Children & Society

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

How Do 9–10-Year-Olds Conceptualise, Engage in, and Navigate Banter Within Primary Education? A Figurational Analysis

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Received: 9 September 2024 | **Revised:** 25 April 2025 | **Accepted:** 2 May 2025

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Keywords: banter | child development | figurational sociology | peer-group dynamics | primary education

ABSTRACT

Despite growing research concerning banter in educational settings, this article is the first to examine how primary-school aged children conceptualise, engage in, and navigate banter in England. This focus is important given this impressionable phase of childhood development and teachers and policymakers concerns regarding possible links between banter and bullying. Key findings from eight focus groups with 32 children (aged 9–10 years) are thematically analysed using theoretical concepts of individual civilising process, habitus, and figuration. Whilst being able to differentiate 'good' from 'bad' banter, pupils conceptualised banter in a prosocial manner, reported regularly engaging in banter for enjoyment and social bonding purposes. Furthermore, pupils navigated banter by appraising content, relationships between those involved, and how comments were received. The figurational dynamics within the school day meant that banter most often took place within breaktimes, whereby pupils mostly engaged with like-minded same-sex peers. To differentiate good from bad banter and navigate such banter, pupils had to exhibit relatively sophisticated cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence. To substantiate and develop our findings, ethnographic research is needed to gather observations of pupils' (and possibly teachers') engagement in banter and the extent that banter is self-regulated and/or socially constrained by peers and teachers.

1 | Introduction

Over the past three decades, banter has become an increasingly popular term and means of communicating within the UK (Ngram 2024). Popularity is mostly evident amongst males (Hein and O'Donohoe 2014; Yeo et al. 2018), predominantly taking place within single-sex homosocial work-based environments (Brown and Woodfield 2024; Giosmpasoglou et al. 2018). Definitions of banter include reciprocal exchanges of jovially framed insults, mockery, sarcasm, baiting, goading, and teasing amongst friends (Betts and Spenser 2017; Buglass et al. 2021). Within social relations, these characteristics serve positive and negative functions in secondary schools (Steer et al. 2020), higher education (Lowe et al. 2021), and sporting environments (Booth et al. 2023). However, only Wardman (2021) has examined banter in primary schools, albeit focusing on male teachers' use of it, rather than pupils.

Furthermore, this topic is worthy of study given that from a sample of nearly 900 teachers, 26% identified banter as a serious problem within their schools (Anti-Bullying Alliance 2023). Seriousness was largely due to 62% of teachers agreeing that there is a fine and subjective line of acceptability between banter and bullying (Anti-Bullying Alliance 2023). This problem

is further evident in the Department for Education, (2013, 12) *Keeping children safe in education 2023: Statutory guidance for schools and colleges*, which states:

> Downplaying certain behaviours as 'just banter', 'just having a laugh', 'part of growing up' or 'boys being boys' can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviours, an unsafe environment for children and in worst case scenarios a culture that normalises abuse leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it.

Such recognition demonstrates the omnipresent and problematic nature of banter in schools within the UK, underpinning the need for our focus on how primary school pupils socially construct banter through answering the following research questions:

- How do 9–10-year-olds conceptualise banter?
- How and why do 9–10-year-olds engage in banter at school?
- How do 9–10-year-olds navigate banter at school?

2 | Literature Review

Due to sparse research relating to primary school-aged pupils, the literature reviewed in this article primarily concerns teenagers and young adults in the UK. Steer et al. (2020, 7) demonstrated that secondary school pupils described banter as humorous social interaction which involves 'aggressive, yet innocuous, playful behaviour'. Pupils deemed friendship a significant differentiator between humorous, yet potentially offensive banter, compared with more harmful and socially unacceptable bullying (Steer et al. 2020). This may in part explain why Booth et al. (2023) found that teenage boys within a community football club understood banter as light-hearted, prosocial, and jovial. Further, identifying the relationship between peer relations and appropriateness, scholars found banter directed towards non-friends and/or strangers is often interpreted as demeaning, offensive, or discriminatory (Lowe et al. 2021; Steer et al. 2020; Yeo et al. 2018). Moreover, to avoid causing offence or be deemed inappropriate, Buglass et al. (2021) discovered that university students predicated banter on reciprocity, humour, and social closeness. Collectively, these findings illustrate that despite the potential dual positive and negative functions of banter, young people's conceptualisations were generally prosocial, although this conception was often determined by the strength of social bonds of whom the banter took place.

