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A figurational analysis of secondary physical education gendered changing room procedures and practices in England

Matthew J Green
York St John University, UK

Mark F Mierzwinski
York St John University, UK

Abstract

This article provides ethnographic insights from one state-funded secondary school in the north of England detailing gendered differences within changing room procedures and practices when changing attire for physical education (PE). Attained through participant observations, focus groups with pupils and individual interviews with PE teachers, the school's changing rooms were found to encompass multiple spaces, which served dual intended and unintended functions and social consequences. Applying the concepts of figuration (Elias, 1978), [gendered] civilised bodies (Elias, 2012), habitus (Elias, 1978) and emotions (Elias, 2001) as theoretical prisms revealed how PE teacher-informed procedures and expectations were gendered. Furthermore, with age, boys' and girls' diverging changing room behaviours and emotional navigations became increasingly gendered. This article demonstrates how changing rooms not only serve practical functions, but also evoke social and emotional processes which impact peer-group dynamics and pupils' experiences of PE. Given this, participatory action research could be undertaken aimed at creating more equitable, inclusive and effective localised changing room policies, procedures and practices. This study could also be expanded into investigating policies, practices and experiences within other similar spaces, such as toilets and swimming pools.

Keywords

Changing rooms, physical education, figurational sociology, gender

Corresponding author:
Matthew J Green, School of Sport, York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX, UK.
Email: m.green2@yorksj.ac.uk

Introduction

Described as 'critical access zones' (Fusco, 2006) and 'gateways' to physical education (PE) (O'Donovan and Kirk, 2008), school changing rooms are spaces whereby young people are required to change clothing. For children and young people, the practice of changing attire in a public space is relatively unique to PE, with only swimming lessons offering similar experiences; however, individual cubicles are often used for the latter (Kjaran, 2019; Sport England, 2013). Recognising emotion-laden tensions evoked, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2022) stresses that clear guidelines are required, as getting changed can make young people feel vulnerable, cause anxiety and create uncertainty for staff around pupil supervision. Despite this recognition, few studies have examined how for many young people this individual, but also public, process may foster discomfort, shame and embarrassment (see Frydendal and Thing, 2020; Johansen et al., 2024; Niven et al., 2014). Whilst intended to maximise physical activity, a growing number of primary schools (4–11 years) now allow children to attend school in PE kit, perhaps alleviating such emotional tensions. Whilst this approach was adopted by some English secondary schools (11–16 years) during COVID-19 restrictions (Department for Education [DfE], 2020), most returned to the traditional changing practices (DfE, 2023).

In England, the *School Premises Regulations* (DfE, 2014) mandate that all state schools must provide suitable changing accommodation and shower facilities for children who are aged 11 or over. Furthermore, the DfE (2023) states that changing rooms and toilets should be single-sex spaces, based upon pupils' biological sex (i.e. male or female) determined from birth. In England, children are not able to obtain a *Gender Recognition Certificate*, meaning their legal sex will always be the same as their biological sex (DfE, 2023). However, the DfE (2023) suggests that where possible, schools may consider providing alternative changing facilities for 'gender questioning' children. Furthermore, the DfE (2023) endorses the NSPCC (2022: 3) statement that 'it should not be necessary for adults to remain in the changing room in order to maintain good behaviour; being in close proximity and students being aware of this should be enough'. This guidance perhaps explains academic scarcity in this topic area, with many ethnographers unable to access 'protected' and 'off-limits' school changing rooms (see Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Gerdin, 2017; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020).

Given the emotional tensions and policies outlined, this article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are changing room procedures gendered within secondary PE?
2. To what extent are pupils' behavioural norms gendered within changing rooms in secondary PE?
3. How do pupils emotionally navigate changing attire during secondary PE?

Literature review

Alongside toilets, as sex-segregated areas, changing rooms are labelled as heteronormative spaces within secondary schools (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Kjaran, 2019; Slater et al., 2018). This labelling is underpinned by 'male' and 'female' binaries, which Kjaran (2019: 1027) argues are central to the 'heterosexual matrix', whereby there is an expectation that one's biological sex matches their gender identity and (hetero)sexuality. Consequently, school changing rooms not only provide a physical function for changing attire, but also serve as a social space whereby young people's gender identities are part-determined, developed and policed (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Herrick and Duncan, 2020). Such determining can impact already gender-influenced social

relations, with Atkinson and Kehler (2012) discovering that boys were subjected to peer surveillance, jock masculinity policing and ridicule within changing rooms, behaviours partly enabled due to a lack of teacher presence. Offering a different perspective, Gerdin (2017: 48) found that changing rooms served as a haven and 'unofficial space' whereby boys escaped male PE teachers' surveying gaze and imposed pressures of embodying masculine performances within competitive PE lessons.

