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# **‘It is a grey area in sport, not just in school’: A figurational analysis of banter in secondary Physical Education in England**

## **Abstract**

This article provides a figurational sociological analysis of how secondary school pupils and teachers perceived, manifested and determined (in)appropriate banter in Physical Education (PE). Generated through lesson observations, pupil focus groups and teacher interviews, ethnographic data is thematically analysed and interpreted through Elias’s (1978, 2012) concepts of figuration and individual civilising process. Banter was increasingly normalised and legitimised amongst most older pupils, who often enjoyed banter’s motivating and competitive functions. Such productive functions were deemed appropriate, whilst judgements on inappropriate banter were fluid, relationally dependent and emotion laden. Within a PE figuration centred on sociality, competitiveness and performance-related commentary, to successfully understand, engage in and navigate (in)appropriate banter, older pupils embodied cognitive foresight, social awareness and emotional intelligence. Given these qualities, social constructions of appropriateness, and policy-based concerns regarding inappropriateness, we recommend educators/pupils and coaches/players develop a localised shared understanding of appropriate banter and agreed mechanism to report inappropriate banter.

**Keywords:** Banter, Physical Education, secondary school, figuration, individual civilizing process

## **Introduction**

In sport there are various levels of ‘banter’ which can go from mild to harsh... Banter is something that most teams engage in. Banter is a form of gentle ribbing by friends, colleagues and teammates; it is episodic (ie irregular), never intended to cause harm and importantly reciprocal. (Grey-Thompson, 2017, pp.16-17)

Taken from *The Duty in Care in Sport Report*, commissioned by the United Kingdom (UK) Government, this extract emphasises banter’s prevalence, good-naturedness and degrees of severity within English sporting cultures. Whilst the term banter is considered ‘quite elastic’ (Hein and O’Donohoe, 2014, p.1303), it is often defined as reciprocated humorously framed jokes, insults, or mockery between friends, colleagues and teammates (Buglass et al., 2021; Grey-Thompson, 2017; Rivers and Ross, 2021). Given these characteristics, banter can serve productive, prosocial and enjoyable functions (Budden et al., 2022; Lowe et al., 2021; Plester and Sayers, 2007). However, whilst distinguishing both behaviours, Abell et al. (2023), Booth et al. (2023) and Newman et al. (2022a) demonstrate how banter can be deemed inappropriate, offensive, and escalate into a form of verbal

bullying. These dual functions have also been evidenced in Physical Education (PE) based environments (Green et al., 2024; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020, 2024), whilst educational policies reference banter's potential detrimental effects:

It is essential that all staff understand the importance of challenging *inappropriate* behaviours between children that are abusive in nature. Downplaying certain behaviours, for example dismissing sexual harassment as 'just banter', 'just having a laugh', 'part of growing up', or 'boys being boys' can lead to a *culture of unacceptable behaviours* and in worst case scenarios normalise abuse leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it. (Department for Education, 2023, p.12, italics added)

Cited within the *Keeping Children Safe in Education* statutory guidance, this extract illustrates the need for teachers to confront abusive behaviours by holding account those pupils who masquerade it as banter to avoid such behaviours becoming normalised and legitimised. Furthermore, the Anti-Bullying Alliance (2023) discovered that 26% of teachers believed face-to-face banter is a serious problem in schools, whilst 62% agreed that there is a fine and subjective line of acceptability between banter and bullying.

The line between banter and bullying is arguably significant to secondary school PE (11-16 years) given that studies evidence the prevalence of verbal bullying (Green et al., 2024; Tischler and McCaughtry, 2011; Wei and Graber, 2023). Furthermore, Mierzwinski and Velija (2020, 2024) evidence how pupils and PE teachers often struggled to differentiate banter from bullying. This differentiation can be increasingly challenging given Smith and Parr (2007) and Wilkinson and Penney's (2022) reference to PE's highly social, often competitive, and team-based practices. Therefore, in this article, we provide empirical insights into pupils' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of (in)appropriate banter by answering the following research questions:

1. How and why is banter normalised in secondary PE?
2. How and why is banter manifested in secondary PE?
3. How do pupils and teachers determine inappropriate banter in secondary PE?

Ethnographic insights are thematically analysed and interpreted through figurational concepts of figuration and individual civilising process. Given our original empirical PE focus, the following literature review is predominately based upon broader education-based and sport studies, a difference partially abated as PE is often viewed as synonymous with sport (Smith and Parr, 2007; Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022).

