**“"Soccer is all I am, there is nothing else.” Self, future orientation, and cultural capital among low-socioeconomic status youth who play professional soccer**

**Abstract**

This paper examines how low socioeconomic status youth who play soccer in professional clubs experience and define themselves and the place of soccer, and being professional youth-players in their self-concept from the perspective of Bourdieu's class theory. In-depth interviews with 22 youth revealed four key findings: self-definitions and perceptions of their significant others (parents, teachers, and coaches), school experiences, descriptions of professional soccer participation experiences, and future orientation. These findings provide insights into the link between class, sports, and education, including the characteristics of the sporting habitus and class habitus of youth and their contribution to social inequality and educational stratification. Moreover, the discussion section emphasizes the educational importance of a future orientation and practicing it as an agentic means of coping with the habitus of constraint, structural vulnerabilities, and social exclusions.

**Keywords**: soccer; youth; socioeconomic class; cultural capital; future orientation

**Introduction**

This article examines how low-socioeconomic status (SES) youth who play soccer in professional clubs experience and define themselves, the place of soccer and being professional youth-players in their self-concept from the perspective of Bourdieu’s class theory. This examination may help in understanding the processes of socialization associated with sports among different classes and the acquisition of class habitus through sports (Bourdieu, 1978). The research literature linking class, education, and sports explores how specific sports are related to class (Andersen & Bakken, 2019; Bourdieu, 1978; Townsend & Cushion, 2017; Wheeler & Green, 2019); the decision-making process of parents from different classes in enrolling their children in different sports as a leisure activity (Aurini et al., 2020; Eriksen & Stefansen, 2021); and the acquisition of sporting habitus through specific sports (DeLuca & Andrew, 2016; Schmitt et al., 2020).

However, little attention has been given to the youths’ perspectives in the literature. This lacuna should concern us because the study of youths’ perspectives can provide insights into sport socialization in class contexts (Stuij, 2005), the habitus and cultural capital (educational credentials and the possession of legitimate knowledge, traits, skills, and tastes) of sports-related activities (Lenartowich, 2016), and the transmission of cultural capital by sports coaches as socializing agents (Stuij, 2015) in the field of informal education. To explore these research interests, this article reports on a study involving 22 in-depth interviews with low-SES youth who play in professional soccer clubs located in Israel’s geographical and social periphery. These youth players participate in professional soccer during after-school hours, i.e., in the daily spaces of what is known as informal education or extracurricular activities (Friedman, 2013). Against this background, this article poses five key research questions: How do low-SES youth describe their self-concept? What are the educational experiences of these youth in school? How do the youth describe their experiences of participating in professional soccer? What is the future orientation of these youth? Are the descriptions of the youth related to the processes of construction and maintenance of social inequality, and if so, how?

**Children and adolescents in professional sports**

In recent decades, along with an increase in the number of children taking part in organized sports programs, amateur sports have been becoming more organized and professional (Mubarik et al., 2016). A few decades ago, the center of children's and youth sports was school and the residential neighborhood; today, we are witnessing the setting shifting considerably to organized and professional settings. In the United States, for example, recent estimates are that approximately 45 million children and youth take part in organized sports. Seventy-five percent of families in the United States with school-age children have at least one child who participates in organized sports (Merkel, 2013). In Israel, it is estimated that half a million youth, male and female, engage in organized sports in schools, community clubs, and sports clubs, investing about 12–15 hours a week in practices and games (Noza, 2018). This allows scarce time for these youth to engage in other leisure activities, making the sports arena the largest informal “youth movement” in Israel, with larger numbers of participants than all the other youth movements combined. The number of participants in all youth movements in Israel (such as the Scouts) is 350,000 (Zarhovich, 2018).

Several studies have reported that engaging in sports in an organized, controlled, and educational-pedagogical setting may help children internalize the values of fair play, cooperation, helping a friend, being law-abiding, discipline, and self-discipline. These goals are achieved through play, competition, and team sports activities (McCann & Prentice, 1981). Sports have been described by many researchers as an educational tool that helps impart behavioral norms to the individuals who make up society (Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Like adults, children who engage in sports practice daily the skills and educational values found in sports: self-control, goal setting, the rejection of immediate gratification, coping with stress, physical pain, and disturbing emotions (Toering & Jordet, 2015).

