

WHO HAS NOT DREAMED OF BEING A SOCCER PLAYER?: INVESTIGATING FOREGROUNDS¹

Quem já não sonhou em ser um jogador de futebol ? Investigando *foregrounds*

¿Quién no ha soñado con ser un jugador de fútbol ? ": Investigación *foregrounds*

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the importance of using the concept of foreground to understand the motives and attitudes for a student to learn mathematics and towards his education. Foreground is a concept developed by Ole Skovsmose (1994) and refers to how individuals see their future. To conduct an investigation about foregrounds, I developed a learning experience with a youth group in a Brazilian social institution that shelters economically poor children in an after-school center. I present and discuss the reports of one participant who wants to become a professional soccer player.

KEYWORDS: Foregrounds. Prospects. Critical mathematics education.

Resumen: En este trabajo se analiza la importancia de utilizar el concepto de *foreground* para comprender las motivaciones de una persona para aprender matemáticas. *Foreground* es un concepto desarrollado por Ole Skovsmose (1994) y se refiere a cómo las personas ven su futuro. Para llevar a cabo una investigación sobre *foreground*, he desarrollado un trabajo que implicó la creación de un entorno de aprendizaje en una institución social para los niños y adolescentes. Me presento y discuto aquí el caso de un participante en el trabajo que desea convertirse en un jugador de fútbol profesional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Foreground*. Perspectivas de futuro. La educación matemática crítica.

Resumo: Neste artigo, discuto a importância de utilizar o conceito de *foreground* para entender os motivos e atitudes de uma pessoa frente à aprendizagem matemática. *Foreground* é um conceito desenvolvido por Ole Skovsmose (1994) e refere-se a visão que uma pessoa pode ter sobre seu futuro. Para conduzir uma investigação sobre *foregrounds*, desenvolvi um trabalho que envolveu configurar um ambiente de aprendizagem em uma instituição social para crianças e adolescentes em regime de semi-internato. Apresento e discuto aqui o caso de um dos participantes do trabalho desenvolvido que deseja se tornar um jogador de futebol profissional.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Foregrounds*. Perspectiva de futuro. Educação matemática crítica.

INTRODUCTION

¹ This paper is a result of my doctoral thesis Biotto Filho (2015)

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Soccer and foregrounds

"Who has not dreamed of being a soccer player?" This sentence from a song of a Brazilian band is an example of how common the dream of becoming a soccer player is. No wonder. Soccer produces winners. Soccer produces fantastic stories of overcoming obstacles. Soccer produces heroes. Soccer fulfills dreams.

Indeed, the life of a famous soccer player is very attractive. The media constantly publishes news and pictures of the famous players in their luxury cars and private yachts, dating beautiful and famous models, visiting the most expensive nightclubs in the city, wearing expensive clothes, and being praised by fans wherever they go. And the wages earned by the most famous players are colossal.

But if it is true that soccer produces winners, it is also true that soccer produces losers. The reality of players from less popular teams is not as widespread in the media; however, they are the majority. Pimenta (2006) suggests that the hopes and dreams of many young people who begin careers as soccer players end in frustration, not meeting their expectations and discovering they have little prospects.

Many poor and under-privileged children who love soccer are familiar with the amazing stories of players who had a poor childhood but are currently rich and famous. Pimenta (2006) states that this situation makes many children view soccer as a safe form of economic and social advancement. The most popular sport in the world seems an easy activity to practice and even easier to achieve.

The dream of being a soccer player can impact many aspects in the life of a child. In this paper, I discuss this topic in a social perspective, and focus on the importance of using the concept of foreground to understand the motives and actions of a person. Foreground is a concept developed by Skovsmose (1994) and refers to how individuals see their future. It includes wishes, dreams, intentions, expectations, aspirations, hopes, fears, obstacles, achievements, frustrations. The concept of foreground is discussed from a social perspective, and has two dimensions. One dimension is external because the context of a person may provide their opportunities, possibilities, obstacles, barriers, facilities and disadvantages. Thus, foreground can be understood as being configured by social, economic and political parameters. Moreover, the concept of foreground includes a subjective dimension. In this sense, the foreground of a person is formed through their experiences and how he or she interprets the possibilities and obstacles present in their context.