## **Literature Review**

*The normalised nature of banter within youth sport cultures*

Qualitative research reveals that banter is often integrated within English sporting cultures. Mierzwinski and Velija (2024) reported that banter is common practice in male secondary PE and understood to be an important aspect of boys' (11-14 years) peer- and teacher-pupil relations. Further detailing this finding, Mierzwinski and Velija (2024) explained how banter became increasingly normalised and legitimised through the years, with older boys regularly bantering with peers and male teachers during lessons. Outside of PE, Booth et al. (2023) found that banter was common amongst players (young males) and coaches (adults) at Community FC and deemed an important aspect of the football club's culture. Further illustrating banter's integration within youth sport cultures, Hague and Law (2023) discovered how banter was ever-present within a professional male football academy (16-19 years). Equally, Abell et al. (2023) denoted banter's 24/7 nature within university sports clubs and societies. Collectively, these findings support Grey-Thompson's (2017, p.16) claim that 'banter is something most teams engage in', evidencing the normalised nature of banter within English sporting cultures. Therefore, in this paper we seek to build upon Mierzwinski and Velija's (2024) findings by examining how and why banter is normalised within secondary PE.

#### *The multiple functions of banter within sporting environments*

Banter has been found to provide productive, prosocial and enjoyable functions in sporting environments. Lawless and Magrath (2021) discovered how within an adult male cricket team banter fostered homosocial bonding by strengthening group solidarity and friendship, serving inclusionary functions. Similarly, Hugman (2021) found that dressing room banter fostered high degrees of rapport, peer support and solidarity amongst a male university football team. Offering two further functions, Budden et al. (2022) reported how banter enabled adult males within a sport-based weight-loss programme to overcome heated moments and escape everyday pressures, positively effecting group dynamics. As detailed by Abell et al. (2023), these evidenced functions demonstrate how banter can provide a sense of mutual identification and harness feelings of belonging. These reported productive, prosocial and enjoyable functions arguably explain why banter is often manifested within sporting environments.

Despite such cathartic and inclusive functions, banter has also been found to be discriminatory, divisive and offensive within educational and sporting environments. Lawless and Magrath (2021) cited how exclusionary banter involved humorously framed comments that crossed the line of acceptability, serving what Rivers and Ross (2021, p.879) labelled as 'banter violations', marking transitional points whereby banter becomes bullying. Offering insights into possible transitional points, Buglass et al. (2021) and Steer et al. (2020) referred to comments targeting an individual's identity, including appearance-related jokes, whilst Abell et al. (2023) and Booth et al. (2023) referenced humorously framed gendered, sexist, or homophobic slurs, and Burdsey (2011) and Lawless and Magrath (2021) cited racist or ethnic undertones. One indicator of a violation is when banter involves negative

referencing towards protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (see GOV.UK, 2015), possibilities recognised by the Anti-Bullying Alliance (2023), the Department for Education (2023), and Grey-Thompson (2017). Collectively, these findings demonstrate how banter can serve negative functions, further explaining why banter is often manifested within educational and sporting environments. Therefore, in this paper we examine how and why banter manifests in secondary PE.

### *Determining inappropriate banter in educational and sporting environments*

Despite banter negatively referencing protected characteristics being generally considered unacceptable, determining appropriate banter has been found to involve further relational and situational factors. Steer et al. (2020) discovered that secondary school pupils often perceived online banter exchanged between non-friends as offensive and ‘bad banter’. Providing further considerations, when discussing rules for engaging in banter, Buglass et al. (2021) detailed how university students moderated degrees of appropriateness contextually, adapting humour styles and content to specific audiences. Drawing greater distinction from bullying, Abell et al. (2023) denoted how banter lost its humour and became offensive when repetitive and not reciprocated. Given these differentiations, it is not surprising that ‘bad banter’ has been questioned, problematised and affiliated with bullying. Whilst acknowledging how bullying can involve isolated incidents, Booth et al. (2023) found that amateur coaches positioned repetition as a distinguishing feature between banter and bullying, but players believed that banter can be repetitive if exchanged between friends. However, whilst distinguishing features, Newman et al. (2022a) found that male professional footballers held differing perspectives on the width of divisions between banter and bullying, whilst coaches suggested that boundaries may vary depending on the recipient’s feelings at the time of comment (Newman et al., 2022b). Collectively, these findings illustrate how, when combined, mutuality, repetition, and emotions largely determine how (in)appropriate banter is socially constructed.

Unpacking the role of emotions and reception in determining (in)appropriate banter, Booth et al. (2023) reported that boys differentiated banter from bullying based upon recipients’ reactions, rather than speakers’ intent, arguably signifying a victim-centred approach. Noting this approach, Newman et al. (2022a) discovered that (un)acceptable banter was primarily judged upon recipients’/victims’ body language. Relying on visual rather than verbal cues is problematic given normalised stoic responses found within sporting cultures (Abell et al., 2023; Booth et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022a). Indeed, Green et al. (2024) and Mierzewski and Velija (2020) found that in secondary PE pupils often masked their emotions when offended to avoid (further) peer conflict and/or friendship loss. Given a reliance on non-verbal cues, young people’s stoic responses, and their reluctance to report, pupils and teachers face challenges in determining (in)appropriate banter in PE. Therefore, in this study, we examine how pupils and teachers determine inappropriate banter in secondary PE.