When changing attire, a lack of personal space and privacy may foster discomfort for some young people, particularly girls (Fisette, 2011; Frydendal and Thing, 2020; Johansen et al., 2024). Fisette (2011) explains that changing rooms' public nature enables pupils to observe and judge peers' bodies, whilst many pupils (more so girls) also engage in self-comparison. Therefore, many girls sought privacy from peer gaze and judgement by changing within cubicles or through peer support, such as creating a curtain to limit body exposure (Fisette, 2011). Similarly, studies by Frydendal and Thing (2020) and Johansen et al. (2024) found that pupils experienced feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and shame when showering and changing, emotions evoked when revealing their semi-naked bodies. To navigate such feelings, pupils deployed a range of tactics, including disengaging during physical activity to avoid perspiration and the need to shower, whilst boys used humour to bypass feelings of bodily-induced shame (Frydendal and Thing, 2020).

One further reason young people experience feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and shame is due to fears, or experience, of bullying. Secondary PE changing rooms are widely cited as high-prevalence 'bullying zones' (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Forsberg et al., 2024; Jachyra, 2016). Bullying in changing rooms is often attributed to a lack of adult supervision, overzealous peer interactions and gender-influenced peer policing (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020). Consequently, changing rooms are depicted as unregulated, volatile and humiliating spaces (Herrick and Duncan, 2020; Jachyra, 2016). Despite evidence of being aware of changing room bullying (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020), many PE teachers are reluctant to supervise this space due to child safeguarding measures and taboos attached to adults observing children's semi-naked bodies (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Jachyra, 2016; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020). However, the issue of bullying further reiterates changing rooms' practical and social functions, and how when combined, these functions can impact peer-group dynamics and pupils' experiences of PE.

Figurational sociology

In this article, we adopt a figurational sociological framework to analyse gendered nuances within changing room procedures and practices when changing attire for PE. Considering secondary PE as a figuration, 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people' which combine to form social bonds and networks of interdependence (Elias, 1978: 261), we focus on how in core (compulsory) PE pupils are interconnected through single-sex, mixed-ability and same-sex delivered lessons (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025; Smith and Parr, 2007; Wilkinson and Penney, 2023). Furthermore, core PE involves unique spaces (i.e. gymnasiums, sports halls/fields), requires different attire and entails physically centred and group-based activities within an often highly social and competitive environment. Therefore, we view teachers' and pupils' perceptions of and behaviours in single-sex changing rooms as being enabled and constrained by the broader dynamics of the PE figuration. In doing so, we explore the changing rooms' spatial/practical functions, as well as gendered procedural processes and gendered behavioural expectations and practices.

Elias demonstrated how 'the changing structure of social relations over time increases expectations for people to exert self-regulation over their bodies' (Malcolm and Gibson, 2019: 170). Elias

argued that these expectations gradually became increasingly significant the more manners, emotional self-restraint and bodily deportments came to be viewed as markers of 'civilised bodies' (Malcolm and Gibson, 2019). Civilised bodies and emotional expressions have been evidenced as gendered. Mansfield (2008) demonstrates how female bodies are civilised in accordance with established ideals of femininity, with Thing (2001) illustrating how females are perceived as having 'soft' emotions, whilst Monaghan (2014) displayed how recalcitrant boys' bodies were civilised to socially constrain 'hard' emotions. Moreover, Slater et al. (2018: 958) found differing toilet arrangements, with boys using shared urinals and girls using individual cubicles, evidencing how 'gender is one axis along which civilising lessons of shame and privacy are learnt'. Therefore, we apply this conceptual understanding to examine how expectations concerning gendered civilised bodies can partly enable and constrain boys' and girls' behavioural norms within single-sex PE changing rooms.

Shame and embarrassment are two emotions associated with secondary school changing room processes (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Fisette, 2011; Frydendal and Thing, 2020). Elias (2012: 292) understood shame as 'a kind of anxiety which is automatically reproduced in the individual' but triggered by fears of social degradation and socially informed feelings of inferiority. In contrast, embarrassment is an emotion triggered by the actions of another individual, denoting a 'displeasure or anxiety which arises when another person threatens to breach, or breaches, society's prohibitions represented by one's super-ego' (Elias, 2012: 296). Changing attitudes towards and experiences of shame and embarrassment associated with nakedness and sporting participation are evidenced within Cock's (2012) thesis on the formation and development of swimming as a sport. Exploring school changing rooms, Frydendal and Thing (2020: 167) explain that feelings of shame and embarrassment are 'developed in a figurative space' and are generationally and culturally specific. Therefore, we examine if and how when changing attire, boys and girls navigate shameful and embarrassing experiences triggered and developed through interdependent relationships within single-sex changing room figurations.