Foreground is important in understanding the motives and attitudes for an individual to learn and towards his education (SKOVSMOSE, 1994). The reasons that students have for learning are formed in their foregrounds. Students with ruined foregrounds, with no prospects for the future, have no reason to learn; therefore, ruined foregrounds are a huge obstacle to learning (SKOVSMOSE, 2007).

To conduct an investigation about foregrounds, I was looking for an Brazilian institution where I could develop a learning experience with a youth group. Schools were a possibility, but I was wondering what other possibilities there might be. I searched and found a social institution that shelters economically poor children in an after-school center. The children attending are from economically poor families who are in need of the assistance provided by the institution. Fourteen children with an average age of ten years participated. The theme of this project was chosen by the children: the Soccer Project. The activities were

designed to explore soccer as a career and included investigative activities in groups and discussions with invited professionals.

The reports of the participating children during the development of the Soccer Project were audio recorded. I also performed and recorded interviews with the individual children. These audio recordings allow many interpretations and analysis from many perspectives. However, my interest in this paper is to present and discuss the reports of only one of the participants, I will call him John. To refer to other children who participated in the Soccer Project, I will use the name William.

Soccer in John's foreground

John is an eleven-year-old boy who wants to become a soccer player. When I interviewed him, he clearly explains why:

John: I want to be a soccer player. Since childhood I've realized that this is the career that will give me everything. And so, I always strived to learn how to be better. In this career I will make lots of money, and also I'll do something I like .

For John, the career of a soccer player was linked to the idea of having a good life. In his view, a soccer player is someone rich and famous. I asked him if there is another career that he would like to have. His answer was no. I persisted and asked what he would do if a soccer career did not work out. He said that God only knows what will happen. Later, during a Soccer Project activity, I asked John again:

Denival: You want to be a soccer player, but let's say, for some reason, it did not work out. What would you do?

John: The important thing is not to stop practicing. I'll look for some simple job, but I will not stop practicing on weekends, so I can keep trying to become a soccer player.

William: But let's say you hurt your leg and you can't play anymore?

John: Then I will try to recover. And if it does not work out, I don't know.

John was unable to think of any attractive possibility for his future except a soccer career. I identify a problematic situation here. One might ask: what's wrong with wanting to be a soccer player? Before answering this question, let me make a few remarks about the concept of foreground.

In Biotto Filho and Skovsmose (2012), we list some features of a foreground. One of these features is: foregrounds are multiple. This means that, at any given moment, a person may have more than just one foreground. A person may simultaneously envision different sets of possibilities.

However, it does not seem to be the case for John. He was not able to think of any other attractive possibilities for his future, except a soccer career. Of course, I appreciate the positive thinking of John in the sense that he believes he will achieve his dreams. However, I'm worried about the fact that becoming a soccer player is the only attractive option for his future. In this sense, a new feature can be added to the list of features of a foreground: foregrounds may be single.

Single foregrounds put one in a dangerous situation. Pimenta (2006) brings reports of individuals who entered their career as soccer players and failed. The author discusses the construction of the dream to be a soccer player, as well as the frustration of those who failed to achieve their goal and have no other prospects. Looking at the cases of these failures

presented by the author, I conclude the following: a single foreground can become a ruined foreground.

Taking into consideration the cases presented by Pimenta (2006), I wonder what would happen with John if he faces a situation of failure in his dream to become a successful professional soccer player. According to Skovsmose (2007), for those with a ruined foreground, the context seems to offer few attractive possibilities and can lead to social exclusion, wrecking hopes and eliminating other opportunities for success in life. So it worries me that John has no other expectation, and that succeeding in becoming a famous soccer player is his only prospect in avoiding social exclusion.

