



A body and a dream at a vital juncture: Ghanaian youth, uncertainty and the allure of football



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the rationale leading growing numbers of West African males to pursue a career in professional football, by taking the particular case of male youth in Accra and exploring how and why they are drawn into the football industry. Football is used as a lens to extend contemporary geographical debates over the agency, resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism of young people residing in the Global South. The transition from junior to senior secondary school is found to be a pivotal moment within many of the biographical accounts collected in Accra. I use theorisations of youth in sub-Saharan Africa to conceptualise this moment as a vital juncture, and shed light on how a career in football is now seen as a way to circumvent an education system considered to lead to unemployment, or unacceptable employment. Significantly, against a backdrop of neoliberal reform and an absence of state welfare, the perception that a career in professional football offers a means to create an income and be self-sufficient is very appealing. But it also offers more than that. It provides a means to demonstrate one's masculinity, specifically, displays of wealth through conspicuous consumption, behaviour that young Ghanaians refer to as living the X-Way. It is argued that for male Ghanaian youth, the professional football player who is able to draw upon his latent sporting bodily capital and live the X-Way embodies resourcefulness. He is his own enterprise, a Foucauldian 'entrepreneur of self'.

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1. Introduction

You yourself go to any part of Accra and in any small place you will see people playing football, and you will ask yourself 'are these not supposed to be in school?' (Herbert Adika, the Ghanaian Football Association – GFA).

The extensive global media coverage dedicated to professional, particularly European football, and the cult of stardom attached to footballers plying their trade on this lucrative stage, are claimed to have popularised the myth of a career in football as a means of upward social mobility (Christensen and Sørensen, 2009; Poli, 2010). This is considered particularly problematic for young people in West Africa, where a handful of high profile cases depicting upward career paths conceal far more common occurrences of downward career trajectories and unfulfilled dreams (Darby et al., 2007; Poli, 2010). The precarious nature of a career in professional football fails to deter West African youth, and as alluded to by Herbert Adika in the quote above, the pursuit of football stardom typically comes at the expense of formal education and vocational training (Bourke, 2003; Darby, 2010; Donnelly and Petherick, 2004). In

the case of Ghana, the number of amateur football clubs and youth academies is rising, a reflection of broader trends taking place throughout sub-Saharan Africa (see Darby et al., 2007). For example, in March 2011 while registration was still taking place, the GFA regional office in Accra estimated that 700 clubs in 12 regional zones would take part in a new regulated national junior 'Colts' league (under 12, 14 and 17). Two hundred and forty of these clubs were located in Accra spread over 11 districts, with the number of registered youth players estimated to be in the region of 20–25,000.

An important question currently remains unexplored, namely, why are male West African youth more disposed to prioritizing a career in professional football? Or, as they say in Ghana, 'why does everybody want to play football by force?' This article addresses this question, and in doing so conceptualises the rationale leading young Ghanaian males specifically, and West African males more generally, to pursue a career in professional football. For some readers the answer to this question may appear obvious, i.e. fame and financial remuneration, however, my goal is to offer a richer understanding of the complex array of motivations in specific contexts for specific individuals.

This article argues that a career in professional football is now deemed to provide male Ghanaian youth with a means to circumvent an education system they consider to lead to unemployment,

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or unacceptable employment in the feminized informal economy. These male Ghanaian youth opt in a Foucauldian sense to become 'entrepreneurs of self', by investing in their bodily (football) rather than cognitive (education) human capital. In the absence of state welfare the perception that a career in professional football offers a means to create an income and be self-sufficient is very appealing. But it also offers more than that. A career in football is also seen as a way to demonstrate their masculinity, specifically, displays of wealth through conspicuous consumption, behaviour that young Ghanaians refer to as living the 'X-Way'.

I use football as a lens to conceptualise the conduct of male West African youth as they attempt to 'make the best of their situation and negotiate the grounds of their everyday lives and their future' (Langevang, 2008, p. 2039). As highlighted by Porter et al. (2010), Africa's urban youth are often represented both inside and outside the continent as 'forever in a state of becoming (yet never arriving)' (Porter et al., 2010, p. 796). Therefore the idea that young people make one transition to adulthood, and that adulthood is both a stable status and destination that one arrives at, is deemed a problematic premise (Jeffrey, 2010; Langevang, 2007; Vigh, 2010). Consequently, geographical and anthropological research on young people in Africa has highlighted how it is often more productive to relocate attention from distinct life stages marked by specific events, to 'episodes or conjunctures of events that have implications for people's social relations, positions and life trajectories, but that do not necessarily move them neatly from one life stage to the next' (Langevang, 2008, p. 2040).

Contemporary academic research has documented how young people in many parts of Africa do not just see youth as a stage they are passively passing through (Abebe, 2008; Ansell and Van Blerk, 2004; Gough, 2008; Simone, 2005; Young and Barrett, 2001). On the contrary, 'they are 'agentic' in achieving what they desire for their lives, they are forging new ways forward in socially and economically difficult circumstances' (Langevang, 2007, p. 269). As noted by Jeffrey (2010), the suggestion that young people have agency 'has become a type of mantra within the social sciences', however, a key finding emerging from this literature is that the form and nature of this agency is multifaceted, often departing from open resistance (Katz, 2009). Instead of resistance, the agency of young people in Africa is often 'discovered' or 'performed' during specific durations in their biographies (Jeffrey, 2011), for example dropping out of school (Ansell and Van Blerk, 2004), or when confronting educated-unemployment (Waage, 2006). Accordingly, Holloway et al. (2010) have highlighted the importance of 'foregrounding young people as the subjects rather than objects of education', and how this requires that 'attention be paid to their current and future life-worlds' (Holloway et al., 2010, p. 583).