### **Figurational Sociology**

To explain how (in)appropriate banter is predicated upon young people's behavioural norms, peer relations and emotional expressions, the reviewed literature often drew upon gender theories (hegemonic/inclusive masculinity) or utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis. Given our mixed sex sample and relational/emotional focus, we adopt figurational concepts of figuration and individual civilizing process. Central to this adoption is recognising how banter can be socially constructed in nuanced ways depending on environmental conditions within secondary PE. Elias (1978, p.261) used the term figuration to denote 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people', which combine to form social bonds and networks of interdependence. These relational bonds and networks, Elias (1978) maintained, foster and are underpinned by power relations. Elias (1978) stressed the inherently relational, asymmetric and fluctuating characteristics of power, meaning individuals can never possess complete power, nor be completely powerless. Driven by this conception, Elias (1978) argued that individuals' thoughts and behaviours should not be viewed in isolation, but rather examined through chains of interdependence, asymmetric power relations, and prevailing enabling and constraining processes within figuration.

In this article, we position PE as a figuration that is part of a broader school figuration. This positioning is based upon the fact that co-educational secondary schools (11-16 years) in England often group young people into a mixed-sex form class of approximately 30 same-year pupils, who report each morning and afternoon to a form tutor. From here, pupils are timetabled into several different subject lessons, usually mixed-sexed and ability-grouped, and taught by a specialist teacher. Despite this secondary school figuration, core PE is often single-sex, mixed-ability and delivered by same-sex teachers (Smith and Parr, 2007; Stride et al. 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022). Furthermore, PE involves unique spaces (i.e. gymnasiums, sports halls/fields, changing rooms), requires different attire, and entails physical and group-based competition within an often highly social environment. Given PE's unique characteristics, we examine a) how pupils and teachers are socially bonded and interdependent within this environment, b) how their behaviours are enabled and constrained, and c) how power within pupils' peer- and teacher-relations impacts upon how banter is determined, received and reacted to, and d) how, collectively, these considerations underpin perceptions of (in)appropriate banter.

The literature reviewed also demonstrated how appropriate banter is partly predicated upon rules of engagement, emotional resilience and prevailing societal attitudes towards discrimination. We examine such predications through the lens of Elias's (2012) concept individual civilizing process. Elias (2012) denoted how individuals undergo a civilizing process whereby they gradually internalise social constraints and embody broader long-term civilizing processes passed down through generations. Whilst similar to the concept of socialisation, Elias (2012) stressed how humans must learn to exercise sufficient degrees of emotional self-restraint and foresight over their actions to engage in civilized behaviours and social relations. Comparing this process, Elias (1987, p.355) writes, 'a child's learning of language is made possible by the intertwining of processes: a biological process of maturation and a

social learning process'. In this sense, Elias (1987, 2012) understood behaviours, attitudes and emotions as dependent on time, culture, figurational structures and prevailing conventions. In this article, we consider how engaging in appropriate banter requires degrees of cognitive, social and emotional intelligence. We examine how pupils and teachers determine (in)appropriate banter within a PE figuration, which is part bounded by civilizing customs but can also contain nuanced and fluctuating civilities.

Finally, reviewed literature demonstrated how (in)appropriate banter was part-identified through how it was received, which could be problematic given many young people's stoic responses. As part of the individual civilizing process, Elias (1987) explains how emotional expression involves three components: a) a behavioural component (i.e. voice or physical act), b) a physiological component (i.e. blushing or raised heart rate), and a feeling component (i.e. pride, anger, or love). Comparing human to non-human emotions, Elias (1987, p.356) considers how only humans can mask their emotions, stating that 'what shows itself on one's "outside", for instance on one's face, is merely a derivative or else an "expression", and an often distorted expression, of what one is feeling inside". As such, Elias (1987) believed that humans may use behavioural and/or physiological responses (i.e. displaying a smile) to mask their feelings. In this article, we apply this conception of emotion to examine how pupils receive and react to inappropriate banter, and to what extent these part-determine pupils' and teachers' conceptions of inappropriate banter in secondary PE.

## **Research Methods**

Given this article's research questions and focus on how pupils and PE teachers determined (in)appropriate banter, an interpretivist research methodology was adopted when completing an ethnography. Between January and July 2022, Author One conducted fieldwork at one state-funded school in the north of England, pseudonymised throughout as Lord Taylor's School (LTS). LTS was identified through a criterion sampling strategy based on state-funded co-education secondary school which delivered single-sex PE lessons. This three-part criterion was part-based on examining the most widely utilised school and PE structure in England, and part-driven by our desire to address a lack of literature concerning banter in PE, particularly in girls PE. At the time of study, LTS had a pupil population of approximately 1500 pupils (ages 11-16 years), of which approximately a) 20% were eligible for pupil premium <sup>1</sup>, b) 15% of pupils were Black or Minority Ethnic, and c) 10% had a registered special educational need or disability. Core PE was delivered in bi-weekly lessons, with pupils grouped in year-specific, mixed-ability, and sex-segregated classes, and taught by same-sex teachers.