It has been found that acquiring these skills is accompanied by a sense of accomplishment that is transmitted to other areas and enables the development of social prestige, a positive self-image, and a sense of control over life (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997). Exercise and sports have also been associated with behavioral changes in interpersonal relationships and relationships with the environment, manifested in mutual help and cooperation, self-discipline, and adherence to a schedule. Other researchers have described exercise as a means of discharging excess negative energy, regulating stressful situations, and directing them to acceptable sociosporting activities (Fu & Ruskin, 2000). All these associations have been described educational means for instilling tolerance, nonviolence, and fair play (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997)

Children join – and leave – sports for different reasons. Several studies (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006; Govindaraju et al., 2007; Merkel, 2013) have defined the main reasons why youth take part in sports, such as having fun, improving skills and abilities, being with friends, engaging in something they are good at, getting excited about competition, being in good physical shape, and being part of a team. Participation in sports reaches its peak at the age of 13, after which it drops drastically each year until the age of 18, when only a small percentage of young people become professional athletes (Martin, 2014). The reasons for leaving sports are varied and include an overemphasis on victory in the sports framework, loss of interest in the activity, lack of enjoyment, waste of time, lack of professionalism of coaches, and high pressure (Witt, 2018).

In another study of elite athletes in Israel examining psychological aspects in the early stages of sports development (Lidor & Lavyan, 2002), it was found that the main factor that directs children to sports is one of the family members, especially the parents. These same athletes were able to successfully combine studies and sports activities, as their families provided the necessary psychological and financial support. In addition, when these athletes were asked to counsel other young athletes on how to realize their potential, they singled out consistency, demonstration of effort, determination, and hard work (grit) as the most important characteristics.

In surveys and interviews conducted in the United States with parents whose children participate in organized sports, parents noted that, through athletic activities, their children develop life skills such as teamwork, learning fair play, athleticism, discipline, commitment, responsibility, self-esteem, and self-confidence. These same skills will help them in the future when reality requires that they be able to work with people to succeed in life (Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007). Social support and acceptance, which are integral to the teamwork of a sports team, can contribute to reducing the risk of suicidal situations (Merkel, 2013). In a study on the relationship between participation in sports, leisure activities, and social welfare, boys and girls who engaged in sports demonstrated more psychosocial benefits compared to those who were not active (Lu et al., 2016). Studies in the United States of children and adolescents found that those who participated in extracurricular activities, particularly sports, demonstrated improved skills in goal setting, time management, emotional control, leadership, social intelligence, cooperation, and self-inquiry (Hansen et al., 2003). It has also been found that adolescents who participate in team sports are happier, have greater self-esteem, are less anxious, and have a reduced risk of suicidal behavior (Merkel, 2013).

**Sports and socioeconomic class**

Differences in social class and status have played a significant role in sports since the Middle Ages (Galili, 2009). Then, these differences were reflected in the privileges granted to certain athletes over other athletes and to certain groups over other groups and the types of sports in which athletes from different classes engaged. Feudal society was characterized by a lack of mobility between classes and huge gaps in society arising from the aristocratic stratum dominating almost all social and economic resources, as the nobility owned nearly all the land, which they leased to peasants the These gaps were reflected in the division and different types of sports: sports for the nobility and those for the peasants (Henricks, 1982). Class differences were manifest in f hunting, for example. In medieval times, hunting was a sport reserved for the ruling elites, who also owned most of the land. At the same time, hunting for food was a primary way of survival for the lower classes (Items et al., 2002). Hunting rights were granted by the controlling landowners to the lower classes to operate in certain areas, usually deserted, for certain types of animals that were allowed to be hunted. The same laws also applied to weapons that the lower classes were allowed to use; the bow and arrow, for example, were approved for use by the peasants and lower classes for hunting purposes only, not for engaging in warfare.

A study conducted in the 1970s (Bourdieu, 1978) found that members of the French upper class were more likely to participate in sports such as golf, tennis, and skiing than the lower classes but less likely to be interested in soccer, boxing, rugby, and bodybuilding, sports, which are perceived as requiring more physical contact (as well as pain and physicality) and in which more members of the lower socioeconomic class participate (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Upper-class individuals are described as preferring and investing in sporting activities in which the body is used in a more strategic and tactical way, such as sailing (Schmitt et al., 2020). The culture of sailing is socially constructed as related to intellectual skills, such as map reading, route preparation, tactical and practical decision-making, leadership, and problem-solving (Schmitt et al., 2020). Most of the sports associated with the upper classes have traits considered as cultural capital by those with high SES , and are related to aesthetics and luxury, which, in turn, also connect to upper class taste in art and music (Wilson, 2002).

In a study conducted in Australia (Light & Kirk, 2001), researchers used Bourdieu’s concept of capital to explain how rugby players in a boys’ school were able to convert the physical, social, and cultural capital accumulated through their participation in rugby into economic capital in lucrative future careers. For those young men of a middle- to high-class background, playing sports was an integral part of their lives and served as a means of creating personal gain, both culturally and economically.