Through ethnographies within three Australian schools, Wardman (2021) demonstrates the prevalence of banter within primary schools. Male teachers engaged in self-deprecatory, disciplinary, and occasionally humiliating forms of humour in classrooms, labelled as banter (Wardman 2021). Whilst many pupils often enjoyed and occasionally engaged with such banter, defaming jokes and ridicule were negatively received by some pupils (Wardman 2021). Similarly, examining banter in further education, Yeo et al. (2018) discovered that some teenage males welcomed and enjoyed banter, whilst others viewed it as damaging and harmful. These dual constructive-destructive functions are further evidenced within university campus culture, with Abell et al. (2023) highlighting how banter simultaneously strengthened social bonds but also contained misogynistic and sexually explicit undertones, which some students, particularly females, considered unnecessary and inappropriate. Examining gendered banter used by university male rugby players, McCormack and Anderson (2010, 918) highlighted the use of 'ironic heterosexual recuperation', a form of banter involving imitating and mocking behaviours. Within this single-sex environment, this form of banter served homosocial bonding functions and was not deemed homophobic or negative (McCormack and Anderson 2010). Collectively, these prevalence-based findings demonstrate how young people's banter can be gendered and interpreted as humorous, offensive, and harmful, simultaneously serve dual constructive-destructive functions, and be deemed less or more acceptable within different settings.

Given banter's duality, subjective nature and myriad effects on peer group dynamics, how young people navigate banter is important to consider. Buglass et al. (2021, 294) found that university students navigated 'social rules of engagement' by recognising individuals' differing humour styles and tolerances, as well as desires to engage in banter. Students reported how such recognition was central to ensuring that humorous exchanges did not cross over into inappropriate verbal communications (Buglass et al. 2021). Buglass et al. (2021) also documented how many students believed emotionally reacting to what they perceive as inappropriate banter could lead to further targeting or social exclusion, thus informing stoic responses. Evidencing such self-preservation tactics, Lowe et al. (2021) reported how students remained silent when navigating sexist and racist jokes not directly impacting them, seemingly neutralising inappropriate banter to manage feelings of complicity. However, many students interviewed by Abell et al. (2023, 8734) admitted feeling complicit when not intervening in banter that had 'gone too far' but feared being 'othered' by breaching perceived established social norms and desired to maintain their social status. Collectively, these studies evidence how some university students successfully navigated banter by identifying, understanding, and accommodating peer's humour preferences and intentions. However, when banter was deemed inappropriate, many university students were reluctant to intervene due to fears and desires linked to their social status.

3 | Theoretical Framework

Given banter's links to morality, identity and power, this paper utilises figurational sociological concepts of individual civilising process, habitus, and figuration. Whilst broadly sharing similarities with 'socialisation', Elias (2012, 5) concept of individual civilising process stressed how:

Every human being is exposed from the first moment of life to the influence and the moulding intervention of civilised grown-ups; they must indeed pass through a process of civilisation in order to reach the standard attained by their society in the course of its history.

In this sense, children's attitudes and behaviours are inherently developed through past (passing down of values), present (current customs and practices) and localised (situational expectations) social processes. Therefore, compared with more fixed, static and universal conceptions, Elias's (2012) more sociological sensitive understanding of childhood development recognises how infants and children undergo an intense period of civilising, influenced by shifting and prevailing civilities. This period involves children internalising social constraints (i.e., school policies and behavioural norms) to regulate their emotional and behavioural impulses to avoid sanctions (often imposed by parents and teachers). This learning process involves children developing greater degrees of foresight (i.e., when determining their actions against possible sanctions) and mutual identification with others (i.e., how their behaviour may impact and is received by peers and teachers). However, Elias (2012) also noted how a key process in children embodying sufficient levels self-reflection and self-regulation is when their emotional and behavioural self-restraint is informed by their desires to avoid feelings of shame and embarrassment from their conduct. Given evidence of its prevalence within schools, banter is a communicative practice which children must learn, adapt to and use in socially acceptable and 'civilised' manners to avoid harming others or being accused of bullying, which could evoke shame and result in social reprimands.