The importance of agency is also evident in debates discussing the resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism of young people residing in the Global South (Jeffrey, 2011; Langevang et al., 2012), these discussions draw attention to how the resourcefulness of young people often resides in their ability to not only survive, but also assume responsibility for social reproduction amidst socio-economic insecurity and the restructuring of labour markets (Chant and Jones, 2005; Gough, 2008; Langevang and Gough, 2012; Porter et al., 2011; Waage, 2006). Here, I take the particular case of male African youth in Accra, and explore how and why they are drawn into the football industry. In doing so I extend these debates by showing how for male Ghanaian youth, the West African professional football player who is able to draw upon his latent sporting bodily capital is the embodiment of resourcefulness, he is his own enterprise, an 'entrepreneur of self' capable of overcoming socio-economic uncertainty.

The article draws on data obtained in Accra during 2011 in the form of multi-sited ethnography at three amateur football clubs with youth academies (under 12, 14 and 17), referred to here as

Austin Texans FC, Barracks FC and Future Icons FC.¹ I attended 116 training sessions across the three clubs and also home and away matches. Alongside participant observation, I conducted hundreds of informal interviews and dozens of group discussions, which I complemented with 20 formal interviews with senior team players, coaches and owners. In addition to the data collected at the clubs, I conducted 11 expert interviews including executive members of the GFA, former professional players and educational practitioners.

I begin by discussing how male Ghanaian youth claim that the spiraling cost of privatised education compels them to 'drop out' during the transition from junior to senior secondary school, and turn to a career in professional football. This moment in their lives is precisely the type of time space Johnson-Hanks refers to as a vital conjuncture, 'a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 871). This concept is useful here as it allows us to examine the specific and momentary configuration of structures that become relevant in this particular situation, while maintaining recognition of young people's agency. The second half of the article highlights that while constituting one element of a wider approach, successive governments and international organisations in post-independence Ghana have sought to inculcate the idea that education is a prerequisite for individual social mobility and national development (Rolleston and Okech, 2008; Langevang, 2008). However, as this article will demonstrate, for male Ghanaian youth the triumvirate of education, acceptable employment and development no longer appear connected. Accordingly, at the vital conjuncture outlined above, they pursue a career in professional football and attempt to become 'entrepreneurs of self'.

2. Dropping out of school and into football

The sight of children walking to and from public primary schools in their unmistakable uniforms is now commonplace in Accra. With girls in their yellow skirts with brown jumpers, and boys in their yellow shirts with brown shorts, embodying the country's longstanding commitment to universal education. Organisation of pre-tertiary education as it exists today does appear to have facilitated an increase in educational provision for young people in Ghana. Research has found that the current system – consisting of a 6 years primary level (fully state subsidised), followed by 6 years at secondary level comprising 3 years in junior (fully state subsidised) and senior secondary (partially state subsidised) respectively – has led to overall increases in enrolment (Osei, 2004). In spite of this, a study by the UNDP (2002 cited in Osei (2004)) found junior secondary enrolment rates to be strongly linked to household income, with 65% of children from the poorest quintile of households enrolling compared to 94% of children from the wealthiest quintile. The distribution of senior secondary enrolment is further skewed, with rates ranging from 27% for children from the poorest quintile to 77% for those from the wealthiest. Moreover, a study by Gondwe and Walenkamp (2011) noted that in the 2007–2008 school year 1,224,964 pupils enrolled in Ghanaian junior secondary schools, yet enrolment for senior secondary dropped drastically to 454,681 for that cohort.

The everyday reality of Ghanaian youth 'dropping out' of formal schooling came to my attention during a post-training session discussion with the under-17 players at Future Icons FC. Several players intimated that they had taken the decision not to enroll at a senior secondary school and had instead opted to pursue a career in professional football. As children they had entered the formal

¹ The names of clubs, owners and players are pseudonyms. All other are names are genuine unless stated otherwise.

education system not just because it was compulsory, but on the premise it would eventually lead to formal wage employment and instigate an improvement in their material condition. Those playing for the under-12 teams verified this sense of optimism during the early stages of formal education, though perhaps understandably – given that they were currently involved in Colts football – the hope of a career in professional football was present. Yet they conceptualised this hope as an alternative not a default destination. In order to maintain a good grade point average, some of the most talented under-12 players at Barracks FC would often miss training to complete their homework and revise for exams. When I discussed this with them, they described their ambition to obtain a ‘serious job’ upon completing their formal education, which for some included attending university. Attending school was one of life’s traditional milestones on the path to adulthood and becoming a ‘serious person’. So what changed in the period between primary and senior secondary?

The main issue was the payment of tuition fees, and their families’ inability to meet costs associated with continuing their education. Nevertheless, they were keen to continue their education later and emphasised their desire to do so. These discussions endorsed Langevang’s observation that young people in Accra rarely receive the education they wish for in a continuous or linear manner, rather ‘they enter school, drop out, work for a couple of years, and then begin formal or informal education again’ (2008, p. 2044). When the subject of ‘dropping out’ was broached with players at Austin Texans FC and Barracks FC, I was met by a similar response to that at Future Icons FC. Curiously, on a different occasion during a discussion about ‘walking alone’ (referring to being single rather than in a relationship) the players at Future Icons FC mentioned there were lots of very good public senior secondary schools in Accra (often with dateable girls), some of which are free if not almost free to attend. So why would they attend a private and more expensive school when options better suited to their financial situation existed?

