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Extra-curricular sport: A figurational analysis of gendered activity provision, behavioural expectations, and peer group dynamics in one secondary school in England

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Abstract

This article provides a figurational analysis of extra-curricular sport within one secondary school in England. Viewing physical education (PE) as involving gendered and age-based networks of interdependencies, we examine how extra-curricular sport was provided, how pupils' behaviour was enabled and constrained, and how teacher–pupil relations became closer and more informal with age. Generated through participant observations, pupil focus groups and teacher interviews, ethnographic data is thematically analysed and interpreted through Elias's (1978) concepts of figuration, power and habitus. Despite no differences in boys' and girls' rates of engagement, the provision of extra-curricular sport reflected PE's long-standing traditions concerning gender appropriateness. Whilst attendance at lunchtime sport clubs and afterschool sport practices reduced with age, opportunities for and engagement in inter-school sport fixtures became more frequent with age. Particularly evident within minibus journeys, such opportunities heightened pupils' expressions of their sporting and gendered habitus, and degrees of informality within teacher–pupil relations. Such relations were partly enabled by the temporary removal of constraining PE policy and teachers' coaching pedagogy. However, one unintended consequence of more informal teacher–pupil relations was some pupils' perceptions of teacher favouritism, heightening power imbalances between sporty and less sporty pupils. As such, we recommend that the Department for Education's (2024) vision of extra-curricular sport being tailored towards a culture of participation, targeting less active pupils, is at the forefront of PE teachers' planning and delivery of extra-curricular sport.

Keywords

Extra-curricular sport, physical education, policy, gender, figurational sociology

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Introduction

For decades, schools in England have provided extra-curricular sport to supplement compulsory core physical education (PE). Optional extra-curricular sport usually takes place during lunchtimes and after school (Department for Education, 2023). The Department for Education (2023: 13) details that *all* pupils should have the opportunity to participate in some form of extra-curricular sport, emphasising how:

Playing sport as part of a school team or representing the school in individual sports can be rewarding for pupils and builds a special cultural connection to the school. The pupils taking part in extra-curricular sport will build rapport with teachers delivering opportunities which can have positive impacts on pupil behaviour during the core school day.

Whilst all pupils should be able to experience such perceived outcomes, a government report found that only 73% of secondary school pupils (11–16 years) had the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular sport or physical activities (Hingley et al., 2023). Moreover, the *PE and School Sport Annual Report* (Youth Sport Trust, 2024) revealed that 81% of parents felt that their children do not participate in enough physical activity in PE or extra-curricular sport. Such reports may be partially explained by evidence that pupils' participation decreases with age (Green, 2005; Rainer et al., 2015; Sport England, 2024) and long-standing gendered differences in PE and extra-curricular sport provision (Kirk, 2002; Penney and Harris, 1997; Wilkinson et al., 2024).

Gendered differences in extra-curricular school sport provision remain at odds with the Department for Education's (2023: 23) vision that gender 'is not a barrier to participation in sport' and that 'boys and girls have the same opportunities for school sport'. Existing knowledge about the gendered provision of extra-curricular sport in English secondary schools is dominated by survey-based studies (Green, 2005; Penney and Harris, 1997; Smith et al., 2007), with limited exploration of how such provision is enacted and experienced in practice. Notably, Wilkinson and Penney's (2016) interviews and observations a decade ago examined the role of external agencies in either reinforcing or challenging gender inequities, yet little subsequent research has provided detailed insights into pupils' and teachers' perceptions of and experiences in extra-curricular sport. This study addresses this gap by offering ethnographic insights into the gendered provision and experiences of extra-curricular sport at one state-funded secondary school in England. In doing so, this article adds to existing literature by revealing PE teachers' rationale for adopting sport-centred provision and PE teachers' and pupils' lived experiences of and attitudes towards such provision. This focus not only explores gendered activity provision, but details more nuanced lived realities concerning behavioural expectations and peer group dynamics in extra-curricular sport. Given this behavioural and relational focus, we adopt a figurational sociological theoretical perspective by applying the concepts of figuration and habitus.

Literature review

English government policymakers have consistently sought to embed team-based games within extra-curricular sport (Department for Education, 2013, 2024). As such, within secondary schools, Hingley et al. (2023) discovered that football (58%), basketball (30%) and netball (28%) were the most widely available extra-curricular sports. This availability appears to align with pupil preference, with 77% of pupils wanting to participate in team sport, particularly football (37%), basketball (24%) and dodgeball (22%). Indeed, 58% of pupils played team sport outside of PE lessons,

with participation dropping from 66% in Years 7 and 8 to 46% in Year 11 (Department for Education, 2024). Decreases in team sport engagement align with evidence that extra-curricular sport participation decreases with age (Green, 2005; Rainer et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2007). Reasons for such decreases include reduced opportunities to participate in team-based sports from Year 7 (80%) to Year 11 (67%) (Hingley et al., 2023) and falling sport participation rates amongst girls between Year 7 and Year 11 (Sport England, 2024). Whilst there are multiple complex explanations for such patterns, it is useful to recognise tension balances with school sport engagement and examination-based revision (Fitzpatrick, 2023), and pupils' changing orientations towards sport in favour of lifestyle activities (Frydendal and Thing, 2020). These tension balances include gendered differences, with girls tending to display more scholastic attitudes towards academic attainment (Pennington et al., 2021) and boys tending to demonstrate greater propensity towards competitive sport (Nielsen et al., 2018).

