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To cite this article: Gustavo González-Calvo, Göran Gerdin & Alfonso García-Monge (14 Feb 2025): Soccer: the only way to be a boy in Spain? narratives from a Spanish primary school on the influence of playground soccer in shaping masculinities and gender relations, Sport, Education and Society, DOI: [10.1080/13573322.2025.2459686](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2459686)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2459686>



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Published online: 14 Feb 2025.



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Soccer: the only way to be a boy in Spain? narratives from a Spanish primary school on the influence of playground soccer in shaping masculinities and gender relations

Gustavo González-Calvo^a, Göran Gerdin^{b,c} and Alfonso García-Monge^a

^aDepartamento de Didáctica de la Expresión Musical, Plástica y Corporal, Universidad de Valladolid, Valladolid, Spain; ^bFaculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden; ^cSection for Sports and Physical Education, Faculty of Social and Health Sciences, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Elverum, Norway

ABSTRACT

Soccer, a dominant playground activity in many primary schools worldwide, plays a significant role in shaping boys' masculine identities and influencing gender relations. This paper explores the experiences of three young Spanish boys, observed over a longitudinal ethnographic study spanning from early childhood education (3 years old) to their final year of primary school (10 years old). Informed by Foucauldian theory, we present three narratives that critically examine the boys' engagement with school soccer activities, challenging dominant educational practices and exploring inclusive alternatives. The findings highlight the role of gender socialisation in reinforcing traditional masculine norms and exclusionary dynamics through playground soccer. At the same time, they highlight opportunities for reimagining school spaces to foster inclusivity and challenge hegemonic practices. This study calls on researchers, educators and policymakers to recognise these dynamics and promote gender-inclusive and diverse extracurricular activities within schools.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 June 2024

Accepted 21 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Gender; masculinities; soccer; narratives; Foucault; space

Introduction

The emergence of the 'second wave' of feminism in the latter half of the twentieth century was characterised by struggles for women's suffrage, equal access to work and education, and criticism of the traditional role assigned to women in society (Mohajan, 2022). At the heart of feminism lies the question of gender, and given that gender is a system of social relations (Butler, 1990), the inquiry should not be confined solely to women and girls. Consequently, the social position of men and boys, the nature of masculinity, gender practices, and discourses surrounding 'manhood' and the concept of what it means to 'be a man' have also been subject to extensive scrutiny and numerous transformations (Connell, 2005; Pinkett, 2023). These transformations include shifts in societal expectations of men's roles, the growing recognition of diverse masculinities (including non-hegemonic and intersectional perspectives) and a reevaluation of traditional gender norms in light of changing family structures, workplace dynamics, and an increased awareness of mental health challenges among men and boys. One prominent domain in which masculinity has been examined and

CONTACT Göran Gerdin  goran.gerdin@lnu.se  Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sport Science, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden; Section for Sports and Physical Education, Faculty of Social and Health Sciences, Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Elverum, Norway

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challenged is the realm of sports (Hickey, 2008; Matthews & Channon, 2019). Traditionally, it has been assumed that men appreciate the significance of sports, the value of competition, striving to 'outperform others', courage, and emotional control in a way that women are purportedly unable to achieve (Dowling et al., 2012; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Scraton & Flintoff, 2001). Moreover, the role played by soccer in male socialisation, particularly in the European context (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020), manifests both as homosocial spaces for building bonds among men and as arenas for demonstrating manhood linked to rivalry and competition, which occasionally leads to acts of violence towards women and other men (Newman & Rumbold, 2024; Pinkett, 2023).

Sports, particularly soccer, have evolved to hold substantial social, cultural, and economic significance, with high-profile athletes inadvertently shaping societal norms (Llopis-Goig, 2014; Rodríguez Ortega, 2019). Recent cases of alleged sexual assault by soccer players underscore the intersection of sports success, wealth, and ethics, prompting a re-evaluation of the sport's social responsibilities in addressing issues such as gender-based violence. Movements such as '#MeToo' have further amplified global attention on the harmful impacts of toxic masculinities, particularly in contexts of power and privilege, such as elite sports, where such discourses often manifest and perpetuate violence and inequality (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019). This global scrutiny resonates with incidents in professional soccer, where players from prominent teams such as Real Madrid, Fútbol Club Barcelona and Manchester United, among others, have faced accusations of rape and gender-based violence.¹ Some studies even suggest that instances of gender-based violence increase when soccer matches are being played (Kirby et al., 2014; Quigg et al., 2012). While the call for inclusivity and diversity in sports is crucial, it is particularly pertinent within the realm of soccer, where entrenched hegemonic masculinities often perpetuate toxic norms (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017). By critically examining soccer's role in shaping gender identities, we can more effectively challenge these dominant narratives and promote healthier, more inclusive expressions of masculinity (Matthews & Channon, 2019; Messerschmidt, 2019).

Since the dissemination and establishment of Western sports in the late 1800s, sports have been acknowledged as activities inherently influenced by, and contributing to gender distinctions (Hickey, 2008; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). Sports were devised by men, intended to serve male interests, and have been predominantly controlled by males (Pringle, 2008; Wellard, 2009). In line with this, critical feminist scholars have recognised sports as fundamentally sexist institutions that favour men over women and perpetuate dominant models of masculinity while marginalising and subjugating alternative forms (Bhana, 2019; Paechter, 2010; Scraton & Flintoff, 2001). Within the realm of sports, certain disciplines carry more societal prestige than others. In the Spanish context, as in many other countries, the sport that holds the most material, economic, and symbolic power is men's soccer (Burillo et al., 2024; Llopis-Goig, 2014). According to Bacete (2017), the spectacle of soccer in Spain constitutes a device of immense power, a 'perfect storm of marketing, dreams, illusion, competitive hegemonic masculinity, and capitalism' (Bacete, 2017, p. 86). Furthermore, the monopolisation of playgrounds by this sport in Spanish schools has recently raised concerns about how soccer reproduces unequal gender relations and hegemonic masculinities (Burillo et al., 2024; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020).