How pupils learn to embody such generational and culturally specific gendered performances can be partly explained through Elias's concept of habitus. For Elias (1978: 113), habitus refers to an individual's 'embodied social learning', which acts as a 'blindly functioning apparatus of self-control'. Habitus, Elias (1978) explained, is developed through ongoing processes of socialisation from birth whereby human beings learn seemingly taken-for-granted ways of interpreting and using their bodies. At an individual level, a person's habitus contours their actions, dispositions and expectations (Elias, 1978). Whilst such contours are enduring, Elias (1978) considered childhood to be the most impressionable phase of habitus development. This developmental process, Elias (2001: 182) noted, is partly informed through a collective habitus, whereby values, behaviours and dispositions are shared by group members. Discussing a male PE figuration, Mierzwinski and Velija (2020) state how boys' shared gendered habitus becomes intensified as they enter secondary school, forming more complex and nuanced figurations and developing greater understandings of social and biological differences between male and female bodies. Therefore, we examine how individual and shared gendered habitus is part-socially informed within single-sex PE changing rooms.

Methods

Having received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at one Church of England state-funded secondary school in the north of England, pseudonymised as Lord Taylor's School (LTS). Whilst being subject to Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), PE teachers disclosed how their practices

were not explicitly informed by the theologically rooted Christian Vision; LTS followed DfE's (2023) policy in terms of sex-segregated changing room policies. Therefore, as a male, Green only observed boys' changing rooms during Year 7 (ages 11–12), Year 10 (ages 14–15) and Year 11 (ages 15–16) core PE lessons. Given research citing young people's concerns of judgement within such spaces, Green recorded observations using a pocket-sized notebook once boys had exited the changing room. During 7 months of fieldwork, over 35 hours were spent observing everyday procedures, common processes and behaviours within boys' changing rooms, enabling in-depth insights into age-based nuances of boys' etiquettes to be garnered.

Ethical tensions were faced when conducting participant observations in school changing rooms. Whilst NSPCC (2022) policy guidelines recommend adults (teachers) should not be present whilst pupils change attire, at LTS male PE teachers supervised pupils in the changing rooms. As such, the Head of Department, Mr Wilkinson (gatekeeper), permitted Green access and permission to observe boys' changing rooms. Whilst almost always accompanied by a teacher, there were rare occasions when teachers briefly (2–3 minutes) left Green unaccompanied, requesting he kept an eye on the boys whilst they (teachers) collected equipment or completed administrative tasks. During such occasions, Green undertook departmental tasks (i.e. folding laundry, organising lost property) rather than directly observing and/or policing boys' behaviours. On three occasions when unaccompanied, Green observed boys playfighting, addressing such behaviours with questions such as, 'what would your teacher say to you doing that?' and 'is that behaviour really acceptable?' This approach avoided directly sanctioning pupils and creating role ambivalence, i.e. shifting from participant observer to authoritative figure (McGinty, 2012). This exemplifies regular tension balances Green navigated and managed, ensuring that throughout the 7-month ethnography, no boys questioned his changing room positioning, whilst PE teachers welcomed an additional pair of adult eyes.

During the final 2 months of fieldwork, observational insights were complemented by completing 14 focus groups with 49 pupils (24 girls and 25 boys) across Years 7, 10 and 11. Akin to PE classes, focus groups were single sex, involved three to seven pupils, and lasted between 19 and 48 minutes. Given the potentially sensitive nature of topics related to changing attire, the gatekeeper requested that Green did not question pupils around the extent to which their appearance influenced their changing room experiences and avoid asking female pupils about how they navigate changing when on their period. Subsequently, amongst other questions, pupils were asked (a) to describe everyday changing room procedures, (b) to explain how pupils behave and interact within the changing rooms, and (c) to provide their feelings towards the changing process. Similar lines of enquiry were pursued during individual semi-structured interviews with nine PE teachers (six males and three females), which lasted between 14 and 75 minutes. To compensate for no observational data concerning girls' changing rooms, during discussions with girls and female PE teachers, additional emphasis was placed on gaining in-depth descriptions and explanations regarding everyday procedures and processes within girls' changing rooms. These methods enabled data to be triangulated in relation to the psychological (i.e. emotion- and gender identity-laden behaviours), spatial (i.e. physical spaces and positioning of pupils/teachers) and sociological (i.e. pupils' interactions and peer-group dynamics) dimensions of changing room processes.

Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, then imported with observational fieldnotes into NVivo 12. Data were grouped in accord with type (i.e. observation, focus group, interview), gender and year group, aiding the visualisation and navigation of this large data set (Jackson, 2017). Braun et al.'s (2016) six-phase guide to thematic analysis was followed, beginning with Green refamiliarising himself with the data. During Phases 2 and 3, initial nodes were formalised into 33 codes, including the dual functions of changing room spaces,

gendered changing room supervision strategies and heightened emotional expressions towards semi-nudity. When developing and reviewing themes (Phases 3 and 4), the figurational concepts of gendered civilised bodies, shared gendered habitus, and shame and embarrassment were used as sensitising tools. Phase 5 involved the generation, reviewing and defining of themes, which culminated in the following: (a) gendered changing room procedures; (b) pupils' changing room etiquettes; and (c) pupils' emotion-laden navigations of the changing process. Mierzwinski then reviewed the thematic mapping and posed critical questions regarding the rigidity of the defined themes, strengthening the analysis and foregrounding the following write-up of results and discussion in this article (Phase 6).