A study conducted in Finland (Kahma, 2012) also found class differences. Cycling, walking, and gym training are considered middle- to low-class sports, as they are less preferred by other teams. Swimming and skiing, for example, are preferred by the middle-upper class more than the by lower class. A study conducted in Ireland on the acquisition of physical capital in upper-class and lower-class schools identified, inter alia, the dedicated facilities and types of sports operating in the upper-class school sector, including rugby, cricket, hockey, archery, golf, and tennis. However, the programs of these same schools did not include soccer, which is more identified with the lower classes (Kennedy et al., 2020).

**Study Design**

***The study population***

The Central Bureau of Statistics in Israel ranks all localities by clusters between 1 (localities of low socioeconomic class) and 10 (localities of high socioeconomic class). The ranking of the clusters is based on variables such as the average number of persons per household, the percentage of recipients of income support, and the percentage of recipients of a matriculation certificate. A total of 22 youth from low-socioeconomic localities were interviewed. All youth selected for the study play soccer in competitive teams in a league run by the Soccer Association; they train at least three times a week and participate in official competitive games with other teams on the weekends.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). The main criteria were: Jewish youth [boys], aged 12–16, playing in competitive soccer clubs, and living in the geographical-social periphery of Israel in low-socioeconomic localities (clusters 3–5). Clusters 3–5 are the lowest socioeconomic clusters for Jews in Israel. Clusters 1–2 consist mainly of Arab and ultra-Orthodox Jewish localities. Because of the unique characteristics of the Arab and ultra-Orthodox populations, they were not included in this study.

All youth play in soccer clubs belonging to the lowest-ranked (district) organized leagues. None of the youths' parents, according to their reports, have an academic degree. Some parents have a vocational certificate (such as medical secretary or locksmith). Most of the youth reported that their mothers are housewives and do not work in the labor market. The interviewees were located by contacting officials (mainly coaches and managers) in various sports clubs. This request was made possible mainly because the first author, a former soccer player, currently works as a field activity manager for an educational association that deals with sports.

***Research tool***

The research tool in this study is a semistructured, in-depth interview. The interviews, which lasted about an hour, included several sections: background information (e.g., place of residence, family structure, agenda); self-definition (“How do you define yourself?”; “What is important to you in life?”; “Who are your friends?”); leisure activities (“In what other settings are you active?”; How do you spend your free time?”); school experiences (“How do you feel at school?”; “What connection do you have with the teachers?”); identity as a soccer player (“What is it like to be a boy who plays soccer in a professional club?”; “Why did you choose soccer and not another sport?”); values related to being a professional soccer player (“Are there specific values you develop as a result of playing soccer?”); relationship with the coach (“Do you feel comfortable contacting the coach when you have a problem unrelated to training?”); and future orientation (“Do you think about the future?”; “Who do you talk about the future with?”).

The interviews were recorded using a mobile recorder with the consent of the interviewees and then transcribed. The names of the players were changed to maintain their anonymity. The youth and their parents signed a consent form to be interviewed for this study. The interviews took place after receiving approval from the ethics committee of the faculty at the university to which we belong.

***Data analysis***

All interviews were analyzed using the methodological processes proposed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, open readings were made of the transcripts to identify various themes mentioned by the youth freely and unrelated to the research questions. Next, targeted readings were conducted according to the research questions: self-definitions, culture and leisure, school experiences, the identity of a professional soccer player, the key values they develop through practice and play, relationships with the coach, and their future orientation. In the last stage, the transcripts were read to examine whether the youth addressed additional themes and issues that we had not identified in the previous readings.

**Findings**

***The youths’ self-definitions and descriptions of the ways in which their significant others (parents, teachers, and coaches) perceive them***

According to Gecas, the self-concept reflects the general framework within which individuals value themself as a “physical, social, and spiritual or moral being (Gecas, 1982, p. 3.” Thus, the self-concept serves as a conception whereby a person considers him or herself as a creature who experiences and functions in interaction with the world. Symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, Harris & Irvine, 2019) underlies this definition of self-concept, emphasizing that the self is a concept of relationships that expresses personal reflexive activities, interpersonal interactions, and the internalization of the gaze of others (the gaze of both significant others and of society). In this context, symbolic interactionist theory emphasizes that the self-concept is closely related to the ways in which significant others perceive and define us. In other words, the self-concept is how we think others perceive us (Charmaz et al., 2019). Against this background, we examined how youth define themselves and how they think their significant others or the adults in their lives (parents, teachers, and coaches) perceive them.