The players elaborated, by describing how the allocation of senior secondary school places is linked to a student’s score in the common entrance exam and subsequent ranking on a computerised system. This was intended to provide a more meritocratic process for allocating senior secondary school places, founded upon academic attainment rather than income. Unfortunately, as Kate Bannerman the District governor and Headmistress of Nungua Secondary School in Accra explains below, the system has not achieved its intended goal. Instead, it reproduces the educational disparities it sought to alleviate.

They start paying at senior high but if you get a scholarship to the public schools then the government will subsidize it...normally those that were not picked by the computerized system they find themselves in the private schools because they couldn’t qualify to come to the public schools which are virtually free. In the private schools you pay fully so it disadvantages those who need help most because normally the ones who have got the good grades, they come from good homes and were able to go to good schools to begin with. It should have been the other way around...and yes some cannot afford it so eventually they drop.

The prevalence of Ghanaian youth ‘dropping out’ during the transition from junior to senior secondary school as highlighted by other studies and verified by the participants, exemplifies how certain social structures not only alter in form and intensity over time, but also become more or less significant at particular moments in peoples lives (Jeffrey, 2010). This situation epitomises the key time–space Johnson-Hanks (2002) envisioned when describing the concept of ‘vital conjunctures’, circumstances which

lead to the reassembling of particular material bodies in time and space while conveying the crystallisation of structural forces (Jeffrey, 2010; Johnson-Hanks, 2002).

I would argue that the computerised allocation of senior secondary school places is indicative of ‘symbolic violence’, tacit modes of power that exist within seemingly innocuous social norms (in this case formal education), which maintains a social structure benefitting and serving the interests of those already dominant (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Yet despite being familiar with the computerised system and how it functioned, participants never suggested that this was intentionally biased towards wealthier households. It was acknowledged that those from wealthy households did indeed appear to benefit from the current education system, yet this was deemed one of the rare occasions where it was not due to plutocracy. Moreover, while the familiar criticisms of rote and uncreative learning exercises, overcrowded classes and a lack of material resources were levelled at public primary schools (see also Dull, 2004), this was not considered the principle reason for their inability to access a place at a subsidised public school. Rather, it was attributed to an individual’s intellectual and familial situation. Those who had achieved a successful ranking on the computerised system had done so on merit, primarily through hard work but also a natural proclivity towards academic attainment. With regards to the subject of familial influence, the issue also moved beyond finances and was framed in the context of behavioural dispositions.

The respective owners of the Austin Texans FC and Future Icons FC mentioned that most of their players who had ‘dropped out’ came from low-income single parent households, often with a history of limited educational attainment. This situation reinforced a long-standing perception in Ghanaian society, as Jordan Anagblah, former vice president of the GFA explains below:

It is a trend that you will find in the whole of West Africa, that good footballers did not go to school. Those who don’t have good parents and come from poor homes are the people who have the chance to be on the streets everyday playing football. A very good footballer therefore often did not go to school.

A confluence of financial circumstances and educational accomplishments were considered key to the provision of an intellectually stimulating environment. Problematically, as is often the case in the aftermath of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and the implementation of neoliberal governance policies, families and households are increasingly responsible for managing the risks associated with child/adolescent development choices, particularly schooling (Kelly, 2001). The ‘pedagogic family’ becomes responsible for making the right choice for the sake of the child (Kelly, 2001). In Accra, the household is considered the key space in which the inculcation and reinforcement of the principles underlying an appreciation of formal education takes place, primarily through the interaction between the parent and child in the form of enforcement and encouragement. Addae, the owner of Austin Texans FC, informed me of a particularly noteworthy situation, one that suggests that pursuit of a professional football career can transcend issues of household income and access to education.

There is a kid on the team called Eugene, a very talented player. His father was just made a Principle (Headmaster) of a high school but he doesn’t want to go to school...he can go for free but he doesn’t want to study he wants to play football. So even though his father is a Principle and very educated man Eugene doesn’t want to go to school. His father has now put him in my care...so now football is the motivator. If he doesn’t go to school I cannot let him play in the team.

Eugene's example also indicated that despite claims to the contrary, when an opportunity to attend senior secondary school arose the offer could be rebuffed and overlooked in preference of football, as was also the case at Barracks FC. A fundraising campaign enabled 21 academy players to attend a private senior secondary school, but only four attended regularly and the remaining 17 were eventually expelled for absenteeism and disruptive behaviour. A rift occurred at the club, with verbal altercations exchanged between those allowed to remain and those asked to leave, with the latter complaining they wanted to return. Samson, one of the players allowed to stay, pleaded with the headmistress to reenroll his peers. When she agreed and he informed them at training, they retorted 'what do you want us to do there?' During several conversations with the youth in question, they eventually admitted using phrases to that effect when informed of their reinstatement.

One of the key complaints that emerged during discussions with the players at Barracks FC was the duration between 'dropping out' and receiving the scholarships to recommence their formal education. The oversight that appeared to have been made when allocating the scholarships was viewing age as an independent variable, a biological and temporal condition. Spaces that have associations with certain age groups influences who uses them, accordingly, people have difference access to and experiences of places on the grounds of their age (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). This was particularly problematic in this situation, as Ghanaian football encapsulates and embodies the notion of age as a social construct rather than an independent variable. The practice of falsifying player ages is widespread, and it is common for an individual to have both a biological age and a constructed 'football age'. Interestingly, this practice complies with contemporary literature in the social sciences that argues against the idea that young people, particularly those residing in the Global South, make a linear transition to adulthood and that it is a destination a person not only arrives at, but *actively seeks* to do so (Evans, 2008; Jeffrey, 2011; Langevang, 2008). In the case of football, perpetual youth is desirable as it provides an individual with multiple opportunities to become a professional football player.

