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# 'It is hard to establish boundaries': Pupils' and teachers' perceptions of blurred lines between banter and bullying in secondary physical education

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## Abstract

This article examines pupils' and teachers' perceptions of blurred boundaries between banter and bullying in secondary physical education (PE) in England. Focus on this topic is timely amid policy-maker concerns regarding young people's banter escalating into bullying, or bullying being downplayed as banter within educational and sporting environments. Perceptions were gained through 14 focus groups with 49 pupils and nine interviews with PE teachers, which were thematically analysed using the concepts of figuration and power relations (Elias, 1978). Whilst pupils conceptually distinguished banter from bullying, differentiating between the two in practice proved difficult during PE lessons. Difficulty was premised on subjective evaluations of performance-related comments concerning who was involved, the intention behind comments and how they were received, and if comments were considered humorous or harmful. Within the PE figuration, sporting competence proved a key power resource, resulting in humorously framed performance-related comments illuminating and heightening power imbalances between sporty and less sporty pupils. Given these pupil power dynamics and how performance-related comments were construed by some as banter and others as bullying, PE teachers should regularly remind pupils of conceptual differences between banter and bullying, set clear behavioural expectations, and consistently regulate borderline banter.

## Keywords

Banter, bullying, physical education, figurational sociology, power

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## Introduction

Banter is omnipresent within many contemporary sport settings (Abell et al., 2024; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2024; Nichols, 2018). However, some forms of banter have been considered as, and criticised for, resembling bullying behaviours (Booth et al., 2023; Green and Mierzwinski, 2025; Newman et al., 2022a). These concerns are acknowledged in the following UK-based *Duty of Care in Sport: Independent Report to Government*:

> In sport there are various levels of 'banter' which can go from mild to harsh, but for clarity, it is not the same as bullying. Banter is something that most teams engage in; bullying is not. Banter is a form of gentle ribbing by friends, colleagues and teammates; it is episodic (i.e. irregular), never intended to cause harm and, importantly, reciprocal. Bullying, by contrast, is subtly relentless, intentionally wounding and one-directional. Banter can never be used as an excuse for bullying behaviour, and it is important to recognise that for some, banter is a route into bullying (Grey-Thompson, 2017: 16–17).

Whilst emphasising conceptual distinctions, this extract highlights possible interconnections between banter and bullying within sporting environments. Valuing physical competence, these environments often involve competitive zero-sum games and can include a sport ethic based on positive deviance (Hughes and Coakley, 1991). However, as well as possible conflict, sporting environments are often premised on respect and fair play, and have been found to foster camaraderie (Loland, 2013). Understanding these dynamics is important as physical education (PE) is often viewed as being synonymous with sport (Green, 2008; Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022).

In England, to combat bullying, many secondary schools follow guidance provided by the Anti-Bullying Alliance.[1] Guidance acknowledges how *playful* banter can blur into *harmful* bullying, as 'sometimes, banter can unintentionally hurt someone's feelings'; therefore, 'it is crucial to distinguish between innocent mistakes and behaviours intended to harm, which can escalate into bullying' (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024: np). This differentiation and possible escalation often involve differing perceptions of intention based on a metaphorical 'line of acceptability', a phrase increasingly used when discussing this topic in education (Abell et al., 2024; Buglass et al., 2021) and sport (Booth et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022a). Whilst scholars cite power imbalances as distinguishing factors between banter and bullying, sociological theorising is seldom used to analyse the role of power. Seeking to address this theoretical gap, we apply the concepts of figuration and power relations (Elias, 1978). These concepts help examine how competitive, physical, and team-based sports in PE often induce performance-related comments (Green et al., 2025; Green and Mierzwinski, 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a). Specifically, we analyse how pupils and teachers socially construct and assess blurred boundaries, and differentiate between banter and bullying in secondary PE.

## Literature review

Evidencing blurred lines between banter and bullying within secondary male PE, Mierzwinski and Velija (2020b) found that boys and teachers determined appropriate banter based on repetition and context. Being able to determine appropriate banter was clouded by frequent *chewing*, a colloquial term denoting 'a deliberate attempt to test a peer's temperament' (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2024: 140). Banter and chewing were considered funny, but if persistent, they blurred into 'bad banter' and/or bullying. Outside of PE, Johannessen's (2021) school-based study revealed that boys'

bantering involved disparaging slurs, which they often trivialised and downplayed as humorous and not hurtful. Downplaying was premised on boys' shared belief that 'you should be able to joke around anything', even though many boys were uncertain of how their humour was perceived and received by others (Johannessen, 2021: 486). Similarly, Buglass et al. (2021) found that some university students trivialised intentionally harmful bullying as playful banter, serving to legitimise this behaviour. However, contrasting with ideas concerning freedom of expression and right to offend, students emphasised the importance of navigating 'social rules of engagement of the audience', acknowledging that not all students will share the same desires to banter and/or humour styles (Buglass et al., 2021: 294).