As noted, in England, extra-curricular sport continues to be centred on traditional competitive team-based games. Largely due to common same-sex delivery models and teachers' gendered sporting preferences, scholars have criticised how extra-curricular sport can reinforce perceived 'gender-appropriate' sporting participation (Green, 2005; Penney and Harris, 1997; Wilkinson and Penney, 2016). Evidencing gendered sport provision, Hingley et al. (2023) reported how boys had greater access to football, basketball, cricket and rugby, whilst girls reported more opportunity to participate in netball, rounders, dance, and hockey. Such entrenched gendered trends are particularly concerning considering the (now former) Education Secretary Gillian Keegan's ministerial address:

Key to the [former Conservative] government's vision for PE in schools is ensuring boys and girls have the same opportunities for school sport. The new guidance spotlights schools who are leading the way to ensure that whether you are a girl or boy, this is not a barrier to participation in sport. (Department for Education, 2023: 23)

Despite political consensus, the historical development of PE in England has been shaped by gendered assumptions about appropriate sporting activities for boys and girls, producing long-standing inequities (Clark et al., 2024; Kirk, 2002; Scraton, 2017). Providing a 50-year review from the post-Second World War period, Kirk (2002) traced a shift in departmental leadership from predominantly female to predominantly male, which reinforced a prioritisation of 'gender appropriate' team-based sports for boys and more individual or aesthetic activities for girls. Such patterns emerged partly from the influence of dominant cultural norms about masculinity, femininity and athleticism, often embedded through teacher education, curriculum design and activity provision (Brown and Evans, 2004; Kirk, 2002; Stride et al., 2022). Resistance towards such gendered provision has been largely unsuccessful, partly due to PE's 'pedagogic traditionalism' (Evans et al., 1996: 169) and many PE teachers' 'pseudo-educational rationales to support such [gender] stereotypical views' (Waddington et al., 1998: 45). Indeed, despite calls for greater gender equity in activity choice (Clark et al., 2024; Department for Education, 2024) or co-educational PE (Hills and Croston, 2012; Scraton, 2017), PE continues to be identified as gendered subject (Flintoff, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2024; Wilkinson and Penney, 2025).

Within English secondary schools, PE teachers are primarily responsible for organising, overseeing and contributing to extra-curricular sport (Department for Education, 2024). Furthermore, PE teachers are encouraged to enthusiastically motivate pupils to participate in extra-curricular sport (Department for Education, 2024). Whilst some PE teachers are 'devoted' to 'extensive' extra-curricular sport (Green, 2000: 186), recent evidence suggests that teacher encouragement

wanes with pupil age (Youth Sport Trust, 2024). Moreover, pupils' experiences of extra-curricular sport are partially shaped by tensions between PE teachers being able and/or willing to offer inclusive 'sport for all' whilst simultaneously meeting some pupils' and schools' competitive/performance-driven preferences (Department for Education, 2024; Rainer et al., 2015; Wilkinson and Penney, 2016). This tension may be compounded when external sports coaches facilitate extra-curricular sport, as many prioritise talent identification and elite sporting development (Wilkinson and Penney, 2016). Sport coaches also tend to reinforce gendered and ability-based divisions, offering separate and limited activities for boys and girls (Rainer et al., 2015; Smith, 2015). In this sense, in terms of gender and competition-orientation, in England, extra-curricular sport provision has been marked by more of the same (Penney and Harris, 1997), rather than diversification through a broader variety of activities (Green, 2005). Given possible tensions between extra-curricular sport policy guidance and the presented literature, ethnographic insights into gendered activity provision, behaviours, and teacher–pupil relations are timely.

Figurational approaches to PE

In this article, we adopt the inter-related concepts of figuration, power and habitus to examine how and why extra-curricular sport was provided and experienced. According to Elias (1978: 261), a figuration is a dynamic network of 'mutually oriented and dependent people' bonded over time and space. As such, secondary school figurations are formed by pupils, teachers and significant others (i.e. support staff, parents, governors), who are mutually orientated (i.e. structurally, educationally, relationally) and dependent upon one another (i.e. co-educated year-group classes, shared learning goals, expected behavioural standards). Whilst sharing similar constraints (i.e. bound by timetable, national curricula, school values), PE figurations are mostly sex-segregated and taught by same-sex teachers (Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson and Penney, 2025). Furthermore, compared with classroom-based subjects, extra-curricular sport includes differing spaces, attire, and levels of physicality, group-based competitiveness and sociality (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025a, 2025b). As previously detailed (Evans et al., 1996; Kirk, 2002; Waddington et al., 1998), over decades, PE and extra-curricular provision display more continuities (i.e. prominent traditions) than significant changes (i.e. policy visions). Such continuity demonstrates how teachers, pupils and policymakers involved in other and past PE figurations are in some ways indirectly interdependent with individuals in current PE figurations (Green, 2008). As such, individuals' behaviours and relations within a PE figuration should not be considered as isolated, ahistorical, and static snapshots. Furthermore, pupils do not enter PE figurations as blank slates, nor are PE departments blank slates. Therefore, teachers' and pupils' behaviours and relations should be viewed as being informed by a series of continuing and malleable past and present enabling and constraining social processes (Green, 2008; Webb, 2021). It is also important to recognise that social processes within PE figurations are also partly informed by past and present broader civilising processes (Mierzwinski et al., 2019; Webb, 2021).