The aforementioned recipients of the scholarships all had football ages of 17 years or younger, but biologically, most were over 18 years old. Confidence was not in short supply on and around the football pitch where they were considered highly talented players. The participants would probably disagree, but I would argue that to a certain extent this confidence was attributable to positive relational effects of age, which they were able to accrue by concocting an age that made their performances stand out in this particular space. This was not the case in the classroom. The discrepancy between their biological age and football age led to scenarios where 20 year olds were sharing English lessons with 15 year olds. This became an acute source of embarrassment, and left them fearing intellectual emasculation. Phillip, one of the expelled students from Barracks FC articulated this as follows:

If the teacher asks you to come to the front and you cannot read, the way you will see some small boy insulting you.

A minority also confessed that on several occasions they did not attend school because they 'only' had 1 GHC to spend on ice-kenkey,² and other male pupils had 3 GHC.³ I will discuss the subject of wealth and masculinity below, but the point I want to make here is that the school became a place of potentially unlimited opportunities for humiliation. It is not being suggested that educational practitioners were unaware of the role played by age in shaping classroom dynamics. In fact, from the outset, it was suggested that

those put forward for the scholarships were inappropriate because of doubts concerning their biological age. So would the youth in question have preferred a different learning environment? Perhaps at one of the private further education colleges in Accra, designed for those no longer of schooling age to obtain academic and or vocational qualifications. Kate Bannerman felt that preoccupation with the subject of age and even to an extent familial circumstances masked the crux of the matter at hand, a loss of faith in the value of formal education.

If they say they are not going to school because of money it is not really true but it is a nice excuse. If you go down to the beach you will see boys playing there but if you give them a uniform to go to school see how fast they will run. They just use it as an excuse because they think there is no future in schooling but there is in football.

When probed beyond their initial, often vociferous claims to want to attend school, all but one of the 17 Barracks FC players who were expelled ultimately admitted that education was no longer considered an avenue worth pursuing. This was the underlying reason behind their absenteeism and earlier decision to 'drop out' after junior secondary school. This also resonated with discussions and experiences garnered from interactions with players at Austin Texans FC and Future Icons FC. When Samson's peers replied 'what do you want us to do there?' they were on one level referring to the school in question, but it was also a shot of contempt towards, and indication of a deeper disillusionment with, the Ghanaian education system. They were particularly scathing of its inability to equip them with the tools needed to improve their material situation both in the immediate present and foreseeable future. In raising this question, they were challenging a national dogma.

3. Show me the bread: the declining value of education

The belief that education is a prerequisite for individual social mobility and national development is traceable to the 1960s post-independence policies of Ghana's first President Kwame Nkrumah (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). This connection between development and education is attributable to the adoption of neo-classical perspectives that emerged during that era, particularly Schultz's (1961) 'human capital theory'. In contrast to unskilled individuals who remain at the mercy of others, those with sufficient human capital are able to take control of their own productivity and wealth creation. A lack of human capital could therefore be linked to instances of poverty. Schultz proposed that education be considered an investment in human capital, through which an income will be earned (see also Becker, 1993). Based on this logic, formal education as an investment in human capital could play a pivotal role in Ghanaian poverty alleviation (Rolleston and Okech, 2008), by equipping a person with the skills and capabilities to improve their material condition (Coleman, 1988). Following independence the economic rationales for educational investment and expansion continue to be prominent in Ghanaian and international developmental policy, however, several decades of military coups and political instability following independence hindered effective policy implementation until reforms were introduced in 1987 (Rolleston and Okech, 2008).

In many ways the reforms that were introduced ran counter to the standard SAP protocol, as they increased the duration of mandatory schooling to 9 years (6 years primary school and 3 years in junior secondary). The reforms were the precursor to the 1996 'free compulsory universal basic education (FCUBE)' program. The FCUBE initiative was part of the Ghanaian government's broader outline for development as stated in the 'Vision 2020' document.

² A meal traditionally prepared by boiling balls of mixed portions of fermented cooked maize meal and raw maize dough wrapped in cornhusk.

³ Ghana's currency is the Cedi. During my fieldwork \$1 = 1.30 GHC (approx).

It openly declared the state's commitment to 'enhancing human capacities through the education and training of all citizens in order to reduce the level and incidence of poverty, increase employment opportunities, and ensure real increases in individual and national incomes' (GoG (1997) cited in Rolleston and Okech (2008, p. 321)). Additionally, the reforms were particularly keen to remedy what was perceived as an inadequate link between education and employment, through 'increased investment in human capital to increase labour productivity' (GoG (1997) cited in Rolleston and Okech (2008, p. 324)). The aim of this article is not to determine whether the approach taken by the Ghanaian government is the correct one, but it was apparent during my fieldwork in Accra that the rationale for an education-social mobility and economic growth link did not correspond with the everyday realities of participants.

A lack of employment opportunities alongside an increasing supply of educated labour has deflated both the economic and symbolic value of education. This is partly attributable to the simultaneity of broader educational provision in conjunction with falling labour demands in the aftermath of structural adjustment retrenchment. This left large numbers of public sector workers and civil servants (predominantly male) jobless, and removed a key employer of educated workers (Langevang and Gough, 2009; Overa, 2007). As participants did not emphasise or articulate these broader socio-historical factors, I do not want to dwell on them. Rather, for them, the issue of employment insecurity was more closely associated with an intuition that the supply of educated young people in Accra had exceeded the point of healthy competition. I lost count of stories recounting the plight of a cousin or family friend who had completed their tertiary education but was now either unemployed, or being poorly paid in the job they were eventually able to procure. This perception is corroborated by research that has observed 'qualification inflation' in Ghana, as employers select from an increasingly larger pool of educated labour (Rolleston and Okech, 2008).

