Identity, Physical Capital and Young Men’s Experiences of Soccer in School and in Community-based Clubs

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Abstract
This article engages with four key informants from a school into the meaning of soccer in the lives of the informants and the disparity between the school’s practice and the cultural meanings attached to soccer, at the school and community-based clubs. We will demonstrate how their ability and the cultural knowledge developed through playing club soccer over most of their lives provided them with an identity and meaningful membership in communities built around soccer. Drawing on Bourdieu (1884), we see this physical and cultural knowledge as embodied capital. While it provided them with meaningful membership, social status and position within the communities of their soccer clubs, it had far less value at school. Within the community of the school, their embodied cultural capital provided them with few opportunities to develop a sense of social distinction, personal identity, self-expression and self-determination.

The article reports on a study that was designed to explore the inter-relationships between culture, the body, schooling, community and learning in school-based soccer.

Following on from work highlighting the central role that physical activity plays in the embodiment of culture, social relations and the formation of identity (see for example, Bourdieu 1978, Connell 1995, Flemming 1991, Kirk 1992, Light 2000, Shilling 1991) we were interested in the learning that takes place through young men’s participation in school-based soccer and how this might be shaped by their engagement in community-based soccer clubs. We spent one day a week for two months at the school, referred to in this article under the pseudonym of ‘Tower District High School’, leading up to the first round of the Victorian Secondary Schools Sports Association (VSSSA), interschool soccer competition. Expecting the team to progress through to the latter stages of the knock out style competition, we had planned to base much of our research on observation of the senior soccer team’s training and games over the duration of the inter-school competition.
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Our research plans were, however, disrupted by the school's decision to remove the team from the competition in response to an incident that had occurred in the previous year's competition. This incident developed following what the team saw as an unfair decision against them by the referee. A group of 'Tower District' players vented their anger and frustration by severely vandalising the referee's car after the game. Although the team's non-participation in the VSSSA competition was initially disappointing for us, we saw the attack on the referee's car as a critical incident that we felt could provide an opportunity to explore what were emerging as significant differences between the meaning and practice of soccer at the school and in their community-based clubs.

**Embodied Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu's analytic concepts of cultural capital and cultural fields are central to our analysis. Since his work with Passeron on the reproduction of inequality in education his concept of cultural capital has been widely employed in sociological analyses of schooling (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Bourdieu (1984) sees the accumulation of capital as determining an individual's 'distance from necessity', his or her distance from material want. Capital largely determines the individual's social position within a particular social field. Capital occurs in economic, social and cultural forms and one form can be exchanged for another (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, the social capital of connections in an exclusive golf club or those made in an elite independent high school can be exchanged for economic capital through the establishment of profitable business connections. While cultural capital can refer to culturally valued objects such as paintings or university degrees, it is the embodied forms of cultural capital or 'physical capital' with which we are more concerned in this article. This physical capital includes forms of embodied knowledge, particular modes of movement, postures, gestures, appearances and tastes that are typically transmitted from the family to children. It is embodied through the everyday use of the body over an individual's lifetime within culturally specific contexts.

Cultural fields are sites of cultural practice that are constituted by institutions, rules and rituals and form their own hierarchies. (Webb, Shirato & Danaher, 2002). They are semi-autonomous and produce their own discourses. The value of cultural capital is dependent upon the field in which it is exchanged. Fields are fluid and shaped by both internal and external forces and overlap with other cultural fields. For example, school sport and physical education are practised at the intersection of the two cultural fields of education and sport and this is of particular significance for this study. The field of sport has changed dramatically from the 1960s and much of this change is due to what
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Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, p. 29) refer to as the 'intrusion' of the field of business. One of the results of this intrusion is increasing tension between the 'doxa' (the set of core values and discourses) of sport for its own sake, sport for character building, and the logic of the market place that drives commercialised sport. Changes in fields affect the value and distribution of capital.

The cultural capital that is most valued in schools, within the field of education, is that which is typically passed on to the children of the more privileged sections of society. The forms of knowledge most valued in schools, and which are required for achieving academic distinction, tends to favour the children of the dominant classes and disadvantage children from other backgrounds. In this way, Bourdieu (1984) argues that schools, along with other social institutions, reproduce the status quo of the unequal distribution of capital.