Similar findings can be found within contemporary sport-related literature. Interviewing eight players (15–16 years old) and four coaches in a male community football club, Booth et al. (2023) discovered that repetitive comments were consistently viewed as overstepping into bullying. However, bullying could be ambiguous, as the same comments were received differently depending on the relationships and situations in which they were exchanged. Explaining this finding, Booth et al. (2023) noted how a social hierarchy based largely on embodiment of hegemonic masculine norms part-enabled the masquerading and downplaying of bullying as banter. Further evidencing the influence of social hierarchies, through interviewing 18 professional footballers, Newman et al. (2022a) discovered that less experienced players passively accepted and seldom challenged bullying, which maintained power imbalances between players. Passive responses and lack of reporting were also found within university sports societies, whereby preservation of identity was the reason many students opted not to voice their feelings of disapproval and distress (Abell et al., 2024). This reluctance contributed to a prevailing culture of banter within the university campus, whereby banter was used as a 'catch all' term to euphemistically label and excuse bullying (Abell et al., 2024: 8736).

Building upon young people's peer relations and social constructions of banter, it is necessary to consider how coaches differentiate between and monitor banter and bullying. Interviewing five male football coaches, Newman et al. (2022b) found that bullying was perceived to manifest when there is an imbalance of power. Within this academy, players' perceived weaknesses offered perpetrators opportunities to deliver calculated personal comments to display and maintain their authority (Newman et al., 2022b). Furthermore, coaches found separating and monitoring banter and bullying difficult given varied tolerances towards banter and emphasis placed on offence caused. Explaining this finding, Newman et al. (2022b: 1585) noted how a 'player's personality could solely determine what is appropriate behaviour or not'. Detailing how banter was regulated in a community football club, Booth et al. (2023) discovered that coaches believed the term 'banter' is used to mask bullying. This masking was problematic given coaches' uncertainties and contradictions regarding how and when banter blurred into bullying (Booth et al., 2023). Whilst insightful, such literature is football-dominant, and it is necessary to acknowledge how teachers have different roles, responsibilities and pressures. Therefore, this article addresses an empirical gap by exploring how PE teachers differentiate between and monitor banter and bullying.

The literature reviewed identifies several themes concerning blurred lines between banter and bullying within educational and sporting environments. Ambiguities most often appeared when: (a) episodic comments became repetitious without being reciprocated; (b) contexts, relationships and intentions were perceived differently; and (c) social rules of engagement had not been established, adhered to and/or valued. Collectively, these factors, alongside passive responses to challenging harmful comments and cultures of silence concerning reporting bullying, may enable the downplaying and euphemistic labelling of bullying as 'just banter'. Seeking to contribute to and expand these themes, we detail pupils' and teachers' perceptions of social processes whereby banter

'can go from mild to harsh' (Grey-Thompson, 2017: 16) and can escalate from 'playful banter [and] can blur into harmful bullying' (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024: np). Given that 'sometimes, banter can unintentionally hurt someone's feelings' (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024: np), we explore how 'innocent mistakes and behaviours not intended to harm … can escalate into bullying' (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024: np) to demonstrate social processes whereby lines of acceptability become blurred in secondary PE.

## Figurational sociology

Within the literature reviewed, there is little theorising concerning the concept of power. This means that how power develops, manifests and fluctuates within relationships whereby banter and bullying can become blurred is underexplored. Therefore, in this article, figurational concepts of figuration and power relations (Elias, 1978) are used to examine pupils' and teachers' perceptions of banter and bullying, paying specific attention to power within pupil–peer and teacher–pupil relations. As Elias (1978: 261) defined a figuration as 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people', we recognise how pupils are interdependent through compulsory education and are often bound by common interests and needs. For instance, within a school figuration, children orientate, and can be orientated by and with teachers, towards certain types of knowledge, behaviours and relations (i.e. how to think, behave and socialise appropriately). Whilst such social processes can involve tension balances, social cohesion is fostered through differing and conducive networks of interdependencies. This may include teachers and, to some extent, pupils setting, maintaining and regulating parameters of acceptable behaviour, whilst pupils see value, largely agree with, and mostly conform to, such expectations. Behavioural and relational expectations have been found to differ within and across the secondary school figuration, particularly within PE (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020b; Nielsen and Thing, 2019; Williams et al., 2021). Contrasts could be due to pupils in PE often being grouped in sex-segregated and mixed-ability classes and mostly taught by same-sex teachers, whilst PE is often competitive, physical performance-centred, and team-based in nature (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025; Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022). By positioning PE as a figuration, Green et al. (2025) and Mierzwinski and Velija (2020b) demonstrate how and why performance-related commentary becomes normalised, legitimised and, at times, promoted.