Elias (2012) argued how broader long-term civilising processes have led to a growing preoccupation with teaching children how to behave according to established manners. In many contemporary societies, schools are nation-state's means of civilising children, in ensuring desired values are transmitted (Gillam and Gulløv 2024). This partially explains why many sociologists have adopted the respective works of Bourdieu and Foucault to examine school's reproductive and disciplining functions. Like such theorists, a figurational approach can be used to acknowledge the role of primary schools in developing children's individual civilising process through structural (organisation of school day), educational (curricula) and schooling (instilling desired values) social processes. Furthermore, we adopt Elias (1978, 261) concept of social figuration to examine how children 'are mutually oriented and dependent' within various networks of interdependence when at primary school. For example, within a class figuration, children's opportunity to and type of banter is somewhat constrained by classroom conventions and authority figures (i.e., teachers) who are responsible for instructing children how to behave in culturally acceptable ways and interact with peers in a 'civilised' manner (Department for Education 2013). However, we are cognisant that school days also involve non-classroom pupil interactions, such as break/lunch periods and Physical Education lessons, whereby children negotiate and navigate their relationships, conduct and social status (Blatchford 2012). In this sense, we supplement works focusing on adult-driven reproductive and disciplinary transmission of values when inculcating children, by considering how children can learn and become socialised through their peer-group interactions and, therefore, considering how banter can vary depending on who, when and where banter manifests.

Focusing on banter within primary schools is significant as Elias (2012, 415) notes how 'the web of social relations in which individuals live during their most impressionable phase, that is during childhood and youth, which imprints itself upon their unfolding personality'. Indeed, in the UK, the regularity that comes with children attending primary school 36 five-day weeks of least 6 h per day offers a significant means of and role in children's habits of interaction. Indeed, it is during primary school where children learn or have reaffirmed many of their dispositions, attitudes, and preferences, which become increasingly embedded as part of what Elias (2012) referred to as habitus formation. Supplementing and possibly illustrative of this learning process, it is useful to highlight conventional wisdom concerning key stages within children's humour development. By 2 years of age, most infants have a 'socio-cognitive understanding of humour' (Hoicka and Akhtar 2012, p.14), which includes exhibiting social laughter that is, joining in the laughter of others without necessarily fully understanding what evoked it. Such engagement and understanding of humour become more complex with age. From seven to 12 years of age, children become more adept at telling jokes, which can contain degrees of hostility, developing an understanding of why jokes are funny, yet often struggling to interpret irony (Bergen 2020). During this developmental phase, children's humour styles can be crude, refer to taboo topics, and can be simultaneously socially unacceptable but deemed hilarious by peers, serving to strengthen peer-group bonds (Bergen 2020). Whilst these broad and generic age-based insights provide a useful foundational context, it is important to note nuances in humour ability, preference and appropriateness based on time, space, culture, demographics, and specificity concerning those involved (i.e., neurodivergent children). Therefore, in this article we apply the concept of individual civilising process to reiterate how children are not born with an innate ability to understand, engage in, and navigate banter, but learn it through entering, being a part of, and contributing to their family, community, and school figurations.

4 | Research Methods

To examine primary school children's understandings and experiences of banter, we adopted an interpretivist qualitative research design. This design enabled detailed insights on the social phenomenon of which little is known (Creswell 2014), specifically exploring how children conceive, engage in, and navigate banter. Prior to commencing data collection, institutional ethical clearance, informed gatekeeper consent, parental consent, and participant assent was received. Data collection took place during 2022 at a state-funded primary school in the north of England, pseudonymised throughout as Birchwood Park. Birchwood Park is located in a relatively affluent area with approximately 8% of pupils eligible for free school meals, with a predominately White British pupil population.