Elias (1978) outlines how dynamic networks of mutually orientated and interdependent people are underpinned by power relations that are asymmetric and in flux. According to Elias (1978), as an attribute of all human relationships, power should always be viewed as a matter of relative balances, rather than a fixed zero-sum entity. In this sense, whilst PE teachers' professional status means that they can plan, deliver and expect *all* pupils to attend mandatory PE lessons, pupils' engagement can differ depending on their attitudes towards PE and PE teachers, their sporting preferences, and degrees of conformity. Given such tension balances and with typical staff–pupil ratios of 1:25, many PE teachers continue to adopt traditional command-style teaching approaches to

maintain sufficient levels of decision-making powers, formal authoritarian teacher–pupil relations, and pupil obedience (Moy et al., 2023; Pill et al., 2024). Whilst PE teachers are responsible for organising, overseeing and contributing to extra-curricular sport, the Department for Education (2024) proposes that they should consult pupils regarding activities and actively encourage them to participate voluntarily. One challenge PE teachers may face in fostering the Department for Education's (2024) vision for increased participation (from 58%), a greater sense of belonging, and special cultural connections with the school through extra-curricular sport is pupils' dispositions towards sport. Such dispositions are partly based on their experiences of and peer relations within core PE, whereby power imbalances central to bullying episodes have been found and linked to sporting competence (Green et al., 2025; Wei and Graber, 2023).

To further understand the reasons how pupils behave and relate with each other and teachers, and why sporting competence is used as a key power resource within the PE figuration (Green et al., 2025; Green and Mierzwinski, 2025a), we adopt Elias's concept of habitus. In part, Elias conceptualised habitus as the 'learned emotional and behavioural dispositions which are specific to a particular person' (Dunning and Rojek, 1992: 87). Stressing how an individual's habitus development is strongly influenced by broader past, inter-generational and present shared habituses, Elias (1978) explained how closely interdependent people with strong mutual orientations develop similar attitudes and behaviours. This point is significant when considering how Elias (1978) viewed childhood and youth as particularly impressionable phases of habitus development. Therefore, by the age of 11 years, many pupils inevitably will have developed a (gendered) sporting habitus through their primary (i.e. parents) and secondary (i.e. schooling) socialisation. Such tastes and dispositions may explain why the opt-in nature of extra-curricular sport attracts pupils most interested, capable and able to participate in sport (i.e. trend data concerning social class, ethnicity, and disability) (Green, 2008; Wilkinson and Penney, 2016; Youth Sport Trust, 2024). In this sense, extra-curricular sport enables many pupils to embody their gendered sporting habitus, enabling closer social bonds to develop with mutually orientated peers and teachers who also embody a gendered shared sporting habitus (Brown and Evans, 2004; Green, 2008; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020).

Research methods

Data presented in this article is drawn from ethnographic insights of young people's gendered peer group dynamics and teacher–pupil relations in secondary PE (Green, 2024). Between January and July 2022, fieldwork was conducted at one co-educational state-funded secondary school in the north of England, pseudonymised throughout as Lord Taylor's School (LTS). Largely representative of secondary schools within the region (GOV.UK, 2019), pupil demographics included approximately 20% eligible for pupil premium funding, 15% Black or Minority Ethnic, and 10% with a registered special educational need or disability. After receiving university ethical approval, data collection consisted of participant observations, pupil focus groups, and individual teacher interviews.

This article refers to observations of 42 extra-curricular school sport clubs (lunchtimes) and practices (afterschool), involving 20 girls' and 22 boys' sessions. Author One also observed 14 inter-school sport fixtures/competitions, involving minibus journeys to opposing schools and/or sports centres. Recommended by Gubby (2023), short-hand notes were recorded in a pocket-sized notebook before being written up into detailed fieldnotes at the end of each day. Whilst the project gatekeeper (Mr Wilkinson – Head of PE) consented to observations of pupils' peer relations and behaviours, teacher–pupil interactions, and teachers' pedagogical approaches, he requested no notes to be taken during inter-school matches due to the involvement of pupils and teachers

from other schools. Seeking to avoid role ambivalence, Author One adopted a ‘least-teacher role’ (Swain, 2006) by not delivering sessions or disciplining pupils but instead engaging in daily sport-related conversations with pupils during clubs and practices. However, to mitigate being viewed as an exploitative interloper by staff (Gubby, 2023), he occasionally assisted PE teachers with non-teaching duties (i.e. organising equipment stores and scoring sporting events).