Most of the youth describe themselves as “good children,” “responsible,” “loving to help,” “respectful to others,” and having a high level of self-discipline. As Ami (15) described himself: “[I] am a responsible, mature child ... I have very, very high self-discipline.” Ran’s (17) description of self-discipline, a subject that appeared throughout the interviews is representative of the interviewees:

I define myself first and foremost as someone who has discipline, and discipline is important to children like us [What children?]. Children who were born into difficult neighborhoods and see crime every day. Discipline prevents me from committing a crime, and I work hard to be a person with discipline.

This self-definition of “I have discipline” appears in most interviews as a trait that prevents delinquency and that requires hard (self) work. The youth describe a number of values as particularly important to them: family, friendship, respect for others, and loyalty. These values are depicted in the research literature as dominant in collectivist cultures and in notions of the interdependent self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and are also found in several studies on the self-concept of high-SES individuals compared to those of low socioeconomic class (Author, 2020).

It is also important to note that most of the youth describe themselves and the traits that characterize them through the attributes they acquire in soccer: being a winner, goal-focused, and persistent. As Omri (17) describes himself:

Who I am is what I get from soccer. [That is?] I am a winner, I have discipline, I am goal oriented, and no one will deter me from it, I block out anything else when I want something, and I have perseverance, and all thanks to soccer.

When asked the adolescents how, in their estimation, their *parents* would define them, the prevailing answer distinguished between the mother’s and the father’s perceptions. Most of the youth think stated that their mother would define them as “a good boy with discipline, a soccer boy” (Ofek, 16). Most of the youth describe their fathers as being very involved in their lives as professional soccer players, accompanying them to games, and being especially proud of them for being disciplined, loyal, good friends, and understanding the importance of family values. Elad (15) relates:

My father is proud of me. He knows what’s going on with me in soccer and comes to every game. He has not missed a game since I started playing. Something like at least eight years. He is especially proud of me for my values, that I respect family, adults, and friends. I’m just like him, loyalty to friends and family is the most important thing in life, just like soccer. My dad reinforces that soccer will help me in life and make me a good person with respect and a regular salary, so he reminds me that I must turn soccer into a real profession and not just a hobby.

Elad’s description of his father, similar to the descriptions of many of the youths in the study, addresses not only the way his father perceives him, but also the importance the father attaches to soccer as a critical career path for his child.

In response to the question, “How do your *teachers* define you?” many responded, “The teachers will say I am a problematic child.” Most thought that the teachers perceived and defined them in negative terms (“problematic child,” “does not invest in studies,” “disturbs class,'” “is not very smart,” and “studies are not for him”).

Another recurring description in the interviews involves the teachers’ perceptions that professional soccer would save the youth from a life of delinquency, roaming the streets, and entanglements with the police. Aviel (17) describes it as follows: “One of the teachers told me, ‘You’re lucky you play soccer because your entire intelligence is in your feet,’ and another teacher told me, ‘You’re lucky you’re in soccer because otherwise, nothing would come of you.’” Many youths also described the teachers’ expectations that the youth would not get into trouble and would be human beings. When Elad (15) was asked, “What does it mean ‘that you will be a human being?’” he replied:

She has no expectations for me regarding studies, and sh’'s right - I hate studying, and it will not help me in life, but she wants me to at least be a human being. [That is?] Not to disturb the class, that I will not be a criminal, a drug dealer, and stuff like she is used to seeing in our neighborhood.

This morality of low expectations (Furedi, 2002) of teachers, as the youth describe, also appears in their descriptions of how they think the *coaches* perceive them. Many youths described their coach as a “big brother,” a “second dad”" and “He is like my nonbiological dad” (Aviel, 17). All the youths expressed that they could, in principle, consult with the coach about their lives, even though they do not do so in practice. They also indicate that the coaches do not have personal conversations with them (one-on-one conversations off the soccer field) and that the main conversations with the coaches are related to disciplinary interventions when problems are discovered in the home or at school. This is how Danny (aged 13) describes it:

If we just say there was some disciplinary problem at school or something ... he [the coach] would come to our school every few days to check up on our behavior. He would follow us because if you make some improper disciplinary problems, you ... you do not get to go to practice or a game.

Many youths described how the coaches perceived them as “problematic,” “undisciplined,” and “violent,” and how their central role was to “educate,” “turn them into human beings,” and “turn us into children with discipline.” Ofek (16) related the following:

The coach told me, ‘You’re lucky you have soccer that turns you into a human being. Without soccer, you would be a criminal like all the children in the neighborhoods here.’ He tells me that his job is to educate me to be disciplined. He reminds me that thanks to soccer, I am a good person. It is important to him that I do not make problems and integrate into society like a good kid and not like some criminal. The most important thing for him is that I will be a human being and that I succeed thanks to soccer. I appreciate him for that.