The overall aim of the larger longitudinal ethnographic study upon which this paper is based was to examine dominant leisure practices in Spanish school playgrounds, with the goal of challenging the hegemonic masculinities associated with some of these practices. In this particular paper, we delve into the experiences of three young Spanish boys who were observed over eight academic years, from their early childhood education stage (age 3) to the last year of primary school (age 11). We explore the representation and meaning of these boys' experiences through a narrative framework. Narrative inquiry examines individual interpretations crafted through the tapestry of life narratives. A narrative serves as a literary form encapsulating a central idea, characters, and a plot that interlinks events, gradually revealing a rationale or outcome (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Thus, narratives provide a comprehensive thematic framework that individuals use to recount tales, while stories represent the personal narratives articulated by an individual (Pereira Vargas

et al., 2023). By presenting these three narrative stories, our aim is to explore and critically reflect on the boys' experiences of school sporting (soccer) activities as a means to disrupt dominant educational practices and open up possibilities for alternative and enriching educational practices.

Schooling and soccer – disciplinary and masculinising spaces

In the title of this paper, we ask: 'Is playing soccer the only way to be a boy?' However, the initial question we should pose is: 'What does it mean to be a boy or a man?' There is no singular answer. To approach a definition, it is important to conceptualise masculinity as a status, as an identity construction constantly under scrutiny. Any fissure in the demonstration of masculinity can have negative repercussions on the perception of manliness received by other males and, consequently, lead to a loss of masculine status (Burillo et al., 2024; Llopis-Goig, 2014; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020; Segato, 2016). Masculinities represent an ongoing endeavour that evolves gradually within a gendered framework of authority. Research within early childhood studies and masculinity studies has provided some insights into the dynamics through which power influences the shaping of young masculinities (Bhana, 2019; Keddie, 2003; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017). Furthermore, this body of work suggests that boys under the age of ten actively participate in the construction of masculinities as they navigate the complexities of a power-laden gender system (Bhana, 2019).

One of the central aspects around which masculinity revolves is homosociality (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). In this study, we draw on Martínez-Andrés et al. (2017) and others to conceptualise homosociality as the social bonding and relational dynamics among boys that revolve around shared activities like soccer. This concept highlights how such interactions reinforce group solidarity and affirm traditional masculine norms while simultaneously marginalising those who do not conform. In this sense, the peer group serves as a fundamental reference within male socialisation, a process that begins to take shape during the school years. In this context, school practices fulfil a function of normalising sanction (Foucault, 1979), wherein a boy who does not conform to expectations attributed to masculinity is considered deviant from the male norm. Group discipline, therefore, works to reduce the diversity of masculinities, with disciplining and peer pressure playing instrumental roles in maintaining hegemonic masculinity. On the other hand, gender is conceptualised as performative (Butler, 1990, 2011). Gender is discourse and narration, meaning that masculinity is formed and reinforced in relation to others through the storytelling of lived experiences. Thus, masculinity must be constantly demonstrated through practices and narratives to gain recognition from other males. Gender identity is largely constructed through theatricality, seeking both self-affirmation and group affirmation (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). Masculinity exists in a constant tension between the approval of others and self-approval (Connell, 2005). In this context, playground cultures serve as crucial environments for the construction of masculinity and homosociality among boys. Play holds significant importance in shaping sporty masculinities (Bhana, 2016, 2019).

Indeed, numerous researchers have demonstrated how physical strength and athletic prowess delineate dominant forms of masculinity (e.g. Bhana, 2016; Hickey, 2008; Kirk, 2010; Swain, 2006). Renold (2005) highlights how boys who rejected soccer were subjected to mockery and ridicule, often labelled as effeminate or homosexual. Swain's (2006) research in the United Kingdom further corroborates the pivotal role of soccer in the formation of masculinity. In his study involving 10–11 year-old boys, Swain (2006) illustrates how behaviours such as crying, collaborating with girls, engaging in activities considered 'soft' or lacking sporting skills can lead to disparagement and the questioning of one's masculinity. Although power structures and representations of masculinity remain prevalent in soccer (Bhana, 2019; Kostas, 2022), there appears to be a movement towards transforming and diversifying male identities (e.g. Burillo et al., 2024; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020).

Soccer serves as a means to feel part of something much greater and to 'team up' in constructing a shared sense of belonging, particularly within the male world. Within the school environment, it acts as

a vehicle for generating networks of friendship and affinity (Bhana, 2019; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). On many occasions, soccer acts as a stage for exaggerated representations of masculinity. It stands as one of the most significant and dense frameworks in which traditional androcentric masculinity is recreated, constructed, and lived, characterised by machismo, misogyny, and arrogance (Kostas, 2022; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). By 'dense frameworks,' we refer to the intricate, multi-layered social, cultural, and spatial contexts within which traditional androcentric masculinity is reinforced and reproduced. In this study, the school playground serves as such a framework, where interactions, practices, and discourses collectively contribute to the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. Furthermore, soccer occupies such a substantial television time slot in Spain that its power as a socialising device within the hegemonic model of masculinity cannot be denied (Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). Soccer occupies television space in a similar manner to how it occupies and claims public space. An example of a socialising device is represented by the playgrounds of schools, where the soccer field dominates, relegating non-participants to marginalised spaces. In playing soccer, boys encounter what Foucault refers to as 'heterotopic space' (Foucault, 1967), a space where they can recreate their athlete self, detached from the norms and discourses prevalent in school and familial contexts. Drawing on Foucault (1967), heterotopic spaces are understood as 'other' spaces that juxtapose and challenge conventional social norms. In this study, the playground functions as a heterotopic space where behaviours diverge from those acceptable in classroom or family setting.