Schooling, Identity and Cultural Capital

Research on contemporary schooling conducted over two decades ago challenged the notion that education contributes to economic and social equality (see for example, Bowles & Gintis 1976, Willis 1977). Some of it highlighted the ways in which schools reproduce social inequity by devaluing the values, skills and abilities that many children bring with them (Willis 1977). This research illuminated how schools fail to provide for individual fulfilment and identity formation by not making provision for students from working class backgrounds to develop the talents they bring to school (Bowles & Gintis 1976). Willis' (1977) study of working class boys in Birmingham showed how the school devalued the practical knowledge that they brought with them even though it was comprised of abilities that were as complex as any of the academic skills demanded for success in school. One of the most powerful ways of explaining the ways in which schools reproduce inequality is provided by the concept of cultural reproduction employed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in their analysis of French schooling and the reproduction of inequality. Bourdieu and Passeron examined the role that schools play in the reproduction of social inequity by focusing on the ways in which schools favour the cultural capital of the more privileged classes while devaluing the cultural capital of the dominated classes. More recently, Goodson (1993) argues that schools differentiate between different forms of knowledge that are strongly related to students' cultural backgrounds. As he suggests, abstracted, content-focused and highly examinable knowledge enjoys high status in schools while the more practical knowledge that constitutes subjects such as physical education suffers low status in schools. Benjamin (2001) extends this argument to contend that institutional pre-occupation with quantifiable academic attainment
as a marker of school and government efficiency denies many students the chance of experiencing success in school. She suggests that, within the context of this focus on quantifiable, abstracted knowledge, providing opportunities for personal satisfaction, affective development and the formation of identity has becomes an irrelevant distraction from 'the real business' of schooling.

Light and Fawns (2001) argue that, when well taught, games can offer students valuable opportunities for social learning, the development of personal identity and physical self-expression unavailable to most other areas of the school curriculum. We suggest that this contention is equally applicable to intra or inter school sport. When it is well taught with a focus on educational outcomes it can offer young people the same opportunities for identity formation, self-expression, and positive social learning. Sport, however, is not part of a Key Learning Area and is typically viewed in schools more as a chance for students to 'let off steam' or as a break from the classroom. Schools rarely seem to consider the range of implicit learning that occurs through sport, whether practised as part of a physical education program, or as intra or inter-school sport. Such learning is neither easily recognised nor quantifiable and does not fit in with the dominant conception of schooling. Such embodied learning is, however, deep, lasting and takes place 'beyond the grasp of consciousness' through 'the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 94). It is learning that is profoundly shaped by the cultural and social contexts within which it occurs (see for example, Light 2000, Light & Kirk 2000).

The Study
This study set out to enquire into the place and meaning of soccer in the lives of young men in a government high school. To understand meaning and interpret social interaction we adopted an interactive ethnographic approach (Woods, 1997). The study was conducted over an eight-month period at a culturally diverse government school in Melbourne and was focused on four young men in the senior soccer team.

In selecting an appropriate site for the study we looked for a school that would be reasonably representative of the cultural diversity to be found in Victorian government schools. We were also looking for a school with a good record in inter-school soccer on the assumption that soccer would hold a place of importance for the players and the school. Tower District High School had a very good record in VSSSA soccer. It had been nominated by officials we spoke to at the Victorian Soccer Federation (VSF) as a school with one of the strongest soccer teams in the state. With over fifty different ethnic groups represented in the student population it seemed to provide us with the opportunity to
explore the relationships between culture, the body, community and learning through soccer.

In selecting the four informants we looked for skilful and committed soccer players from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. Initial visits to the school were focused on getting to know the boys in the senior soccer team and building personal relations that would allow the researchers to enter the ‘realm of meaning’. This also involved identifying informants who were comfortable with the researchers and who were likely to provide useful data (Hammerley & Atkinson, 1983). In choosing the informants we consulted with the physical education staff. They suggested that the four boys we chose as key informants were all committed soccer players from different ethnic backgrounds. Theo had a Greek background, Dean was born in Ghana, Marco was Serbian and Mathew’s parents were Italian and Irish. More detail about the boys’ background is provided in the body of the article.