During the final two months of fieldwork, Author One conducted 14 focus groups with 49 pupils (25 boys and 24 girls) across Years 7, 10 and 11, many of whom took part in extra-curricular sport. Reflecting how extra-curricular sport was delivered at LTS, focus groups were sex-segregated and year-group specific, and involved between three and seven pupils based on participant preference, partly mitigating power disparities between participants (Gibson, 2012). Following Jones and Gratton’s (2014) recommendations, Author One asked generic and direct questions to enable multiple perspectives through deliberation and reflection. Probing included asking pupils to provide specific examples of how peer and teacher–pupil relations differed in extra-curricular sport compared with core PE. Lasting between 18 and 47 minutes, focus groups offered detailed age and gender-based insights. Similar lines of enquiry were pursued when conducting individual semi-structured interviews with nine PE teachers (six male, three female). Lasting between 14 and 75 minutes, interviews enabled specific examples to be probed more deeply, encouraging PE teachers to disclose their thoughts, perceptions and experiences of extra-curricular sport provision. Collectively, these research methods enabled data to be triangulated with respect to the structure of extra-curricular sport, as well as capturing themes within pupil–peer and teacher–pupil relations, and pupils’ and teachers’ experiences of and attitudes towards extra-curricular sport.

Fieldnotes and focus group and interview transcripts were pseudonymised before being imported into NVivo-12 to organise and visualise this large data set. Organised into research method type (observation, focus group, interview) and extra-curricular sport focus (e.g. girls’ lunchtime clubs, boys’ sport fixtures), the data was analysed using Braun et al.’s (2023) six-phase guide to reflexive thematic analysis. Phase One began with Author One (re)familiarising himself with the data by (re)reading fieldnotes and transcripts. Following Allsop et al.’s (2022) NVivo guidance, during Phase One, Author One created memos documenting initial ideas. Phase Two involved Author One identifying relevant extracts and generating initial codes (e.g. competitive sport emphasis, coaching-centred pedagogy, boys bantering during bus journeys). During Phase Three, Authors One and Two collated codes and then identified, discussed and agreed on patterns (e.g. gendered activity provision, more informal behavioural expectations, heightened opportunities for sociality), from which specific meanings were developed. Phase Four involved using Elias’s (1978) concepts of figuration, power and habitus as theoretical analytical tools to partially explain patterns in and meanings attributed to data, developing themes. These themes were developed during Phase Five by both authors iteratively reviewing and evaluating interpretations and meanings attached to data, before agreeing final themes. This process culminated in the following themes being defined: age- and gender-based extra-curricular sport patterns; pupils’ behaviour and teacher–pupil relations in extra-curricular sport; and bus journeys, sports fixtures and gendered peer group dynamics. These themes were further scrutinised and refined during the production of this article (Phase Six).

Results

Age- and gender-based extra-curricular sport patterns

Aligning with governmental guidance (Department for Education, 2023, 2024), at LTS extra-curricular sport was voluntary, open to all, and delivered daily, with each year group offered a

minimum of three opportunities per week. Not outsourcing this provision to external sport coaches (Wilkinson and Penney, 2016), sessions were facilitated by PE teachers and mostly sex-segregated lunchtime clubs and afterschool practices. Lunchtime clubs generally lasted 30 minutes, involved pupils with mixed abilities and tended to be participation-orientated, emphasising enjoyment and resembling a ‘sport for all’ approach (Penney and Harris, 1997). These clubs took place within the sports hall, gymnasium or fitness suite, with pupils wearing school uniform and sports trainers, as recommended by the Department for Education (2024). Contrastingly, afterschool practices ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, and offered a more ‘performance-driven’ and competitive focus (Wilkinson and Penney, 2016), with teachers emphasising skill development and talent identification, appealing to more able sports performers. These practices were delivered indoor and on sports fields and tennis/netball courts, with pupils wearing PE kit or LTS-branded sporting attire. When designing the extra-curricular timetable, the Head of PE, Mr Wilkinson, aspired to, in his words, ‘provide all pupils regular opportunities to participate in a wide range of sports’, mindful that ‘not all pupils would enjoy all activities’. Furthermore, Mr Wilkinson expressed how the extra-curricular sport timetable was enabled and constrained by: (a) pupils’ sporting preferences, (b) teachers’ sporting biographies, expertise and willingness to deliver, (c) access to specialist equipment and facilities, (d) seasonal factors (e.g. athletics and cricket during the spring term), and (e) scheduled inter-school sport fixtures/competitions. Whilst similar considerations are acknowledged elsewhere (Rainer et al., 2015), at LTS, teachers’ gendered sporting identities were not a key factor in a narrow activity choice.