In light of the strategy adopted in the 'Vision 2020' development plan this situation is clearly problematic. In a context where the supply of educated labour exceeds demand, as appears to be the case in Accra, the ensuing 'qualification inflation' fuels the perception that returns from education are in decline or insufficient. David, one of the four players at Barracks FC who chose to attend senior secondary school having been provided with a scholarship, highlighted this point when discussing the situation of his peers who were expelled.

They don't care if you agree to pay their school fees for ten years, they just couldn't see serious bread (money) coming so eventually they started dropping [out of school].

What emerges is an ambivalent relationship with education that is relational to age. On the one hand, the symbolic value and social standing attached to attending school as part of an anticipated and respectable adulthood still lingers, particularly amongst children. While on the other, the economic and symbolic value of education is diminishing amongst youth. Older participants, particularly those in the under-17 and senior teams, frequently made the point that as they grew older it became increasingly apparent that formal labour markets were rarely, if ever, accessed as a result of completing one's education. The primary concern amongst these youth centred on the perception that the 'serious jobs' they initially envisioned obtaining (ranging from lawyer to 'at a ministry' i.e. clerical and public service employment positions) were in short supply, making them increasingly difficult for school leavers and even university graduates to secure. A secondary concern was an inability to generate contacts beyond their immediate social circle. It was argued that a frequent combination of these two concerns

left them simultaneously stranded on the periphery of the formal economy, susceptible to nepotistic practices within it, and increasingly likely to join the majority of their fellow Ghanaians working in the informal economy.

4. A respectable manhood: living the X-Way

Ghanaian women have a long historical association with employment, especially informal labour activities (Amponsah et al., 1996; Overa, 2007). This is in contrast to other African countries (particularly those situated in the south and east), where it has been argued that SAPs reconfigured patriarchal norms by pressurising women to assist in household reproduction through paid income (Meagher, 2010). I am not suggesting that Ghanaian society does not subscribe to a number of patriarchal features, or that in many social domains men do not occupy a dominant social position in comparison to women, because such a claim would be nonsensical. The point I seek to make here is that the informal economy is not one of those domains.

Ghanaian women have and still do enjoy social recognition and political influence based upon their enterprise as both small and large-scale traders. However, a consequence of neoliberal reform and the collapse of the previously male dominated formal public sector is overcrowding in the informal labour market (Grieco et al., 1996; Overa, 2007). The generally unemployed, rural to urban migrants and school leavers of both sexes all seek employment in what is still considered the economic forte of females (Overa, 2007). This was not an acceptable prospect for male youth at the three clubs, who are aware that 'masculinity is simultaneously a place within gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender relations, and the effects of those practices in bodily experience, personality and culture' (Connell, 2005, p. 71). These youth were not aspiring to just any kind of adulthood, but 'serious jobs' entailing respect and authority, ideally situated within the formal and or other associated masculine sphere of employment. Kwesi, an under-14 player at Future Icons FC, indicated this point during an exchange with his teammate when he asked:

So a boy who finishes schooling then works like kayaye⁴ is better than the boy who didn't go [to school], are you sure? (Laughs) you dey touch (are you crazy?)!

Cultural meanings do not restrict themselves to the mind, they also influence conduct and reveal themselves through the organisation and regulation of social practices (Hall, 1997). Previous research conducted in Ghana has touched upon the role of gender relations in the act of 'dropping out', mainly in relation to patriarchal norms. For example, household responsibilities are found to be organised along sex lines, and unlike their male counterparts, female household members of schooling age are usually asked to assist with 'homemaking' often to the detriment of their education (Chant and Jones, 2005). While I would not dispute the general tenets of these findings, their portrayal of gender norms fails to adequately theorise differences in relations between and within genders, as alluded to by Kwesi. This prevents a more critical analysis that takes into consideration that like other parts of the world, heterogeneity within African countries means that 'not all men have the same amount or type of power, the same opportunities and consequently the same life trajectories' (Ouzgane and Morrell, 2005, p. 12).

⁴ The term Kayaye refers to young often-uneducated female migrants from the northern region of Ghana. They are frequently seen in Accra carrying various food and hardware items on their heads, see also Oberhauser and Yeboah (2011) and Grieco et al. (1996).

Ghanaian society places high expectations and tremendous pressure on young Ghanaian men to be successful in material terms, reproducing a sense of monetary success as an inherently masculine trait (Adinkrah, 2010). Daniel, a senior team player and coach for Future Icons FC's under-17 team, succinctly articulated this point:

In Ghana we have this proverb that 'what shows you're a man is your pockets', it isn't what shows you're a man is your degree (laughs).

Ven der Geest's (1997) assertion that 'respect is bestowed primarily upon those who have turned their life into a success, and the most convincing proof of a successful life is money' (cited in Langevang (2008, p. 2044)) is highly prescient here, with the addition of a gender dimension. The modern professional football player encapsulates this perception, as Kwabena, a senior player from Future Icons FC explained.

If you are talking about the famous person in Ghana at the moment it is not the president it is Baby Jet, Asamoah Gyan (Sunderland AFC). They [footballers] are the men at the moment. Look at Essien (Chelsea FC), he comes back to Ghana and he is spending big. He can take care of his family and we this generation we want to go out and get money and look after our parents...you should see them when pre-season comes, they will come to Ghana and drive Wabenzu (Mercedes Benz). But we also want to live the X-Way (extraordinary) we don't want to just struggle.