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<sup>1</sup> The pupil premium grant is funding to improve the educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England.

After receiving university ethical approval, data collection consisted of participant observations, focus groups, and individual interviews. 120 core PE lessons were observed across Years 7 (11-12 years of age), 10 (14-15 years of age), and 11 (15-16 years of age), which included an equal number of boys' and girls' lessons. The classes were observed due to timetabling, pragmatics of fieldwork (i.e. three-day researcher immersion), and broader research aim to capture age and gender-based findings. To adhere to agreed ethical protocol, when observing, Author One accompanied the designated class teacher, actively avoided lone working, and engaging in pupil or pupil-teacher banter. In this sense, designated class teachers were responsible for identifying and addressing inappropriate banter, with Author One only once contacting the Gatekeeper (Head of PE) about the safeguarding of pupils (pupil report of a peer's racist remark). For the purposes of this article, observations served to triangulate pupils and teachers' perceptions and experiences of normalising banter, functions of banter and how (in)appropriate banter was determined.

These perceptions and experiences were gathered and probed during teacher interviews and pupil focus groups, completed towards the latter part of the seven-month ethnography. Focus group and interview guides were part informed from observational data, reviewed literature, and seeking to answer the article's three research questions. Focus group questions were carefully constructed to avoid overly personalising responses or probing sensitive topics, such as racism or specific cases of bullying, mitigating any potential harm caused through participation. Furthermore, whilst pupils and teachers were reminded of the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, they were also informed of Author's One obligation to report any responses deemed in breach of the school's safeguarding policy. 14 single-sex focus groups were conducted with 49 pupils (25 boys and 24 girls) across Years 7, 10, and 11, lasting between 19-48 minutes. Within the 16-question focus group guide, pupils were asked: *to what extent does banter take place in PE? Why do pupils banter in PE? How do pupils respond to banter in PE? What would you consider appropriate and inappropriate banter in PE?* During individual semi-structured interviews, similar questions were posed to nine PE teachers (6 male and 3 female), which produced insights into how teachers perceived and experienced banter and why they utilised banter during PE lessons, as well as triangulating observational and focus group data. Focus groups and interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim for analysis purposes.

All data was pseudonymised before being imported into NVivo-12, a qualitative data analysis software. From here, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phased guide to thematic analysis was followed, beginning with Author One refamiliarizing himself with the data by re-reading transcripts and highlighting points of interest in relation to the research questions. Phase two began with Author One inductively selecting and assigning extracts to a node - a grouping tool in N-Vivo - such as 'banter as a normalised behaviour in PE', 'sledding in PE', and 'fluid lines of appropriateness'. As part of phase three, Author One grouped and formalised such empirically grounded nodes into thematic codes, mainly informed by the article's research questions. From here, phase four involved thematic codes being analysed through the



conceptual lenses of figuration and individual civilizing process to deductively develop identified codes into themes. Adhering to phase five, Author One shared developed themes with Author Two, who critically reviewed them in terms of strength of theme and applicability to the article's research questions, whilst reflecting on and critiquing Author One's positionality. This latter process involved engaging with Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive mechanisms to critically acknowledge Author One's role within the data collection and analysis process as a male neophyte ethnography. This process culminated in the following themes being agreed and defined: a) the normalising of banter within the PE figuration b) manifesting appropriate banter and pupils' individual civilizing process, and c) determining appropriate from inappropriate banter and pupils' emotional self-restraint. These themes collectively foreground phase six whereby both authors wrote up the following results and discussion section.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The normalising of banter within the PE figuration***

Observations revealed that over 80% of the content within 120 PE lessons involved competitive team-based sport, such as football, basketball and rugby (boys) and netball, rounders, football (girls), demonstrating the central role of (gendered) sporting activities within the implementation of the National Curriculum for Physical Education (Stride et al. 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022) and illustrating PE synonymity with sport (Smith and Parr, 2007). Given LTS's competitive sport preference and evidence of banter's commonality within sporting environments (Abell et al., 2023; Lawless and Magrath, 2021; Newman et al., 2022a), it was not surprising that regular instances of banter were observed during PE lessons, becoming increasingly frequent with age. Whilst each observation of banter was nuanced given the relational and fluid nature of banter, the following fieldnote offers a generic example of banter within PE at LTS, capturing the often performance-related nature of teacher and pupil communication:

#### Fieldnote 14<sup>th</sup> April 2022 – Year 10 Boys Basketball

During a transition between games, Ben (sporty boy) and Mr Wharfedale were exchanging humorously framed jibes about Ben's inability to perform a lay-up in the previous game. Mr Wharfedale joked, "basketball captain? You'll be lucky to make the bench, lad". Laughing, Ben replied, "you see Sir, I've got a dodgy PE teacher. What chance do I?", to which Sir laughed loudly. Overhearing the exchange, Ben's four teammates made comments about Ben "costing us the game", whilst also calling Mr Wharfedale a "one trick pony", due to his expertise in football.

