

## **From the sports field to the classroom: The social role of an elite sports team in the periphery**

Orr Levental <sup>1</sup>

Hadas Brodie Schroeder <sup>2</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

National-level professional sports teams can profoundly influence teenagers involved in trials, selection, and participation. In this study, we examined the ability of a successful local soccer team to motivate high school students to improve their academic achievements and behavior. This research used interviews and focus groups with educators from two peripheral towns, one Arab and one Jewish. The texts were qualitatively open coded and constructed into major themes. We found that soccer teams with an educational and societal agenda and solid cooperation with the local schools would influence students to improve their academic achievements and behavior. Sports teams can play an essential role in conveying educational and societal values to teenage high school students.

**Keywords:** Sports, Academic achievements, Periphery, Education

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<sup>1</sup> PhD. Senior Lecturer, Department of PE, Tel Hai Academic College, Kiryat Shmona, Israel. Email: [orrlevental@gmail.com](mailto:orrlevental@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> PhD. Lecturer, Department of Education, Oranim College, Kiryat Tivon, Israel. Email: [Hadas200@gmail.com](mailto:Hadas200@gmail.com)

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

In 21st century Israel, the educational gaps between periphery and center are widening each year. That is, both in eligibility for a Bagrut (matriculation) certificate and in the percentage of high school graduates enrolling in higher education facilities. (Svirsky, 2012). Because the educational system is one of the major means facilitating social mobility and equal opportunities, it is important to examine different options for supporting this system in order to bolster and strengthen the outlying areas. The goal of improving the educational system is to enable all students to achieve educational and moral success as a springboard for self-fulfilment (Getz, 2008). One solution considered to bridge these educational gaps is professional sports. Spectator sports constitute one of the most popular leisure activities in Israel, with professional football leading all other sports. The economic, social and psychological influences of sports have been examined frequently in various contexts. Sports also have far-reaching educational potential, particularly in places where sports are the leading and often the only expression of popular culture, for example; in the towns and cities of Israel's social and geographical periphery. Sports activities dominate many localities in the periphery, among other reasons due to their contribution to community identity, health, sense of place, social relations and human capital (Marlier et al. 2015). Hence, by understanding sports values, skills and influence on the younger generation, the educational system in the periphery may be able to leverage the advantages of sports for its own objectives. In addition, understanding the influence exerted by a leading sports team can advance this field of research and contribute directly to developing educational programs in the context of sports that support learning and academic achievement in the periphery.

The objective of the research on which this paper is based is to understand how educators in the periphery perceive the role and educational significance of a leading sports team based in an outlying locality. The paper analyses the educational role of a professional football team based in the periphery and clarifies the three-way relationship between education, periphery and sports. It discusses the educational values manifested in this singular case of a leading sports team based in Israel's periphery. The research adopted the qualitative approach, focusing primarily on a case study of two localities in Israel's geographic and socioeconomic periphery that are home to leading sports teams (Sakhnin and Kiryat Shmona). In both these cases, two research tools were used: semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups using the WhatsApp Messenger mobile messaging app platform. The interviewees chosen included senior educators from the examined localities, and the focus groups comprised in-service and pre-service teachers working in the local schools. The results underwent content analysis by coding into categories and themes.

## **2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Educational gaps between center and periphery**

In Israel, there is an opportunity gap between different population groups in their eligibility for a Bagrut certificate, a prerequisite for higher education. This gap is especially important factor because of the correlation between higher education and the equality of the working

market (Yirmiyahu et al. 2017) According to Svirsky (2009), this gap is evident primarily among students from localities in Israel's periphery who must contend with distinctive barriers not faced by students from the center (see also Smilansky and Nevo, 2018). In recent years, the number of students in Israel's periphery who successfully finished high school has increased slightly. Nevertheless, there is a major difference in the percentage of those continuing to higher education between the periphery (0.7%-1.3%) and the center (30%) (Dagan-Bozaglo, 2007). According to Gofen (2009), this education gap emerges from the fact that the residents of the periphery lack academic role models, parental support and information about higher education and its importance. Shai (2000) contends that it is possible to develop the educational aspirations and abilities of those from the periphery by means of dedicated educational programs. In other words, alternatives can be created to provide students with educational tools and values that will serve as a future basis for their integration into higher education. Brodie Schroeder (2009) suggests that most of those of peripheral background who succeeded in academics stated that their parents did not play an important role in their success, in contrast to students from high socioeconomic backgrounds (e.g., see Strayhorn, 2006). In the case of factors that motivate success and success factors in general, family and socioeconomic status are less important than alternatives such as role models and the attributes they offer: perseverance, determination, succeeding in the periphery and others. These attributes also characterise local elite sports teams that are based in peripheral localities and compete on an equal basis with teams from central Israel. Hence, these teams have the ability to initiate educational and motivational processes among the local population.