I would argue that one of the underlying causes of the disparity in drop out rates between young males from the poorest and wealthiest quintiles is the prevalence of a social context in which a respectable masculine identity is associated with wealth. A 'Dada-ba'⁵ is likely to dine at Frankie's⁶ amongst Western expatriates, shop in Accra Mall, have access to cars, vacations abroad and other symbols of economic virility available to them. Thus while emasculation may occur in other aspects of their life, they hold a symbolic and material advantage over their financially constrained peers. They embody living the X-Way. This becomes increasingly apparent by junior and senior high school when income inequalities are likely to become more noticeable, particularly for those moving from local public schools to socioeconomically diverse private ones. The embarrassment that arose from having only 1 GHC for ice-cream makes more sense when framed within this context. It is clearly not in keeping with the X-Way of living, and importantly, it is not in keeping with the hegemonic ideal of masculinity associated with a footballer's lifestyle that these youth aspire to emulate.

It is not only in the classroom that disparities in socioeconomic conditions materialise. As I traversed Accra and became familiar with its geography, the salience of Ferguson's (2006) claim that in contrast to the colonial era a first class lifestyle is no longer restricted to Western expatriates was strikingly apparent. However, the problematization of liberal welfare governance requires individuals and families to assume the role of makers of their own 'livelihood mediated by the market as well as their biographical planning and organisation' (Beck, 1992, p. 130). Thus although a noticeable local elite have been able to attain wealth in contemporary neoliberal Ghana, contrary to early post-independence Ghana, the financially secure and affluent are not deemed indicative of an impending generalised societal condition underpinned by the state. In contemporary Accra, the diffusion of responsibility through a shifting of guidance and care of the self from the state to wider society, allocates the task of both social and individual

development upon individuals, households and other informal networks.

Over the course of numerous training sessions and subsequent discussions with young people at the three clubs, it became increasingly apparent that when many of them visualised a future in Accra and Ghana more generally, it was a future shrouded in uncertainty. In the absence of liberal welfare governance, the impression that they were or would be solely responsible for their future economic wellbeing was palpable. Accordingly, there was an acute awareness that if they were not doing so already, they would eventually have to assume the lead role in shaping a secure financial future. They imagined this future buttressed not by positive state intervention through welfare and formal employment provision, but as reliant upon their own ingenuity. Subsequently, uncertainty and risk merge within a seemingly never-ending search to grasp potential opportunities and avenues for survival. Kofi, an under-17 player at Future Icons FC touched upon this point as follows:

Outside⁷ it is better because you will always get something small from the government, but here in Africa that is not the way. If you are in school yes maybe it is ok, but once you have completed [school] you yourself must go out and fend and search for a chance to make your money.

Bauman suggests that the 'gradual yet consistent withdrawal of state-endorsed insurance against individual failure' is a challenge facing the 'developed part of the planet' (2007, p. 1). Yet it is precisely this construction of youthful Ghanaian subjects as being responsible for future life chances, decisions and opportunities within the process of neoliberal governance that underpins the sense of a less than certain future. Samson, an under-17 player at Barracks FC, described how prior to obtaining a mattress in a room with three other people, he endured a traumatic period in which he was homeless. He recounted the harrowing experience of searching Accra for abandoned cars to shelter in, and rummaging through bins for food to eat. The topic of finding ways to survive in challenging circumstances surfaced on numerous occasions. So how does one decide where to look and which path to follow in order to survive in the midst of this uncertainty? Ferguson's assertion 'that contemporary success stories are more likely to be seen as proving the power, *not of education and developmental uplift*, but of luck, ruthlessness, or even criminality (emphasis added 2006, p. 187), is also highly significant. Youth already disillusioned with the merits of education are increasingly aware of football related success stories.

A career in professional football now appears to not only allow male youth in Accra to circumvent an education system leading them towards unemployment or unsatisfactory employment, it also provides them with an opportunity to live how a young Ghanaian male should, the 'X-Way'. Addae, the owner of Austin Texans FC, noted how they believe this is a crucial factor in the decision to 'drop out' upon reaching the vital juncture outlined in Section 2.

AA— So now as a young kid in junior high you know people are politicians, doctors and lawyers but ask yourself who are living the most glamorous lives? It is the sports star. This guy was one of us just walking around the neighbourhood with the same shorts who didn't have money for food and lived in an apartment with a leaky roof. All of a sudden because he got the chance to go to Europe, now he has moved his mother out of the neighbourhood, bought a car for his brother and uncle. 'Oh, why don't I also become a footballer?' Maybe his uncle

⁵ Dada-ba literally means 'father's child', a term sometimes used to describe a spoilt male youth from an affluent family.

⁶ An expensive restaurant in Osu.

⁷ In Ghana the term 'outside' primarily refers to the West but can also be used more generally to indicate a locality beyond Africa.

wants to pay for him to go to a technical school to become a mechanic or engineer but no he sees that as rubbish.

JE– It's not the 'X-Way'.

AA– Exactly you understand, so you see the problem. The deciding factor is that they have seen what Essien (Chelsea FC) can do. Essien didn't have a degree neither does Asamoah Gyan (Sunderland FC) or Derek Boateng (AFC Getafe). So it is the same dream and that is why the boys play on the pitch we have and they keep coming to training everyday.

JE– Who have they actually seen make it in football?