Results and discussion

The spacing and practical functions of PE changing rooms

Whilst this article focuses on social processes and socially informed behaviours and emotions, detailing the architectural design of the changing rooms helps explain how changing rooms were functionally utilised by pupils at LTS. Changing rooms accommodated up to 60 same-sex pupils, allowing two PE classes (approximately 25–30 pupils) to change attire simultaneously. The changing rooms encompassed an open-plan floor space – approximately 20 m in length, 7 m in width and 2½ m in height – serving as a communal changing area. Both boys' and girls' changing rooms contained an open-plan shower area, a small office and a washroom containing either two toilet cubicles for girls or one toilet cubicle and a urinal for boys. The communal area was fitted with wooden benches and metal clothing racks, attached to the interior walls and branched to create four identifiable sections, named 'bays', each of which accommodated 15 clothes pegs. This space was minimalistic in design, consisting of hardwearing non-slip flooring, cream-coloured walls, no windows and two noticeboards displaying departmental information. In one sense, this archaic architecture represents the 1970s era in which LTS was built. Similar descriptions of changing rooms are presented elsewhere (see Forsberg et al., 2024; Fusco, 2006; Gerdin, 2017), suggesting that such architectural designs are common across Western nations.

Although changing rooms are often depicted as all-encompassing spaces, at LTS several spaces were observed as serving dual functions. For instance, the shower block was seldom used for washing, a finding not surprising given pupils' discomforts and avoidance behaviours towards showering in PE (Forsberg et al., 2024; Frydendal and Thing, 2020). Instead, the shower block functioned as a more private space where up to five younger pupils (Year 7) changed attire, away from the communal gaze of their peers and teachers. Similarly, as also found by Slater et al. (2018), toilets were reported by several pupils and teachers as being a more private space for pupils to change attire. The small offices located within the changing rooms were inaccessible to pupils but used to store PE kit and equipment. Collectively, ethnographic insights revealed that some areas of the changing rooms were open in the sense that pupils were able to view each other's bodies (communal changing area), whilst others were more private (toilets, showers and office). Whilst Kjaran (2019) denoted similar findings, such detailing is now examined through a gendered lens with respect to changing room procedures and pupils' etiquettes at LTS.

Gendered changing room procedures

Pupils were generally granted 10 minutes at the start of the lesson to change attire, but only 5 minutes at the end of the lesson, timeframes relatively standardised within English secondary

schools (Hingley et al., 2022). Pupils were expected to adhere to a seating plan implemented at the beginning of the academic year, which provided each pupil with a designated place in the communal area. However, asking how and why seating plans were implemented revealed gendered differences. Mr Wilkinson explained:

> It is not like on a bus where you have the back seats, the kids who take up the back seats. We [male PE teachers] position them [boys] in alphabetical order. If there is a group of boys who are in the higher echelons, if you like, we will often split them up, otherwise they are quite a dominant form in that environment.

Common in classroom-based lessons but seldom referenced in PE-based literature, the alphabetically informed seating plan was a clear, equitable and consistent method for male PE teachers to organise boys. Within this changing room figuration, by partly reducing boys' agency and minimising their interactions with friends, this formalising procedure served as an effective power resource for teachers to maintain social control over up to 60 boys within a relatively confined and crowded space. Importantly, and adding originality to current knowledge of such procedures, this normalised practice was uncritically accepted by boys, as articulated by Freddie (Year 11): 'I think everyone just gets on with it and I don't think anyone has a great dislike of it'.

Female PE teachers opted not to implement an alphabetically ordered seating plan, as detailed by Mrs Hanson:

> We [female PE teachers] let them [girls] pick their seats because, I know the boys have done it in alphabetical order and things, but it is a different kettle of fish. Girls need to be sitting with their friends to get changed, really. They don't have the same sort of issues that they would have in the boys' [changing rooms].

Elaborating on why girls were enabled to self-select their places, Miss Turner noted, 'girls are more likely to, you know, be happier if they are getting changed around their mates and people who they are comfortable [with]'. In adopting this approach, female PE teachers seemed attuned with broader concerns regarding girls' discomforts when changing for PE (Fisette, 2011; Niven et al., 2014; Sport England, 2022). Within this changing room figuration, offering girls agency, comfort and preference contrasted to the more socially constraining seating plan implemented by male teachers. Collectively, these gendered procedures were driven by PE teachers' bespoke knowledge and assumptions of boys' and girls' perceived preferences/needs, behavioural norms and peer-group dynamics.