Data was generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, noted observations and the use of photo-elicitation. We visited the school regularly over an eight month period during 2001 during which we conducted in-depth conversational interviews and observations. In order to gain insight into the place and meaning of soccer in the informants’ lives we employed a combination of auto-photography and photo-elicitation as means of allowing the participants to take the lead in showing us their world. The use of photography and the conversation that it stimulated formed the central means through which we gained insight into the personal meanings of soccer for the key informants. This method involves the use of photographs in interviews to stimulate discussion and dialogue (Emmison & Smith 2002, Harper 2000). Zilker (1990) employed a version of this approach that he described as ‘auto-photography’. After establishing trustful relationships with the subjects we supplied them with a disposable camera each and asked them to take photographs of things that showed what soccer meant to them. We asked them to talk about their photographs and to explain their meaning and why they took them. The conversations that developed from this provided us with personal insights into the meaning of soccer in their lives and the comparative significance of soccer in their clubs and in the school. We were then, in subsequent interviews, able to build on these initial sessions with the photographs. We told the four key informants that we were not interested in their skill as photographers but only in their providing a photographic description of what soccer meant to them in their lives. The intentions of the photographer in selecting the content of the photograph and in organising the order in which they are presented in this method are of prime importance. These intentions were explored in the subsequent interviews and built upon over the duration of the study.
The name of the school and the names of subjects in this article are pseudonyms used to protect their anonymity. For this reason, some details of places, organisations and dates have been omitted.

The School and Inter-school Soccer

A large part of the school's student population had European ethnic backgrounds in countries where soccer is an important cultural practice. The school had a very good record in VSSSA soccer and boasted many soccer players of outstanding ability. We, therefore, expected soccer to figure as a prominent practice in the school. The promotional literature on show in the school's foyer emphasised the importance of sport and physical education for the physical and social development of its students. In an early interview with the principal he told us that sport was very important in the local community and that it was, therefore, valued in the school. He also pointed out that there were many talented sports people in the student population. Sport, and soccer in particular, was, as the principal had told us, very much valued in local communities. All the boys in the school's senior soccer team played in community soccer clubs and several were very talented. Subsequent conversations with the physical education staff and other staff involved in sport, however, revealed deep dissatisfaction with the low status of sport in the school and what they saw as a lack of support for, and recognition of, their efforts to promote and organise inter-school sport and the efforts of the students participating in it.

Although the boys in our study trained two to three times a week with their clubs there was no formal training at the school. As teachers and the players told us, there was also little formal recognition of the soccer teams' results in inter-school games. While the boys in the senior team enjoyed the chance to play together to represent the school and their district they were disappointed, and sometimes frustrated, at the lack of value their skills and knowledge developed through soccer held in the school:

We feel left out (of the school) and they don't care about us. They're not even interested in the scores, even if we win the game. We've probably got some of the best players in Victoria in soccer but in the end it's a waste of time. (Dean, interview, 11 April)

The Victorian Secondary Schools Sport Association (VSSSA) coordinates inter-school sports for government secondary schools. These are run as 'knock out' competitions in which teams must win to continue playing. As the physical education staff at the school explained to us, for
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a school team to compete in the VSSSA competition students who are interested nominate for a sport that they wished to participate in and, if they had adequate numbers, form a team. The sports coordinator at the school then appoints a teacher to oversee the team. If the teacher appointed has the experience necessary and the desire, he/she acts as a coach in preparation for the first round of the competition against other local schools. If the teacher does not have the necessary ability, or inclination, to act as a coach then he/she would typically adopt a supervisory role and accompany the team on the day of competition. This normally means that the students organise details such as their training, team selection and game plans.

The knock out nature of the competition places an unfortunate emphasis on winning because, as Marko told us, once the team loses a game 'you're going home':

(If you lose a game) Yes, you've lost the whole thing. The team is gone. In club football there's always the next game. You probably try a bit more at the school soccer. Because you know if you lose that's it—it's the end. It's the last chance you're going to get. It puts a lot of pressure on you in school soccer. You know if you lose you're going home. There's no more. That's it. (Marko, interview, 11 April).

Tom (a pseudonym) works for an umbrella organisation involved in organising inter-school sport and was previously head of a government school physical education department. Toward the end of the study we asked him about the stress that the inter-school competition placed on winning. He explained how, despite the aim of providing students with a range of enjoyable sporting experiences, the limited resources available to run interschool sport meant that there was indeed an unfortunate stress on winning to ensure that the team could keep playing.