Soccer to cross the border

The idea of borderland position is discussed in Skovsmose, Scanduzzi, Alrø and Valero (2008) and refers to a position where individuals can see their own life conditions in relation to other possibilities. The idea of borderland position focuses on the contact and conflict between people of different cultural worlds. The borderland position has a dual meaning for those who inhabit it, because while it promotes the experience of diversity, it also promotes the experience that some options may be out of reach for some.

Skovsmose, Scanduzzi, Alrø and Valero (2008) use the idea of borderland position to discuss the perspective of children who live in a Brazilian favela. Since John lives in a favela and has some contact with other social classes, one could say that he also lives in a borderland position. However, the borderland position inhabited by John refers not only to where he lives. It also includes other factors, such as what soccer means to him.

During an interview, John provides some information about his side of the border. He lives with his parents and his twin brother. His parents have a hard workload, so John and his brother have to attend an after-school center. John rarely sees his mother on weekdays. At the end of the day, John likes to play outside with his friends, and he also likes cycling. However, the streets of his neighborhood are unpaved and rocky, so John falls and gets hurt frequently during cycling. Rain causes further inconvenience because it makes the roads muddy and bumpy. The soccer field where he plays also gets damaged by rain. Since the field has little maintenance, it also becomes bumpy. Another problem is related to sanitation. Rats, snakes and the smell of sewage are a constant nuisance, not only in the neighborhood where he lives, but also on the soccer field where he plays. Still, John enjoys playing soccer, and he wants to be a soccer player when he grows up. He says that, if he becomes a famous soccer player, he would solve many existing problems in his neighborhood, he would help his family, and he would have a better life.

John believes that if he deserves it and works hard enough, his dream of becoming a soccer player will become a reality. This can be observed in a later discussion:

William: If you want to be a soccer player, you have to keep practicing until you reach the top.

John: It is like trying to achieve higher levels. First, you reach number one, then you reach number two, then you reach number three, and so on.

William: It is like a stairway, a stairway for the future. You start from nothing. For example, if you have a house, you start with a brick. Brick by brick. And then you build gradually.

John: A soccer player needs to be good. He has to play well, very well. And then he will be famous. He will appear on magazine covers. He will make money. (...) Often some soccer players do not have a teamwork attitude. They just plan to be the top scorer of the game. The role of a soccer player should not be to be the top scorer nor

be known as the best. The soccer player's duty should be to help the team become the champion. (...) The coach observes those who deserve it and try the hardest.
William: That is, there are players who only think about themselves.

It can be noted in this report that discussions about soccer were linked to the idea of overcoming obstacles and being rewarded for their effort. William exemplified this when he stated that if you want to be a soccer player *you have to keep practicing until you reach the top*. Those who reach the top can enjoy a good life. John said that the soccer player who plays well *will be famous. He will appear on magazine covers. He will make money*.

The children know about the many stories published in the media about soccer players who were poor but are now rich and famous. Soccer was, for them, the way out of social exclusion and marginalization. As William said, *you start from nothing*, in other words, a situation of total exclusion. Then *you start with a brick. Brick by brick. And then you build gradually*. Thus, soccer is one – and perhaps the only – attractive opportunity for those who *start from nothing*.

However, it takes effort. You need to earn it. John says that the chosen players are *those who deserve it and try the hardest*. To me, it brings to mind the idea that if you are not successful, it's your own fault – you did not deserve it or didn't make enough effort. It has nothing to do with your social situation. Famous players should be revered because they deserve it.

Therefore, soccer is seen as the way to cross the border between social classes, for anyone who tries their hardest. However, this border has a dual nature. One aspect of the borderland position refers to the situation where the individual can see their own life conditions in relation to other life possibilities (SKOVSMOSE, SCANDIUZZI, VALERO, ALRØ, 2008). In this sense, cross the border can mean to "start from nothing, build brick by brick, reach the top, to become famous, to appear on magazine covers, to make money."