Gendered procedural differences extended to teachers' roles in pupil supervision. Whilst the NSPCC (2022) recommends teachers remain in earshot of changing rooms, at LTS male PE teachers directly supervised boys within changing rooms. Explaining this procedure, Mr Harris stated, 'you wouldn't leave anybody in a maths classroom or a science laboratory on their own. I think in whatever lesson you are teaching it is only sensible to be there 100 percent of the time'. Whilst rational, this logic overlooks: (a) how pupils do not have to expose their semi-naked bodies in classroom lessons, (b) pupils' desire for privacy when changing, and (c) some pupils' suspicions, and teachers' concerns, regarding adults gazing over momentary child nudity (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020). Irrespective of such concerns, at LTS male PE teachers stressed the importance of their direct supervision, sharing concerns of bullying should boys be left unsupervised, rational concerns given evidence of changing room bullying amongst boys (Green et al., 2025; Jachyra, 2016), as well as teachers' responsibilities to safeguard

children and eradicate bullying (DfE, 2023). Whilst scheduling and staff availability are cited as barriers to teacher supervision (Forsberg et al., 2024; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020), at LTS male PE teachers ensured that two staff members were present, as detailed by Mr Wharfedale:

> There is always someone in there with you because you can't leave the boys in there. They are big classes, and they are hard to manage and maintain. Sometimes you have got 55 15-to-16-year-old lads in the changing rooms, who forget kit all the time, who can be a little bit rowdy and a little bit daft. I definitely think it is important you are in there and you have two of you.

This practice enabled one teacher to monitor and police behaviour, whilst the other dealt with common pupil queries (i.e. missing kit, injury complaints) or administrative duties (i.e. departmental notices, registration). Offering a further original finding, boys unanimously welcomed teacher supervision, with Owen (Year 7) stating, 'it is pretty important with us like getting changed, some people could be inappropriate and weird sometimes, so it makes sure everyone is being good'. Referencing changing room bullying, Brogan (Year 11) suggested, 'if a teacher is there then people won't [bully]. It is like a deterrence which stops people doing stuff that they shouldn't do'. Despite being at odds with NSPCC's (2022) guidance, boys' and teachers' shared perceptions vindicated male teachers' approaches to changing room supervision, deeming it necessary to ensure good behaviour and keep children safe within the changing room.

Female PE teachers and girls were sceptical of direct supervision during the changing process. Describing her positioning, Miss Turner explained:

> I never really go in their [communal changing area] to be honest. We [teachers] have like our enclosed area [office] where the girls come if they were to have notes or needed kit. They would come to us; we would never go to them.

Given the architectural design, when in the office teachers were unable to observe pupils, but remained in earshot, aligning with NSPCC (2022) guidelines. Providing her thoughts on whether girls should be directly supervised when changing attire, Miss Jones deliberated:

> Yes and no. Obviously for safeguarding, yes. But then again for safeguarding, no. Because some students will say without even thinking '*what are you looking at?', 'why are you here when I am getting changed?'* So, I think sometimes you feel that you have to stay in the office and only go out when you are needed. There is always a slim thought in your mind that if I go and stand in the changing room somebody, a student, is not going to be comfortable with that and you have got to think about their perception.

Such explanations and deliberations demonstrate competing interests and needs as female PE teachers' positioning was informed by tension balances between safeguarding pupils from potential peer abuse (i.e. bullying) and safeguarding themselves from pupil suspicion, and triggering girls' discomfort or annoyance. However, teachers' reluctance appeared justified as, when discussing supervision, Alice (Year 10) stated, 'it would be really weird' and Neve (Year 11) stressed, 'obviously they [teachers] are not going to be watching us get changed'. Whilst confirming teachers' suspicions, such concerns were not voiced by boys or male PE teachers, a comparison which offers an original gendered finding.

Collectively, these empirical findings reveal gendered differences in changing room procedures and gendered nuances in pupils' and teachers' perceptions regarding how important, appropriate or needed alphabetical seating plans and adult supervision were at LTS. Given educational policies are

often gender neutral, such findings evidence a hidden gendered curriculum within these school changing rooms whereby male and female PE teachers interpreted national policy and enacted school policy in nuanced gendered ways. These findings also appear indicative of long-term perceptions of standards, expectations and social constraints concerning gendered behaviour and gendered civilised bodies (Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Monaghan, 2014; Thing, 2001). Specifically, within the boys' changing rooms, male PE teachers' implementation of a socially constraining seating plan and direct supervision served as effective and perceived much-needed power resources to maintain social order over some boys' childish, domineering and recalcitrant behavioural norms – behaviour associated with long-term and prevailing perceptions of male bodies (Monaghan, 2014). Whilst boys accepted such socially constraining procedures, within the girls' changing room, female PE teachers implemented more empathetic, socially enabling procedures, sharing a perception that girls need social and emotional protection from peer judgement, peer ridicule/abuse or adult gaze. This finding is representative of long-term views of females (girls) having 'softer' emotions and/or weaker/fragile bodies, which need more protection than males' (boys') bodies (Thing, 2001; Velija and Hughes, 2019). Comparatively, this demonstrates a further gendered nuance in the sense that male PE teachers tended to be more concerned with safeguarding boys from physical threats, whereas female PE teachers were more inclined to protect girls from psychological harm. This analysis serves to further demonstrate how civilised bodies are managed in gendered ways, contributing to a hidden gendered curriculum within secondary school changing rooms.

