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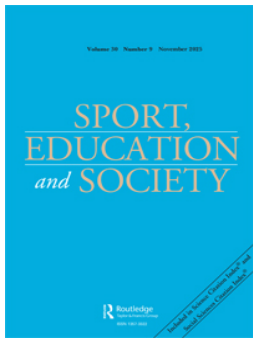
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A figural analysis of boys' and girls' banter in secondary physical education

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A figurational analysis of boys' and girls' banter in secondary physical education

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ABSTRACT

This article explores gendered differences in how banter is socially constructed in secondary school physical education (PE) in England. Focusing on how boys and girls socially construct banter responds to gaps in the literature, which often positions banter as an inherently masculine form of communication. Ethnographic data from one state-funded secondary school were gathered through pupil focus groups, teacher interviews and observational fieldnotes. Figurational sociological concepts of figuration, power and gendered habitus are drawn upon when thematically examining banter as a form of communication found in peer relations used differently by different groups. During single-sex PE lessons, older girls were more likely to banter *within* small friendship groups in a cautious and selective manner, whereas older boys were more likely to banter openly and competitively *between* peers and teachers. Furthermore, girls' and female PE teachers' banter tended to be amicable, inoffensive and self-deprecating, whilst boys' and male PE teachers' banter tended to be more targeted, ribbing and inspired by seeking competitive advantages and sporting failures. These differences were partly informed by, and indicative of, boys' and girls' shared gender habituses and the impacts of these on their peer relations within broader figurations. These differences were also informed by, and indicative of, male PE teachers' more tolerant attitudes towards and enthusiastic engagement in banter compared with their female colleagues. In this respect, PE teachers' seemingly gendered habitus may contribute to and inform boys' and girls' exposure to, learning and embodiment of this communicative style within single-sex PE figurations. Given our focus, findings and theorising, future research should examine how banter is socially constructed in mixed-sex sporting settings, as well as the role of banter within girls' friendship groups.

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Introduction

Banter is common in schools, often serving to foster camaraderie and strengthen relationships (Anti-Bullying Alliance, 2023; Department for Education, 2024; National Children's Bureau, 2024). However, banter is also a term associated with harmful behaviours, as detailed within *Keeping Children Safe in Education*:

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Downplaying certain behaviours, for example dismissing sexual harassment as 'just banter', 'just having a laugh', 'part of growing up' or 'boys being boys' can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviours. (Department for Education, 2024, p. 13)

This policy document extract concurs with existing literature which often depicts banter as a masculine behaviour embodied by young males, particularly in single-sex sporting environments (Booth et al., 2023; Green & Mierzwinski, 2025a; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2024). This positioning could be because there is no research on how young females socially construct banter, and therefore no comparative data exploring gendered differences. Therefore, this article examines how girls and boys socially constructed banter in their respective single-sex secondary Physical Education (PE) lessons. As well as offering empirical originality, this article moves away from tendencies to apply gender theories to analyse this social phenomenon (Booth et al., 2023; Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Nichols, 2018), by adopting a figurational sociological framework. We utilise Elias's (2012) concepts of figuration, power, and gendered habitus, and Elias and Scotson's (1994) concepts of praise and blame gossip to help examine banter as a form of communication found in peer (power) relations but used differently by different groups.