These descriptions of the youths’ perceptions ofhow the coaches regard them, similar to their descriptions of how they think their teachers perceive them, are critical to the construction of the self-concept and self-image as symbolic interactionism (Charmaz et al., 2019). It is important to note that most of the youths agree (or internalize) with the coaches’ and teachers’ descriptions of them and experience the construction of their self-concept through the coaches’ and the teachers’ characterizations. These depictions are based on low expectations (“for them to be human beings,” “for them not to be criminals”) and a great deal of engagement in discipline and obedience. In other words, according to the youths, teachers and coaches are more concerned with them fitting in rather than standing out. In a study on childrearing practices among parents from different socioeconomic classes, Gillies (2005) reveals how high-SES parents, who invest considerable resources in nurturing their children, engage in practices of *standing out*, which are oriented toward “constructing their children as ‘unique’ and distinct from others” (p. 845) or “being singled out as special” (p. 846). Eriksen and Stefansen (2021), in a study of youth sports parenting in working-class communities in Norway, found that parents expressed aspirations of *fitting in* that highlighted how sports might protect their children from risk and provide a pathway for their children to become decent citizens and lead respectable lifestyles.

***School experiences***

In the first part of the interview, the youths freely describe their self-concepts and the elements of their daily lives. Most did not voluntarily and spontaneously address their school experience or the place of school in their self-concept. In this sense, the youth expressed “narrative indifference” (Author, 2022) or lack of biographical relevance (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974) to school. In other words, the school does not fulfill a central source in their self-concept or life story. When the youths were specifically asked by us about their experiences at school, they answered briefly and then returned to talking about their life experiences as professional soccer players. Most explained that they attend school because they have to, to meet friends (“all my friends from soccer are there”), and that nothing special or helpful takes place at school for them. Matan (16) explains:

From my point of view, I can give up school. Nothing special happens there. In any case, the teachers think I’m wasting my time, that I'm only good at soccer, that I’m problematic. There are always quarrels over discipline and punishments, I do not learn anything important for life there.

Matan, like many of the youths, describes the school in terms of its high engagement in discipline, the low expectations of the teachers, and the lack of acquisition of academic and cultural capital, all of which are critical to the upward mobility of low-SES individuals (Lareau, 2015).

***Experiences of participating in professional soccer: “Thanks to soccer, I am a human being and not a problematic child who gets involved in crime.”***

During the interviews, all the youths described in detail how soccer and being professional soccer players play a central role in their own self-definitions. The following comments were prevalent in the interviews: “"Soccer is everything I am;" “I am soccer, there is nothing else;" “There is nothing else that suits me in life;” “The only thing I’m good at in life is soccer;" “I don’t know how to do anything other than play soccer;” “Soccer is my whole life;” and “Thanks to soccer I’m a human being.” Danny (13) describes it this way:

Soccer is in my heart. I live and breathe it every day ... I breathe and lived it from a very, very young age ... If you slice open my vein now, you'll see soccer there.

The interviewees convey that soccer is central to their self-concept, is the only occupation they are good at, and that they are unable to think of another major occupation or identity characteristic. They also express that soccer is responsible for their positive qualities and for everything they are grateful for: “Thanks to soccer, I am a good person;” “Thanks to soccer, I have discipline;” “Thanks to soccer, people appreciate me;” “Thanks to soccer, I'm calm;” and “Thanks to soccer, my life is full, and I have real meaning.” Eyal (14) relates: “From a young age, I have played soccer. I like it. I’m also not that good at other things, maybe that's the only thing I’m good at.” Moreover, many of the youths expressed how being involved in professional soccer is also responsible for enabling them to escape from the self they might have been. Yossi (13) sees soccer as “holding me back from being a problematic kid who gets into trouble.” Chaim (13) offers a similar description:

As a kid I got upset quickly and could get into a fist fight over nothing. Today, I know more about controlling myself thanks to soccer ... I can still get upset a lot during a game, but it’s much better than when I was a kid.

Ofek (16) describes his possible self (Markus & Nuris, 1986) were it not for soccer in vivid terms and with great conviction :

I am telling you this in the most direct way – without soccer I would be a criminal today, a drug dealer or a supermarket thief or something like that. This is the fate of many children who live here in our neighborhood. This is a difficult neighborhood, a neighborhood of the worst poverty and crime in the northern region. Thanks to soccer, I’, a good person, and I have a future.

The centrality of soccer in the youths’ self-concept was also expressed through descriptions of their future, which reflect their great confidence in their chances of becoming professional soccer players. They also describe their beliefs that they cannot be good or successful in other occupations and that, if they fail to become professional soccer players in adulthood, they will not have another career path.