In conversation with the physical education staff at Tower District they explained to us how there was a critical shortage of teachers who are interested in coaching teams at the school. Within an increasingly crowded curriculum and a focus on 'core' academic subjects sport is one area of the curriculum that is under pressure. Physical education staff and other staff involved in organising inter-school sport suggested that many teachers at the school saw their involvement as an imposition on their time. Tom said that many schools had problems finding staff interested in giving up their time to make students' experiences of interschool sport satisfying and rewarding. In interviews with physical education staff and the staff at Tower District who were enthusiastic about sport, they complained about the lack of interest shown by teachers who did not value sport. They suggested that, while reluctant staff
would dutifully accompany the team to the competition they were unlikely to organise training and the other preparation that is essential to make sport an enjoyable and positive learning experience. They felt that this lack of interest by some teachers let the sport program down.

**The Boys**

Of the four informants, only Mathew, was performing poorly in his studies and was marginalised from the school. Dean was achieving average grades for the school and both Marko and Theo were doing well at school and aspired to studying at university. Theo's soccer formed an important form of physical culture that connected him with his family, ethnic Greek culture and his friends. With reasonably good grades in school he balanced his soccer with his studies. His involvement with soccer was a major part of his life, but he felt that his future career direction would be more critically influenced by his performance in his school studies.

Unlike Theo, formal schooling for Matthew was totally irrelevant as evident here in his use of the past tense while still enrolled at school:

> Education is not for me. Me and school didn't go in the same... I just wasn't made for school. I never listened. I'd focus on other stuff. Most of the time it was soccer. I'd sit in class and daydream about training and thinking about other stuff. And when I started writing and sometimes I was so out of it that I'd be writing something and soccer would come up. Its not that I don't like to learn, it's just not the stuff you do at school. (Mathew interview, 29 June).

He had very poor grades and attended school so rarely that we had to conduct some interviews in coffee shops and a pizza restaurant near his home. Soccer provided him with lofty yet tangible life goals toward which he could aspire and in July he left home to play semi-professional soccer in Italy on a six months trial contract.

Marko was a very talented player and soccer dominated his life. He was also very modest and reluctant to speak of his achievements. Many of the photographs he took for us showed his room at home decorated with pictures of his favourite European players, as well as posters and insignias of the clubs he supported and the local clubs he was connected with. Alongside these was an impressive display of trophies. Marko would regularly get up in the early hours of the morning to watch the telecasts of the European leagues. At school however, he was a conscientious student aspiring to combine a 'mainstream' career such physical education teaching with his love of soccer through physical education or sports management.
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Dean's soccer ability provided him with much confidence. It had also been pivotal to his personal identity and had provided him with a sense of continuity and security in moving between very different cultures. It was of central importance in his life:

'I need to be involved in the game (soccer). It's a game that's been part of me all my life. It's the only thing that people don't question me about. I can't live without it'. He was born in Ghana where he began playing when he 'was a little kid with my friends and cousins in a big family'. He then moved to London when he was seven and to Australia when he was eleven. He suggested that his soccer playing ability helped him cross cultural and ethnic boundaries. Soccer had allowed him to access 'other' communities and engage in their cultural discourse. This was an important asset for a young man relatively new to Australia. After two years in one club in Melbourne his friendship with Theo, and a change of coach at his old club, led to his joining Theo's Greek club. His physical capital played a significant part in being able to negotiate entry into an ethnically different community. He outlined to us how he had to 'prove himself' by succeeding at soccer to be accepted:

You have to try to break into the culture, and if you're not strong enough, it's not about physical strength, it's mentally, you're not going to make it. Because you've got people training in the same club and they've got their mums and dads on the club committee and they've already got their place in the team. But for you, you have to work hard to prove to the other players and to the club that you're worth playing for the club. (Dean, interview, 11 April)

Soccer had provided Dean with a means of experiencing success and a sense of achievement. He explained this when talking about being in a team with Theo that won a major club championship:

I kind of felt this sense of achievement. I've never really achieved anything in my life. When I won that and got a trophy and everything I felt like I belong. Finally I'd won something and felt a sense of achievement. (Dean, interview, 11 April)

Theo's Greek ethnic background meant that playing for a Greek club allowed him to confirm and extend his ethnic identity and his intra family relationships through soccer. This was particularly so for his relationship with his father who was an intimate part of Theo's life in soccer. We asked him if there were any photographs that he would like to have taken yet didn't. His response indicated the importance of his father in his life and how deeply soccer was tied into his family relationships. He said that would like to have a taken a photograph of:
Things you can't take photos of, like my dad watching me or when I play a good game and we'll usually go out to see the family and you'll see my dad straight away when everyone asks me, 'Oh how did you play Theo?' And dad will jump in and say, 'Oh he played all right'. (Theo, interview, 25 May)

Marko and Mathew in particular were players of outstanding ability that staff at the school felt could take them into financially rewarding careers in professional soccer. Indeed, Mathew did decide to pursue a career in professional soccer. Although Dean and Marko also aspired to play soccer at a high level they saw the need for a 'back up' career. Dean had been offered a soccer scholarship to train and study in the UK but, on his mother's urging, had declined it to finish his VCE. Theo was a skilled player valued in his club but his career ambitions lay outside soccer.