AA– Here Prince Tagoe (Hoffenheim) he made it. He played on the same pitch so they have seen him go through the ranks. Vorsar (Hoffenheim) came from the same neighbourhood. It is the dream and they are looking up to us to get them a contract somewhere.

Although I am a Ghanaian by birth and parentage, having lived in Britain for the majority of my life I initially found this perspective perplexing. It reflected the fact that young Ghanaian would-be footballers had a very different understanding of the balance between merit and reward than I did. Although a talented player myself, as a teenager I perceived the relative likelihood of success in football to be much lower than in alternative professions. It was my understanding that only exceptionally talented players went onto be successful. I therefore never considered pursuing a career in professional football, as investing in my footballing ability was deemed too risky. Yet for the Ghanaian males I encountered in Accra, there is far less to lose and more to gain by taking a gamble on the claim that you are good enough to become a professional football player. It is however one thing to propose that you are dropping out of school to become a professional football player because you have seen others do so, and quite another entirely to think you are actually capable of achieving this feat. So why do increasing numbers of male youth in Accra think they are capable of becoming professional football players?

5. Rise of the entrepreneur of self

The question as to why male youth in Accra think they are capable of becoming professional football players, is of course also dependent upon understanding who or what they think they are becoming. What is a footballer? Brackenridge suggests that a young person involved in professional football is simultaneously a 'worker, a unit of labour, and a commodity, to be traded in multinational markets' (Brackenridge, 2010, p. 3). Neoliberal capitalism's model of exchange and value extends itself to include the individual, in this case a football player, facilitating what appears to be a commodification of self. This description reflects that as part of this system of exchange and value, football players are employees of, owned by and traded between clubs for a fee. They therefore resemble the Marxist interpretation of a commodity, in that they are produced and offered for sale within a capitalist mode of production (Appadurai, 1994). Alternatively, even when non-economic relations are explored, it often gives rise to a discourse of neo-colonial exploitation (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2007; Lanfranchi and Taylor, 2001). We again see the influence of Marx, as drawing on dependency and world systems literature this process is argued to involve the sourcing, refinement and export of 'raw materials' (African football players), for consumption and wealth generation in the European core, inducing impoverishment of the African periphery (Darby, 2007). Yet this sheds no light on the interconnected simultaneity inherent in the process of being a worker, raw material, a unit of labour and commodity.

I agree with Poli's (2010) concern that the term commodity is inadequate, as it fails to recognise a key peculiarity of this situation, namely, the humanity of the commodity in question. In order

to conceptualise why male youth in Accra opt to aspire to, and think they can become professional football players, I propose that we relocate our reference point away from structural and economic analysis fixated with modes of production and exchange. Influenced by Bourdieu (1989), my basis for doing so acknowledges that the social structures highlighted by pushing aside the subjective representations of these male African youth, do influence the latter's practices by establishing constraints and prescribing possible paths. Yet these representations and the mental structures that underpin them must also be taken into account, because as this article has shown, they inform how these young people understand, react to or transform their situation. Similarly, Foucault (2008) suggests that in order to understand labour we must adopt the position of the worker, and not present them in our analysis as merely an object of supply and demand in the form of labour power. These young men are not merely objects of supply and demand in the form of a commodity, raw material, or unit of labour power in the football industry. They are active subjects cognisant of, and engaging with socioeconomic contexts. Accordingly, we should try to understand from their perspective, what a professional football player is and why they think they can become one.

This position brings us back to Schultz's proposition that in contrast to unskilled individuals who remain at the mercy of others, those with sufficient human capital are able to take control of their own productivity and wealth creation. The decision to 'drop out' and pursue a career in professional football is not a dismissal of the basic logic of human capital theory, or investing in oneself to obtain an income. These male youth concur that in contrast to unskilled individuals who remain at the mercy of others, those with appropriate human capital are able to take control of their own productivity and wealth creation. Rather, it is a dismissal of government and developmental institutions' narrow interpretations, which run counter to neoliberal logic. The latter emphasises that educational investment is much broader than schooling, and that many more elements are involved in the formation of appropriate human capital (Foucault, 2008). The crucial issue for these male youth is deciding what form this investment should take, as opposed to limiting themselves to society's default option of education.

If income in the form of wages is a return on human capital investment (consisting of the physical and psychological attributes that enable a person to earn remuneration i.e. both innate and acquired attributes), then human capital becomes both that which makes a future possible income through a wage, and inseparable from the person who possesses it (Foucault, 2008). To that extent it is not like other forms of capital, nor a conception of labour power, rather it is a notion of capital ability. Neoliberal capitalism's model of exchange and value extends itself to include the individual, but not as a partner of exchange facilitating a commodification of self, rather the individual becomes an enterprise. The holder of appropriate human capital is not only able to acquire a wage, but becomes 'an entrepreneur of self, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings' (Foucault, 2008). These young men could therefore pursue other status enhancing entrepreneurial activities, for example as actors, models, hiplife artists and other musical careers (see Cho, 2010). A small minority did declare an interest in becoming musicians if they were unsuccessful in football, or even alongside football if they 'made it'. However for the majority, the West African professional football player who is able to draw upon his natural sporting bodily capital to obtain spatial mobility and live the 'X-Way' epitomised success. Richard, an under-17 player at Future Icons FC highlights this point below:

The under-twenty national team that won in Egypt were all given a Toyota Corolla, even the managers and officials just

for playing football. If someone goes to the hospital and he is just about to die and the doctor saves him I don't think the government will give him a car, but someone who plays football to get an opportunity for himself is given a car? So many of us stop and we think...I get some boots, some kit and I can become a footballer and earn for myself.