***Future orientation: “There is no chance I will not be a soccer player.”***

Future orientation refers to the images that individuals have regarding their future in terms of the hopes, experiences, planning of desirable events, and fears about experiences and life events in relation to different areas of life (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). These images may be expressed in life trajectories (such as work, relationships, family, and education) and existential areas (such as self-fulfillment and doing good in the world) (Seginer, 2009). Studies have reported how a positive and open future orientation, which takes into account diverse existential and occupational pathways, is a personal quality that contributes to resilience and mental well-being, aids in positive adjustment in times of crisis, protects against risk behaviors (Oshri et al., 2018), and is related to academic and occupational achievement (Adelabu, 2008).

Studies have also reported how variables and social contexts affect the formation and maintenance of future orientation, such as differences between various members, minority and majority groups, parental support, social support, school climate, and teacher-student relationships (Sulimani-Aidan, 2017). In this context, a number of researchers have revealed how living in different socioeconomic classes also affects the construction and maintenance of future orientation. Compared with young people of low SES, high-SES youth report having a brighter future in which they envision diverse existential and employment paths, leadership roles, and, together with the adults in their lives, thinking more about their future, its planning, and the specific means to achieve it (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022 ).

All of the youth in our study described how they would like to have a happy and healthy life in the future, start a family, and take care of their parents. (For similar future orientations among low-SES youth, see Stahl, 2012). They also described how they plan and very much desire to be professional soccer players in the future and to make a living from it. With the exception of two youths who expressed slight doubts but still a strong desire to be professional soccer players in the future, the youths in the study relayed their confidence in the probability of becoming professional players. According to Ehud (15), “Outside of sports, I want to be a loving person. I want to be a humble person, and I’m not being self-righteous now ... there’s no way I'll not be a soccer player.”

In the conversation with Ehud, which is representative of those with the youths who participated in the study, he not only expresses his conviction of being a professional soccer player in the future—conceiving of his only options as professional soccer player, delinquent, or being unemployed—but also expresses that he has not even considered alternative career paths. Like all the youths in our research, Ehud is convinced that he is not good at anything else and that he has no other passions or skills that could have been developed.

Even when the youths were asked about their future in the army (which is mandatory in Israel), they expressed similar attitudes of apathy, a lack of thinking, or of the insignificance of the army’s place in their lives. Yossi (13) for example, declared, “Whatever they give me, I’ll take.” Nevo (17) conveyed:

The army will only hurt my career. I hope to do nothing and try to be at home every day to invest in soccer. What will I get out of the army at all? It’s just a place that needs to be passed through easily because [military] service in Israel is mandatory; it’s not like in Europe.

It is important to note that the youths are unaware of the special cultural capital, what some researchers have called military capital (Kachtan & Binks, 2021), that is acquired during military service. Service in highly respected units (e.g., pilot, cyber, intelligence) and in officer positions equips an individual in Israel with cultural and symbolic capital that is instrumental in obtaining senior positions and economic capital in post-military civilian life (Kachtan & Binks, 2021).

None of the youths mentioned higher education when describing their future. When asked explicitly if they intended to pursue higher education after military service, most answered no, that they had not thought about it, they do not have the academic skills, and higher education does not suit or interest them. (For similar findings about the lack of academic aspirations among low-SES youth in England, see Stahl, 2012.)

Young people of high SES, more than their low-SES peers, report how the adults in their lives (teachers and parents, for example) talk to them about the future and practice future orientation with them (Silva & Corse, 2018). This practice of the future, what Appadurai (2004) called *the capacity to aspire*, operates as cultural capital that maintains privilege for young people of high socioeconomic class (Tevington, 2018). Most of the youths described that the adults in their lives do not talk about, think about, or practice their future with them. This description is critical to the replication of social inequality and educational stratification (Tevington, 2018).

**Discussion**

This paper joins a series of studies dealing with the link between education, socioeconomic class, and habitus in different educational spaces in terms of Bourdieu’s class theory (Calarco, 2018; Howard, 2008; Lareau, 2015). This article also joins other studies, influenced by Bourdieu’s intellectual heritage, that have examined the relationship between sports and socioeconomic class (Bourdieu, 1978; DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). However, few studies have focused on the perspective of children and adolescents engaged in professional sports to understand the ways in which sporting habitus is formed (Stuij, 2015) in the various classes. Against this background, the central question of this article is how youth of low SES who play soccer in professional clubs experience and define themselves, the place of soccer, and being youth-professional-players in their self-concept. Answers to this question help us understand how class habitus is acquired (Howard, 2008), the impact of socializing agents in the transfer of habitus and cultural capital (Lenartowich, 2016), and the link between professional sports, as a field of informal education, class, and inequality (Aurini et al., 2020).