## **2.2 Sports, community and individual development**

Professional competitive sports as well as popular amateur sports promote a variety of values, such as self-control, physical fitness, teamwork, organization, attentiveness, reciprocity and more. The personal development of those engaged in sports is influenced by learning opportunities and social and psychological aspects of the environment (Côté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007). Mertinek & Hellison (2016) suggest that sport and physical education extend beyond developing motoric skills or expanding knowledge on healthy lifestyle. According to them, sports can be a tool for teaching social and personal responsibility. This view is also shared by Drummond and Pill (2011) which argue that sports and physical education can be the most appropriate platform for learning other values and skills detached from the functionalist goals of physical movement. Another advantage of sports is in serving as a platform for coping with social aspects and for developing opportunities, particularly for weakened population groups (Skinner et al., 2008). It should be noted that although the field of study of potential social benefits for youth participating in sports is well researched, some topics such as cognitive and academic development, demand further empirical research (Bailey, 2005). According to Bailey (2006) another meaningful factor of potential individual development are the interaction between the young participants and their coaches, teachers and parents. Similarly to the importance of adult role models in academic success.

This team devotion is not dependent upon any prior conditions apart from the very fact that this is a sports team. But the devotion can be enhanced when there is a special connection

between the team and the local community. Richelieu (2003) notes that athletes' community involvement by visiting hospitals, signing autographs and visiting commercial and educational centers indicates that the team is willing to be an inseparable part of the local community. This type of community involvement serves to increase fans' support for the team and the players and hence their sense of belonging. The local team thus becomes a brand with a social conscience (*ibid.*). The sense of community between the team and its fans and the fans' identification with the team can be nurtured through frequent contact between the team players and representatives and the fans. A team's ongoing involvement in its urban community reinforces its status as a brand, so that the team becomes a part of the cultural, economic and social landscape of the city and even of the region it represents (Richelieu, 2012).

According to Pye et al. (2015), the ability of sports to represent values and sense of collectivity and to arouse these in individuals and in the local community resides in the fact that, even more than a factory or an industrial zone, a sports team changes the residents' perceptions of themselves and their city. Hence, enthusiasm and support for a professional sports team contribute primarily to a locality's emotional foundations. Levental (2013) similarly claims that especially when sports symbolizes peripherality and an alternative to the central ideology it arouses community team spirit, reinforced social ties and the creation of human capital on a higher standard. According to Hudson (1999), the connection between a local team and its location is particularly important. He contends that a team's economic impact is only felt after five years, a negligible period for the team to become essential in the eyes of the local community. In this way, the success of a sports team is a catalyst for generating support and ties to the local community, while the team's geographic location is the most important variable determining the intensity and continuation of these ties (Branscombe & Wann, 1991; Wann et al. 2017).

Yu-pu (2005) contends that the difference between urban and rural areas is most clearly and concisely manifested in the context of the development of social sports. The potential impact of sports on producing social capital is felt more strongly in peripheral or rural regions, for the most part due to involvement with third sector organizations (Skinner et al., 2008). Programs for encouraging involvement in sports that target large cities for the most part are not suitable for the psychological, social, economic and political attributes of youngsters living in rural regions or far away from large urban centres (Christensen et al, 2008). Social capital is particularly important in the daily lives of rural populations. Regional sports clubs serve as central points in their community life, and their association with the local team directly affects individuals in the community in forging social ties, becoming assimilated into the society and creating a sense of belonging (Frost et al. 2013). In this regard, Heere and James (2007) add that a sports team deliberately built around a local community is not only a means of generating group identity, but also symbolically represents the community and its attributes. These authors contend that the team merges with the community into a single entity that represents the different components comprising it, such as ethnicity, objectives, gender and geographic location.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on research conducted using qualitative methodology. The goal of the research is to understand how educators who grew up in Israel's periphery and work there today perceive the educational role of sports teams in the periphery. The use of qualitative research tools, including in-depth interviews and focus groups with the research participants, will yield a profound understanding of their worldview and their opinions of the researched topic (Smith & Flowers, 2009). In addition, in this study we focused on two localities in the periphery as a case study. We chose to focus on the northern city of Kiryat Shmona, located at Israel's geographical and social periphery. Kiryat Shmona is home to an elite football club that plays in Israel's Premier League (as of the writing of this paper in the 2019/2020 season) and that won the league title in the 2011/2012 season. We also chose to focus on the Arab city of Sakhnin, which is also situated in Israel's geographical and social periphery and is also home to an elite football club that plays in Israel's Premier League (as of the writing of this paper).