Literature review

The term banter is often used to describe humorous forms of joking, teasing, insulting, mocking, goading, and bonding (Hein & O'Donohoe, 2014; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Whittle et al., 2019). More specifically, in the *Duty of Care in Sport: Independent Report to Government*, Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson (2017, p. 17) defines banter as 'a form of gentle ribbing by friends, colleagues and teammates; it is episodic (i.e. irregular), never intended to cause harm, and importantly, reciprocal'. Similarly, when exploring young people's conceptions, Steer et al. (2020, p. 4) discovered how 11–15-year-old pupils (20 girls, 8 boys) understood banter as 'a harmless exchange of social interaction between friends which involves teasing or mocking either on a one-on-one basis or more commonly a friendship group basis'. Likewise, Buglass et al.'s (2021) survey data from 190 university students (166 females, 24 males) demonstrated how banter was predicated on reciprocity, humour and social closeness. Whilst these studies involved males and females, neither explored gendered similarities or differences in their findings. Whilst Whittle et al. (2019) attribute 11–16-year-old boys' bantering to seeking social rewards and embodying desirable forms of masculinity, there are no equivalent studies examining girls' bantering in relation to gender identity. A study of this nature would further demonstrate how boys and girls socially construct banter, and the extent to which such constructions evidence gendered differences. Banter is 'something most [sport] teams engage in' (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 17, bracket added) and has been found to be highly prevalent, normalised, valued, enjoyed, legitimised, and socially expected within adult male rugby (Nichols, 2018), cricket (Lawless & Magrath, 2021) and football (Budden et al., 2022). Such characteristics have also been identified within teenage male elite football academies (Adams, 2020; Hague & Law, 2022) and youth community football (Booth et al., 2023). Booth et al. (2023, p. 19) reported how male football coaches used banter to mock and effeminise 15-year-old boys' performances, bantering which was often accepted, embodied and viewed by boys as being 'non-harmful' and 'pro-social'. Furthermore, Lowe et al. (2021) detailed how male university sport society members were significantly more likely than females to strongly agree that sexist jokes are not at all harmful regardless of intent. Whilst this finding demonstrates a gendered difference, there is little comparative data on how boys and girls perceive and experience banter in different ways.

There is evidence that banter is common amongst boys and girls within single-sex secondary school PE lessons. Green and Mierzwinski (2025a) found that banter aided pupils' engagement and enjoyment and was therefore used by male and female PE teachers for motivational purposes. However, female PE teachers and girls were more wary than their male colleagues and peers of the appropriateness of banter as a pedagogical aid and social bonding tool. Furthermore, boys were more likely to use more combative forms of banter (i.e. sledging and goading) to gain a competitive

advantage (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025a). Similarly, Mierzwinski and Velija (2020, 2024) discovered that banter was an important aspect of 11–14-year-old boys' peer- and teacher-pupil relations in male secondary PE. Whilst PE provided boys and male PE teachers with enabling opportunities for sociality, banter became more prevalent with age, partly because more emphasis was placed on competition and masculine expressions became more pronounced and significant within boys' peer relations. Indicative of this dynamic, male PE teachers used 'gender-informed banter' as a form of gendered play to cajole, embarrass, or gender-shame boys (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020, p. 129). Seeking to develop upon these studies, this article centralises comparative data to focus on differences in how boys and girls socially construct banter in secondary PE.

Figurational sociology

Central to figurational sociology is the concept of 'figuration', described by Elias (2012, p. 121) as 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people'. Figurations are constantly changing according to the movements of people, and to their wider webs of interdependence to other and broader figurations (Gillam & Gulløv, 2024). From birth, infants join a family figuration, become part of community figurations, both of which contribute to and are shaped by broader historically informed, politically influenced and contextually nuanced national figurations. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalised world, young people are exposed to and influenced by digital figurations (i.e. social media), which can inform their humour preferences (Steer et al., 2020), gender identity (Hällgren & Björk, 2023), and perceptions of freedom of speech and right to cause offence (Badrakh et al., 2024). Collectively, young people's exposure to and immersion in these various figurations influence their perceptions of communication styles, gender embodiment and peer relations. These perceptions are also strongly informed by children's experiences at school whereby they spend a 'vast amount of their waking hours in relatively small, confined spaces in close interaction with each other [and teachers]' which has a 'huge influence on the social behaviour they need to learn' (Gillam & Gulløv, 2024, p. 67, bracket added). In England, in co-educational primary schools, children experience mixed-sex PE, whilst rarely experiencing single-sex situations (i.e. toilet usage). However, outside of this school figuration, some children are likely to participate in single-sex sport and/or recreation clubs, where they learn and develop same-sex group dynamics. Similarly, in state-funded secondary schools, PE is often taught in single-sex classes by same-sex teachers, involving gender-appropriate sports (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025b; Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2023). In this sense, PE delivery often reflects PE teachers' sporting preferences, schools' and/or regions' sporting traditions, and longstanding sporting legacies in PE (Green, 2002; Stride et al., 2022), all of which are often gendered. Viewing secondary PE environments as figurations helps understand how banter is used differently by different groups in single-sex peer – and teacher-pupil relations.

