterns (Figure 2). The map illustrates a pattern of internal migration which forms around county Dublin. Wicklow, Meath, Kildare and Louth are the counties most prominent in terms of migration. Moving west from this tier of counties, another band of migration patterns emerge from Carlow, Laois and Westmeath.

The DDSL club of migrating destination was also analysed. Twenty clubs in the DDSL were represented by players from outside of Dublin. The primary recipients of migrating players can be seen in Figure 3.

DISCUSSION

Clear patterns of talent migration are evident within schoolboy football in Ireland. Using the basic concepts and terminology of world systems theory, the regions involved in various stages of talent development in Irish football could be seen as: core (British, mainly English clubs), semi-periphery (DDSL clubs) and periphery (clubs from leagues outside the DDSL). Players move from periphery leagues to semi-periphery clubs in Dublin. Poli (2010) also developed a typology for spaces related to migration, in relation to the Irish structures, regional schoolboy leagues clubs could be identified as the ‘platform’, the DDSL as a ‘stepping stone’ to gain access to another country where economic gains and sporting levels are higher and ‘destination’ space as British professional teams (p. 502). There exist descending layers of internal migration towards the DDSL as one moves geographically away from this ‘core’.

The primary donor leagues are those which are geographically close to Dublin (Figure 2). According to Lowry’s (1966) theory on internal migration, this could be due to easier transportation and travel demands being placed on parents (as players would have to travel to their Dublin club on average three times per week) and a more sophisticated network between
clubs and coaches from neighbouring counties. Living close to elite youth football clubs can provide greater social linkage between home, school and the club for a youth player, with proximity to elite sports clubs being an important predictor of expertise development (Rossing et al., 2018). In the absence of survey data on the motivations for migration, it is impossible to be definitive on the reasons for migration, which could also potentially include commuting parents, schooling or family connections. However, it is reasonable to conclude that the primary motivation for travelling substantial distances and incurring significant time and financial costs is to enhance the potential for career advancement. Of the four boys who migrated from Limerick to the DDSL and played on the ETP (Figure 1), two of those went to the same club. This indicates that perhaps networks exist between clubs in Limerick and that club in the DDSL; akin to research by Poli (2010) who suggest that football migration is more related to interpersonal networks that facilitate migration rather than economic relationships. Certain clubs are prominent in attracting migrating players. These are often the clubs with historic ties to English clubs. As a semi-periphery system, the DDSL simultaneously acquires resources from the periphery (other schoolboy leagues) while losing resources to British clubs (core). As stated previously, perhaps the DDSL acts as a buffer between the regional leagues and British professional football to prevent further polarization between two regions.

Figure 2. Choropleth map of the migration patterns of youth football players in the Republic of Ireland.
Players (and club teams) migrating from ‘periphery’ leagues often results in a deskilling of the league of origin as suggested by Frank’s theory of ‘dependant underdevelopment’, which Darby (2000) applies to football migration as ‘core’ leagues continuing to prosper at the expense of ‘periphery’ leagues. Within Irish football, elite youth players appear willing to migrate into the DDSL from neighbouring leagues, due to the enhanced visibility of the DDSL to professional club scouts and international underage coaches. Placing the DDSL in a strong position as a dominant, resource rich organization while resulting in a deskilling of the neighbouring ‘donor’ leagues. In the absence of national football association data, the ETP playing population data provides some insight into the migration patterns between counties. The final figure is likely to be much higher, as the ETP data just illuminates those players selected onto the development pathway.

Elliott and Weedon’s (2010) concept of ‘feet exchange’ suggests that players within the DDSL may benefit from exposure to the migrating players. They would potentially have exhibited good technical ability to be signed by the club and may bring different playing experiences and learnings from the migratory journey. Conversely, Finnegan, Richardson, Littlewood, and McArdle (2016) illustrated that Dublin born footballers have less opportunities to gain places on the ETP due to higher population densities and the numbers of players feeding into such centres. That analysis combined with this insight that 27.5% of the places available within the DDSL went to boys from outside of the county; further underlines the lack of equity in terms of access to player development pathways in high density areas in the Republic of Ireland.

The League of Ireland underage structures have progressed since this data collection. An aim of the new pathway is to reduce the dependency on DDSL clubs for player development, with the FAI High Performance Director stating that ‘seven or eight years ago, there was no pathway for elite players. There was no structure for national competition, players had to go to Dublin to be challenged’ (as cited in O’Riordan, 2017, para. 18). Continued analysis of the migration patterns of youth football players will identify whether changing the competition structures in Ireland leads to a lessening of internal migratory patterns. A regional spread of quality leagues may result in players developing equitably across the country. This would reduce the ‘asset stripping’ of local leagues, while player development fees could further cyclically enhance the quality of resources in these periphery locations. To apply the behavioural model by Lowry (1966), the benefits of having access to regional League of Ireland clubs at underage level, may outweigh the migration costs of often extensive travel to Dublin.
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