Schools, through the allocation and production of spaces, play a significant role in the production and disciplining of bodies shaped by discourses of masculinity, among other factors (Gerdin, 2017; Markula & Pringle, 2006; Webb & Macdonald, 2007). In the case of school soccer, this disciplining is determined by partitioning (the specific position each player occupies), function (the role each player adopts), and rank (coach, captain, leader, substitute). Furthermore, these spaces are characterised by the surveillance of others as a technique of power that is internalised by the students (Gerdin, 2017), who regulate their behaviours and identities in accordance with the dominant discourses in society, striving, for instance, to perform and act like their sporting role models. Drawing upon Foucault's (1979) theoretical framework regarding the disciplinary utilisation of space, it can be further asserted that the engagement in soccer practice functions to regulate and coordinate the behaviours of boys. Specifically, establishing or allowing a routine where soccer predominates during recess time can be understood through the disciplinary mechanism of 'enclosure' (Foucault, 1979, p. 141). Furthermore, the practice of soccer carried out in the playground functions as a panoptic space where students feel constantly under observation. Panopticism, as conceptualised by Foucault (1979), refers to the mechanism of surveillance that compels boys regulate their behaviour under the implicit or explicit gaze of their peers, fostering conformity to masculine norms. This internalisation of the panoptic gaze act as a technique of power (Azzarito, 2009; Webb et al., 2004), leading to the self-regulation of behaviours. The disciplinary technique of enclosure, coupled with the public arrangement of school spaces, enables maximum (self)surveillance of the boys by both the teacher and their peers (Azzarito, 2009). This simultaneous surveillance engenders a range of (dis)pleasures as the boys are compelled to align their behaviours and identities with the prescribed model of masculinity and manhood expected of them (Gerdin, 2016).

In the next section, we describe the methodology used to generate the findings upon which this paper is based.

Methodology

Ethnography

Ethnography is a fundamental methodology for studying social phenomena in their natural context, particularly when aiming for a deep understanding of the interactions and dynamics within a specific group (Atkinson, 2019; Stan & Humberstone, 2011). This qualitative approach has been employed in

various fields such as education, health, and sports, and is characterised by the use of participant observation, open interviews, and document analysis. Ethnography focuses on capturing experiences, meanings, and behaviours within a specific community, providing detailed and contextualised data about the studied group (Atkinson, 2019).

In the educational field, ethnography has proven to be particularly useful for understanding socialisation and power dynamics in informal interaction spaces, such as playgrounds (Stan & Humberstone, 2011). It allows for the observation of spontaneous behavioural patterns that may not manifest in more structured environments. Furthermore, as some authors note, the immersion of the researcher in the study environment facilitates the development of trust with participants, enabling deeper access to their experiences and meanings (Atkinson, 2019; Jachyra et al., 2015; Stan & Humberstone, 2011). One of the main advantages of ethnography is that it does not seek a singular representation of reality but assumes that interpretations are multiple and co-constructed with the study subjects (Atkinson, 2019).

Studying the dynamics established by participants in the school playground through an ethnographic lens offers the opportunity to observe how children negotiate their position within the group, generating qualitative data that describes the processes of socialisation and identity construction in a sporting environment, such as the practice of soccer. Thus, ethnography allows for the documentation of how the physical and social context of the playground influences children's behaviour (Stan & Humberstone, 2011) and how these spaces reinforce or challenge power dynamics related to the sense of masculinity (Llopis-Goig, 2014).

Furthermore, the longitudinal design of this ethnographic study provided a unique lens to examine the evolving dynamics of playground soccer as both a 'heterotopic' and 'panoptic' space (Foucault, 1967; 1979). Over an eight-year period, we documented how playground discourses, social compositions, and power relations shifted alongside the developmental trajectories of the children. This approach allowed us to capture not only the static elements of soccer's dominance but also the fluid negotiations of masculine identities that intensified, modified, or resisted these norms over time. The temporal scope of the study was critical in revealing how the boys' engagements with soccer evolved in response to changing social pressures and peer dynamics.

The questions that guided the study evolved and became more specific as we delved deeper into the phenomenon (Atkinson, 2019) (see Table 1).

Research context and participants

This study originated from concerns expressed by families close to two of the researchers (Author 1 and Author 3). These families were worried that, during the transition from Early Childhood Education to Primary Education, their children were experiencing a significant homogenisation of their recreational activities. Rather than engaging in a variety of games – such as construction play, symbolic play, and chase games – the children increasingly limited their play interactions to soccer. Recognising the researchers' expertise in education and childhood, and knowing that one of the authors (Author 1's name) would be their children's teacher in Primary Education, the families requested a more in-depth investigation into this phenomenon. (first author's name) worked at the school from the 2014/2015 school year to the 2021/2022 school year.

The students who participated in the study began in the first year of Early Childhood Education (age 3) and were in the fourth year of Primary Education (age 10) at the study's conclusion. They attended a public urban school in Spain, where the socioeconomic status of parents could be considered upper-middle class, with occupations ranging from teachers to health professionals. The three male students highlighted in this paper, for example, sought a sense of belonging and acceptance among their peers, using their passions to navigate their emotional and social experiences within the school environment.