Pupils' gendered changing room etiquettes

Following such changing room procedures, pupils were expected to, and often did, behave in gendered ways. By etiquette, we refer to expectations concerning (unwritten) social rules of appropriate behaviour in specific settings (i.e. changing rooms). Pupils were enabled to socialise in the changing rooms, as explained by Mr Walker: 'we have a policy that they can talk amongst themselves whilst they change'. Although this socially enabling policy mapped across all classes, ethnographic insights revealed gendered differences in pupils' etiquettes within changing room figurations. Discussing boys' behavioural norms, Mr Walker stated, 'they can be a bit boisterous, and it can be hard to get them to be quiet. There is a lot of laughing and joking'. Boisterous was a term used by all male teachers when describing boys' changing room behaviours, an assessment supported by observations. Exemplifying such behaviour, many boys were frequently observed chatting and laughing with their peers, some were observed mock-wrestling and/or playing with various sporting items (i.e. balls), whilst a few boys were observed flexing their muscles to peers. However, more physical acts (i.e. mock-wrestling, playing with equipment) were quickly addressed, as exemplified in the following observation:

> Fieldnotes 28th April – Year 11 Boys' Changing Room
>
> As the class entered the changing room, five boys approached Mr Wharfedale and I [Green] to discuss an interschool football fixture. Mr Wharfedale and the boys were exchanging banter, joking about a team captain slipping when taking a penalty, labelling him 'John Terry'. Three other boys were wandering around the changing area topless, talking to their friends across bays and flexing and comparing their biceps. Many boys remained in their designated spaces, quietly chatting to peers in their bay. In the far corner of the changing room, a group of five boys were playing with a tennis ball, which Mr Wilkinson quickly confiscated after witnessing the ball being thrown around.

Some boys sought to exploit greater socially enabling opportunities to the detriment of active participation time in PE, as depicted by Mr Walker:

> We have some boys who unlike in a normal [classroom-based] lesson have free rein and are free to roam. So, the first three or four minutes if you aren't on top of them, they spend wandering around the changing rooms, chatting to their mates that they may or may not have seen throughout the day.

In one sense, the boys' changing room served as a 'room of cohesion' (Johansen et al., 2024), enabling boys to chat/banter with peers and PE teachers, whilst also enabling some to gain kudos for their athletic and masculine bodies (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Jachyra, 2016). In another sense, male teachers stressed the need to constrain boys' socialising to maximise in-lesson activity and reduce boisterousness to prevent dangerous and/or harmful behaviours.

In contrast to boys, girls were described as less energetic, less disorderly and more reserved in their peer-group interactions within the changing room. Capturing female PE teachers' shared descriptions of girls' etiquettes, Mrs Hanson noted:

> Year 7s will giggle and gossip away, well I think all [year] groups will actually. It is definitely a social occasion. If we get them changed in silence, the worst thing we can do is get them changed in silence. It is for a chat really, that is what it is.

Further expanding on this socially enabling approach, Miss Turner revealed:

> The changing room is quite a relaxed environment because like I said, we want to break down as many barriers for the girls, so it is not silent. The girls are chatting away and what not. From what I hear, it is more like catching up on their days off or TV shows and stuff like that.

Female PE teachers felt their socially enabling policy helped alleviate some girls' discomforts associated with the changing process, emotion-laden tensions and perceived barriers to PE, which are well documented (Fisette, 2011; Johansen et al., 2024; Niven et al., 2014; O'Donovan and Kirk, 2008; Sport England, 2022). In contrast to boys' behaviours, there was no evidence to suggest that any girls engaged in overzealous, self-expressive or dangerous behaviours within changing rooms, further vindicating female PE teachers' empathy, trust and approach to supervision. Within the girls' changing room, these more independent (i.e. less supervised) amicable peer-group dynamics may be partly due to girls' self-selected seating plan and conformity to social constraints and self-restraints.

Collectively, these findings reveal that within changing rooms pupils' etiquettes were gendered. Whilst socially enabled by teachers, gendered behavioural norms were described as relatively habitual, perhaps denoting Elias's (2001) notion of a shared gendered habitus. This is informed by how by 11 years of age, boisterousness and more reserved behaviours had become second nature for most boys and girls, respectively. Illustrating a particularly impressionable phase of their gendered habitus development (Elias, 1978), pupils' gendered etiquettes became more pronounced and differentiated with age (i.e. boys flexing, girls gossiping). Furthermore, whilst less socially constrained than boys, girls were more enabled to and were reported by teachers to display greater degrees of behavioural self-restraint than boys. These findings somewhat justify teachers' gendered and differentiated changing room management of boys' and girls' civilised bodies (Monaghan, 2014). In this sense, this evidences how within the PE figuration, the hidden gendered curriculum within changing rooms is partly informed by managing pupils' gendered civilised bodies.