However, the idea of borderland position also transmits the contact and conflict situation between people of different cultural worlds (SKOVSMOSE, SCANDIUZZI, VALERO, ALRØ, 2008). Therefore, it is possible to understand why, on many occasions, children related wealth and fame with greed and selfishness. William criticized *players who only think about themselves*. And John said that *the role of a soccer player should not be to be the top scorer nor be known as the best*. Later, he said:

John: I have to take a chance. What will be, will be. I'll try to be a soccer player. I will not be like Neymar. He is cocky, he gains a lot of money, and he is not humble.

I want to be like the player who gave an interview and said that he helped the poor people. Once, he ran out of money. But it's better that way, because he had already been voted the best in the world – he was already rich, enjoyed life, and now helps others.

The opinion that John has about rich and famous people was generated amid the existing contact and conflict between social classes. He wants to cross the border, but he does not want to become like the people on the other side. This explains why many children venerate famous soccer players who profess not to have forgotten their origins, showing that they still are humble.

John's opinions certainly were formed through various social processes. For children who inhabit a borderland position, foregrounds can be configured by existing contact and conflict between social classes. Foregrounds can also be influenced by other means, such as the media, family, or friends. Since the foreground of a person receives external influences, could this contribute to designing a way to restructure foregrounds? Is it possible to do something in order to reconstruct ruined foregrounds? To answer these questions, I turn to two features of foregrounds pointed to by Biotto Filho and Skovsmose (2012): dynamicity and collectivity.

Foregrounds are dynamic. They are constantly changing, even if not associated with a social change. The change in a foreground can occur when a person develops new prospects and expectations about his or her future. This dynamicity is more evident with children, because for them the difference between what is fantasy and what is reality is often less clear. Therefore, the foreground of a person should not be seen as a static phenomenon, but as a flexible entity.

Foregrounds can be collective. From a broader perspective, foregrounds can represent the possibilities of a particular group of people. One can think, for example, about foregrounds of children who live in a Brazilian favela. Foregrounds can be configured by social, economic and cultural parameters. Although these parameters are not strictly deterministic, trends are set as these parameters represent opportunities or barriers for specific groups. Moreover, foregrounds include interpretations of possibilities, and interpretations can be collective. Thus, one can think about conversations between friends who share and build together their prospects for the future.

The dynamicity of foregrounds states that they can change. And the collectivity of foregrounds offers a hint of how to do this. So is it possible to redesign foregrounds through

collective processes? To explore this possibility, I present reports documented during the Soccer Project and the impact they had in John's prospects.

Soccer: dream and frustration

During some point in the Soccer Project, we received a visit from Andrew, who was a soccer player but now a degree student in mathematics. Andrew told us that at eighteen years of age, after ten years of dedication, he chose to abandon soccer as a career. He talked sincerely with the children about the importance of not viewing soccer as the only alternative and the importance of having other options:

Andrew: I was eight years old when I started. At eighteen-years-old, I had to choose between continuing training with a small team or going to college. That's when I chose college. My greatest wish was to play soccer. But I understood that, for a soccer player, at eighteen-years-old the player is already considered old if he is not on a great team. So I decided to stop playing soccer. Now I play soccer for fun. I advise everyone not to stop their education, so that you can later choose what is better for you. I loved soccer so much that I could not imagine myself not being a professional soccer player. Even then, at eighteen, I had to accept the idea of not being a soccer player. Today I'm attending college, and I am very happy with the choice I made. It's really satisfying when you study and come to the realization that you do not want to be a professional soccer player. Children today think about Neymar as the greatest player of our time, and they think it is easy to become someone like him. But they need to understand that Neymar was one of millions of children who dreamed of becoming a famous soccer player.

Then Andrew stated that soccer players are not only those rich and famous people that we see on television. Many players are from less-famous teams. Among the approximately 14,000 players who are professionals officially registered in Brazil, about 8,000 are paid less than the minimum wage. This data presented by Andrew generated a discussion about what it means to be a non-famous soccer player. Andrew explained that a soccer player's career is an unpredictable path to success, and he emphasized the need to have another option. He also said that a career in soccer does not mean wealth and fame for the vast majority of players, and that the reality is very different for soccer players who do not play on famous teams.