Through the concept of figuration, Elias (1978) also illustrated how networks of interdependencies are inherently underpinned by power. As such, power should only be viewed relationally because Elias (1978) noted how, to say someone is powerful, one needs to state who that power resides over. As all relationships are formed by mutual dependencies, Elias (1978) warned against viewing power as a zero-sum entity, advocating power to be conceptualised as being in a state of flux due to the constant developing, evolving and negotiated nature of human relationships. This conception is significant given how the Department for Education (2024) identify power imbalance as one characteristic of bullying, whilst perceptions of blurred lines were partly informed by the (power) relationships between those involved (Booth et al., 2023). Furthermore, within secondary PE figurations, sporting competence, popularity and peer commentary have been identified as evidencing and influencing power imbalances within pupils' peer-group dynamics (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a). This conception of power enables a greater appreciation of how behaviours and relationships are contested, in flux, and can vary across different teachers, year groups and sexes. Therefore, in this article, Elias's (1978) conception of power is used to analyse the role of power imbalances within perceptions of how banter and bullying may become blurred within the PE figuration.

# Research methods

Data presented in this article derives from an ethnographic exploration of young people's behavioural norms and peer-group dynamics in secondary PE. After receiving university ethical approval, the first author conducted fieldwork at one state-funded secondary school in the north of England, Lord Taylor's School (LTS – pseudonym). Indicative of standardised practices within many mixed-sex secondary schools in England (see Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2022), at LTS, PE involved two compulsory lessons per week, with pupils grouped in year-group-specific, mixed-ability, and sex-segregated classes. As this article focuses on pupils' and teachers' perceptions and described experiences, focus group and interview data is presented, as opposed to observational data. 14 focus groups were conducted with 49 pupils (25 boys and 24 girls) across Years 7–11 (11–16 years). Volunteering pupils were largely representative of the broader school population (up to 1500 pupils), of which approximately 20% were eligible for pupil premium funding, 15% were Black or Minority Ethnic, and 10% had a registered special educational need or disability. Akin to PE classes, focus groups were year-group-specific and sex-segregated, involving between three and seven pupils and lasting between 18 and 48 minutes, with a mean duration of 23 minutes. During these audio-recorded conversations, amongst other questions, pupils were asked to define banter and bullying, to compare how banter and bullying are manifested in PE, and how they perceived the extent to which banter and bullying can be differentiated in PE. Similar lines of enquiry were pursued when the first author interviewed nine teachers (six male and three female), with semi-structured interviews lasting between 14 and 75 minutes, with a mean duration of 44 minutes. Teachers were white, British, predominantly middle-class, aged between 25 and 55 years, and all but one (military veteran) entered teaching straight from university.

Both authors self-identify as being white, middle-class males and were aged 26 and 38 years when conducting data collection and analysis. Both studied sport and PE at university, but neither continued onto initial teacher education. As sport enthusiasts and regular participants in team sports, both authors are attuned to sport-related banter and are cognisant of how verbal bullying featured in PE during their schooling. They are also aware of literature pertaining to the detrimental effects bullying can cause (Brown and Taylor, 2008) and believe all pupils should experience inclusive PE environments. Therefore, to mitigate researcher bias, these factors were reflexively acknowledged when Green conducted data collection, and both authors analysed pupils' and teachers' perceptions and described experiences. For instance, the first author's male sporting identity was considered when moderating single-sex focus groups and problematised during analysis: that is, could pupils' responses be informed by their perceptions of the researcher's identity? As such, pupils were asked to elaborate upon initial responses, probed for specific examples, and asked to respect others' perceptions. Whilst this type of moderation is considered best practice (Gibson, 2012), pupils' discussions concerning bullying within PE may have been constrained given its sensitive nature, pupils' peer relations within the focus group, and prevailing cultures of silence (Green et al., 2025). Furthermore, Green's probing relating to bullying was somewhat constrained due to the agreed ethical protocol (i.e. reporting specific incidents to the gatekeeper) and his lack of intimate knowledge regarding personal relations amongst focus group members. Such reflexivity also took place during the teacher interview process. For instance, Green's shared sporting passion and relationships with teachers formed over several months of fieldwork were considered when interviewing and problematised during analysis: that is, were interviewees' responses informed by their perceptions of the researcher's preference for inclusive PE? Seeking to avoid passing any personal judgements and following Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) recommendations on probing during interviews, he encouraged teachers to elaborate on initial responses such as 'like early

today, you saw how they were interacting' and 'you know how it is'. Processes of reflexivity during analysis were also aided by applying the concepts of figuration and power, which further mitigated any preconceived preferences or judgements concerning banter and bullying, that is, analysing what happens in PE as opposed to what ought to happen (Green, 2008).