**Soccer, Friendship and Identity**

The body is central to the formation of identity for children. As Giddens (1991, p. 56) suggests, the body is 'at the very origin of the original explorations of the world whereby the child learns the features of objects and others'. The work of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Wittgenstein (1953) also highlights the importance of the body in the development of identity as a mode of engagement with the physical and social world. For all four of the key informants, their experiences of soccer from a very young age had been central to the formation of identity. The physical and social interaction facilitated by playing soccer had formed an important means through which they had developed long-lasting friendships and developed personal identity. Marko, Theo and Mathew took photographs of themselves with long time friends, both in local parks or grassed spaces and at school. When discussing the photographs they explained how social relations and attachments to their neighbourhoods had been developed around a soccer ball. They had all begun their engagement in soccer in familiar local spaces. They had begun in the backyard or the local park with their neighbourhood friends and progressed into club soccer. Through these first experiences they developed strong friendships and a sense of local identity through physical and social interaction focused on 'the round ball'. When talking about a photograph that he took of a local park Marko spoke fondly of his experiences there:

We always used to play a lot there. Using two jumpers as goals. The local guys. Local friends stayed with local clubs and won't leave. They like it there. They're used to it. They wouldn't want to move up any more. (Marko, interview, 21 April).
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Marko's ability and ambition had taken him up and away from his friends in soccer. He still played with them 'on the courts' at school and occasionally in the local park but not in club soccer. His experiences of playing in the local park with his friends formed a long-lasting and important part of his sense of identity and place in the world. Marko's descriptions were often poetic as he captured his deeply embodied experiences of soccer. Marko had taken a photograph of a bright blue sky streaked with white clouds. When asked to explain it he told the second author that:

When it's raining and the ground's wet and the sun comes out.
The grass is (pause) you just kick the ball and it just slides and
the sun is out and you feel warm. (Marko, interview, 11 April).

The early experiences of the boys in this study held deep significance for them. Even the career-focused and egotistic Mathew recalled how important these early experiences of soccer and the friendships that developed from them had been for his sense of who he was. The photograph, to which he afforded most significance, by ranking it as number one, was of him and three mates from childhood with whom he had grown up playing soccer. The next most important photograph he showed us was one he had taken of his empty backyard where he first learned to play soccer. The local friendships the boys had developed through soccer and a sense of belonging to the local area were further developed at school. This did not, however, occur so much through any part of the school curriculum but in the social spaces offered during breaks from formal schooling. In particular, the informal soccer games played on the basketball courts during recess and lunchtime offered the boys the opportunity to play with friends from the local neighbourhood and other friends made at school.

Important social relations and understandings of the boys' social world were developed around a soccer ball. In this way the soccer ball operated as what Gibson (1979) describes as an artefact that, embedded with cultural meaning, facilitates social interaction. Using the concept of 'affordance' to refer to the properties of objects such as a soccer ball, Gibson argues that they invite or sustain bodily and social actions. He suggests that, regardless of the nature of the object, this affordance allows objects, such as a soccer ball, to take on meaning because of the role they play in affording human action and inter-action. Both Marko and Mathew took photographs of a solitary and stationary soccer ball for us but had trouble articulating the meaning of the photographs. For the boys in this study the meaning extended through symbolic systems and into soccer balls in backyards and local parks affords physical and social
actions that form important experiences through which identity is developed. This engagement in physical culture around which deep friendships were developed was extended into school through a cultural discourse that included the social interaction generated by the informal games played on the basketball courts. Such experiences remained important for them all as Marko outlined:

I have fun playing soccer at school. Year before we had competitions organised by year 12, six verses six and make your own team. Not along ethnic lines. Just friends...at school you're playing with your friends. It doesn't usually happen (in clubs). I never play with my friends at (my club). At (my first club) I had a few (friends) but not with all of us together. It's pretty special.
(Marko, interview, 11 May)

The Incident

After briefly outlining the incident that led to the school removing the senior boys soccer team from the interschool competition this section examines the ways in which it demonstrates the vast differences between the meaning of soccer in their clubs and in the school. It then discusses the consequences of this for the boys in the study and other boys like them.