The school day is structured into different class periods, including a 30-minute break for free time, during which students can have lunch and choose their activities. The playground's central area is

Table 1. Research questions and emerging concepts.

Research Questions	Emerging Concepts
How does the dominance of soccer during recess and school affect dynamics of inclusion, exclusion, and power among children, and how is social pressure to participate managed?	Social exclusion, peer pressure, power dynamics, play spaces
How does participation (or non-participation) in soccer influence the construction of identity and the development of self-esteem in children, and what role does soccer play in their self-expression and sense of belonging?	Identity, belonging, self-esteem, self-expression
How do children experience competition in school soccer games, and how do they perceive and manage their sports abilities, including experiences of exclusion and tension?	Competition, sports abilities, exclusion, conflict
What role does soccer play in the creation and strengthening of friendships and social networks among children, and how does participation affect their social integration in the school environment?	Friendship, social networks, integration
How does the family environment influence the development of children's soccer passions, and how does soccer foster or reflect family dynamics and shared activities?	Family support, cultural opportunities, family dynamics
How does soccer influence the construction of masculinity and social expectations of gender among children, and what gender dynamics emerge in the context of school soccer?	Gender, masculinities, social expectations, gender roles

occupied by two small concrete soccer fields, with additional spaces for basketball and quieter games like jump rope, walks, and conversations. Since these activities are of a 'free-choice' nature, it is common for some children to play soccer daily during break time, organising teams and deciding who can join the game themselves.

The study was primarily conducted during non-academic activities, such as recess and extracurricular sports, which minimised the risk of the teacher-researcher's involvement affecting students academically. As activities took place outside the formal classroom environment, students did not feel that their participation could impact their grades or school performance. This distinction between curricular and extracurricular spaces helped reduce any perceived pressure, ensuring that their decision to participate was voluntary and without academic consequences.

It is important to note that two of the researchers maintained friendships with some of the families participating in the study. This closeness offered several advantages, such as access to richer and more contextual information, a deeper understanding of the children's experiences, and an increased willingness of participants to collaborate. However, this proximity also presented potential limitations, including the risk of biases in data interpretation and challenges in maintaining objectivity. To address these risks, strategies such as adopting a reflexive approach, utilising triangulation methods to validate findings, and ensuring the confidentiality and well-being of participants were implemented. These measures aimed to balance the benefits of proximity with the need to uphold ethical standards and objectivity in the research.

The parents actively participated in the research project, providing their informed consent at various stages of the research process. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the first author's institution (code: PI 22-1995-NO HCUV), in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data collection

Over the eight academic years, a substantial amount of data was collected through teacher diaries, interviews with students and families, and participant observation. Participant observation took place in various contexts: during school recesses, in extracurricular sports settings, and within family environments. The data further comprises informal conversations with the parents of the schoolchildren and the students themselves throughout the eight years of ethnographic observation. It also includes two semi-structured interviews with nine families (out of a total of 25, of which 12 were families with girls) and two semi-structured interviews with nine students. Parents

were not present during the child interviews, allowing the children to speak freely and providing a contrast to the information shared by the parents.

The interviews took place when the students were in the fourth year of primary school, at the age of 9–10, in the school library, and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each. Some of the questions posed to the families included: *Is there a particular interest in your child's participation in soccer? Where does this interest originate? What recreational activities are of the greatest interest to your child and your family? Are there specific factors that you believe may contribute to your child's interest or lack of interest in soccer?* Students were asked questions such as: *What activities do you enjoy participating in at school? What would you say are your favourite sports, and why do you think they have become your favourites? Do you feel influenced by the sporting preferences of your friends or family when choosing to engage in sport activities?* The transcripts were sent to the participants, who ultimately decided whether they wanted the content of their interview to be included in the research and if they wished to provide further clarification on anything they had said. Other data collection tools included field notes, documents, visual data, and an extensive volume of teaching diaries that provided deeper insights into the observed realities.

Data analysis and representation

Dialogical narrative analysis is an interpretative method that focuses on how stories are constructed and how they impact individuals' lives and identities. It explores the cultural and personal narrative resources that storytellers use and examines the social dynamics within the stories. This approach involves asking dialogical questions to uncover how stories reflect identity, relationships, and societal influences, emphasising the interactive and relational nature of storytelling (Cavallerio et al., 2017; Sparkes & Stewart, 2019). The method highlights the role of narratives in shaping and transforming the self. Instead of following a strict step-by-step procedure, dialogical narrative analysis functions as a heuristic guide and an interrogative method to stimulate imagination.

The analysis of the selected stories unfolds through the process of writing. The research report is not a product that simply follows an analysis completed prior to writing; rather, the reports emerge through multiple drafts that progressively reveal what should be included and how the stories interrelate (Sparkes & Stewart, 2019). Throughout this process, decisions are continually made about what belongs in the representation, what should be set aside for later, and how the stories fit together. Thus, our analysis began with attempts to compose the stories of the three participants, drawing from interview data, numerous informal conversations with the students and their parents, and participant observation. The iterative and cumulative nature of this process is a key feature of dialogical narrative analysis, fostering a deeper dialogue with the story told and allowing others to reinterpret it in various ways, creating new connections and representations (Sparkes & Stewart, 2019). As Frank (2012) suggests, part of what makes a dialogical report valuable is the openness it creates for future interpretations.