The findings of the study reveal that youths define themselves in positive ways, their daily lives revolve around soccer, and the role of professional soccer occupies a central place in their self-concept. At the same time, they expressed how their teachers and coaches perceive them (what is symbolically called “taking the role of the other”) in negative ways and in terms of their deficits (Atkins, 2010): “problematic,” “violent” children, who, if it weren’t for soccer, would have been criminals or fallen into other high-risk situations. As articulated by symbolic interactionism, the way in which youth believe significant others perceive them is critical to establishing the self-concept (Charmaz et al., 2019). The findings further show that youth do not perceive school as an important life space and have no academic aspirations that could serve as a “passport to a good life” (Gatsi et al., 2020, p. 24) or as a means of mobility, as has been found among low-SES young people in Malawi (Frye, 2012), England (Archer et al., 2014), the United States, (Adelabu, 2008), Australia (Bryant & Ellard, 2015), and Peru (Crivello, 2015).

This description is jarring in light of the findings of many studies that the acquisition of academic capital in schools is extremely important for the mobility of disadvantaged youth (Lareau, 2015). Moreover, the youths in our study described how the teachers and coaches focused extensively on discipline, obedience, and turning the youth into decent citizens (“just be a human being”). In other words, this engagement expresses a practice of *fitting in*, in contrast to the practice of *standing out* (encouraging the uniqueness and excellence of the child compared to others) as commonly found among high-SES parents (Gillies, 2005). In line with Eriksen and Stefansen (2021), we argue that the qualities and skills acquired through striving to fit in (e.g., conformity, obedience) are not cultural capital that, in Bourdieuian terms (1984), will help working-class children gain benefits and privileges or symbolic and future capital. As Rivera (2015) has revealed in her study of admissions interviews at prestigious New York firms, interviewers single out, and even hire more for senior positions, those candidates who evidence cultural capital and a habitus of standing out.

A similar claim was made by Golann (2021) in her ethnographic research on “no-excuses” schools, which were established to improve the academic achievements of disadvantaged students and increase their chances of being admitted to college. Golann described how these schools apply scripts or tools of interaction based on rigid discipline and surveillance. Using these scenarios and tools, Golann emphasized (2021, p. 8), students continue to be taught “obedience, punctuality, and deference-all in the name of social mobility.” Following Golann (2021), we argue that the perceptions of teachers and coaches about the youths in our research, as the youths reported, are not capital but control.

As for soccer and being professional soccer players, all the youths expressed their love for soccer and the central place it occupies in their self-concept. They regarded soccer and being a professional player as equipping them with the discipline, perseverance, and goal orientation needed for success as future soccer players. In other words, the youth described how professional soccer equips them with the grit characteristics that various researchers have described in recent years as the cultural capital valued by gatekeepers in elite life spaces (academia and the labor market) (Nothnagle & Knoester, 2022).

It is important to note that, alongside their descriptions of soccer as central to their self-concept, the youths do not see themselves as good at any other occupation and do not consider alternative career paths. Most also expressed great confidence in their chances of becoming professional soccer players in adulthood and making a living from this occupation in a way that includes financial well-being. This perception, however, is challenged by studies in various countries that have found only a very small percentage of children and adolescents who engage in sports become professional athletes in adulthood (Farmer, 2019). For example, the chances of becoming a professional football player in the United States are 1–4,233 (0.02%), in men's basketball 1–11,771 (0.008%), in women's basketball 1–13,015 (0.007%), and in soccer 1–5,768 (0.017%) (Luke, 2016). In Israel, statistical estimates report that only 1–2% of children who engage in professional sports will continue in professional sports careers after the age of 18 (Tolchin, 2021).

As a number of researchers have revealed, the lack of consideration of a professional future in other areas impedes individuals from controlling their future or being open to existential alternatives (Silva and Corse, 2018; Soulimani-Aidan, 2017). The youth in our studies not only portray soccer as the only occupation they are good at (or describe that they are bad in other areas), but they also did not anticipate a bright future, which has been depicted by a number of researchers as cultural capital or an “intrapersonal asset” (Oshri et al., 2018, p. 1465). Positive expectations of the future contribute to success, help individuals prepare for challenges or barriers that may arise in the future, and contribute to practicing agentic creativity when plans fail (Appadurai, 2004; Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022). The youths also did not aspire to jobs that require an academic education. This lack of ambition is disturbing in light of Tai et al. (2006), who found that young people in the United States who aspired to a career in science at the age of 14 had a 3.4 times greater probability of studying engineering or physical sciences than those who had had no such aspirations at the same age.