Data was collected through eight focus group discussions with 32 pupils (aged 9–10 years), with an equal number of boys and girls. This sample aligns with Bergen's (2020) research into children's learning of humour, which identified this age group as one whereby children become adept at using humour effectively and gendered differences in humour styles develop. Guided by best practice recommendations (see Daley 2013; Scarparolo and MacKinnon 2024), focus groups were considered the most suitable and practical method of gaining rich descriptions from primary school pupils. Due to fieldwork logistics and gatekeeper

preference/advice, participants were recruited from two Year 5 classes, with focus groups involving same-sex and same-class peers. Focus groups were facilitated by a male university research assistant who also worked part-time as a teaching assistant at Birchwood Park, working across both Year 5 classes. As noted by Gibson (2012), having existing relationships enabled degrees of familiarity and rapport with pupils and aided in gaining access, recruiting participants, and moderating discussions.

During focus groups, child-friendly language was used, as recommended by Gibson (2012), to verbalise the assent form. Pupils were then provided with opportunities to ask questions or seek clarification regarding their participation. From here, the researcher established 'ground rules', derived partly from Scarparolo and MacKinnon (2024), which included emphasising that there were not any 'right' or 'wrong' answers as each pupil's thoughts and experiences were being sought after, and stressing that all members should listen to and respect each other's views. Once started, a semi-structured focus group guide of 13 open-ended questions was used to moderate discussions. All questions were worded in a child-friendly accessible manner, for example: *what does the word banter mean? what type of things do people banter about?* and, *would you consider banter to be good or bad?* Guided by Adler et al. (2019), prompts and probes were used to encourage pupils to elaborate on their and peers' initial answers, enabling richer insights to be captured. Focus groups were audio recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. Focus groups lasted between 22 and 42 min, with an average duration of 30 min, and totalled 242 min of audio.

Often used to examine children's focus group data (Scarparolo and MacKinnon 2024), thematic analysis was considered the most suitable technique to capture patterns and themes in relation to the research questions. Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-staged guide, during phase one, the research team systematically (re)read interview transcripts, recorded initial ideas, and discussed emerging patterns. Then, initial notes and ideas were inductively generated into 36 codes (phase two), such as banter as 'single-sex interaction', 'banter as a social bonding mechanism', and the 'importance of mutual interests'. Codes were developed into potential themes (phase three), for example 'prevalence of banter', 'reasons for bantering', and 'gender differences' in bantering. These themes were then reviewed based on their relatedness to research questions, capturing meaningful patterns (phase four), as displayed in the following results section. From here, each established theme was analysed using the figurational concepts of individual civilising process, habitus, and figuration (phase five), as presented in the discussion section (phase six).

5 | Results

5.1 | Pupils' Conceptualisations of Banter

29 of the 32 participants reported being aware of banter, therefore, their definitions of the term were sought. Pupils' defined banter based on four key elements; (a) joking, (b) humorous, (c) insults and/or mockery, and (d) no intention to cause harm. Representative examples included, 'teasing, but in a funny way so not hurting them [recipient]' (Holly), and 'like insulting, being mean in like a jokey way' (Morris). Despite relative definitional consensus, pupils' reflections on how jovially framed comments manifest in practice were nuanced based upon strength of social bonds. For some, banter was 'more commonly with friends than people you don't know because you're like with them a lot' (Tim), and,

> It's [banter] joking and saying things that if you said to a complete rando [non-friend] might be hurtful because you know it's your friend, it's funny...so a bit of sarcasm. But the person knows they don't really mean that you're actually like super rubbish, they're just joking.
>
> Emily

Offering a slightly different perspective, Fraser suggested:

> It [banter] can always be like against your rivals or someone and you can still have a good time. Like in Year 4 last year, I would have banter to people like Elijah because he supports Spurs and I would have banter with him and [I am] not best friends with him, I'm not really friends with him, but you know.