Once data had been collected, focus group and interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymised through the use of pseudonyms before being imported into NVivo 12. From here, Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase guide to thematic analysis was followed, beginning with the first author refamiliarising himself with data and producing initial codes in NVivo 12 (Phase 1). Combining focus group and interview extracts, 37 codes were generated, including: banter as a dualistic process, challenges in differentiating banter from bullying, and performance-related bullying masquerading as banter (Phase 2). These codes were then developed and explained by applying the concepts of figuration and power (Phase 3). Informed by both authors' strong affiliations with figurational sociology, the choice of these concepts was data-informed. This approach explains why the concept of established-outsider relations was not applied here, despite our previous application of this concept when examining how bullying manifested in PE (see Green et al., 2025). Triangulated with the second author, empirical themes and theoretical explanations were critically reviewed and revised where necessary (Phase 4), leading to the development of the following themes: (a) pupils' social constructions of banter and bullying within the PE figuration, (b) blurred boundaries between banter and bullying within the PE figuration, and (c) identifying and differentiating banter from bullying within the PE figuration (Phase 5). Following the presentation of the findings section, these themes are further theoretically examined in the discussion section (Phase 6).

## Findings

### Pupils' social constructions of banter and bullying in secondary PE

Given sparse evidence of young people's understandings of the conceptual differences between banter and bullying, during focus groups pupils were asked to define both behaviours. Providing comparative data, Sean (Year 10) stated:

> Bullying, you are hurting someone. Like you know you are hurting them. Banter, they know, you know it's all joking and you can see that they are not like physically upset and it is not repeated, so it's not over and over or anything.

Reiterating such sentiments, Alice (Year 10) stated, 'it [bullying] is intentionally trying to make someone feel bad and I feel that is one of the biggest differences between bullying and banter', and Ben (Year 10) explained how 'bullying is meant to harm, whereas banter is meant to have a laugh'. These quotes demonstrate how pupils differentiated banter from bullying through appraising intent, degrees of harm caused, and repetition. Such differentiations reflect academic and policy-based definitions (Grey-Thompson, 2017; Volk et al., 2014) and conceptions provided by other young people who characterised bullying as being repetitive and intentionally harming (Steer et al., 2020). Considering bullying's 'goal-directedness' (Volk et al., 2014), at LTS many pupils stated that the 'goal' of banter was to be humorous, rather than cause harm or distress. Whilst partly differentiating both behaviours based on intention (i.e. humour or harm), some pupils problematised determining this in practice. Connor (Year 11) stated that, 'you can never know how badly you are hurting someone because … say like not meaning things and they could interpret it [comments] differently', whilst Natalie (Year 10) suggested, 'people might take it [banter] the wrong way,

they might say it is bullying when it is not'. Pupils' considerations demonstrate potential issues when an initiator and recipient interpret a comment differently, interpretations which may not only differ, but fluctuate when repeated or reacted to in myriad ways. Whilst this subjective judgement is acknowledged within PE (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025) and sporting environments (Newman et al., 2022b), here it is necessary to note that, irrespective of a response, intentional harmful comments could still be classified as bullying.

Indeed, many pupils referred to reciprocation, repetition and targeting when differentiating banter from bullying. For example, Nick (Year 11) explained:

> Everyone doing it [banter], they understand it and it isn't crossing the line. Bullying is like picking on someone, targeting someone who is vulnerable and they won't do anything back … If you are doing it [banter] once or twice then that is ok but if you keep doing it and keep doing it when the person says stop, you need to realise that it is not right and you need to move on.

In one respect, Nick's perception reflects Grey-Thompson's (2017: 17) reporting that banter 'is episodic (i.e. irregular), never intended to cause harm and, importantly, reciprocal', and bullying is 'intentionally wounding and one-directional'. In another respect, Nick assumes a shared understanding, and determines appropriateness based on a recipient's reaction (i.e. 'says stop'), which is a problematic determiner of harm given young people's masking of perceived vulnerable emotions in secondary PE (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020b). Despite many pupils' differentiations resembling academic definitions, only one pupil specifically cited power, which is used in the Department for Education's (2024) definition of bullying. Jessica (Year 10) stated how, 'with bullying you feel empowered whereas banter there is no empowerment between people, you are just having banter towards each other'. This appraisal is insightful as it differentiates bullying and banter based on emotional (i.e. feeling empowered) and relational (i.e. asserting dominance) effects. More broadly, pupils' omissions in this respect are not surprising given that, when used in this context, 'power' is primarily an academic term and is seldom referenced in the Anti-Bullying Alliance's (2024) school-based banter awareness campaign.