The research population included eleven interviewees, all of them teachers and school principals in the researched localities, and a focus group comprising five pre-service and in-service teachers who live and work in the cities we examined.

The primary Research tool was in-depth semi-structured interviews – Interviews were conducted with educators, as outlined above. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The second research tool was focus groups comprising in-service and pre-service teachers on the WhatsApp Messenger mobile messaging app platform. Focus groups using the WhatsApp platform constitute a new tool that has emerged from this application's innovative technology and its popularity. For this study, we created a WhatsApp group and added five participants. We then initiated a discussion in which each group participant responded with his or her opinion, while the other participants were allowed to react.

The data was analyzed by an open coded method in two parts. First, in the early analysis the researchers organized the data to categories. Then, the researchers gathered the categories to central themes, which answered the research question. The categories that the researchers found are: The contribution of the team to the community, The negative and positive effects that the team had on adolescents, central values in a sport team, The effects of the team spirit on the community, The meaning of society's agenda of the team's owner, The connection between the team to school, The impact of the elite team in a periphery town. First, the data were analyzed by the researchers separately in order to follow the trustworthiness rules. Only after that, the themes were found.

### **4 RESULTS**

The analysis indicated that the perceived educational role of an elite sports team in the periphery is expressed through four main themes: a) sports as the key to the world of youth; b) the social role of the team in the educational development of the local youth; c) close

cooperation between professional sports and educational processes; d) the importance of the team in developing local pride and in bridging the gaps between periphery and center.

#### **4.1 Sports team as a socialisation agent for youth in the periphery**

The popularity of sports spans differences in socioeconomic status and age. Interest in sports characterises many of those living in the periphery. For many it is a major part of their leisure culture and keeps them occupied during their everyday routine as well. Among adolescents, the area of sports is even more important, for at this age they are engaged in formulating their individual personality on the one hand and highly influenced by their peer group on the other. In this regard, one of the research participants noted that 'the young people in this city (Kiryat Shmona) become attached to the team because they are at the age when football fans decide which team to support'. Most of the sports enthusiasts among the youngsters living in the outlying localities root for the same local team. This serves to strengthen the team's ability to play a major role in the socialisation of these young people. Therefore, the local team exerts a rapid and direct hegemonic influence on the local youth. One interviewer noted: 'Because the cities are located in the periphery, the kids have fewer things to do in the afternoon than in the cities in the center. Hence, the football team is one of the focal points in the city that attracts a large number of teens.' According to another teacher, 'Football is something national and even global, and because there aren't many opportunities here in Kiryat Shmona football plays a very major role in the kids' lives.'

Another important point in youngsters' attraction to the world of sports is related to the special status attributed to sports heroes. One of the interviewees noted: 'The kids see them as role models. They want to succeed and progress just like these heroes. They understand that this is a small city and that whoever succeeds turns into an urban symbol of sorts.' This aspect is also tied to local pride and the immediate recognition these athletes receive from the small community in which they live. The physical and social proximity between the local population and the top-level athletes reinforces the ambitions of local youth and serves as a tangible example.

#### **4.2 Educational aspects of sports**

As noted, the field of sports is a major area of interest for a large proportion of youth. Hence, this field enables educators to capture the hearts of young people for it removes the barriers to their educational and cultural world. Schools and teachers can promote their educational agenda by directly and indirectly using the local team's success and its willingness to play an active role in the educational processes in the schools and informal educational settings. Yet such a connection is not obvious and requires that the local educational system promote certain values. This can take place in two ways: promoting sports values per se and promoting universal educational values by using sports as a motivating factor.

A controversy emerged from the interviews and focus groups in this study regarding the unconditional role of sports in promoting positive values. Following are some of the responses: "I could never unconditionally state that football games have a positive impact on students. Violence and curses lead to bad places and I would not like the kids to be involved in such situations." "Some players use verbal violence and sometimes even physical violence.

And the kids learn this . . . ." Despite these reservations, the research findings indicate that most of the educators can point to the educational advantages of sports, deriving both from the competitiveness and professionalism of sports and from the team's social nature. Some of the values mentioned include coping with failures and disappointments, striving for excellence and accomplishments, discipline, perseverance, attentiveness, respect for others, leadership, cooperation and avoiding violence. In this context, it is important to stress that these values are not necessarily related to the world of football or even to physical education classes in school, whose value is perceived mainly in physical aspects and not necessarily in social or personality aspects. The broad recognition of the values of sports that emerged in this research derives from the fact that the research participants are educators who examine cultural phenomena through the prism of education. This prism enables them and local educational decision makers to use the basic principles of the love of sports to promote the educational interests of the schools.