The individual 'small' stories and examples from the three participants were synthesised into ethnographic fiction stories, which are a blend of observation and imagination grounded in theoretically-informed, ethical, systematic and rigorous data collection (Bruce, 2014; Sparkes, 2002). These stories weave together real statements and factual events described in interviews, with the aim of creating empirically-based, plausible stories that other parents, students and PE teachers would recognise as having a high level of believability or 'verisimilitude' (Denzin, 1994). Verisimilitude – the belief that these interactions happened or could have happened – was primarily judged through the positive reactions of the teacher participants who provided feedback on inconsistencies or missed meanings. We chose a storied approach for two reasons. First, it engages readers at different levels than the traditional academic presentation of results. As Richardson (1990) argues, 'people live by stories' (p. 26). In striving to create opportunities for 'deep emotional understanding' (Denzin, 1994, p. 506), stories do not provide simple answers but remain open for readers to create their own meanings and understandings (Bruce, 2014).

The representation of the data is based on three boys' stories, which have been particularly significant to us and encapsulate and saturate the collected and analysed dataset.

Shaping masculinities: three stories of Soccer and belonging in a Spanish primary school

The following section presents the constructed narratives of three young boys – Daniel, Juan and Pablo – whose experiences with soccer during school recesses offer insights into how this sport shapes their identities and gendered social dynamics. These stories reveal both the 'small stories' of their individual struggles, passions and friendships, and the 'big stories' of broader sociocultural expectations and pressures (Thompson, 2018). Each narrative offers a unique perspective on the role of soccer in their lives: for some, it is a space for belonging and self-expression; for others, it represents exclusion and tension. Through these stories, we aim to explore the interplay between personal experiences and societal norms, challenging the dominance of soccer in school spaces and imagining alternative, more inclusive forms of play.

The narratives of Daniel, Juan, and Pablo are constructed from data collected across the longitudinal period, including observation notes, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. While the interviews conducted during Year 4 provided in-depth reflections at a specific time, the longitudinal data allowed us to trace shifts in the boys' interpretations and experiences of soccer. This integration of temporal layers adds depth to the narratives, highlighting how their constructions of masculinity and social belonging were not static but evolved over time.

Daniel – 'Whether you like it or not, I will play soccer next year'

Daniel is a whirlwind of enthusiasm and expression, always in motion, as if an invisible energy propels him to explore the world around him. In the playground, much of that energy is devoted to his ever-present companion: the soccer ball. Wherever there's a ball, you can be sure that Daniel is not far behind.

Soccer at home is rare, mostly relegated to the times his grandfather switches on the TV. When the UEFA European Championship lights up the screen, Daniel watches intently, his legs tucked beneath him, barely blinking. To him, these matches are more than a spectacle – they are a promise, a whisper that one day, he could be out there too. His parents, though supportive of other interests like nature exploration or gymnastics, tread cautiously around his growing obsession with soccer.

But Daniel's will is unshakable. His determination is like a storm cloud gathering strength – you can feel the energy before the first thunderclap, before his next words break the air with a surge of passion: 'Whether you like it or not, I will play soccer when I turn 10.' His voice, small but resolute, echoed through the room, leaving no space for doubt.

Yet, behind this fiery resolve, there are darker moments. Daniel returns home after school, cheeks flushed from the cold and frustration, his small hands gripping his backpack too tightly, shoulders hunched under the weight of something unsaid. When asked about his day, his answer comes out like a rush of air escaping a balloon, deflated, angry – his emotions too big to fit into words. At school, the playground becomes a different kind of stage, where the soccer field stretches out like a battlefield, full of unspoken rules and quick tempers.

Conflicts erupt like sudden storms. A shove here, a push there. Daniel's face twists with the sharp heat of competition, arms flailing as he jostles for position, his eyes darting between his teammates and the ball. The field is alive with the roar of the game, yet it often leaves him on the outside, waiting for a chance that never comes. He speaks of these moments, his voice tightening with frustration. 'I make good passes,' he insists, almost pleading with the air. 'But they don't let me score.'

At home, the ball rarely leaves his side. The yard becomes his sanctuary. There, he moves with the grace that only comes from loving something deeply, his small foot tapping the ball with a focus that is almost prayerful. His father sighs, resigned to his son's passion. 'This is what he loves,' his father thinks, and with a beaming face, he gets ready to play a little match with Daniel. But at school, with its looser, more chaotic rules, is where he truly thrives. Here, the formal discipline of the classroom dissolves, and the field becomes a wild stage where anything can happen. The pushes, the sharp words – they're all part of this unspoken dance, and Daniel, caught in its rhythm, never stops moving.

'Mateo's always pushing,' Daniel mutters one evening, the words slipping out between bites of dinner. His mother looks up, concern in her eyes. 'And what happens then?' she asks, leaning in slightly. Daniel shrugs, poking at his food. 'He pushes everyone, not just me. And Luis, he ... he always shouts things. Bad things. Yesterday, he called me 'slow' and said I couldn't play.' 'He does it to everyone. i don't think he even means it half the time,' Daniel says, his eyes darkening for a moment before he lifts his fork again. His mother sighs softly. 'That must be tough.' Daniel shrugs again, eyes on his plate, but his face betrays the simmering frustration beneath. 'It's just how it is. Everyone's trying to win.'

The transition from kindergarten to primary marked a turning point for Daniel. Gone were the carefree days of running barefoot in the sand, replaced by the stark, asphalt courtyard of primary school. Those early days were especially rough. He would come home with tears staining his cheeks, recounting how there were never enough soccer balls for everyone, how he was left out.