Despite most pupils not referencing power when differentiating banter from bullying, their descriptions of bullying alluded to power imbalances in PE. For example, Mickey (Year 10) stated:

> The person who is receiving [bullying] is not as good at sport in PE, whereas the person doing the bullying would be better at sport. They kind of bully them because they are not as good. Whereas when you are better at it you can have that higher ground.

Further evidencing how sporting competence served as a differentiating power resource, Mr Wharfedale explained how, 'any bullying would be where it is more of a talented sportsman who goes about abuse, not abuse, well in a way it is verbal abuse towards other people who cannot perform at their levels'. Whilst perceived poor sporting competence has been identified as a risk factor for PE-based bullying (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a), this finding is important when considered alongside which pupils are more or less likely to engage in banter during PE.

Pupils and teachers agreed that perceived sporty pupils frequently engaged in banter, while less sporty pupils rarely, if ever, did. Jessica (Year 10) stated, 'people who are better at sport banter all the time', whilst Mickey (Year 10) explained, 'people who understand the sport because they may be more advanced than others … you can like take the mick out of someone because they can't do something as good as you'. Such assertions indicate that pupils with perceived or actual high levels

of sporting competence are most likely to initiate banter in PE, directing outwardly humorous comments to peers who may not embody the same levels of sporting ability. When probed further about this competence-based differential, Ben (Year 10) explained that 'they [sporty pupils] can have that higher ground than those people that aren't as great at sport', whilst Nick (Year 11) stated, 'they [less sporty pupils] just sit on their own … they don't really participate in it [banter]'. Therefore, sporty pupils' use of banter in this respect was enabled by power imbalances within PE, which are factors within bullying (Department for Education, 2024), possibly blurring pupils' and teachers' interpretations of this type of interaction. Collectively, our findings show how: banter develops within secondary PE; there are differences in prevalence amongst different peer groups; and it is often directed at less able pupils. These findings offer originality, as existing sport-based research involves amateur and elite athletes, where competency levels are more equal (Booth et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2022a).

## Blurred boundaries between banter and bullying in PE

Given the differentiation between pupils more likely to initiate and receive banter, pupils and teachers were asked how banter may blur into or be construed as bullying. As documented elsewhere (see Green et al., 2025), in PE at LTS, whilst rare, incidents of bullying involved some sporty pupils directing defamatory, derogatory and chastising comments towards less sporty peers. Whilst bullying was rarely disclosed, banter's commonality was frequently discussed, as exemplified in Nick's (Year 11) response, 'I can speak of my experiences, we like to banter each other a lot'. Whilst echoing this reflection, but acknowledging similarities between banter and bullying, Mr Wharfedale reported:

> There is a lot going on. Like in football lessons, you hear a lot [banter]. Like in Danish longball with the Year 10s today, there was quite a lot flying around then. There is a very fine line between it [banter and bullying] sometimes, but if it's light-hearted, it's fun and people enjoy it, I don't mind it at all.

These assertions capture how banter frequently manifested, was generally permitted by PE teachers, and was judged upon a metaphorical line of acceptability, based largely on teachers' preferences towards humorous comments and their emotional intelligence (i.e. ability to judge pupil enjoyment/distress). One issue with such appraisal is that it is mainly teacher-derived and not pupil-derived, which may be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, PE teachers are most likely to have been sporty pupils themselves (Green, 2008), therefore, sharing greater mutuality with and understanding of current sporty pupils, and potentially less empathy towards and understanding of less able pupils (Tischler and McCaughtry, 2011). Secondly, some pupils mask perceived vulnerable emotions (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025) and are reluctant to report bullying (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a). Whilst Abbie (Year 10) stated, 'I feel like there is definitely, definitely a line', and Natalie (Year 10) explained, 'I think banter is something to skirt around, it is fine to tell jokes, but you need to know where the point is', further discussions revealed ambiguity in determining lines of acceptability. Mr Harris reflected:

> I think it is a real grey area in sport in general, not just in school in PE. Banter is a very controversial word in my opinion. Banter is sometimes used as an excuse for bullying. I think it is a fine line between something that is banter and saying something that will make somebody else upset or question themselves or make them feel upset.