Pupils' emotion-laden navigations of the changing process

Pupils' gendered habitus and teachers' gendered changing room management strategies were also informed and evidenced by gendered nuances in how pupils felt and managed their emotions when changing attire. Whilst male PE teachers determined where boys changed and most younger boys (Year 7) adhered to this practice, around five pupils per class changed in more private areas of the changing room (i.e. toilet or shower block). Typically, boys' ability to use these spaces was supported by an email from a parent or pastoral team and granted by PE teachers. However, some younger boys' more ad-hoc requests, most often when swimming was delivered, were not granted permission. Irrespective of activity, older boys (Years 10 and 11) did not make such requests. Whilst reasoning for such self-isolation was not probed due to potential sensitivities, no previous research references age-based differences in pupils' changing room preferences or practices. Therefore, this original finding may be due to some younger pupils' differing responses to shifts in practice from primary school PE or due to contrasting biological maturation amongst peer groups. However, during an impressionable phase of their gendered habitus, with age boys became increasingly accustomed to expected gendered etiquette within the PE figuration.

One further possible reason why most boys did not seek preferential treatment was due to the peer scrutiny such requests could attract. Younger boys' deviation from normalised and expected practices of communal changing were observed attracting unwanted peer attention and ridicule, as exemplified below:

> Fieldnotes 3rd February – Year 7 Boys' Changing Room
>
> Upon entry to the changing room most boys proceeded to their pegs and quickly began changing attire with many chatting with peers in their bay when doing so. Two boys headed straight into the shower block and three boys headed for the toilets with their bags. On route to the toilets, Max – a particularly loud and often disruptive pupil – shouted 'off to get changed in the toilets, are we?', followed by a burst of laughter, fostering laughter from several other boys in the vicinity. Upon hearing Max's snide remark, two of the boys headed back to their peg and began changing. The other boy, Sam, rushed towards the toilet, not leaving until Mr Harris called the register six minutes later. As Sam exited the toilet, Max and two other boys pointed towards Sam and began laughing again, before being reprimanded by Mr Harris for disrupting the register.

Whilst appearance-based bullying is reported in boys' changing rooms (Atkinson and Kehler, 2012; Jachyra, 2016), there was no evidence of this at LTS, perhaps due to the constant adult presence. Instead, deviating from social norms by being observed changing in more private areas was mocked and shamed, which could result in conformity to expected changing room etiquette, even if this felt uncomfortable. Navigating this emotion-laden process, older boys were seldom observed seeking alternative changing arrangements. When asked why older boys do not change in toilets or showers, Elliot (Year 11) described how, 'it's like masculinity, no one wants to feel or look embarrassed in front of other men'. In this sense, far from being a 'haven' to escape masculine norms (Gerdin, 2017), this finding demonstrates how concerns of gender-informed peer judgement were often underpinned by boys' gendered pride, embarrassment avoidance and peer-group status. Such sentiments further illustrate inevitable social, psychological and emotional processes underpinning individual physical acts of changing attire, which pupils must navigate.

Girls also reported having to navigate such emotions during the changing process. Referring to actively avoiding peer gaze, Jade and Olive (Year 7) discussed:

Jade: You will want to be at the back because it is a bit awkward when you are getting changed and it is easier to be at the back.
Olive: I think that obviously it is to do with your friendship groups, but I think that people don't want to be near the front and people want to be at the back because they don't want to get dressed in front of people.

By suggesting it is 'easier' to change attire at the back of the changing room, arguably, Jade implies it is less emotionally discomforting, rather than physically arduous. Further discussions revealed that many younger and older girls also felt uncomfortable and/or embarrassed when changing attire, feelings which appear common amongst adolescent girls (Fisette, 2011; Niven et al., 2014; Sport England, 2022). Navigating a heightened body consciousness and minimising feelings of discomfort, Molly, Fran, and Alice (Year 10) explained how:

Molly: Lots of people get changed in the toilets.
Fran: There are like two toilets in our thing. There is always a queue for who is going to get changed in them and if you actually need the toilet then you have to wait.
Alice: I know a lot of people who aren't really that body confident and feel really awkward in front of a big group. Because everyone has a different form because we are all growing and that, a lot of people, they feel really judged and like they have to get changed behind walls.

Corroborating these emotion-laden age-based findings, Miss Jones stated, 'as the children go up in years you will find more and more wanting to get changed in the toilets, so you will have a bigger queue. Not a lot of girls like changing in front of everybody'. As such, many older girls explained that by Year 10 (ages 14–15 years), changing in toilet cubicles had become normalised practice, which, in contrast to boys, did not attract unwanted and potentially hurtful peer judgement. Seemingly aware of and attempting to mitigate identified and well-documented negative emotions evoked through the changing process (DfE, 2023; Fisette, 2011; Niven et al., 2014), female PE teachers enabled older girls to change in toilet cubicles. In contrast to male PE teachers, not seeking to normalise communal changing, female PE teachers granted such alternative arrangements despite detrimental effects on active participation time and the use of this space for its intended functions (i.e. urination and defecation). Whilst girls mentioned 'all growing [up]' and drew reference to contrasting biological maturation (i.e. 'different form'), no girls or teachers cited specific issues concerning menstruation cycles (i.e. periods), nor was this topic probed during focus groups and interviews due to sensitivities, Green's male identity and gatekeeper requests. Despite this omission, given findings elsewhere, girls' experiences of puberty and periods must have contributed to their experiences of changing attire, heightened body consciousness and feelings of discomfort (Niven et al., 2014; Sport England, 2022).