Fraser implies that banter may be exchanged between non-friends if during competition and/or if the orator and auditor share and are aware of a mutual interest (e.g., football fandom). Further probing the manifestation of banter, pupils stressed how humorous forms of joking, insults or mockery should be reciprocated. Many pupils considered banter to be 'two sided, it's not one sided' (Jane), with Frank stating, 'I think it should be back and forth. If you're wondering why because like I say something mean to John and he'd say something mean to me'. Whilst Jane and Frank considered that banter had to involve in kind retorts, Emily expressed, 'I don't think it necessarily has to be back and forth, both people they don't have to explicitly say it'. Moving beyond dual relationship-based conceptions, Morris considered how, 'it can be a lot of people ganging up on one person or just one person on one, but usually the person doesn't attack back in the banter, but sometimes they do'. Despite 'ganging up' and 'attacking' resembling bullying behaviours, Morris attributes such communicative styles with banter, albeit in an ambiguous manner. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how whilst primary school pupils' conceptions of banter were consistent, their reflections on how banter manifests revealed the importance of social connectedness, common interests, and a shared understanding of humorous intent, whilst highlighting degrees of ambiguity concerning banter's reciprocated nature.

5.2 | Pupils' Engagement in Banter

Most pupils reported that banter occurs regularly at Birchwood Park, with Jimmy detailing:

> I'd say daily. It happens a lot because everybody knows each other in the classes, like everybody knows them at school. Maybe you don't see them outside of school,

> but it's enough [time] for people to go in and have a conversation, like a proper one and do banter.

Sharing a similar assessment of its commonality whilst also alluding to who is involved in banter, Polly stated, 'a lot. I would say between our friend group because me and Evie play quite a lot, we do banter quite a lot'. Referring to when and where banter most often takes place, Jim noted, 'I think it's breaktimes because there is more space and less teachers compared to the classroom', and Tim added, 'it is not as often in the classroom because we rarely get to chat together'. Whilst socialising was constrained, episodic banter during lessons could occur, with John describing how 'sometimes we do it like when something funny has happened in class, but it just comes out randomly'. During such instances, probing revealed how teachers seldom engaged or encouraged banter. These findings reveal how pupils experienced banter within recreation-oriented, rather than learning-centred, spaces during periods with less teacher supervision.

Pupils were asked to compare boys' and girls' engagement to ascertain possible gendered banter. Whilst Emily reported that, 'normally it happens between the boys', most pupils cited relative parity, with Fraser reflecting, 'I think boys and girls both banter, so I think it would be unfair to say boys' banter more than girls or girls banter more than boys'. Whilst both boys and girls engaged in banter, further probing revealed how banter often takes place between same-sex peers, with Jim asserting, 'I think girls, well, all genders, will probably banter the same genders more than different genders bantering each other'. Such descriptions suggest that at Birchwood Park, whilst there were no differences in how often boys and girls bantered, who they bantered with was portrayed as being gendered.

When reflecting on why they engage in banter, pupil responses revealed enjoyment, boredom busting, and social bonding as three key reasons. Barry explained, 'I just do banter to have fun with people sometimes', Jane reported, 'it's fun, it's a cool thing to do at times, if you're a bit bored', and Polly noted, 'I think it is a way to socialise with people, get to know different people'. This last assertion demonstrates that whilst perceived to be predicated and determined by the strength social bonds, banter can serve to develop friendships, as detailed by Josh, 'I've become closer with my friends this year, I think that is because we have done more banter'. Pupils enjoyed forming mutuality through bantering, as Morris acknowledged, 'it's just nice to have a good bonding situation'. Whilst most discussed banter's prosocial elements, some pupils enjoyed bantering that involved offending or irritating peers. Alex confessed, 'roasting people is quite fun when you're good at it', and Rosie admitted, 'sometimes I do it to annoy them [recipient]'. Collectively, these findings reveal how banter served multiple enjoyable functions despite being used for both socially cohesive and/or momentarily destructive purposes.