Mr Harris's concerns speak to Johannessen's (2021) finding that the word banter can be used to euphemistically label bullying behaviours, and in this case perhaps excuse performance-related bullying in PE. In one respect, this finding is concerning given the Department for Education's (2024) warnings against the downplaying of harmful behaviours as just banter, and Grey-Thompson's (2017: 17) assertion that 'banter can never be used as an excuse for bullying behaviour'. In another respect, Mr Harris's problematising of the potential for pupils' banter to cross the line (accidentally) or be misused (intentionally harming) evidence interpretive difficulties pupils and teachers may face when differentiating between these two behaviours in PE.

Further probing how the line of acceptability is determined revealed importance placed on who comments are exchanged between. Shay (Year 11) stated, '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', whilst Abbie (Year 10) noted, 'I think it depends on the person and the friendship group as to where the line is'. Reference to individual preference and strength of peer relations offers nuanced insights into understanding how lines of acceptability are conceived (Buglass et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2022b). Conceptions may become blurred between those intimately involved and more passive observers during ribbing-based banter between friends. For instance, Eleanor (Year 11) stated, 'people must think we are horrible to each other, but we are not', and Beatrice (Year 11) added, 'because some of the stuff we say, some other people might not say it to their friends but that is just their personalities together'. Teachers' and pupils' ability to distinguish between friends' shared understanding could be further blurred when banter was considered by those involved to escalate into verbal bullying. For example, Laura (Year 11) stated, '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 [banter] is with your mates, when it is with someone who 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 and then you carry on, that is when the line is hard.

These assertions capture the processual nature of banter in terms of how it is delivered, interpreted and (self)regulated, and how it may escalate into bullying. More specifically, initial jovially exchanged comments could transgress into bullying if they were targeted, repeated and not reciprocated. However, given the intimacy-based and flux nature of acceptability highlighted, onus appeared to be placed on pupils to ensure comments remained as banter. There are three potential issues with this onus: (a) teachers, not pupils, are responsible for monitoring banter (Department for Education, 2024); (b) pupils tended to judge blurred comments as banter, as opposed to bullying; and (c) bullying masquerading as banter may not be reported, given identified cultures of silence in secondary PE (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a). Furthermore, the presented dialogues illustrate how pupils and teachers may not share the same friendship bonds, humour styles and tolerances towards offence (Newman et al., 2022b), a finding which appears predicated on social and emotional awareness of pupils' preferences. Collectively, these findings speak to Grey-Thompson (2017: 17) assertion that 'for some, banter is a route into bullying'.

## Identifying and differentiating banter from bullying in PE

Amid recent academic interest (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2024), policy-based recognition (Department for Education, 2024), and our findings concerning fluctuating boundaries between banter and bullying, this section explores how pupils and teachers identified and differentiated

between both behaviours in secondary PE. Given pupils' conceptions of banter and bullying and their perceptions of who was most and least likely to be involved, pupils were asked how they differentiate between both behaviours in often competitive and highly social PE lessons. Exemplifying consensus-based responses, Patricia (Year 10) stated, 'I think it is quite personal and it is always going to be different for different people, so it is not always the same', whilst Laura (Year 10) explained, 'banter is more about the boundaries and how far you can say things'. These assertations illustrate differentiating factors based on personal preference and perceived appropriate levels of offence caused, illustrating possible contrasting interpretations (Newman et al., 2022b) when evaluating borderline bantering (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025). Such nuance may partially explain why Natalie (Year 10) stated, 'it is hard to establish boundaries', whilst Mark (Year 11) explained, 'I think you have to be careful of whether the person would understand it or not'. Both pupils' insights into distinguishing banter from bullying highlight the previously established importance of ensuring that the recipient interprets the banter as intended (Steer et al., 2020), as well as the necessity of adhering to shared social rules of interaction (Buglass et al., 2021).

When probed, pupils detailed how perceived crossed boundaries between banter and bullying are identified and navigated during PE lessons. Discussing this process, Jessica (Year 10) stated:

> I think that it is common sense. Like if you don't have a laugh out of it then it is not the best circumstances of saying it's banter because it is not. If you have actually offended the person, and you repeatedly do it, then it turns into bullying.

Jessica implies that secondary school pupils *should* be able to differentiate banter from bullying by evaluating a recipient's initial response (i.e. elicited laughter) and then a peer's continued engagement (i.e. repeating comments). Further evidencing the importance placed on a recipient's response, Sean (Year 10) stated:

> 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 are going to get a reaction out of them because you are saying something that will offend them. You might be saying something that you meant as a joke, but they might have found it quite upsetting. Once you know that you have their weakness it probably turns into bullying if you carry on.