Supporting such observations, when asked '*to what extent, if any, does banter take place during PE lessons?*' Toby (Year 7) reported, 'not at all, really', whilst Natalie (Year 11) noted that, 'it [banter]

happens a lot, like an awful lot', and Miss Jones indicated that, 'it [banter] is more prevalent in upper school than lower school, definitely'. Probing this trend, Mr Walker explained:

As they get older, they have got more confident, and I like to think that my lessons are relaxed enough where they can do that [exchange banter with me]. If I make a mistake and the kids give me grief for it, then fair enough. But I like to make sure they know where the line is and if it stays on PE and doesn't spill out into any other lessons then I am more than happy.

Speaking to a possible culture of banter in PE relative to other subjects, Mickey (Year 10) reported:

In PE, you probably do it [banter] a lot more, like you have more of a laugh in PE than in maths, because in maths you get told off a lot more. Whereas in PE it is a bit more free and they [PE teachers] don't tell you off as much.

Recognising enabling opportunities to banter offered, Nick (Year 11) also referred to PE as an academic escape, 'because we are in older years it is all about focusing on your work and getting stuff done, that is why PE is a bit of a break and a chance for people to enjoy it'. For further context, it is important to recognise that there is no formal assessment attached to core PE, unique to curricular subjects studied by Year 10 and 11 pupils.

Examining these empirical findings, it was clear that banter was popular, largely accepted and legitimised within the PE figuration at LTS. In this respect, the PE figuration was more enabling compared with other more socially constraining classroom-based figurations. This figurational difference also included a shift from knowledge-based and assessment-focused curricula, with older pupils benefitting from and embracing this form of academic escapism. The role of banter in this sense is reminiscent of Budden et al.'s (2022) finding concerning adult males using banter to escape everyday pressures. Other enabling factors included a) PE teachers socialising with pupils and legitimising banter through their engagements, b) greater levels of sociality available in PE lessons due to structural differences (i.e. changing rooms, more transitions and open spaces), and c) PE involving public performances and team-based activities which offered more opportunities for socialising, peer appraisal and commentary. These enabling factors were partly predicated upon pupils, and older pupils and teachers, mostly sharing close social bonds, which appeared to partially circumvent more classroom-based teacher-pupil didactic and formal relations, constraining pupils' ability to socially bond through humorous means. Across the PE figuration, these opportunities were more likely to be accepted amongst older pupils who appeared to better understand how and when to engage in banter and, therefore, feel more confident and able and to mock peers and teachers in an acceptable and enjoyable manner. Furthermore, it could be argued that, compared with their younger peers, older pupils have formed more established friendship bonds, gained greater degrees of mutual interest/identification, and developed heightened levels of shared understanding of banter. Contrastingly, younger pupils were less

familiarised with PE figurational dynamics, more socially constrained in their interactions (i.e. PE teachers maximising task-orientated activities), and less able to confidently openly mock peers or teachers without fear of causing offence and being reprimanded.

### *Manifesting appropriate banter and pupils' individual civilizing process*

Having established banter's commonality in PE at LTS, there was also observed differences in how banter functioned within younger and older peer groups. Younger pupils were occasionally observed making silly and/or teasing remarks towards peers but rarely teachers, whereas older pupils were regularly observed exchanging jovially framed insults (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014), humorously mocking (Steer et al., 2020), or gently ribbing (Grey-Thompson, 2017) their peers and/or PE teachers. When asked to reflect on the role of banter in PE, older pupils unanimously revealed how peer banter served a combination of competitive, motivational and/or enjoyment functions, with Abbie (Year 10) stating, 'I think it can be quite motivating, almost. Like if someone is making a joke about it [your performance] it makes you want to do better', whilst Lydia (Year 10) added, 'it makes it [PE] like more fun and makes you want to do sport'. Aware of these performance-related functions, PE teachers also used banter as a motivational pedagogical tool, as articulated by Miss Jones:

To some extent I would use banter to engage students and encourage them [pupils] to participate and obviously we [PE teachers] know a lot more about them because you have the time to have those conversations with girls rather than in a classroom setting. So, you can use your own personality if you want to put it under the banter bracket to try and engage them and motivate them, to put a smile on their face.

Although Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) found that some PE teachers engaged in inappropriate banter to ridicule, ostracise and marginalise some pupils, at LTS teachers' banter was more appropriately used for inclusionary purposes. Offering a similar sentiment, Mr Wilkinson reflected:

I think it is a part of sport, you know. Sometimes using banter as a way of encouraging or you know, for example if a ball goes really high in the air you say, "he is going to drop it, he is going to drop it". It is just a bit of banter.