Applying students' motivation to engage in sports to educational activities constituted an additional educational contribution, carried out through organised cooperation between the school and the teachers on the one hand and the local sports team on the other. This aspect came up regularly in the interviews and the focus groups. Most supported the existing framework: "Through the combination of the kids' love for football and cooperation from the coaches, we can achieve many positive things. We can leverage this to benefit the kids and clearly integrate it into what we teach."

The cooperation between the football coaches and the extracurricular activities sponsored by the team's local youth club emerged as a major element, as did the direct contact with the teachers. Improper behavior at school affected whether a student could participate in the afterschool football club. This cooperative relationship enabled the teachers to promote their interests through the disciplinary and organisational base of the football clubs. As one of the focus group members indicated, this connection made it possible to join forces to promote, reinforce and enhance certain values.

#### **4.3 Realising the potential – Procedural, professional and close relationship between education and sports**

According to the research participants, the educational impact of an elite sports team on youth in the periphery is not necessarily significant unless two major conditions are met: One is the social agenda and the educational perspective of the owners of the elite sports team. The other is the connection between the formal and informal educational institutions and the team's staff and players.

Sports teams and players today are aware of their social importance and the extent of their influence, both because the Ministry of Sport and other associations promote social programs and also because the media frequently showcase the social contributions of sports teams. One consideration lies in the professional nature of sports and the consequent limitations on possible social involvement and integration of social aspects into the team's objectives and goals. In this regard, the team owners' agenda is important, as is their perception of their team as an essential socialisation agent that plays a major role in educating the local youth and

helping the city's residents. One of the teachers from Kiryat Shmona noted: "Management and professionalism have been influenced by the shift to private ownership, and the decision to engage in education is the outcome of the owner's gradual conditioning every team naturally engages in education and values. The change is in additional community activities outside the team's regular scope of operation. For example, players from the Kiryat Shmona team are involved in distributing food to the needy, using vehicles they received from the team for this purpose.". When social and educational involvement is part of the team owners' social agenda, the team will work together with and be part of the municipal educational system. Team owners with such a social agenda can invest time and resources in afterschool facilities at which the city's children receive help with their studies and homework.

The interviewees' responses on this point indicated that the perceived social agenda of the team in Sakhnin differed from that of the Kiryat Shmona team. In Sakhnin the social activities of the team and its players are recognised and praised. In Kiryat Shmona, the interviewees stressed the personal contribution of team owner Izzy Sheratzky, and particularly his broad involvement in the city as a whole as part of his social vision. This support is not necessarily the result of a sense of social responsibility deriving merely from the team's success and dominance in the city. In three different cases, interviewees also mentioned the name of the owner, Izzy Sheratzky, claiming that he was the inspiration for the team's social initiatives. All of this points to the educators' respect for Sheratzky and his contribution, which they all believe goes beyond his trivial obligation as owner of a sports team in Israel.

As noted, the second condition for a team to make a significant educational contribution is related to forming close ties with the local schools. The interviews show that unless the discussion is professional and directed toward strengthening ties between school and team, it is of no value. With respect to this condition as well, the cooperation is more evident in Kiryat Shmona than in Sakhnin.

In localities where cooperation is based on close and structured ties between the school and the team coaches and on shared values, the educational role of sports is seen as central and important. In this regard, one of the teachers noted: "There is a close relationship between the team coaches and the teachers in the school. The team encourages the kids to combine football with school rather than taking the place of school. If a student does not behave properly at school or does not keep up with his studies, the team coach is informed and often imposes sanctions that have an immediate impact on the students. For some students, playing on the team is what keeps them in school." One of the interviewees from Kiryat Shmona even noted that around 30% of the students at his school take part in the sports clubs run by the team. He adds: "We work in cooperation with the coach, who tells the students first to be good students and then to be good players. Cooperation between the classroom teacher and the coach is extremely important and produces immediate results." His remarks indicate that this cooperation with the team and its representatives facilitates direct enhancement of school values among one-third of the students.

Another significant point emerging from the interviews touches upon giving credit for the cooperation to the team and to the school staff. With respect to the third side of this

structure—the local municipality—interviewees noted only that the municipality should work to institutionalise and encourage this cooperation by establishing dedicated organizations to promote this matter. This finding indicates that the involved individuals' personal willingness to succeed is what maintains the existing cooperation, which does not necessarily require municipal sponsorship.