This quote demonstrates the situation-specific identification of boundaries and how it is not only the content of what is said but the manner, as well as the reception to what is said, which held more significance in differentiating banter from bullying. More specifically, and illustrative of many pupils' perceptions, Sean implied that initially a recipient's response, rather than the banterer's intent, is a key determinant in judging comment(s) as banter or bullying, a finding discovered elsewhere in relation to verbal and non-verbal cues (Buglass et al., 2021; Steer et al., 2020). However, rather than solely adopting a victim-centred approach (i.e. solely determining appropriateness based on a recipient's reaction), it appears that these pupils also understood that comments *should* be deemed bullying, rather than banter, if the banterer is aware that their remark will cause offence, distress or harm and continues ribbing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given issues in assessing intent and degrees of harm caused (Slattery et al., 2019; Volk et al., 2014), most pupils reported challenges in assessing the situational, relational and agreed boundaries between those involved, as articulated by Thomas (Year 10):

Sometimes you can't tell if they are just having banter because it could just be banter but just say one person is receiving it a bit more than the other person and you don't know if they are friends or not. So, you don't really want to get involved.

Emblematic of bystander behaviour (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024), as many pupils were unsure whether comments should be classified as banter or bullying, they were unlikely to intervene when banter appeared to, or could easily, blur into bullying. Far from being 'common sense' (Jessica, Year 10), these levels of uncertainty led to the benefit of the doubt been given to the banterer, which can be problematic considering issues concerning legitimacy, responsibility and complicity often cited within episodes of bullying (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024; Slattery et al., 2019; Volk et al., 2014).

Finally, when asked to reflect on pupils' abilities to identify and navigate when banter crosses into bullying in PE, Mr Wilkinson stated:

I think they know the difference, generally. Some might also know when to stop but choose not to stop. Erm, the younger kids might often say 'I didn't mean to hurt his feelings, Sir. He is a mate of mine. I didn't mean to upset him'. So, maybe they understand the difference, maybe they don't know the difference actually.

Whilst evidencing how some pupils may bully under the guise of banter, whilst others' banter may accidentally be a 'route into bullying' (Grey-Thompson, 2017: 17), this reflection also implies pupils struggle to differentiate between banter and bullying in PE. Reiterating this perception, Mrs Hanson stated, 'no, I don't think they do … they don't know the difference. It gets out of hand quicker … they don't know when to stop'. This perception further illustrates the processual nature and possible escalation of banter into bullying, whereby some pupils can fail to identify 'episodic' versus 'repetitive' commentary (Grey-Thompson, 2017: 16). Offering more insight into pupils' abilities to differentiate banter from bullying in PE, Mr Wharfedale contended:

I think most kids know the difference. I genuinely do think that they know the difference because they understand that if you are repeatedly saying things to someone that you are not friends with and they don't like that, they can see when someone doesn't like something that they are saying. They have emotions. They have feelings. They know that the person isn't liking what they are saying, they are sat there being quiet and not saying anything back and they are not enjoying it … there is the odd time when they don't understand that line, at first you have to be very clear where you draw that line. I have had kids who are like lovely kids who have crossed that line, they have been laughing and joking but then they have said something that has crossed the line and straight away and they have seen my reaction and obviously I have straight away removed them or sat them out straight away and they do understand that but it is important that they do understand that or it is just a free for all where you can say anything.

Mr Wharfedale's perception differs to that of Mrs Hanson concerning if pupils know the difference between banter and bullying or not, and if they would stop if they became aware of causing offence and it possibly escalating into bullying. There were no notable gendered differences in male and female PE teachers' interpretations, but there was a tendency for older teachers to adopt a more cynical and less tolerant attitude towards bantering. Commonalities in teachers' perceptions reiterated previous points concerning repetition, peer-group dynamics, and lines of acceptability. Sharing similar perceptions, pupils also highlighted emotional processes involved when engaging in banter

(i.e. enacting, digesting, responding to), which need to be navigated instantaneously within highly competitive and social PE lessons.