Boys were offered afterschool practices in basketball, cricket, dodgeball, fitness, football, rugby (league and union), and volleyball. Girls were offered dance, fitness, football, leadership, netball, rounders, rugby league, and trampolining. However, Year 7 and 8 pupils could also attend mixed-sex lunchtime clubs in badminton, spikeball, tennis, and table tennis. This provision reflects ‘gender appropriateness’ (Green, 2005; Penney and Harris, 1997; Wilkinson and Penney, 2016) attached to certain sports, and age-based concerns regarding mixed-sex sporting provision (Clark et al., 2024; Department for Education, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2024). During focus groups, several Year 10 girls commented on such gendered provision:

Molly: The guys [boys] do different sports to us [girls].

Fran: We don’t get to do cricket. We get put with things like trampolining and cheerleading, like more dance-based activities. Like more girl things. Even though we would like to be doing more cricket and rugby.

Alice: They [boys] do full contact rugby, we are not allowed to play that. We have to play tag.

Fran: Just because we are girls, you have to be more delicate.

Interestingly, no boys highlighted or appeared to recognise these gendered contrasts, perhaps because the offered afterschool practices aligned with many boys’ sporting preferences (Hingley et al., 2023). Contrastingly, girls’ frustrations centred on mismatches in their activity aspirations and sporting provision offered. Such gendered contrasts are concerning given the Department for Education’s (2023 : 23) aim to ensure that ‘boys and girls have the same opportunities for school sport’. However, this aim is based on recognised gender inequalities (Department for Education, 2023; Youth Sport Trust, 2024), which are partly explained by the previously noted long-standing

deeply entrenched gendered ideologies and practices in secondary PE in the United Kingdom (UK) (Capel, 2012; Kirk, 2002; Penney and Harris, 1997).

Aligning with national participation patterns (Department for Education, 2024; Hingley et al., 2023; Youth Sport Trust, 2024), ethnographic insights revealed age-based differences in how many pupils attended extra-curricular clubs and practices. Whilst now recommended (Department for Education, 2024), at LTS, no registers were taken during extra-curricular sport, meaning exact numbers of participants and comparative analysis were not possible. However, observations revealed that Year 7 lunchtime clubs and afterschool practices were the most popular, with up to 40 and 30 pupils respectively (out of approximately 200) attending these sessions. Comparatively, around 10 Year 10 and Year 11 pupils attended lunchtime clubs, whilst very few attended afterschool practices, despite PE teachers' frequent encouragement. Triangulating these observed patterns, Miss Jones reported:

You won't get any Key Stage Four [ages 14–16 years] really compared to Year 7. Year 7, you get hundreds [over the course of a week]. For example, in trampolining I had over 80 people who wanted to attend and wanted to do it, just for Year 7 [...] We are getting no Year 10s coming to practice at all.

Equally, Mr Shaw reflected:

Year 7 participation is more predominant within extra-curricular than older years. For example, tennis club afterschool practice there was 20 Year 7 students taking part, whereas previously I did a Year 10 basketball session after school and there were maybe five or six students.

Explaining this age-based pattern, Miss Turner offered:

Year 7s are really keen on trying new things and they are willing to try new sports [i.e. spikeball, trampolining] that are coming up that they might want to see. They really want to get involved in extra-curricular, but the Year 9s, 10s and 11s will only ever do something if their friends are attending or if they are made to do it for GCSE [assessment] PE moderation.

At LTS, irrespective of age, all pupils were offered extra-curricular sport, a more inclusive offering than the 73% reported in government data (Hingley et al., 2023). Despite this offering, engagement appeared to wane with age, a finding somewhat contradicting broader survey data revealing that approximately two-thirds of pupils desired to be more physically active at school (Youth Sport Trust, 2024). However, age-based differences at LTS reflect long-standing and current national extra-curricular sport patterns and broader physical activity levels (Department for Education, 2024; Green, 2005; Sport England, 2024). One possible reason for this difference is the importance pupils place on friendship groups and peer-group preferences, as noted by Miss Turner and in existing literature (Ferry and Lund, 2018; McDonough and Crocker, 2005; Nielsen et al., 2018). Another factor is that at LTS perceived 'new sports' (e.g. spikeball) were not only mixed sex but also only available during Years 7 and 8, meaning older pupils could only participate in traditional 'gender-appropriate' sports. When explaining apparent age-based differences, it would be remiss not to acknowledge tension balances with school sport engagement and examination-based revision, which disproportionally affects older pupils (Fitzpatrick, 2023). Arguably, such competing pressures may result in reduced attendance in extra-curricular sport sessions and a subsequent narrowing of sporting involvement, as older pupils' changing preferences and academic workloads are likely to limit their abilities and desires to engage.

Pupils' behaviour and teacher–pupil relations in extra-curricular sport

PE teachers were observed adopting differing pedagogical approaches compared with those used when teaching core and/or assessment PE (see Green, 2024), as exemplified in the following fieldnote:

Fieldnotes 24th January 2022 – Year 10 boys' basketball.