It is important to note that the youths in our study did not evidence an inability to envision themselves in the future, unlike the working-class young people in the United States in the study by Silva and Corse (2018). Neither did they answer “I don’t know” to questions about their future, as did disadvantaged youth in studies set in Brazil (Raffelli & Koller, 2005) and Denmark (Raven, 2019). They also did not describe future uncertainty or bumps as did young working-class Americans in a study by Silver et al. (2022). Importantly, the youths in our study did not express self-defeatism (MacLeod, 1987) or reject upward mobility (Willis, 1977).

At the same time, our research participants did not express any expectation of an open future with various career paths and existential paths, being prepared to face challenges and failures, consulting with significant others about the future, or being equipped to fill senior positions (or what Demerath (2009) called colonialization of the future), as described by other upper-SES youth (Silva and Corse, 2018; Silver et al., 2022; Tevington, 2018; Weinberger et al., 2017).

The youths in our study optimistically imagined a future as professional soccer players, without preparing for challenges and failures and without planning for or investing in alternative career paths; neither did they consult with significant others about their future or practice imagining their future with them. A number of researchers have described how envisioning the future and its practice, what Appaduari (2004) called the capacity to aspire, is more prevalent in the lives of young people of high SES, called the archives of experience. This archive includes interactions, experiences, skills, and exposure to messages and representations of success in various pathways that aid in the development of an open and positive orientation toward the future.. Moreover, the development of such an archive promotes agentic control over the future and, in fact, serves as cultural capital (Appadurai, 2004; Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022).

We propose viewing future orientation as “much more than abstract ‘futures’; they orient actions in the present and say a great deal about young people's current realities and relationships” (Crivello, 2015, p. 38). Moreover, we consider future orientation as a component of class habitus. The habitus, as Bourdieu (1984) suggested, includes not only dispositions or past experience but also future aspirations, or as Forbes and Lingard (2015, p.118) write: “While habitus is the embodiment of the past, it also frames the future” (p. 118). Against this backdrop, future orientation may serve as a marker of social position (Silva and Corse, 2018). More specifically, one of the arguments in this context is that an open future orientation, which includes, inter alia, talking about different career paths, developing an interest in various areas, and preparing for challenges and barriers, acts as a badge of distinction (Weinberger et al., 2017).

The youths in our study described a future based on a professional soccer career, despite the low chances of achieving their dream; they are not practiced in envisioning or preparing for alternative future pursuits (academic and other) and are not actually utilizing cultural capital that might help them develop other professional opportunities. Against this background, we want to emphasize the educational importance of talking, envisioning, and practicing the future in order to improve life opportunities.

It is important to call attention to, and even encourage the development of, workshops for teachers and coaches (and other figures in formal and informal educational spaces) in which they can determine and practice building students’ future orientation and, as socialization agents, to equip students with cultural capital. We thereby join researchers’ claims that one of the tasks of education is to engage with the future by developing the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004), encouraging students to envision alternatives, and developing an explicit critical discussion of the barriers and challenges to attaining one’s aspirations in light of specific living conditions (Stitzlein, 2018). This engagement is critical for students from all socioeconomic classes, but particularly so for children and adolescents of low socioeconomic class, given the habitus of constraint (Bourdieu, 1984) they experience and their need to envision existential alternatives that consider, and perhaps even transcend, the structural vulnerabilities they experience in their daily lives.

**Study limitations and suggestions for future research**

This article is based on interviews with youth, professional soccer players of low SES who play in sports clubs located in the geographical-social periphery of Israel. It is important to conduct a similar study among young professional soccer players of high socioeconomic class. In light of the differences in the disparate habitus of youth in formal educational contexts (including, for example, a sense of comfort with authority figures- see Lareau, 2011), including in their ease and sense of entitlement and other relationships with teachers in school (Calarco, 2018), it would be beneficial to ascertain their sporting habitus. Second, in light of the influence of educational figures on the self-concept and their role in the development of cultural capital, it is also worthwhile interviewing professional soccer coaches who work with youth from different socioeconomic classes. Third, because soccer is socially structured as a sport for low-SES youth (Bourdieu, 1978), it would be valueinteresting to examine the self-concept and future orientation of children and adolescents who play sports associated with high socioeconomic class (such as swimming, tennis, and sailing). Finally, given the link between socioeconomic class and future orientation (Silva & Corse, 2018) and our claim that an open and positive future orientation operates as important cultural capital, it is pertinent to explore the future orientation in additional formal and informal educational contexts. This article considers future orientation as a component of habitus and suggests further exploring the variations in future orientation across classes in different contexts.

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