#### **4.4 Bridging the gaps between center and periphery and generating local pride**

The two most significant differences with respect to the contribution of a sports team to bridging these gaps are the supply of activities offered and the location. According to the interviewees, informal educational settings in the periphery make the crucial difference. Such settings are more readily available in the cities at the center of the country. With respect to Kiryat Shmona, the interviewees also criticised the quality of the teachers (stating that the good teachers prefer to work in the center) and the willingness of the local authority to invest in developing informal education. For this reason, the sports teams and their youth divisions add to the supply of afterschool activities available to the city's youth and provide new or alternative educational settings. Sometimes engaging in sports also serves the function of a social and cultural center, thus attracting the adult population as well.

Because these two cities are relatively small—Sakhnin with 28,000 residents and Kiryat Shmona with 23,000—and relatively far from Haifa, the closest urban metropolis, interpersonal relations tend to be more intimate than in larger cities. Yet these factors also prevent the children and adolescents from being directly exposed to other places in Israel. In this regard, according to the educators interviewed for this study, the presence of an elite football team that plays in the national Premier League serves as a thread connecting the periphery to the center. According to one of the educators, "Because the team is part of the football elite, it automatically arouses national interest, especially because this is a small peripheral city. This was very powerful when the team won the championship." Another teacher stressed: "The football team is one of the major places in the city that operates on the national rather than the local level." The connection to the rest of the country by means of sports also has an impact on the locality's collective identity and sense of pride, which are accompanied by additional personal and social advantages. The matter of local pride was important to all the interviewees, both in Kiryat Shmona and in Sakhnin. One of the educators interviewed noted for example that sports serves as a tool for positive internal migration of athletes and their families. In accordance with the fans' sense of identification with their team, the students often see success in sports as personal success.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The distance between the periphery and the center is not only geographical. The distance between young people living in the periphery and those living in the center is mainly measured in educational gaps, variety of afterschool activities and exposure to different role models and future scenarios (Ben Gigi, 2011).

Several major insights emerging from the findings are likely to improve the potential impact of a sports team on the youth living in the periphery. First, in an outlying city the influence of

a sports team on the local youth is greater and offers more potential than in the cities in the center. This finding goes together with the literature that says that the impact of a sport team in small cities is stronger than in big cities (Pye *et al.*, 2015).

A sports team is a source of local pride, and its team members are role models for the adolescents who show interest in them and cheer them on. In addition, hundreds of local teens play in the youth divisions of the sports club. Hence, the team is a leading means of educating the youth for it constitutes an entry card to the team's social world and values. This finding shows what Branscombe and Wann (1991) say about the role of a role model for the teen and the importance of have players with values and social responsibility.,

Institutionalising the ties and cooperation between the various socialisation agents is essential for generating a holistic educational process. Relations must be initiated between the formal educational system (schools, teachers and educators) and the informal educational setting of the sports club so that the youth will acknowledge these ties and treat these two systems as one united educational system. This is a new finding that see the big picture and the system understanding by using this great influence of the team on the teen. Taking this advantage to improve the motivation of the teen's studying at school.

The educational/social agenda of the team's owner contributes a great deal to the ties between school and informal sports club and to the degree to which they influence one another. It is particularly important for a team to have a community social identity, where the team players and coaches are committed to making a contribution to education for social and community responsibility. In addition, for the sake of a holistic connection between school and sports club, the sports club must convey the message that succeeding in school and acquiring knowledge are important. This result says what the literature shows that a sport team of a community has a potential to educated teen. Regional sports clubs serve as central points in their community life, and their association with the local team directly affects individuals in the community in forging social ties, becoming assimilated into the society and creating a sense of belonging (Frost *et al.*, 2013).

Because the sports team is an important agent of socialisation, it must recognise that it has been charged with responsibility for young people's education. Hence, it must strive for educational and appropriate behavior on and off the playing field. This finding is very interesting. There is no doubt that the owner's societal agenda is impactful on the local education. Heere & James (2007) found that the role of the management's perspective is the base for educational impact. They showed that philanthropy, cooperation and ethics are the most important factors that motivate sport team to be involved in the community. These values are an educational agenda that passes to the younger generation.

In conclusion an elite sports team on the national level can serve as a bridge that connects periphery and center and creates opportunities for social mobility. The chance for social mobility encompasses the principles of justice and equality that create a better society for us all, one in which all citizens strive for social justice and equal opportunity for success and personal fulfilment.

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