## Discussion

Pupils confidently conceptualised and differentiated between banter and bullying by appraising intent, degrees of harm caused, and levels of repetition. However, their perceptions revealed challenges in differentiating *playful* from *harmful* comments during PE lessons. Within the PE figuration at LTS, it was reported that sporty pupils were most likely to banter, but this could become blurred as their bantering was often aimed at less sporty peers, who incidentally rarely initiated banter. Distinguishing factors within these peer-group dynamics included sporting competence, popularity and confidence, which collectively served as key power resources within the PE figuration. Given power imbalances at play, sporty pupils' performance-related comments directed at less sporty peers could be construed as targeted, derogatory and potentially hurtful, and therefore could be construed as bullying. Banter could also become blurred within friendship groups, whereby power relations are more likely to involve greater degrees of equity, when initially playful remarks were described as escalating into harmful comments. These relationally focused insights differ from, and add to, Newman et al.'s (2022b: 1585) finding that a 'player's personality could solely determine what is appropriate behaviour or not'. Described blurred lines are significant when positioned alongside pupils' and teachers' portrayals of how borderline comments were generally evaluated as banter rather than bullying. This evaluation could also be relationally informed, as teachers may lack intimate knowledge of pupils' friendship bonds, group-based in-jokes, and desires to engage in banter. This lack of knowledge explains why teachers and some pupils struggled to judge perceived intent and reception when differentiating banter from bullying. Instead, as also found by Mierzwinski and Velija (2024), pupils and teachers reported feeling more able to evaluate repetition and content when determining banter's appropriateness. This may explain why some teachers intervened to (re)set boundaries of acceptable banter in a more content-driven focused way, as opposed to relationally informed manner.

The discussion above is now further analysed within the broader context of viewing PE as a figuration involving networks of interdependence and fluctuating power relations. At LTS, core PE lessons generally involved competitive team-based sports and were highly social, enabling pupils to mingle within and across various same-sex and mixed-ability peer groups. Socialising opportunities enabled mutually orientated pupils to use humour to bond, cajole, and/or embarrass peers, often manifested through performance-related comments. Such comments were described as being normalised, partly through notions of camaraderie (Loland, 2013), but also elements of positive deviance (Hughes and Coakley, 1991). In this sense, humorously framed performance-related comments were enabled by, indicative of, and arguably heightened power imbalances between sporty and less sporty pupils within the PE figuration at LTS. Within this figuration, PE teachers' position of authority includes responsibility to ensure banter does not blur or escalate in bullying. However, when appraising such comments, PE teachers were largely dependent on pupils to report crossed boundaries of acceptable banter. In this respect, teachers' dependency could be problematic, considering evidence of pupils' stoic responses and prevailing cultures of silence in secondary PE (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020a). As such, one possibly unintended consequence of this reliance on pupil reporting is that sporty pupils were granted the benefit of the doubt when directing borderline performance-related comments to less sporty peers. Indeed, within the PE figuration, less sporty pupils were often dependent on teachers to intervene in borderline exchanges or when they felt banter escalated into bullying. These degrees of interdependency may explain why

pupils' and teachers' perceptions contained uncertainty and contrasts when describing their confidence in others to successfully differentiate banter from bullying. Viewing PE as a figuration involving networks of interdependencies, differing degrees of mutual orientation, and power imbalances sheds light on how pupils and PE teachers socially constructed, differentiated between, and regulated banter and bullying.

## Conclusion

The *Duty of Care in Sport Report* (Grey-Thompson, 2017) and *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (Department for Education, 2024) evidence and stress the need to practically distinguish banter from bullying in educational and sporting environments. However, prior to this article, there was little empirical evidence of how young people conceptualised, socially constructed and differentiated between both behaviours in PE. Whilst conceptualised as distinct behaviours by pupils, within the PE figuration at LTS, pupils and teachers described banter and bullying as occasionally becoming blurred, as some comments could accidentally or deliberately transcend into bullying. Described challenges differentiating between both behaviours were centred on who the banter was between, how banter was intended and received, and reactions to perceived borderline or inappropriate performance-related comments. Therefore, evaluations of such comments often accounted for inherently flux relationships, taking emphasis away from repetition and content, and placing more importance on situational and contextual factors. This relationally-informed differentiation meant that boundaries between banter and bullying constantly evolved and were frequently (re)negotiated and (re)evaluated, making it difficult for pupils and teachers to assess blurred lines. Instead of leaving the onus of boundary setting to pupils, we suggest that PE teachers should regularly remind pupils of conceptual differences between banter and bullying, set clear behavioural expectations, and consistently regulate borderline banter. Whilst further pupil-led discussions of such nature could be possible, given their status and responsibility within the PE figuration, PE teachers are best placed to ensure that innocent and playful banter is not considered as or escalates into bullying (Department for Education, 2024). Given PE teachers' responsibilities to set 'clearer parameters' (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2024), initial teacher education and continuing professional development courses should distinguish between both behaviours, enabling teachers to establish and maintain more consistent boundaries.

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### Ethical considerations

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### Informed consent

All participants provided informed consent in written and oral forms.

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## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Data availability statement

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

## Note

1. Established by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the National Children's Bureau in 2002 and hosted by the National Children's Bureau, the Anti-Bullying Alliance provides expertise in relation to all forms of bullying between children and young people.

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