This quote illustrates how banter in the form of 'sledging' (Duncan, 2019) was deemed an effective and legitimate pedagogical tool to make PE more social, competitive and fun. Replicating such sledging, pupils also engaged in performance-induced bantering, as described by Sean (Year 10), 'say you are doing dodgeball, I would always try and wind up my mates on the other team because it is like more intense... in a game you might want to try and sort of offend your friends'. Such examples were regularly observed, particularly when older boys played team sports:

As Jason prepared to take a freekick, Lewis (an opposing player) shouted, “he couldn’t hit a barn door that lad”, eliciting laughter from the spectating pupils when Jason missed the target. Shortly after a ripple of performance-related jibes from opposing players, Jason scored a goal and ran around the gymnasium with his finger to his lip, as if to silence his peers, smirking when doing so. Mr Wharfedale and many of the boys laughed at and applauded Jason’s celebration. During the next game, one of the boys was labelled ‘Karius’ by his teammates after conceding a ‘howler’ [a term used to denote a costly sporting mistake]. When touching the ball, members of the opposing team shouted “careful, Karius”. By the end of the lesson many of the boys had been given nicknames of professional footballers who are famous for ‘having a mare’. Several boys were calling Mr Wharfedale, ‘Howard’, with Nick explaining that this was due to Sir’s poor refereeing ability and receding hairline, comparing him to professional referee, Howard Webb.

Sean’s comment and this fieldnote demonstrate how regular competitive team games (i.e., over 80% of PE content) elicited much performance-related commentary (i.e., sledging) within friendly rivalries to gain competitive edge by momentarily distracting and/or exposing a peer’s mistake, technique or misfortune. Often observed as being delivered in a pantomimic manner, such episodic exchanges demonstrate pupils right to reply (verbally or non-verbally), how sledging was deemed humorous and enjoyable, and how teachers were not exempt from such banter.

Examining these empirical findings, it was clear that amongst many older pupils’ banter fostered engagement and/or competition and/or enjoyment. Such perceived productive functions were partly the outcome of the aforementioned figurational dynamics in PE at LTS whereby sociality, competition and performance-related commentary were often enabled. Interestingly, sledging was relatively common amongst older pupils, particularly boys, and was generally accepted and was reported as inclusively fostering enjoyment – as found elsewhere in adult sporting environments (Budden et al. 2022; Hugman, 2021; Lawless and Magrath, 2021), whilst simultaneously being an effective momentary power resource (i.e., pedagogical tool and competitive advantage). However, the appropriateness of this form of banter could be questioned on the grounds that, as Sean stated, it can intentionally ‘sort of offend your friends’, which may cause harm, resembling bullying behaviour. Such perceptions and accusations of bullying were perhaps not forthcoming as sledging was not deemed as a banter violation (Rivers and Ross, 2021) due to the ‘more intense’ (Sean) frequently competitive, fluctuating and contested figurational power dynamics, fostering and enabling inevitable friendly rivalries central to networks of interdependencies within the PE figuration. In this sense, for banter to be productive, older pupils had to realise when, how and why banter was being used for a) humorous and not harmful purposes, b) for motivational and competitive reasons, and c) for fun and enjoyment purposes. Arguably, this realisation is only enabled once young people have developed relatively sophisticated degrees of cognitive, social

and emotional intelligence. Indicative of the individual civilising process (Elias, 2012), key developments include older pupils being able to exercise sufficient degrees of cognitive foresight over their actions to avoid causing offence or being reprimanded. Developments also involve older pupils demonstrating social awareness of the rules of engagement and their peers' intentions. Finally, developments incorporate older pupils exercising adequate degrees of self-restraint and confidence when embodying emotional resilience when bantering.

### *Determining appropriate from inappropriate banter and pupils' emotional self-restraint*

Having established that banter was normalised, legitimised and fostered a combination of engagement, competition and enjoyment, particularly amongst older pupils, all pupils and teachers were asked to reflect on how they determined inappropriate banter in PE. This line of enquiry is pertinent given that 62% of teachers agreed that there is a fine and subjective line of acceptability between banter and bullying, whilst 26% believed face-to-face banter is a serious problem in schools (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2023). Younger pupils were less able to identify inappropriate banter compared with their older peers, who unanimously predicated appropriate banter on what Buglass et al. (2021) refer to as a 'metaphorical line' of acceptability. Capturing older pupils' shared appraisal, Natalie (Year 11) stated, 'I think banter is something to skirt around. It is fine to tell jokes, but you need to know where the point is'. Whilst Natalie refers to a figurative line, most older pupils and teachers were unable to provide a definitive point when banter becomes inappropriate, as captured by Mr Harris, 'I think it is a real grey area in sport, not just in school [PE]'. This perceived grey area may have been part-induced by judgements concerning appropriateness often being personality-driven and relationally constructed, as evidenced by, Abbie (Year 11), 'I feel there is definitely, definitely a line. But I think it depends on the person and the friendship group as to where the line is'. Further evidencing this determining strategy, Shay (Year 11) explained how, 'when it is not between friends, that is when I'd say it's probably not banter because they probably wouldn't take it as a joke'. This individual, friendship-based and localised influence on young people's determination can potentially conflict with bystanders and/or teachers' appraisals of appropriateness, as posited by Eleanor and Beatrice (Year 11):

Eleanor: People must think we are horrible to each other, but we are not.