With no teacher present, eight boys entered the gymnasium, collected basketballs and practiced shooting, dribbling and handling skills. Five minutes later, Mr Wilkinson and Mr Shaw entered, joined in an unstructured shooting practice, and then elected two captains to pick teams including teachers. The game was competitive, with teachers seemingly wanting to show off to the boys, and each other. Equally, boys were quick to point out and make fun of both teachers whenever they missed a shot, exchanges which were reciprocated by teachers towards boys. Sweating profusely, towards the end of the session, Mr Wilkinson declared to me, 'this is why I love being a PE teacher. You get the nice kids who want to be here. You can have a laugh, it's very enjoyable'.

Compared with delivering core PE, teachers stressed how extra-curricular sport provided them with an occupational 'high point' (Armour and Jones, 1998: 16). This point seemed informed by competing against like-minded individuals and momentarily reducing more authoritative teacher–pupil relations, opportunities often only available to PE staff. Further reiterating the unique nature of extra-curricular sport, Mr Walker explained:

They [pupils] are encouraged to recognise that it is a slightly more relaxed atmosphere in extra-curricular. They are not in a lesson, there are set expectations, but there are not set objectives in terms of lesson objectives. So, there is a slightly more relaxed, informal atmosphere, which is a good thing. Expectations should still be high but there should be a difference in terms of it being less formal.

Not constrained by the National Curriculum for Physical Education subject content and attainment targets (Department for Education, 2013), Mr Walker seemingly embraced relative levels of autonomy, flexibility and informality. Aware of how such enabling opportunities can influence teacher–pupil and pupil–peer relations, Mrs Hanson reflected:

In extra-curricular sport it is those [pupils] who want to be there, so they are more likely to be engaged. It is just that different relationship with you and the pupils. I think the way you are influences the way they interact as well. You are turning into more of a coach than a teacher. So, that influences how they interact with you and how they interact with each other.

Such relational contrasts with core PE are understandable given that teachers adopted less authoritarian teaching styles, less need for task-orientation, and more informal communication styles. These shifts were understood by Mr Wharfedale as strengthening teacher–pupil and pupil–peer relationships:

You can get a really good rapport [with pupils]. So, I have a really good Year 11 football team who I get on with really well and they get on with each other really well and they communicate well with each other. They really do have a great attitude.

Aware of such strengthened relations, Cooper (Year 11) noted, 'the football team and cricket team are a lot closer with them [PE teachers] than those [pupils] who are not fussed about PE

and sport'. Whilst this sentiment speaks to the Department for Education's (2023: 13) suggestion that 'pupils taking part in extra-curricular sport will build rapport with teachers', it should be noted that for some pupils, PE teachers' social relations with sporty pupils were perceived to contribute to favouritism:

Alice: There tends to be people who are good at PE who tend to be favoured by PE teachers ... people do a particular sport, and the teacher knows about that sport, they know they do it and they tend to favour them.

Molly: It is the group who do sports outside of school in extra-curricular, like the netball group. They are really close with the teachers. (Year 10)

Elements of favouritism may be somewhat inevitable given that over numerous years some pupils participate in two core PE lessons, three extra-curricular sport activities, school fixtures and assessment PE. This may explain why disproportionately high levels of rapport were observed and discussed amongst older pupils and teachers, which is further evidenced in the following subsection and detailed elsewhere by Green and Mierzwinski (2025a). Such inequitable teacher–pupil relations may be problematic given research detailing how PE teacher favouritism can contribute to bullying and a culture of silence (Green et al., 2025; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020), factors which may serve as barriers to less talented pupils participating in extra-curricular sport (Rainer et al., 2015).

Bus journeys, sports fixtures and gendered peer group dynamics

In the UK, secondary schools are encouraged to enable pupils to partake in inter-school sport fixtures and competitions (Department for Education, 2024). LTS's reputation for sporting excellence was evident through the school's website, weekly parental newsletters, and daily bulletins delivered during assemblies and displayed on noticeboards. As such, selected pupils bi-weekly represented LTS against other schools in sport. Away fixtures or competitions involved one teacher (driver) and up to 13 pupils (mostly Years 10 and 11) travelling on a minibus. Sixteen observations revealed that journeys typically lasted from 20 to 30 minutes, with three lasting over an hour. Close access offered nuanced insights into peer group dynamics, with older boys and male PE teachers, in particular, observed engaging in informal behaviour:

Fieldnotes 6th April 2022 – Year 11 boys' football fixture.

Appearing in good spirits, 10 boys laughed and joked entering the minibus. Several boys bantered with Nick for wearing Crocs and football socks, labelling his footwear as 'fishmonger shoes', which also drew Mr Wharfedale to call Nick, 'Captain Birdseye', making Nick and his peers laugh. Awaiting two late-comers, Nick and three peers quizzed Mr Wharfedale about his car. When Mr Wharfedale pointed to his car, two boys responded, 'that's a hairdresser car', eliciting laughter from other boys and Mr Wharfedale. Continuing this goading, after around 30 seconds, Mr Wharfedale interrupted, 'right, shut up you set of clowns'. Adhering to this demand, boys loudly sang along to music played via a Bluetooth speaker. When lyrics contained expletives, Mr Wharfedale told boys to 'tone it down with the swearing', although this had little effect. Approaching the venue, Mr Wharfedale demanded the music was turned off, reminded boys that they were representing LTS, and emphasised that they should not let him down.

