When Dreams Deflect? Role Models and Human Capital in Brazil

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August 31, 2025

1 Introduction

Aspirations are central to human capital investment, and exposure to role models can shape these aspirations in profound ways (Riley, 2024; Nguyen, 2008; Moreira, 2019). In Brazil—the "country of football"—footballers occupy a privileged cultural position. For children and adolescents, the success of a local player in professional leagues can serve as a highly salient signal. This paper investigates whether the educational trajectories of students are affected when a football player from their municipality debuts in a top team. We combine administrative education data and original footballer career histories to test whether exposure to local role models influences dropout, pass, and fail rates, as well as standardized test scores.

Our contributions are threefold. First, we provide causal evidence that the success of male footballers reduces dropout and raises pass rates in their hometowns. Second, we explore whether female footballers generate similar impacts, finding little evidence of effects. Third, we test for alternative explanations—such as improvements in school sports infrastructure—and find none, supporting the interpretation of a role-model channel.

2 Data

Footballers. We scraped Wikipedia pages of 7,463 Brazilian players, identifying their birthplaces and professional trajectories. Players are classified as joining a "top" team if they appear in a Brazilian team, European leagues, or the Brazilian national team.

Education. From the Ministry of Education's *Censo Escolar* we obtain annual pass, fail, and dropout rates for middle and high school, by grade, age, and sex, 2011–2019. From *SAEB* we use standardized test scores in Portuguese and Math for 5th and 9th grades.

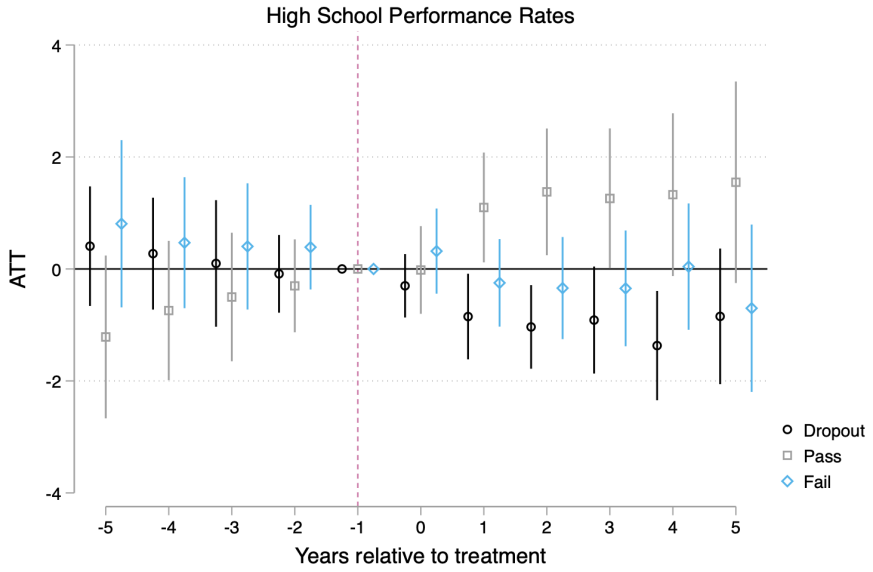
Sample Restriction. We focus on municipalities with fewer than 50,000 residents, ensuring that a player's success is salient enough to be widely known locally. In total, 241 municipalities were first "treated" with a male footballer debut between 2012 and 2019, and 17 with a female footballer.

3 Empirical Strategy

We implement an event study design with staggered treatment timing, following Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). For municipality m in year t:

$$Y_{mt} = \sum_{y=-5}^{+5} \beta_y \cdot 1\{t - t_m^* = y\} + \delta_m + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{mt}, \tag{1}$$

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where Y_{mt} are education outcomes, t_m^* is the debut year of a local footballer, and δ_m, δ_t are municipality and year fixed effects. Controls include baseline GDP per capita, municipal education index, household income, and cash transfers per capita.

Treatment definition: the first year a player from municipality m debuts in a top team. Control municipalities are those with no debuts during the period, or ever before.

4 Results

Male Footballers. High school dropout rates fall and pass rates rise following a local footballer's debut. Effects are strongest among boys aged 15–19, consistent with football being most aspirational at that age. Girls also benefit, though to a smaller magnitude.

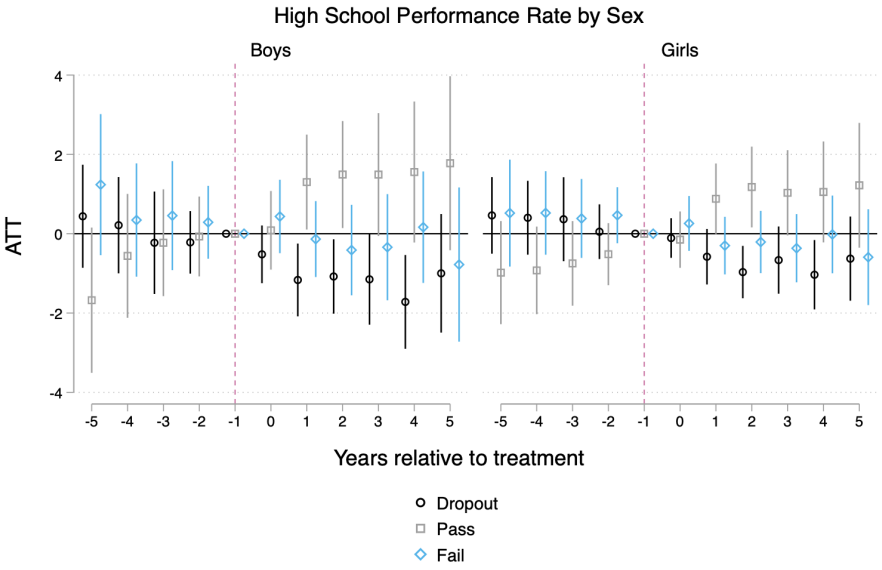
Peer Effects and Indirect Inspiration. Effects on girls' education go in a similar direction, but in slightly smaller magnitude. Two channels are plausible: (i) indirect inspiration—success signals that upward mobility is possible, even outside football; (ii) peer spillovers, consistent with Cipollone and Rosolia (2007) —boys' improved behavior or motivation improves classroom environments for girls. Future work will interact treatment with classroom sex ratios to test these hypotheses.

Female Footballers. We find no significant effects on dropout, pass, or fail rates. Point estimates are close to zero.

School Infrastructure. We checked whether treatment coincides with changes in sports infrastructure, in line with players influencing local infrastructure. No increases in school football courts are observed, confirming that effects operate through role-model inspiration rather than material investments. Moreover, the effects do not differ between municipalities with and without school courts.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides novel evidence that local role models shape educational trajectories. Footballers' debuts reduce dropout and improve pass rates in their hometowns, with boys responding most strongly. Girls also benefit, albeit indirectly, suggesting broader aspirational or peer effects.



Female footballers show no detectable impact, consistent with visibility gaps, cultural norms, and/or structural barriers limiting their inspirational power, which we are currently investigating. The absence of infrastructure effects further underscores the role-model channel.

Our findings speak to a broader literature on aspirations and human capital formation: success stories outside of education can still encourage persistence within school. Yet, the unequal influence of male and female footballers highlights how visibility and opportunity structures shape the reach of role models.

Future research will test proposed mechanisms more directly, using media coverage, baby names, gender-progressiveness proxies, and classroom composition. We also plan to extend the analysis to other public figures and domains, broadening our understanding of whether and how "dreams deflect" into education.

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