The findings presented demonstrate how, during a particularly impressionable phase of habitus development (Elias, 2001), emotions young people felt and navigated during changing processes became increasingly gendered with age. Male PE teachers expected and constrained boys to change communally, with some boys' preferential requests declined or, if granted, attracting disparaging, derogatory and defaming peer commentary. This situation created an emotional

dilemma for boys seeking privacy, as they did so partly to avoid embarrassment but in doing so could be made to feel ashamed. Faced with this inescapable emotional discomfort, boys generally went against their initial preferences and changed communally, therefore conforming to normalised and expected practice. This reality and pragmatic response demonstrate how the changing process was an 'shameful affair' (Frydendal and Thing, 2020), whereby deviations from figurational norms were effectively managed through peer shaming. In contrast, girls did not face such shaming processes when using toilet cubicles to change attire, partly due to female teachers legitimising and pupils normalising this preference. However, whilst not faced with the same emotional dilemma as some boys, for many girls, changing attire was an awkward and embarrassing experience which induced feelings of being ashamed of their semi-naked bodies and fears concerning perceived or actual peer judgement. Collectively, these findings further evidence how civilising lessons of embarrassment, shame and privacy are often gendered (Slater et al., 2018), and embodied and heavily influenced by gendered figurational dynamics, indicating how expectations of gendered bodies influence changing room processes.

Conclusion

This article centred on how changing room policy and guidance (DfE, 2014, 2023; NSPCC, 2022) were implemented within one English co-educational secondary school. This focus is necessary amid gender identity politics concerning schools' provisions of single-sex spaces (DfE, 2023; Herrick and Duncan, 2020) and changing rooms being identified as problematic spaces for many pupils (Forsberg et al., 2024; Niven et al., 2014). Therefore, our ethnographic findings of gendered changing room procedures, practices and pupils' etiquettes enabled sociogenetic (i.e. procedures and practices) and psychogenetic (i.e. emotion-laden behavioural norms) processes within the PE changing rooms to be analysed by answering three research questions. We discovered how procedural seating plans and teacher supervision were gendered, with boys being more socially constrained and girls given more agency when changing attire. This gendered difference was partly informed by gendered behavioural norms, including boys being more boisterous and girls being more self-restrained in their peer groups. For some boys, communal changing was embarrassing, but changing privately was deemed shameful, evoking peer commentary, which could be equally embarrassing. Contrastingly, many girls managed to avoid such embarrassment and shame-inducing experiences by either changing in private spaces or discreetly changing, avoiding peer gaze and perceived or actual judgement. Arguably, these seemingly idiosyncratic procedures and practices evidenced a gendered hidden curriculum within PE changing rooms at LTS.

These original findings revealing gendered differences are significant when one considers how PE and changing room policies are gender neutral in their absence and gender blind in their lack of realisation of boys' and girls' differing biology, behavioural norms and emotion-laden preferences. By demonstrating the importance of considering spatial, social and emotional dimensions of boys' and girls' gendered experiences and navigations of PE changing processes, this article complements seminal work concerning gendered (adult) civilised bodies within sporting environments (Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Thing, 2001; Velija and Hughes, 2019), partly addressing Elias's empirical gaps in this respect. Whilst we sought to mitigate limitations, inevitably there were some. Green's male identity prohibited observations of girls' changing room behaviours, and female PE teachers' positioning within the changing room office further restricted insights into girls' changing room etiquettes. Furthermore, the use of focus groups restricted discussions concerning more sensitive topics (i.e. periods), which may have provided more nuanced insights into the gendered

differences in boys' and girls' perceptions of and experiences when changing for PE. To further expand this line of enquiry, future studies could apply the concept of gendered civilised bodies to examine policies, practices and experiences concerning children's and young people's use of other semi-private spaces, such as toilets, showering and/or village-style mixed-sex changing rooms. Furthermore, given teacher-led differing enactments of national policy alongside differing pupil preferences towards changing room procedures, researchers could conduct and evaluate co-constructed participatory action research aimed at creating more equitable, inclusive and effective localised changing room policies, procedures and practices.

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Data availability

All data included in this research are available from the York St John University repository.

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ORCID iDs

Matthew J Green https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8065-0446
Mark F Mierzwinski https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9751-5865

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Author biographies

Matthew J Green is a lecturer in Sport and Social Science within the School of Sport at York St John University. His research utilises qualitative and participatory methodologies to explore children's and young people's experiences of PE, focusing on language, discrimination and gendered practices.

Mark F Mierzwinski is a senior lecturer in Sociology of Sport and Health within the School of Sport at York St John University. His research examines how people socially construct, promote and enact social justice in sports, education and healthcare environments.