The use of phones, music and singing signified enabling opportunities for pupils to be more informal compared with lunchtime clubs, afterschool practices, and broader school behavioural expectations. Embracing such opportunities, boys bantered with each other and teachers, who enabled such behaviour through reciprocation and initiation. Seemingly aware of and welcoming such enabling opportunities, Nick (Year 11) declared:

I can speak of my experiences on the school team [boys' football team], we like to banter each other a lot, especially if we win games. But then if a couple of people have had a bad game, we like to take the mick out of them and stuff like that ... Mr Wharfedale's hair line, we like to banter him about that.

Indicative of many peers' perceptions, Nick's portrayal implies regular bantering was enjoyable, performance-centred, and inclusive in the sense that even teachers were considered as 'fair game' for such commentary. The style, content and open delivery of banter observed and reported during journeys to sport fixtures was arguably heightened compared with banter's usage in secondary PE identified elsewhere (Green and Mierzwinski, 2025a; Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020).

Contrastingly, during minibus journeys, girls' and female PE teachers' interactions appeared to be equally enjoyable, but tended to be less performance-centred and less directly or indirectly involving female teachers. This gendered difference may be partly due to girls spending more time on their phones and/or listening to music, as exemplified below:

Fieldnotes 4th March 2022 – Year 10 girls' cricket tournament.

Immediately after setting off, Jess and Holly asked Miss Turner if they could play music via a portable speaker, to which Miss Turner agreed. Girls and Miss Turner spent much of the journey singing along to songs, with Aimee taking on the role of DJ asking Miss Turner for song requests. Throughout the journey, chat tended to take place within small groups, often involving non-sport related topics, such as friendship groups and boyfriends.

Triangulating these observations, Miss Jones described how:

They [girls] all get giggly. Nobody wants to sit at the front, they all want to sit at the back. They all get their phones out, they all take pictures, they are all having sweeties. They are all wanting to put something on the radio other than Radio Two. So, yeah, all just having fun.

Older girls enjoyed and embraced more informal opportunities to use their phones, sing along to music, and chat amongst themselves and with teachers. However, adhering to more formal teacher–pupil relations, girls requested permission to play music, rarely bantered with each other or the teacher, and seemed relatively calm and relaxed travelling to fixtures. Triangulating such observations when comparing boys' and girls' peer group dynamics and behaviours during bus journeys, Mr Walker reflected:

I have had the luxury of taking both boys and girls this year and the girls seem a lot quieter on the minibus, although they still seem to be having fun. They still seem to interact with each other, but they do tend to be a lot calmer. The boys tend to be excitable, it could be nervous energy. It could be that they are amongst their peers in a confined space. The dynamics can change depending on the sport.

In this sense, both girls and boys appeared to enjoy the enabling opportunities to engage in informal interactions with peers and their teachers. However, compared with girls, boys were louder, bantered more, and often focused their interactions on sporting performances, with boisterous behaviour possibly being linked to pre-match nerves and post-match high or low spirits. In contrast to boys, girls and female PE teacher relations appeared more centred on respect, friendliness and shared tastes.

Discussion

Within the PE figuration at LTS, the provision of extra-curricular sport was enabled and constrained by several inter-related factors. For instance, the timetable was devised by the Head of Department, who detailed how it was partly informed by pupils' preferences and teachers' expertise. Perhaps evidencing indirect interdependencies with policymakers, this approach aligned with government guidelines regarding 'directly asking pupils what they want their extra-curricular offer to include' when deciding activity provision (Department for Education, 2024: 26). This approach also demonstrates more direct interdependencies between teachers and pupils within the PE figuration at LTS, partly driven by the former's aspirations to improve levels of participation, engagement and enjoyment in extra-curricular sport, and the latter's desires for enjoyment and competitiveness. Such degrees of pupil agency were not as readily available in core PE, partly due to teachers' adherence to more constraining subject content and attainment targets (Department for Education, 2013), further illustrating indirect interdependencies with policymakers. These contrasts between core PE and extra-curricular sport further demonstrate how teachers' planning and delivery are enabled and constrained by direct and indirect interdependencies within the PE figuration.