5.3 | Pupils' Perceptions of (In)appropriate Banter

Given examples of perceived constructive-destructive banter, pupils were asked about the morality of banter. Reporting a widely shared reservation, John stated, 'appearance, we don't joke about that because when we do it mostly gets hurtful, it's not really banter', and Frank questioned, 'with appearance I wonder sometimes if people are just bullying'. For many pupils, such content was inappropriate as it was potentially deliberately harmful. However, adding complexity to such determinations, Bill referenced, 'bullying is more like just insulting and like banter is more like not meaning it, but bullying is more like meaning it'. The suggestion that banterful comments may be accidentally insulting and, thus, be offensive and harmful demonstrates how intended banter could be conceived as bullying. In this sense, banter could be good, bad, and simultaneously both, with Alex evaluating, 'I think it can be a bit of both [good and bad]. There's sometimes where you like probably have an argument and then that's like an argument but then there is also like funny banter, so I think it can be good and bad'. Supplementing this predication was pupils' evaluations of the strength of relationship between those involved, with Mark sharing:

> Well, it [banter] can be both good and bad. In a way good if they are like a friend or a close friend, if you're kind of close friends, if you are mean about their football kit then they will probably take it as a joke but if you are not close with them, they will probably take it as a mean joke.

These findings demonstrate how banter was predicated on perceived (in)appropriate degrees of sincerity, taste, and reception, as well as the strength of social bonds between those involved.

One further way pupils determined (in)appropriateness was in how banter was received. Most pupils reported how peers can become visibly upset when offended and/or hurt by (bad) banter, as reported by Bill, 'they just go away or burst into tears or very annoyed and shouting at you'. Bill's portrayal suggests that when upset, some pupils demonstrate relatively high degrees of composure by walking away, whilst others outwardly express their disapproval, distress, and frustration. Unpacking this process, Jimmy expanded:

> I think it could be like you know go too far and you've gone over the line. It's really like mean and upset them if it's before if it's more like a silly thing. When it gets to the next level and they take it personally then you know, they say something back and then it turns into like a ping-pong argument. That's when it goes too far. Not funny anymore and it's just a bit annoying.

Jimmy's insight and appraisal denotes fluid interpretations of banter's appropriateness, particularly when: (a) comments of a personal nature are interpreted as distasteful, (b) offence is caused, (c) offence prompts an equally offensive retort, (d) an initially playful exchange is no longer rendered humorous and (e) a previously enjoyable interaction has become frustrating. Such processual insights reveal that pupils' appraisals of the morality of banter were informed, relatively complex, and centred on moral judgements (in)appropriate interactions.

6 | Discussion

In terms of conceptualisation, pupils defined banter as humorous, jovial, insulting/mocking, and intended to be funny, characteristics which partly map to those identified elsewhere by secondary school pupils (Green and Mierzwinski 2025; Steer et al. 2020) and university students (Abell et al. 2023). However, unlike these studies, pupils at Birchwood Park held prosocial attitudes by not deeming banter to be harmful, per se. Furthermore, some children explained how comments do not need to be reciprocated and/or only between friends to be considered as banter, contrasting to existing literature (Booth et al. 2023; Lowe et al. 2021; Yeo et al. 2018). Although, akin to Buglass et al.'s (2021) reference to the importance of social closeness, pupils stressed the need for a shared interest and/or pre-existing relationship between those involved in bantering. Qualifying social closeness as a determining factor, pupils cited how humorously framed yet insulting comments between individuals who lacked mutual identification and/or pre-existing relations would be interpreted as annoying, offensive, and possibly harmful. As such, pupils did not associate such interactions with banter. These findings illustrate how by 9–10 years of age these children were aware of and could conceptualise banter in a manner not to dissimilar to secondary school pupils and university students, evidencing a relatively sophisticated 'socio-cognitive understanding of humour' (Hoicka and Akhtar 2012, 14) by largely conceptualising well-intended banter based on strength of social bonds. In one sense, compared with secondary-aged peers or teachers (Anti-Bullying Alliance 2023; Green and Mierzwinski 2025; Steer et al. 2020), pupils' more prosocial attitudes towards banter could be attributed to an innocence of youth having not gone through puberty, intense identity development and/or more varied peer groups. Furthermore, given pupils scarcer life experiences and the amount of time spent in formal education settings, participants' conceptions of and attitudes towards banter are part-informed by the primary school figuration. Compared with secondary schools, Birchwood Park had fewer pupils (approx. 500), who generally remained with the same class group (approx. 25) from the age of four to 11 years, a degree of close proximity, intimacy, and dependency which 'requires a constant consideration of what is proper and convenient in specific situations and relations' (Gillam and Gulløv 2024, p. 54). In this sense, during this impressionable phase of habitus development (Elias 2012), pupils' dispositions, attitudes and conceptualisation of banter are somewhat informed by the primary figuration at Birchwood Park.