Yet his love for the sport only deepened. His admiration for players like Messi and Ronaldo fueled his every movement, every kick of the ball. 'I want to play like Ronaldo and make amazing goals,' he would declare, his eyes glowing with excitement. when he talks about ronaldo, his face transforms, his gaze turning faraway, as if he's seeing himself out there on the field, scoring the winning goal in a match that's being watched by thousands. His family may not watch soccer often, but the memory of the National Team's victory during the European Cup remains a flickering light in his mind, one that fuels his dreams.

It's autumn now, and Daniel is just a breath away from turning 10. His desire to join a soccer team, to wear the jerseys of his heroes – Ronaldo and Real Madrid – burns bright inside him. The jerseys represent more than just cloth; they are armor, a symbol of the future he is determined to create for himself. His unwavering commitment to soccer is no longer just a wish – it has become something larger, something that defines him, as he steps closer to his tenth year, ready for whatever lies ahead.

Juan – 'Soccer as a way to make friends'

Juan is 10 years old, and his smile, though shy, radiates a gentle warmth. His legs are always in motion, and his arms wave with enthusiasm, while his contagious laughter and curious gaze bring everything around him to life. Lately, Juan has been channeling much of that boundless energy into soccer. 'Soccer makes me feel strong and happy,' Juan declares proudly, his voice filled with determination.

Although it can't be said that Juan's parents have much interest in soccer, during the Champions League the family gathers to enjoy the football matches together, fostering a sense of unity and shared joy. 'Watching soccer with my family is the best part of the day,' Juan exclaims with a wide smile, his eyes alight with enthusiasm.

Juan's parents aspire to broaden his horizons by nurturing his curiosity in nature, game-building, aesthetic pursuits, and various sports beyond soccer. In his early years, they introduced him to swimming, which he enjoyed. However, as Juan's passion for soccer grew, he gravitated more toward the sport, irresistibly drawn to its captivating embrace. Although his parents support his soccer interests, they lovingly encourage him to explore other sports. They notice his exceptional skills in basketball, but Juan persists in finding joy in kicking a soccer ball with friends after basketball practice, relishing the laughter that echoes like music. 'In soccer, I feel like I can do anything,' Juan says with conviction, his eyes reflecting his deep passion for the sport.

Juan's parents see him as less confident than his self-assured sister and have noticed a gradual decline in his self-esteem. He yearns to showcase his soccer knowledge and achievements, seeking admiration from those around him. The transition from kindergarten to elementary school proves challenging for Juan, leaving a lasting impact on his self-worth. Initially motivated, he struggles with the unfamiliar environment and an unsatisfactory teacher, leading him to fake illness to avoid school. The absence of his kindergarten friends deepens his unease, shattering his fragile sense of belonging.

To cope with these struggles, Juan finds solace in soccer, a sanctuary where he stands out and lets his talent thrive. Amidst the watchful eyes of his peers, Juan aims to shine. 'Soccer makes me feel like I belong,' Juan confesses softly, his voice tinged with vulnerability.

Though his parents considered changing schools, Juan resisted, fearing the unknown terrain of a new school without the familiar presence of his sister. At recess, the boundaries that segregate the young kindergarteners from the seasoned elementary school children become starkly apparent, demarcating separate realms of play. In kindergarten, Juan enjoyed a variety of games played in cozy nooks, while the vastness of the elementary school playground, with its limited soccer facilities reserved for the older sixth-grade students, offered an imperfect canvas for his beloved sport. Although girls seldom partake in soccer, their fervent support permeates the sidelines, their cheers echoing like melodies of encouragement.

Soccer is a firm passion in Juan's heart, and he seizes every available moment to play with unwavering determination. The child with the ball often organizes teams and assigns positions, a responsibility some children take with authority, determining who is included and who is left on the sidelines. Those excluded yearn for a chance to organize their own game. Every child aims to join the older boys from the second grade, but such encounters often descend into chaos, marked by abuses, fouls, deceit, and goal-scoring imbalances. Unfortunately, some children endure the unjust label of being poor players, facing rejection from their peers. Amidst the whirlwind of informal matches, distinguishing skill from struggle becomes challenging, as participants eagerly chase the elusive ball in any direction. Goal celebrations manifest in solitary jubilant gestures, echoing the theatrics of professional players.

Juan's profound love for soccer extends beyond playing; it reaches a realm of deep devotion. He proudly supports Real Madrid, collecting stickers and cards of revered soccer icons. His knowledge of players resembles an encyclopedic treasure trove. He avidly watches televised matches, dissecting the intricacies of the game. In his daydreams, he orchestrates imaginary matches with bottle caps as players, evoking the beauty of the game. Conversations with Juan are animated symphonies of soccer tales, as he passionately shares his experiences.

In Juan's world, soccer transcends being just a game. It's a means of self-expression, a source of joy, and a way to navigate life's challenges. Through the highs and lows, Juan's unwavering love for soccer fuels his determination to pursue his passion wholeheartedly.

Pablo – 'If there is soccer, there is no play'

From his earliest memories, Pablo discovers the enchanting allure of sketching and constructing with Lego. With an affable nature, a sensitivity that radiates warmth, and a great empathy, he becomes a cherished presence in the classroom. Making friends comes easily to him, and it is easy to see him talking to anyone he encounters. At home, soccer never awakens any special interest. In reality, sports in general fail to captivate the family's attention, although his parents always recognize the paramount importance of fostering an active and healthy lifestyle for their child. For years, Pablo diligently dedicates himself to swimming, and more recently, he embarks on judo and skating. During casual conversations among friends, Pablo's parents often joke, 'Let's hope he doesn't become a soccer player,' although those words are never uttered in Pablo's presence. They are careful not to shape his inclinations and motivations. Pablo possesses unlimited potential to become whatever his heart desires. Beyond his intrinsic qualities, he is fortunate to be born into a family that can provide him with opportunities – cultural interests, travel, books – that not everyone can access, as life, in its capricious distribution of advantages, favors a few while leaving many others on the sidelines. Life, after all, transcends the mere realm of talent.