Beatrice: Because some of the stuff we say, some other people might not say it to their friends but that is just their personalities together.

As indicated by Eleanor, observations revealed that some bystanders, particularly female PE teachers, were uncertain regarding the nature of banter, occasionally intervening in interactions which they (teachers) deemed inappropriate:

Fieldnote 5<sup>th</sup> May 2022 – Year 11 Girls Danish Longball

After Amy striked-out, Jessica (next in the queue) shouted, "Ergh. Well done, Amy. We've got to go stand and field now because you can even hit the ball". Smiling, Amy

sarcastically replied, “well I’ve saved your from having to run anyway, I know how much you love running. LOL [laughing out loud]”. As Amy and Jessica continued to exchange performance-related jibes, Mrs Hanson interrupted, saying “come on girls. It was a good ball, there is no need to make it personal”. In reply, both girls quickly stated, “don’t worry miss we are just joking. It’s nothing serious, don’t worry”.

Whilst intimate knowledge and close social relations helped determine friends’ sincerity when bantering, as also found by Steer et al. (2020), banter between friends could also cross figurative lines of appropriateness. Referring to this process, Laura (Year 11) asserted, ‘I feel like banter is with someone who you are friends with but then there is a line where it can sometimes become offensive’, whilst Mr Wharfedale explained:

When it is with your mates, when it is with someone you spend a lot of time with, but they might be conscious about something and you keep bringing it up and they don’t like it, but because they are mates they don’t want to say anything about it then you carry on. That is when the line is hard to identify.

Given Mr Wharfedale’s omission, such weaponising and blurring of banter may be difficult to detect for the orator, and/or others, due to the receiver masking their dislike, unease and/or offence to maintain face and friendship bonds. Evidence of masking emotions is further problematised when considering pupils’ reliance on non-verbal cues to determine inappropriateness. Explaining how pupils may realise a humorously intended comment has caused offence, James (Year 10) stated, ‘you can just tell from their [recipient's] facial expressions and how they are reacting’. This dependency on non-verbal cues was largely determined by realising if harm had been caused which could initiate a change in manner, as evidenced by Sean (Year 10):

Some people get really annoyed and you have to basically take your foot off the gas and just leave them. If you see someone becoming physically upset or like you know you are going to get a reaction out of them because you are saying something that will offend them, you might be saying something in banter that you meant as a joke but they might have found it quite upsetting and once you know their weakness it probably turns into bullying if you carry on.

Orator’s ability to self-regulate their bantering based on non-verbal cues was considered to become heightened with age, as articulated by Laura (Year 11):

I think it develops over the years as you get more understanding because in Year 7 you probably won’t know anything about it [banter]. But getting into Year 11 and probably Year 9 you get to understand it, but it is not always a talked about thing between friends.

As well as demonstrating capabilities that come with maturity, Laura references how the social rules for engaging in banter were unwritten and unspoken, manifesting a shared and accepted social contract, largely between friends.

Examining these empirical findings, it was clear that determining inappropriate banter was challenging for all involved (i.e., orator, receiver, bystander, teacher) due to an acknowledged fluctuating metaphorical line where appropriate differed from, or became, inappropriate banter. Fluctuations were part-informed by personality type, as also found by Abell et al. (2023), and the relationships between those involved, akin to Buglass et al. (2021) and Steer et al. (2020) finding that friendship can help mitigate banter being received as offensive. However, our findings demonstrated how having and using intimate knowledge for repetitive comedic purposes can blur what perhaps started and was considered as appropriate but was judged as ending in inappropriate banter. This finding demonstrates the relational, flux and complex nature of networks of interdependencies based on close established social bonds centred on intimacy, trust and respect. Indicative of the individual civilizing process (Elias, 2012), older pupils illustrated greater degrees of mutual identification, mutual understandings, and foresight when discussing banter's unwritten and unspoken rules of engagement. Whilst inappropriate banter was abstractly identified as crossing a metaphorical line of appropriateness, in practice these components within the individual civilizing process were needed when making subjective assessments. These appraisals were mostly premised on relational (i.e. who it was said between and their personality types), situational (i.e. humour styles such as sledging) and emotional (i.e. how it was received and self-regulated by the orator) components. Given this intimate premise and subjective reasoning, it is easy to see how observers may assess what those involved deemed appropriate banter as being inappropriate. Conversely, bystanders or teachers may have a broader tolerance towards offence, therefore deeming what those involved consider inappropriate as appropriate, akin to Newman et al. (2022a) finding concerning footballers' differing interpretations of width of banter. Furthermore, as also denoted by Abell et al. (2023), Booth et al. (2023) and Newman et al. (2022b), judging harmful banter can be challenging as some try to mask their distress, and it was only facial expressions of discontent that elicited a change in approach (i.e. self-regulation) from the orator. In this sense, adopting Elias's (1987) theorising of human emotions, inappropriate banter was often determined through physiological emotional expressions (i.e. red face or glazed eyes), rather than behavioural (i.e. physical act or verbal response). Problematising such masking and assessments, Elias (1987, p.356) contends that, 'what shows itself on one's "outside", for instance on one's face, is merely a derivative or else an "expression", and an often distorted expression, of what one is feeling inside'. Such masking not only illustrates a receiver's individual civilizing process through emotional self-restraining their feeling component (i.e. joy, offence, hurt), but also demonstrates other's (i.e. orator, observer) need to emotionally relate to and empathise with receivers, embodying high degrees of emotional intelligence (i.e. take your foot off the gas).