Pupils reported regularly engaging in banter, usually during break times (approx. 1 h per day), a finding rarely acknowledged in the literature reviewed. Furthermore, whilst the literature often evidences banter as a predominantly male endeavour (McCormack and Anderson 2010; Yeo et al. 2018), pupils reported no significant gender difference in the prevalence of banter, but they did note how banter was most likely to take place between same-sex peers. Pupils reported how their engagement in banter was mostly driven by boredom busting, enjoyment factors, and its potential to develop and strengthen friendships, reflecting commonly cited reasons (Abell et al. 2023; Wardman 2021). Pupils' abilities, willingness and frequency to banter demonstrate its habitual nature, which was enabled and constrained within the primary school figuration. Given teacher presence, responsibility and behavioural constraints within classrooms, it was not surprising that break times enabled pupils greater opportunities to banter, serving prosocial (developing social bonds and friendships) and productive (boredom busting and enjoyment) functions. The prevalence of same-sex banter can be part-explained by pupils' socialising via smaller self-selective friendship-based group interactions, opportunities less available within teacher-allocated and mixed-sex classroom seating plans (Victory and Cohen 2014). Therefore, during breaktimes, children were more enabled to gravitate towards more like-minded peers for whom they can mutually identify and share common interests (Renold 2004). Arguably, this social process and preference demonstrate a shared (possibly gendered) habitus between pupils who held mutual feelings towards, tastes concerning, and abilities to banter (Bergen 2020). Pupils' ability to restrain from and know when it is more acceptable to engage in banter is indicative of their individual civilising process (Elias 2012) in the sense that they appear to be able to exhibit necessary emotional self-regulation (i.e., fun but not appropriate in classroom) and degrees of foresight (i.e., possible teacher sanctions).

Pupils appraised and navigated 'good' and 'bad' banter and reported possibilities that banter could be simultaneously both. Pupils determined and differentiated appropriate from inappropriate banter based on content/topic, strength of relationships between those involved, and perceived orator's intent and receiver's response. Most banter was reported as being amicable, with many pupils welcoming its competitive tendencies and humorous exchanges. Although, whilst possibly humorous, appearance-related comments were deemed bad banter due to their perceived poor taste and potential harmful consequences, an appraisal cited elsewhere as failed forms of banter (Buglass et al. 2021; Green and Mierzwinski 2025; Steer et al. 2020). As well as content, pupils appraised banter's appropriateness by considering on orators' perceived intentions and the seriousness and sincerity behind their comments. Pupils exampled how orators could judge appropriateness based on how their comments were responded to either emotionally (i.e., eliciting laughter or showing frustration) or behaviourally (i.e., responding in kind or walking away). It is perhaps not surprising that such judgements are needed given how Bergen (2020) notes that from the age of seven, children's humour styles can be crude, refer to taboo topics, and can be simultaneously socially unacceptable but deemed hilarious by peers. As such, pupils' navigation of when, where, with whom and how to banter is not an innate or naturally developed process but learned from and through their engagement in figurations (i.e., primary school) and broader civilising processes concerning relational/behavioural norms/expectations and prevailing civilities and sensitivities regarding causing offence (Elias 2012).