The beneficiaries of such enabling and constraining social processes in extra-curricular sport were often sporty pupils who revelled in opportunities to embody their sporting (often gendered) habitus with mutually orientated peers and teachers. This embodiment was partly enabled by teachers (particularly males) actively participating in sessions and embodying a shared sporting and gendered habitus. This shared habitus and teacher involvement were enabled by, and indicative of, less authoritarian teacher–pupil relations, whereby teachers adopted a coaching style pedagogy. With age, this pedagogical shift also coincided with a greater emphasis placed on performance, as from Year 8 spikeball was no longer offered but more sporting fixtures/competitions took place. Collectively, these shifts heightened gender disparities with some older girls frustrated by what they described as a constraining deficit model (e.g. cricket and rugby not offered but replaced by dance and cheerleading). These perceived and actual gender disparities in extra-curricular sport provision at LTS seemingly enabled and legitimised older boys' embodiment of their sporting and gendered habitus more so than older girls'. Such gendered differences in provision and subsequent frustration are concerning given the Department for Education's (2024) vision for gender equitable PE. Whilst such frustrations were not the desired outcomes of the male Head of PE who designed the extra-curricular sport timetable, they are indicative of prevailing gender ideologies that have permeated both directly and indirectly through generations of Heads of PE departments, PE teachers, pupils, parents, and policymakers (Green, 2008; Kirk, 2002; Penney and Harris, 1997).

One reason why gender ideologies were enabled to prevail in extra-curricular sport at LTS was that, compared with core PE, teachers felt less constrained to adopt authoritarian command-style pedagogical approaches. As such, pupils were more enabled to laugh and joke amongst themselves, be more boisterous (particularly boys) and banter with teachers. The latter was partly enabled by circumstances whereby teachers often actively participated alongside and against pupils during extra-curricular activities, drove pupils to and from inter-school fixtures, and encouraged a more

informal, relaxed environment. These seemingly more equal power relations between pupils and teachers were enabled by the temporary removal from broader academic pressures (Fitzpatrick, 2023) and attainment-orientated core PE (Department for Education, 2013). Furthermore, the amount of time some pupils spent participating in extra-curricular sport, as well as the closer and more informal social relations formed through this participation, appeared to contribute to a 'special cultural connection' (Department for Education, 2024). Whilst this connection centred on rapport between sporty pupils and teachers who shared a sporting and gendered habitus, one unintended social consequence of such bonding processes seemed to be some pupils' displeasure at perceived teacher favouritism towards certain sporty pupils, which was considered to heighten power imbalances between sporty and less sporty pupils, and less sporty pupils and PE teachers within the PE figuration.

Conclusion

At LTS, all PE teachers and sporty pupils valued extra-curricular sport, which enabled closer pupil–peer and teacher–pupil relations, fostering a special cultural connection with the secondary school. However, ethnographic insights revealed how activity provision, pupil attendance, and teacher–pupil relations within extra-curricular sport were year-group specific, gendered and not entirely inclusive. Our finding that engagement in participation-orientated lunchtime clubs and afterschool practices waned with age concurs with existing literature (Hingley et al., 2023; Rainer et al., 2015). The identified shift towards more performance-orientated 'gender-appropriate' sports and sporting fixtures and competition provides further insight into how gender disparities can exist in extra-curricular sport provision. Compared with core PE, this shift enabled more informal teacher–pupil relations, which seemingly more enabled older pupils, in particular boys, to legitimately express their sporting and gendered habitus. However, one unintended consequence of this shift was that some girls' sporting aspirations were stifled by perceived gender-appropriate provision. These shifts in competitive provision, more informal teacher–pupil relations and habitus expression were most evident during minibus journeys, a component of extra-curricular sport not previously explored.


Analysing PE at LTS as a figuration enabled nuances between how core PE and extra-curricular sport were provided and engaged in to be documented, which enabled behavioural and relational differences to be identified. The concepts of habitus and power enabled these behaviours and relations to be analysed through the lens of gender embodiment and shifts from more authoritarian towards more informal teacher–pupil relations. This figurational analysis from an ethnographic study contributes to limited theoretical explanations regarding activity provision, behavioural expectations, and teacher–pupil relations within extra-curricular sport. A future longitudinal cohort study from Years 7 to 11 would more adequately capture the development of pupils' sporting and gendered habitus, pupils' peer and teacher–pupil relations, and the role of extra-curricular sport in such development. As attendance in extra-curricular sport was not recorded at LTS – as now recommended by the Department for Education (2024) – reasons for waning age-based engagement were mainly derived from teachers' perceptions. Therefore, the proposed longitudinal study should also include exploring how pupils' shifting attitudes towards sport affect their participation in extra-curricular sport. Furthermore, future research could examine if 'taking part in extra-curricular sport...can have positive impacts on pupil behaviour during the core school day' (Department for Education, 2023: 13). Finally, as LTS had a largely homogenous White population, future research should be completed in more culturally diverse secondary schools to examine the extent to which extra-curricular sport provision, engagement, and relations are influenced by ethnicity.

Combining government visions with our findings, extra-curricular sport could ‘concentrate on participation and basic skill rather than solely on competitive experiences for their pupils’ (Department for Education, 2024: 26), instead of more of the same for the more able (Penney and Harris, 1997). This would avoid sporty pupils’ preferences prevailing, enabling more diverse pupil participation, ‘particularly those from targeted inactive groups’ (Department for Education, 2024: 25).

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

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