Importantly, Herbert Adika also explained that the assumption Ghanaian's are naturally gifted football players is now ubiquitous, a belief which fuels the perception that *becoming* a footballer is a feasible alternative to other professions.

Here people think we have the talent that is the attitude, and they say 'I know it so I can go for it', so they go thinking that if they put the ball down they can play. Everybody is now drifting into football and it is that thing which is killing all of us. So you see if everybody will get to where it is good for him then we will make it, but presently everybody wants to play football by force but all of us cannot be footballers.

If young Ghanaian males are now desperate to 'play football by force', it is because they are obliged to rely on their own ingenuity to forge a future for themselves. This sense of individuation, competition and the treatment of the body as capital embodied in the football player as an 'entrepreneur of self', are all linked to this wider construction of youthful West Africans as responsible for their own future life chances. This situation highlights an underlying contradiction in Ghanaian development policy. On the one hand there is a belief that to develop Ghana it is necessary to transform its citizens into formerly educated, atomised and individuated neoliberal subjects capable of managing their own wealth creation. While on the other hand, there is a belief that despite successfully instilling such a form of subjectivity, young men in Ghana will be willing to remain enamoured with a system that fails to keep its end of the bargain. In other words, if the idea that individuals must take responsibility for their own future has been successfully internalized in a context where educational investment is considered superfluous. It is understandable that these same individuals will seek to reconfigure the education (school)-social mobility link so widely promulgated in Ghana, and replace schooling with something else, in this case football.

6. Conclusion

Examining why young Ghanaian males are prioritizing a career in professional football offers a novel insight into how amidst socio-economic uncertainty, West African youth attempt to acquire markers of social status associated with adulthood. Male youth at three Ghanaian football clubs initially claimed that the spiraling cost of privatised education had forced them to 'drop out' out of school during the transition from junior to senior secondary school. Turning to a career in professional football at this vital juncture, was the unfortunate outcome of their socioeconomic situation, and they were keen to continue their education later. This situation, at least on the surface, appeared to corroborate Jeffrey's (2010) claim that the opportunity to enter pre-tertiary education is no longer the central problem for children and youth in many parts of the Global South. Instead, it is remaining present in school as they grapple with the privatisation of education. However, despite enthusiastically claiming they were keen to attend school, the disjuncture between their words and actions began to unravel. In a context where the supply of educated labour exceeds demand, as appears to be the case in contemporary Accra, a perception of 'qualification inflation' has promulgated the belief that returns from education are in decline or insufficient. Thus for these male youth, the belief that education is a prerequisite for individual

social mobility has lost credibility. Problematically, Ghanaian society now constructs these youthful subjects as being responsible for future life chances, and education is promoted as the prerequisite for individual and social development.

This idea that young African subjects must take full responsibility for their own future life chances is, in the context of Ghana, relatively new. It has largely replaced the idea that individuals exist within extended communities, and in the post-independence era of President Kwame Nkrumah's social developmentalism, the idea that the state would assist in welfare provision. Similarly to Douala as depicted by Simone (2005), these young males residing in contemporary Accra feel detached from post-independence narratives of national and social development. This shifting of duty has produced a different form of subjectivity, one in which an individual is obliged to take greater responsibility for their future. I am not suggesting that discourses concerning social development do not exist in Ghana, they undoubtedly do e.g. Ghana's Vision 2020 program. The problem in this case is that Ghana's recent macro-economic success is of little relevance to these individuals, because their own resources, qualifications and capacities cannot help them to enjoy the material benefits of such growth. This is even more frustrating because life becomes 'an economy of goods that are known, that may sometimes be seen, that one wants to enjoy, but to which one will never have material access' (Mbembe cited in Ferguson (2006, p. 192)).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a key attraction of a career in professional football is the associated fame and financial remuneration. But these factors are amplified in Accra, because Ghanaian society places high expectations and tremendous pressure on young males to be successful in material terms, reproducing a sense of monetary success as an inherently masculine trait. Therefore the youth at all three clubs were not aspiring to just any kind of adulthood, but well paid 'serious jobs', entailing respect and authority. Accordingly, like other West African youth in the midst of a vital juncture, they appraised the potential and limitations of their spatial location, and evaluated where and with whom prospects seemed better (see also Langevang, 2008). The dialectic of subjective hope and objective chances imprints definitions of the impossible and possible upon them. They are aware of objective influences and combine these with preconceived subjective notions of personal limitations. From this they are able to translate a future they believe to be tailor made for them, one that does not involve joining the masses in the feminized domain of informal employment. Crucially, in this case, they also contemplated how they could draw on their own ingenuity to create opportunities that enable them to be both self-sufficient and live their desired masculine lifestyle. A lifestyle they referred to as the X-Way. For these male youth, the West African professional football player offers a visible solution to their plight. He is an 'entrepreneur of self', an individual who is able to draw upon his natural sporting bodily capital to earn an income and live the X-Way.

I would like to conclude by highlighting a concern. Although this article used three Ghanaian football clubs as a case study and further research may be required to assess the pervasiveness of the sentiments uncovered above, the increasing prevalence of young males pursuing a career in football is occurring throughout West Africa, particularly in Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Senegal (see Darby et al., 2007; Poli, 2010). My concern is linked to Herbert Adika astute observation that 'all of us cannot be footballers'. Thus a generation of poorly educated males keen to live the X-Way is diverting their energies and attention towards a profession that is unlikely to reciprocate this devotion with employment and social mobility. If this situation is left unchecked, in a decade or two from now the ramifications may prove problematic for Ghanaian, and West African society more broadly.

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