7 | Conclusion

In this article, we examined how children conceptualise, engage in, and navigate banter within an English primary school. Familiar with the term, pupils at Birchwood Park conceptualised banter as humorously framed insults and/or mockery delivered in a jovial manner with no intention to harm. Primary school pupils engaged in banter for enjoyment, boredom busting, and as part of and to strengthen their peer relations, with

banter predominately manifesting in the school playground during recreational play. In this sense, banter served as an important social tool in children's (mainly same-sex) peer group dynamics. Pupils' navigation of when, where, with whom, and how to banter was relatively sophisticated given that banter could be deemed simultaneously good and bad based on relational bonds and behavioural reactions, as well as content. In answering the research questions, this study contributes original empirical knowledge by (a) being the first to consider how primary school children socially constructed banter, (b) providing insight into when, where, and why children engage in banter and (c) evidencing complex processes in which children of this age determine and navigate peer group banter.

This article was also the first to apply figurational sociology to analyse primary school pupils use of banter. Applying the concept of figuration by considering fluctuating degrees of interdependencies between teacher-pupil and pupil-peer partly helped explain why pupils bantered when and where they did and did not. Pupils' abilities to banter were part-enabled and constrained by structural factors (i.e., playgrounds providing pupils with more space to socialise), social conditions (i.e., breaktimes enabling banter with minimal adult oversight), and relationship dynamics (i.e., opportunities for same-sex banter with likeminded peers). When examining children's ability to engage in banter, applying the concept of individual civilising process enabled us to consider required degrees of cognitive, social and emotional intelligence to banter successfully. Given pupils relatively sophisticated understandings and engagement when navigating banter, they embodied varying degrees of emotional self-restraints (i.e., reacting to jovial insults in a socially acceptable manner) and foresight (i.e., determining how to banter appropriately). Such embodiment involves children learning historically, culturally and socially informed behavioural codes, conventions and expectations through their entering, being a part of, and contributing to their family, community and school figurations. The concept of habitus proved useful when analysing the prevalence, lack of gendered difference but same-sex preferences within pupils bantering. Pupils appeared to share banter with those for whom they held greater mutual identification, shared their interests, humour styles and tolerances towards being jovially insulted and mocked. Collectively, our analysis demonstrates how 'a figurational approach offers other important tools to understand the social norms, everyday sociality and social relationships in schools' (Gillam and Gulløv 2024, p. 54).

This article makes empirical and theoretical contributions to understandings of how primary school-aged children develop, sustain, and navigate peer relations. As evidenced in the introduction, such contributions are necessary given the growing teacher and policy-maker concerns regarding the (in)appropriateness of banter in UK schools (Anti-Bullying Alliance 2023; Department for Education 2023). However, it is also worth noting possible limitations within our data collection method. Whilst advocated as a suitable research method (Adler et al. 2019; Gibson 2012), it is important to acknowledge how focus groups can impact children's responses due to the presence of others (Creswell 2014; Daley 2013). For example, seeking pupils' conceptions of banter in a group-based format may detract from individuality and detailed descriptions. Likewise, it could be argued that focus groups with pupils in the same class, same sex and with a teaching assistant (i.e., authority figure) may have influenced some children's reporting on their engagement and navigation of banter. Therefore, such contributions need to be substantiated and developed through ethnographic research that collects observations of pupils' (and possibly teachers') engagement in banter and the extent that banter is self-regulated and/or socially constrained by peers and teachers. Ideally, such ethnographic research would take place in more culturally diverse primary schools to explore possible intersectionality between banter, gender, ethnicity, and social class.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank the pupils and teachers at Birchwood Park for their participation in this research project. The authors would like to extend thanks to the reviewers for the constructive feedback which has undoubtedly strengthened this article.

Ethics Statement

This research project received ethical clearance from the School of Science, Technology and Health Research Ethics Committee at York St John University, reference no: STHEC0039.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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