During the final stages of the VSSSA senior soccer competition, Tower District scored a late goal that they thought had taken them through to the state finals. As Marko explained to us, the players embraced each other in jubilation and the Tower District supporters rejoiced. At the same time the opposition team, staff and supporters voiced their displeasure. Dean told us that this continued for 'at least two or three minutes' before the referee decided that the scoring player had been offside and disallowed the goal. The Tower District team was unable to score again and was eliminated from the competition for the year. According to the four boys in our study, other players and staff that we spoke to, all the team were angry at the result and focused their anger on the referee. Marko said that they were all in no doubt that the remonstrations of the opposing team and supporters had made the referee change his mind.

Following the game someone attacked the referee's car causing considerable damage. While none of the boys in the study offered any suggestion as to who had taken part in the attack on the referee's car they all accepted that it had been done by players from the Tower District team. The school had asked for the names of the guilty players at the time and again in the following year but no one came forward. It seemed to us that the teachers and students involved with the team had a good
idea about who the culprits might have been but there had been no admission of guilt. As Marko explained, the damage had been caused by a group of year twelve students who had left school by the time of this study:

The only way we could get out of it was if someone put their hand up. Someone who had done it. It was really none of us year elevens (at the time of the incident). We didn’t do nothing. Most of the year twelve’s done most of the damage. (Marko, interview, 25 May)

Differences in the Meaning of Soccer
During a group interview with Marko, Theo and Dean, we asked them whether or not something like ‘the incident’ could have happened at their clubs. The responses of Marko and Theo indicate the vast differences between the meaning of soccer as practised in their clubs and at the school:

Marko: (the incident) Would be unlikely at a club. Maybe a spectator but not a player. It’s the committee. They’ve got whole boards, presidents, whole committees. They organise everything. They don’t muck around… At a club there’s more to lose. In school the worst you get is a lecture from a teacher. It’s different.

Theo: (At the club) You get embarrassed through the parents watching. You give the whole team a bad name. At school there’s just the teacher watching. (Marko, Theo and Dean, interview, 7 July)

Soccer in the boys’ clubs provided them with meaningful membership in a community where their embodied cultural capital was valued and gave them a sense of place and identity. Bourdieu’s work shows how much of people’s struggle in day-to-day social life is driven by a need for a sense of identity and social distinction. Waquant (1998) suggests that it is by having a place and a position in society or in a social group that the individual can escape what he describes as the ‘absurdity of existence’. For the four boys in this study soccer formed a physical practice through which they could develop and express a sense of personal identity. For Mathew in particular, soccer provided him with the central means through which he was able to developing self-esteem and a sense of personal identity.

Within the community of the school and the larger field of education their physical capital developed through soccer had far less value than it did in their clubs. The extent to which this physical capital
could confirm and express their personal identity was also limited when compared to their clubs. Mathew experienced no academic success at school and, when asked, had trouble finding a reason for being at school. Indeed, his attendance was sporadic and he left school before the study was finished. Like so many students lacking the cultural capital required for academic success school lacked relevance for him and he was functionally disengaged (see for example, Mills & Gale 2002, Willis 1977). He did, however, value the opportunity to play for the school in the inter-school soccer competition. Competing in the inter-school soccer competition offered him a means addressing the gap between his identity, position and the value of his physical capital in club soccer, his local community and at school. It also offered him an opportunity to confirm and extend social relations with his local friends developed around a soccer ball in local parks and backyards that was not available to him in his club.

Theo and Marko maintained good grades at school yet were still very disappointed at the lack of importance attached to soccer within the school and desperately wanted to play in the senior soccer team. Representing the school in the senior boys soccer team would provide them with a rare chance to extend their social and physical interaction with close friends beyond the informal games on 'the courts' to a more socially significant arena. It also offered them the opportunity of converting their soccer ability into improved social status within the school. The boys knew each other's abilities in soccer through club soccer but, other than in the inter-school games, it was only in the informal, five on five and six on six games played on 'the courts' at recess and lunchtime that they actually interacted through soccer at school. This was an important medium through which they developed and strengthened friendships and established status within their peer group but inter-school soccer provided a means of gaining a degree of recognition in the community of the school for their talents and abilities.