From a figurational perspective, power is an attribute of human relationships and, therefore, should be conceived as relational, flux and polymorphous in nature (Elias, 2012). Within secondary PE figurations, PE teachers are subject specialists, legitimate authority figures, and implementors of curriculum, and therefore hold significant power advantages over pupils. However, this power advantage is often negotiated and can be momentarily contested during lessons with one teacher and approximately 25 pupils. Mierzwinski and Velija (2020) reported how one-way male PE teachers sought to re-establish their momentarily contested power advantage over challenging pupils was to use banter. The use of this pedagogical approach demonstrated how banter served as a disciplinary mechanism and key power resource within teacher-pupil relations in a male PE figuration. Within secondary PE figurations, banter has also featured as a key power resource within pupils' peer relations. Utilising Elias and Scotson's (1994) model of established-outsider relations, Green et al. (2025) detailed how banter, or bullying behaviour downplayed as banter, served to reinforce power imbalances between pupils, with an established group of sporty pupils using performance-related bantering towards less-sporty peers within an outsider group. In this respect, banter is

effective partly because it is normalised more broadly within sporting environments (Booth et al., 2023; Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Nichols, 2018), and partly because (predominately male) PE teachers are part of an established group and legitimise it through their usage (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025c; Green et al., 2025). Further drawing upon Elias and Scotson (1994), Green et al. (2025) also noted how gossip was a communication mechanism used by established members to strengthen social ties, whilst simultaneously perpetuating group disgrace amongst outsider group members. Viewing power as relational, flux and polymorphous helps understand how banter can be used as a form of praise and blame gossip to differentiate, socially bond and stigmatise same-age and same-sex pupils.

Within PE figurations, teacher-pupil and pupil-peer power relations are also informed by teachers' and pupils' sporting and gendered habitus (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025b; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020). From a figurational perspective, habitus denotes individuals' 'second nature' or 'embodied social learning', which acts as a 'blindly functioning apparatus of self-control' (Elias, 2012, p. 74). In this sense, habitus contours a person's actions, ambitions, dispositions, expectations, and tastes, which are developed within and through various figurations in which they are enmeshed (Elias, 2012). Whilst continually developing throughout the life course, Elias (2012) considered childhood to be the most impressionable phase of habitus development. During this period, young people are more affected by those around them as they enter new and more complex figurations, such as secondary school. Given this figurational influence, Elias (2012) denoted how habitus operates at a collective level whereby interdependent people share and embody behaviours, dispositions, tastes and values. As such, the concept of shared habitus can be used to explain how interdependent people develop similar perceptions and behaviours, with gender being one central axis from which shared habitus develops (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025b; Mierzwinski & Green, 2025). In this sense, as pupils enter, contribute to, and become influenced by single-sex secondary PE figurations, their gendered habitus is part informed by bodily changes (i.e. puberty) made visible when changing attire and during (gender-appropriate) performative tasks (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025b). Their gendered habitus is also experientially informed through their peer-group dynamics (Liston & Maguire, 2023; Mierzwinski & Green, 2025), which are influenced by broader prevailing ideologies concerning male and female bodies and socially expected gendered behaviours (Gorely et al., 2016). Engaging with the concept of gendered habitus helps us understand how and why banter may be used differently within peer- and teacher-pupil relations across single-sex secondary PE figurations.

Research methods

This article presents ethnographic data collected by Author One between January and July 2022 at one state-funded secondary school in the north of England, pseudonymised throughout as Lord Taylor's School (LTS). Reflecting PE provisions in many English secondary schools (Stride et al., 2022; Wilkinson & Penney, 2023), at LTS, PE classes were year-group specific, mixed ability and single-sex, facilitated by six male and three female teachers, who almost always taught single-sex lessons. After gaining university ethical approval, participant observations, focus groups with pupils, and individual semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted. In total, 54 girls' and 66 boys' PE lessons were observed, and 14 focus groups were conducted with 49 pupils (25 boys and 24 girls) across Years 7 (11–12 years, $n = 18$), 10 (14–15 years, $n = 18$) and 11 (15–16 years, $n = 13$). These year groups were selected to capture age- and gender-based differences within the agreed three-day per week access. Akin to PE classes, all focus groups were year-group specific and single-sex, involving three to seven pupils, lasting between 18 and 47 min. During these audio-recorded discussions, amongst other questions, pupils were asked for their understandings of banter, to reflect on the prevalence of banter, and to provide examples of banter in PE. Similar questions were posed to nine teachers during semi-structured interviews, which ranged between 14 and 75 min. As well as providing comparative data based on age and gender, using three research methods served to triangulate data when determining perceptions (i.e. consistent attitudes towards

banter) and experiences (i.e. reports of banter consistent with those observed). In this sense, triangulation enabled greater degrees of adequacy concerning understandings of how young people social construct banter in PE.