At 10 years old, Pablo continues to be a very beloved child in his class. He still loves to draw and has very good social skills. Thus, it is easy to see him enjoying games and conversations with his friends during recess. But when a ball enters the scene, his joy and satisfaction dissipate like a sigh. 'I love playing and talking with my friends, but when the ball comes, I feel different,' Pablo confesses, his voice tinged with a hint of unease.

A common scene on the playground is one where several kids are chatting, strolling, or playing superheroes when suddenly someone with a soccer ball appears. It is common for several of those children to abandon what they are doing to shift their interest to the ball. On the other hand, the dominance of soccer during recess means little space for those not involved, who often face unintended hits. No one stops the game, and no one apologizes. It's as if the play space has been created exclusively for soccer.

There are times when tensions rise, with unpleasant words, shoves, and threats. In the heat of the moment, a child may get hurt; at other times, he faces mockery from his rivals. Teachers occasionally intervene, but the threats that they either change their behavior or lose the ball often float like whispers in the wind. 'Why don't they listen to the female teachers? When the male teachers shout, everyone listens and respects the rules,' thinks Pablo.

Once the ball is in play, behaviors shift dramatically: boundaries disappear, rules blur, and disputes overshadow the game. Those excluded from the game tread cautiously, fearing the unpredictable path of the ball or the blame for disrupting the ritual. He remembers scenes from the news, resembling battles between rival teams that extend beyond the stadiums, fostering menace and destruction. In these situations, educators seek to unravel the complex web of understanding.

Pablo's family and his teacher agree that, at the moment a conflict arises, Pablo tends to distance himself from it, moving to a second and almost invisible plane. And, in the soccer he sees at school, it is common for conflicts to arise. 'I don't want to fight with anyone; it's not worth it,' he says.

Maybe he also senses his own perceived incompetence when it comes to soccer. Whenever the ball ventures too close, he timidly cradles it in his hands before releasing it; when invited to join the game, he musters a self-effacing response, 'I'm not very good; I prefer not to play.' Perhaps his true struggle lies in integrating himself into a game

that seems to overlook the dignity of others – a game rife with physical encounters that have left some of his peers bruised and battered, a game in which disputes and troubles loom incessantly. Unlike many of his companions, he has no desire to partake in an activity defined by the mantra of ‘victory at any cost,’ which makes him one of the few who abstain from the allure of soccer. For now, he is not alone. Two or three classmates share his indifference toward the sport and prefer to continue playing superheroes and building houses for ants.

However, over time, the allure of inclusion may ensnare many, compelling them to join the game out of fear of being cast aside by their peers. ‘One day I might end up alone if I don’t play, and that scares me,’ Pablo thinks. And, although the idea scares him, Pablo says that ‘I don’t need soccer to be happy; I prefer to play and have fun with my friends without fighting,’ Pablo reflects. His words carry a wisdom beyond his years.

Discussion and conclusions

The three narratives presented above illuminate how individual experiences and societal pressures intersect around soccer and the school playground. Daniel’s story reveals how his determination, passion for soccer, and engagement with the sport become a struggle for recognition and belonging, highlighting the tension between his love for the game and the challenges he faces on the playground, alongside his family’s cautious support. Juan’s story focuses on his journey of using soccer as a way to fit in and feel accepted, despite challenges with self-esteem and transitions. It illustrates how soccer serves as both a source of comfort and space where competition and social pressures shape his self-worth. Pablo’s story highlights his resistance to the dominance of soccer and his preference for other forms of play, emphasising his reflections on the social dynamics of soccer, the tensions and conflicts it creates, and his desire for a different kind of social experience at school.

Together, these three stories illustrate different facets of how soccer influences the formation of masculinities and peer dynamics. The longitudinal nature of this study allows us to capture the evolving dynamics of boys’ engagement with playground soccer and their shifting understandings of gender and identity over time. By following the participants from early childhood to their final year of primary school, we observe how their relationships with soccer and peer interactions were shaped by both individual and societal changes. This temporal perspective reveals that moments of inclusion, exclusion, and self-assertion are not static but rather fluid processes that reflect broader developmental and social trajectories. The longitudinal nature of the research design was instrumental in uncovering the interplay between the static dominance of soccer as a disciplinary mechanism and the dynamic ways in which boys navigated and negotiated these spaces. By observing these practices over time, we identified patterns of continuity and transformation, illustrating how playground soccer shaped, reinforced, or challenged the boys’ gendered identities and social interactions across their school years.

These processes occur within the specific context of school playgrounds, where interactions through play can either reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms. The narratives demonstrate that school playground soccer functions not merely as a site of interaction among participants but also as a masculinising device (Bhana, 2016, 2019; Renold, 2005). Recess, through the practice of playground soccer, becomes a heterotopia (Foucault, 1967) – a space where social norms diverge significantly from those experienced in familial and academic contexts. In the context of soccer, behaviours such as aggression – unthinkable in a traditional classroom setting – are allowed and even encouraged, though sometimes implicitly. Thus, within the school environment, soccer is characterised by practices where boys can more openly express and shape a version of masculinity rooted in aggression, physical and verbal confrontations, and a ‘victory above all’ mentality.