Andrew's report had a strong influence on the work that John and the other children performed in the following assignment. A group of six children, including John, developed a comedic video in newscast style. They found some useful information about soccer available on the internet to be included in the newscast. One of the facts they gathered was that, in Brazil, only 3% of professional soccer players have an above-average salary. Then they created a script, filmed their performance and edited the recordings. The finished video presented two simulated interviews. The first interview was with a famous and successful player that, with great effort, achieved everything he dreamed of. His speech highlights the dream of overcoming obstacles and being rewarded for the effort. The second interview was with an underpaid player who had to take a second job to support his family.

Previously on the Soccer Project, John and the other children related a soccer career with having a good life. However, later they understood that this is not a simple fact, and they demonstrated this by producing a video that made a clear distinction between the famous player and the poor player. Certainly, a child does not need to categorically reject the dream of becoming a professional soccer player, because it is a hope that lies within the realm of possibilities. However, this group of children, whose perspective had attained to a wider and

more realistic vantage point, were able to explain aspects of the professional soccer player's career which can be invisible for many: the illusion of fame and the heights of success, contrasted with the possibility of unattainable dreams and frustration.

John realized that there are players who are not famous and discovered the kind of life they have. But this did not frustrate his plans. At the end of the Soccer Project, John stated that he still wants to be a soccer player, and that he will try. The Soccer Project even helped him better understand what steps should be taken to become a soccer player. Thus, John had not lost hope by gaining insight into the challenges to a professional soccer career. However, there were some changes in John's viewpoint. He started to see new possibilities. During the final phase of the Soccer Project, I asked him again what he would do if a career in soccer did not work out, and this time, he said he would like to work on a farm. He explained that he likes to deal with animals and enjoys nature, so that this would be a good option. This was a tremendous change in the way John saw his future. Now he could think about other attractive possibilities.

Moreover, another important change had occurred: how he thinks about academic study. Previously on the Soccer Project, I had asked John what was his opinion about his education:

Denival: Do you think it is important to study in order to become a professional soccer player?

John: Not so much. I saw an interview of a famous player who did not attend college. He worked on a farm when he was a kid. But he always practiced soccer. And eventually he was called to try-out for a professional team.

Denival: Would you like to attend college?

John: No. How would I attend classes if I would have to go to soccer training? Attending college would hinder soccer training, and soccer training would hinder attending college.

John's clear response is that studying is not important for a professional soccer player. In his opinion, this could even hinder soccer training. This issue would be taken up later, when we received a visit from a physical trainer who used to be a soccer player:

Physical trainer: I'll give the example of Socrates. He graduated in medicine. He had several good proposals to leave his town to play soccer. But he said: I'm not leaving until I graduate. This is one of his virtues: education. This is the advice I give to you: never abandon your studies. I also studied. I graduated in physical education and became a physical trainer. What would happen if I just put all my effort into becoming a soccer player? The soccer player's career only lasts fifteen years. And then what would you do with your life if you have no other possibilities? A thirty-year-old player is considered old. What if he did not get an education? And what if he did not make money as a player? There are people who were famous players and who now are poor.

Then the trainer listed other jobs associated with soccer, including a coach, orthopedic doctor, nutritionist, physiotherapist, psychologist, social worker, physiologist, massage therapist, and clothing designer. He explained a little about each of these jobs and how they can be associated with soccer. Specifically, he talked about the steps that he took to become a physical trainer. This brought an important contribution to the children who were able to better understand the steps needed to achieve a certain occupation.

The speech of the physical trainer was not contrary to John's opinions, because he did not say that education is important for the professional soccer player's career. However, the physical trainer pointed-out to the children something they had not thought of: the career of a soccer player is short-lived, and players will need another job later. He talked about his own case, since he was a soccer player but now a physical trainer, an occupation that required a degree in physical education.

Let's now return to Andrew's report. During his visit, the discussion about education was resumed.