Kirk argues that meaningful participation in communities of practice through sport provides young people with more than just movement competency (Kirk 1999). He suggests that it also provides them with cultural knowledge of their particular sport, knowledge of their cultural and social environment and a means of developing social relationships and a sense of personal identity (Kirk 1999). Drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) Kirk (1999) suggests that school physical education too often lacks the scope to provide experiences that are relevant to students and which provide them with authentic and meaningful participation in a community of practice. Extended to include the practice of school sport, we suggest that this contention is equally applicable to the practice of inter-school soccer at Tower District
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High School. Schools draw on the 'raw cultural materials' of physical culture and through school-based physical activity contribute to students' total experiences of physical culture (Kirk, 1999). In the case of school soccer at Tower District, however, the school made little contribution to their experience of soccer as a form of physical culture. While the boys enjoyed the chance to play some soccer in physical education classes it provided little stimulation for them. Units on soccer were typically brief and tended to cater for students with far less expertise in soccer than the four key informants. The soccer they played in physical education was far removed from their experiences of soccer in their clubs. While some of the 'pro-sport' staff were aware of the central role that soccer played in the lives of many boys such as the four in this study, there was no indication that the school recognised the learning that takes place through sport as a cultural practice. There was no evidence of the school valuing the cultural and practical knowledge and abilities that are developed through young people's engagement in sport in and out of school.

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This study provides some insight into the significance that sport, in this case, soccer, can assume in the lives of young people for their development of self-identity. It also highlights a marked disparity between the meanings attached to soccer, and the opportunities it provides for the formation of personal identity, in the school and in the boys' community-based soccer clubs. Although this study deals only with one particular school it encourages us to suggest that the current approach to running inter-school sport in government schools require some critical examination. We suggest that this should involve recognition of sports significance in the lives of many young people outside school, the depth and breadth of learning and personal development that takes place, and the need for schools to be actively engaged in structuring that learning. Despite this, we are not at all tempted to argue for 'more sport'. There is ample evidence of the negative social learning that sport in schools can promote and the part that commodified and highly competitive sport plays in shaping its practice within schools (Evans 1993, Light & Kirk 2000, Light & Kirk 2001, Prain 1998). Instead, we suggest that cultural practices such as soccer that have so much meaning for many children and young people outside school require consideration as important areas of learning within schools.

The disjunction in the meaning attached to soccer between its practice at the school and the boys' community clubs that we have
identified in this article will not be solved by just providing more time for sport or by promoting success in inter-school sport within schools. The promotional literature on display in the lobby at Tower District High School rightly identifies a wide range of positive physical and social learning outcomes that are possible through young people’s engagement in sport at school. They are not, however, realised through the practice of inter-school soccer in the school. Such outcomes do not necessarily arise from just ‘rolling out the ball’ and playing inter-school sport. Such learning and personal development needs to be structured and guided through approaches specifically focused on achieving such aims. We suggest that sport can play a significant part in the development of positive social learning and the development of personal identity but that this learning must be encouraged through well-structured and well-taught sport programs that are valued within schools and seen as an integral part of students’ experiences of education.

As Mills and Gale (2002) argue, the development of informed and independent adults requires a complementary relationship between home, family, school, neighbourhood and society. Narrow conceptions of schooling that are restricted to the development of abstract knowledge operate to exclude the practical knowledge that is typically more relevant to the day-to-day lives of many students. This then devalues the cultural backgrounds of many students (Martineck & Hellison, 1997). The practical knowledge that skilful soccer players such as the boys in this study display enables them to develop a ‘practical mastery’ (Bourdieu 1977) of their physical and social environment yet it is typically devalued in schools as an educational outcome. In a similar way the profound disparity that we identify in this article between the practice and cultural meaning of soccer in the school and the boys’ community-based soccer clubs operated to separate the cultural experiences of schooling and that of their lives beyond school. Research on school physical education indicates a disparity between students’ experiences of physical education at school and the range of sporting, leisure and exercise practices that make up the field of ‘physical culture’ (Kirk 1999, Tinning & Fitzgibbon 1993). This is how we see the practice of inter-school soccer in this study. While soccer formed the central means through which the boys in this study developed a sense of their place in the world, the school failed to provide a social and cultural context within which their capacities developed through soccer could enable them to develop the same sense of identity that it did in their lives outside the school.

References

References


Richard Light, John Quay