In this sense, soccer functions as a disciplinary technique (Foucault, 1979) that compels boys to imitate and reproduce certain behaviours to conform to the expected model of masculinity (e.g. Burillo et al., 2024; Kostas, 2022; Llopis-Goig, 2014; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020). The game of soccer acts as a Panopticon, regulating their behaviours under the watchful gaze of peers (Azzarito, 2009), as boys strive to fit into a mold that often, paradoxically, makes them feel uncomfortable. During the course of this study, soccer emerged as the

predominant (and almost exclusive) sporting activity among students in this school setting. Competitive behaviours, the derision of winners towards losers, and the marginalisation of students who chose to engage in activities other than soccer (e.g. walking, chatting, or participating in different types of games) became routine. As observed in Martínez-Andrés et al.'s study (Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017), children who did not play soccer 'were relegated to peripheral areas and lack of materials was a barrier for them' (p. 1).

Some authors (e.g. Burillo et al., 2024; Llopis-Goig, 2014; Rodríguez Ortega, 2019; Swain, 2003) argue that excelling in sports is one of the most effective ways to attain popularity within peer groups and secure a privileged position in the academic setting, as evidenced by Juan's narrative. In this context, the values associated with soccer – such as hyper-competitiveness, the glorification of the victor, hegemonic forms of masculinity and violent behaviours – have been reproduced within the school environment. Soccer, as a mass product of popular culture, has permeated the school setting, where students are unable to fully control its effects. This is further illustrated by Daniel's narrative, where his affinity for soccer transcends mere participation. Therefore, educational institutions should become aware of and raise awareness among students about the harmful models associated with soccer and take preventive actions against the various forms of violence it can generate. Some of the practices that take place in schools, such as playing soccer during recess, (re)produce meanings and identities related to the construction of masculinity and associated pleasures/displeasures (Gerdin, 2016). School spaces and practices acquire special significance through the performances of children within these spaces. The discourses and power relations (Foucault, 1979) related to soccer are discursively linked to masculinity, gender production, and identity (Bhana, 2019).

Soccer, viewed as a disciplinary space within the school context, constructs and (re)produces certain stereotypical forms of being or acting as expected of a man, thereby perpetuating unequal power and gender relations. However, it is also important to acknowledge that some boys actively resist or reinterpret these hegemonic expectations. These alternative identities reflect a broader spectrum of masculine expressions, including collaborative, empathetic, and non-competitive traits, which challenge traditional norms and provide opportunities for boys to engage in diverse and inclusive forms of play (e.g. Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Swain, 2006). Over time, such transformations have been fostered by increased awareness of gender inclusivity in schools and shifts in societal attitudes toward male roles and behaviours. Nevertheless, these shifts coexist with entrenched structural dynamics in school spaces, where traditional masculine ideals still dominate. These spaces often privilege identities associated with dominant masculine sporting ideals, such as competition, aggression and exclusion. Meanwhile, the development of alternative masculinities – those grounded in values of collaboration, respect, and brotherhood – remains restricted and/or subordinated (Bhana, 2016, 2019; Matthews & Channon, 2019).

Pablo's narrative, however, demonstrates that a new pattern of masculinity is possible within schools (Swain, 2006). This pattern aligns with the concept of 'personalised masculinities', where children exhibit no inclination to emulate dominant forms of masculinity. In this sense, it is necessary for schools to offer a wide variety of activities that lead students to view soccer as just one of many leisure alternatives. To encourage physical activity during recess, it is crucial for researchers, educators, and policymakers in the field of education to consider the influence of gender socialisation and advocate for gender-inclusive and diverse extracurricular (physical) activities within schools (Rodríguez-Navarro et al., 2014). In line with previous studies (Kostas, 2022; Martínez-Andrés et al., 2017; Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020), proposals that emerge from our study include promoting new forms of socialisation through sports (e.g. participation in alternative and lesser-known sports), ensuring equal distribution of spaces, and implementing 'soccer-free days' during school recess.

We want to stress that our study does not aim to offer a superficial critique of the world of soccer. On the contrary, we believe that soccer, like any other activity, is not inherently 'good' or 'bad' (Foucault, 1979); rather, it is how we approach it that determines whether it becomes an educational tool

or a source of marginalisation and oppression (Burillo et al., 2024; Llopis-Goig, 2014). For instance, during the course of this study, we observed that some children facing academic challenges found in soccer a means to enhance their sense of competence and self-esteem, as they occupied a prominent position within the game. Additionally, soccer can provide temporary relief for children experiencing adverse family situations (Martínez-García & Rodríguez-Menéndez, 2020; Rodríguez-Navarro et al., 2014). In other cases, soccer has the capacity to foster a sense of belonging, particularly for immigrant students who may be unfamiliar with the host country's language but can communicate through the universal language of the game (Rodríguez-Navarro et al., 2014). For all these reasons, we believe that there are alternative ways to make school soccer a means of transmitting positive values to all students – values that acknowledge and respect the diversity of tastes, interests, ways of being, and ways of feeling within schools. In conclusion, we call for school practices that encourage active participation in soccer for those less interested in the activity, where risks associated with it (e.g. risk of injuries, ridicule, exclusion) are mitigated, allowing all students to feel included, valued and competent.

Note

1. See e.g. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68368372>; <https://www.abc.es/deportes/futbol/dani-alves-ultimo-larga-lista-futbolistas-acusados-20240222135657-nt.html>; <https://www.elperiodico.com/es/deportes/20240904/violencia-sexual-lacra-arrastra-futbolistas-107737087>

Disclosure statement

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

ORCID

Göran Gerdin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2922-1993>

Alfonso García-Monge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4535-5628>

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