Andrew: When I joined the Sao Caetano team, I was very young, twelve-years-old. It was there that I started to practice soccer more seriously. Before that I played just for fun. They did not allow you to quit school. This is important because many people believe that a career in soccer will fix all their problems and that they will not need anything else. But if you wanted to quit school, they would not allow it. Because if the soccer player career does not work for you, and you have not received an education, then you have nothing to fall back on when you get older. (...) If you want to become a professional soccer player, keep in mind you cannot stop studying. A soccer career might work out, but also may not. So you need to have plan B if it doesn't work out.

Andrew talks frankly with the children that *many people believe that a career in soccer will fix all their problems and that they will not need anything else*. This could cause someone stop going to school, or stop considering any other possibilities. Andrew not totally rejects the dreams of these children. Instead, he encourages them to consider more options by developing other attractive possibilities.

The current occupations of these invited professionals demonstrated to the children of the Soccer Project the attainability of other possibilities in their career goals. The physical trainer had been a soccer player. Andrew was also a perspective professional soccer player, but was now a college student. The two guests were happy with the choices they had made. Did the conversation with these two professionals have some impact on John's perspective? During the final phase of the Soccer Project, John stated:

John: The activities of the Soccer Project helped me to want other things for my life. Like Andrew said, I cannot stop studying. Even if I become a soccer player, I cannot stop studying. I want to be a soccer player and I will put forth effort to do so. But I'll do as Andrew did. He said: I was wise and I studied. Many people only think about being a soccer player. But only God knows what will happen. Nobody has a crystal ball to know the future. I need to have more options. If one option does not work, I will try another. Before, I only thought about being a soccer player, but now I see the importance of education. (...) Of course we need to think positively. If I want to be the best player, I need to trust myself and try., and I do trust myself.

Thus, John's perspective changed, not only towards considering other attractive possibilities for his future, but also in his engagement with education. John's case points to a conclusion with important implications for mathematics education: foregrounds can be reworked.

Soccer, foregrounds and mathematics education

"Who has not dreamed of being a soccer player?" In fact, this is the dream of tens-of-thousands of young people from all of Brazil's social classes. However, for some children this dream seems the only attractive possibility. These children put themselves in an at-risk situation, because a soccer player's career has some aspects of low visibility, including frustration and illusion. Many children and young people decide to pursue this dream without understanding these aspects and, as a result, they may have their foregrounds ruined. Children with ruined foregrounds, with no prospects for the future, have no reason to learn. Therefore, ruined foregrounds are a major obstacle to education (SKOVSMOSE, 2007). These considerations bring important implications for mathematics education.

According to D' Ambrosio (2001), knowledge of mathematics can enhance the ability of a person to handle new and real situations. Mathematics is also part of a preparation for the political participation individual, the development of concepts related to economy, the ability to analyze and interpret statistical data, and the ability to resolve conflict and to make decisions. In this sense, one can say that mathematics is practical for many aspects of daily life. But it is also undoubtedly useful for work. In many cases, a poor knowledge of math can contribute to becoming underemployed. Therefore, mathematics is something of a social selector and a useful tool in power relations. Also, mathematics forms a part of the context and perspective of an individual and can provide him or her with opportunities.

However, the reasons for students to learn mathematics depends on the position that mathematics takes in their foreground. For example, what reasons were offered by foregrounds of black students to study math during the apartheid past of South Africa, when jobs requiring math skills, such as engineering, were not allowed in that country for black people? (SKOVSMOSE, 2007) Or, what reasons were offered by foregrounds of female students to engage in mathematics in the past when the employment requiring high math skills were exclusively for men? Or more generally, what relationships are there between the prospects of marginalized students and their engagement with mathematics? When a society closes the door of the future for certain groups of children, marginalizing them, it also ruins their motives for learning. A ruined foreground may be the most brutal obstacle to education.

However, as exemplified by the case of John, foregrounds can be reworked. This has a tremendous implication for mathematics education. Mathematics education can contribute to or avoid exclusionary processes, depending on the assumed position.

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Recebido em: 20/07/2015

Aprovado em: 06/08/2015