## Conclusion

Amid growing acknowledgement of banter's commonality, multiple functions and links to inappropriate behaviours in educational and sporting environments (i.e., Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2023; Department for Education, 2023; Grey-Thompson, 2017), this article examined how pupils and teachers normalised, manifested appropriate and determined inappropriate banter within secondary PE. Key findings revealed how with age banter became increasingly normalised and legitimised through pupils and teachers use and acceptance, processes considered by both groups as being relatively unique to and heightened in PE. In PE, pupils considered banter motivating, competitive and/or enjoyable, functions which PE teachers recognised and used productively to (re)engage pupils. Whilst banter was deemed as being mostly used appropriately, how pupils and teachers determined inappropriate banter was informed by the strength of social bonds between those involved, shared understanding of appropriate humour (i.e., sledging) and tolerances, and mainly how banter was received. Assessing inappropriate banter through facial expressions proved problematic given pupils' stoic responses when annoyed, offended or hurt. Given these situational, relational and emotional components, 'challenging inappropriate behaviours' can be difficult due to pupils' and teachers' fluid and subjective interpretations of inappropriate banter and pupils' masking of feelings towards it, which may ultimately 'lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviours' (Department for Education, 2023, p.12). However, such fears were not realised at LTS, largely due to relative consensus on what constituted appropriate banter, an awareness of boundaries of acceptability, and older pupils displays of cognitive, social and emotional intelligence.

Compared with other subjects, banter was more enabled, normalised and legitimised in PE. This contrast was largely due to figurationally-informed power dynamics centred on sociality, competitiveness and/or performance-related commentary, which collectively fostered nuanced and fluctuating civilities. More familiar, active within, and able to navigate such dynamics, older pupils bantering was underpinned by well-developed teacher and peer social bonds, encompassing heightened mutual identification and shared understandings of (in)appropriate banter. We argue that when successfully bantering, pupils embodied many civilizing traits in realising when, how, and why banter was being used for humorous and not harmful purposes, and, for motivational/competitive and not cynical reasons. Arguably, such traits involved older pupils exercising a) cognitive foresight over their actions to avoid causing offence or being reprimanded, b) social awareness of the rules of engagement and their peers' (i.e., friends or not) and teachers' intentions, and c) adequate degrees of self-restraint and confidence when embodying emotional intelligence. By applying the concept of figuration and individual civilizing process, our theoretically interpreted findings develop critical appraisals of banter's appropriateness within single-sex secondary PE. This development is part-informed by



figurational theorising appreciating that ‘in order to understand the feelings, thoughts and actions of any group of people, we have always to consider the many social needs by which these individuals are bonded to each other and other people’ (Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998, p.22).

Combining our empirical and theoretically interpreted findings, this article offers original findings concerning: a) the role of appropriate and, determining of, inappropriate banter in secondary core PE, b) how appropriate banter between friends can escalate into inappropriate banter, c) why with age pupils become more adept identifying, engaging in, navigating (in) appropriate banter, and, d) the role emotions when engaging in, observing and navigating banter. Given these findings and whilst education and sport policy recognise how prevalent banter is and its possible relationship with bullying, we recommend that educators-pupils and coaches-players should focus on ‘how’ they develop a shared understanding of and enact appropriate banter, whilst also ensuring that there is an effective mechanism of reporting inappropriate banter. This development arguably goes some way to ensuring that inappropriate banter is no longer downplayed, dismissed or normalised, whilst empowering young people to report unacceptable behaviours within PE (Department for Education, 2023). As per the previous literature and policy recognition (i.e. ‘*boys being boys*’), we acknowledge here our finding that particular types of banter (i.e., sledging) was more common amongst older boys. Such gendered findings have been analysed and reported a separate article (under review). However, for the purposes of this article’s focus, there were little gendered differences in how boys/girls and male/female teachers socially constructed inappropriate banter in secondary PE at LTS. We also acknowledge that the ethnographical methodology used in one sense limits the generalisability of our findings. However, without such deep immersion, such findings would not have been realised. Therefore, we feel that this article contributes to the emerging literature concerning the ripeness of banter within educational and sporting environments, some of which is inappropriate, and needs addressing to facilitate inclusive, engaging and effective environments.

**Consent to participate:**

All participants provided consent to participate in this project, provided in written and oral forms.

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The authors declare no conflicting interests with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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