Upon leaving LTS, Author One pseudonymised all fieldnotes and transcripts before importing them into NVivo-12. Organised into folders containing fieldnotes, transcripts from pupil focus groups, and teacher interview transcripts, the data were thematically analysed following Braun et al.'s (2016) six-phased guide. Author One (re)familiarised himself with data by reading fieldnotes and transcripts several times before identifying initial empirically derived nodes (Phase One). From here, Author One revisited, checked and revised initial nodes, adding further ones where necessary, before grouping nodes into 31 thematic codes (Phase Two). Examples of codes included girls emphasising inoffensive joking, boys exchanging performative goading, and female PE teachers using banter to motivate pupils. These codes were grouped into emerging themes, such as boys' and girls' conceptions of banter, differences in how boys and girls used banter, and PE teachers' use of banter as a pedagogical tool (Phase Three). Each theme was then reviewed and examined through a figurational sociological lens, whereby the concepts of figuration, power and habitus were used to help interpret and understand the empirical themes (Phase Four). This process culminated in Author One producing the following themes, differences in how boys' and girls' social constructed banter within PE figurations, older boys and male PE teachers bantering within their peer- and teacher-pupil relations, and older girls and female PE teachers bantering within their peer- and teacher-pupil relations. Author Two further reviewed this theoretically informed thematic mapping, posed critical questions regarding empirical coding, thematic grouping, theoretical application and necessary reflexivity (Phase Five). Despite Author One journaling his researcher position, identity, and relationships whilst immersed at LTS, both authors critiqued if and how their sporty male identities may have influenced and possibly biased interpretations and analysis. That said, reflexivity also included discussing key empirical and theoretically informed themes with three female professors who specialise in gender linguistics, educational spaces, and figurational sociology. Discussions centred on our interpretations concerning gender differences in the role of banter within peer and teacher-pupil relations support our analysis. Cumulatively, these iterative reflexive processes informed the writing of this article, whereby the following sections present empirical findings within the context of existing literature and policies, before theoretically discussing key findings (Phase Six).

Findings

Differences in boys' and girls' definitions and descriptions of banter within PE

Given sparse evidence of how secondary school pupils understand banter, during focus groups, girls and boys were asked to define and describe the term. Some Year 7 pupils were unfamiliar with banter, with Owen (Year 7) stating, 'I have never heard the term before', whilst Eloise (Year 7) asked, 'what is banter?'. From pupils familiar with banter, younger boys were more forthcoming than younger girls in offering definitions and descriptions. This gendered difference may be explained by younger boys' tendency to actively respond directly to questions posed, whilst younger girls were more tentative to provide specific answers. Instead, many younger girls preferred to reflect upon peers' comments, as evidenced below in a focus group conversation:

- Chloe: Like rude arguments about people?
- Imogen: Or when you are gossiping and sort of chatting about other people.
- Chloe: It could be like spreading rumours, maybe ... [pause] banter seems like a bad word, normally bad things. (Year 7)

Whilst speculative, inappropriate comments, gossiping and rumours have contributed to verbal bullying and social exclusion within girls' peer relations in secondary PE (Green et al., 2025). In this sense, many younger girls' descriptions of bantering resembled what Elias and Scotson (1994) referred to as blame gossip. Such negative connotations were not cited by younger boys, as noted by Reece (Year

7) who clearly considered banter to be 'having a laugh and a joke with your friends'. Younger boys' positive descriptions of banter often referred to collegial humorous interactions, resembling what Elias and Scotson (1994) referred to as praise gossip. Differences in how most younger girls and boys felt able to define banter, their attached connotations, and identified contrasting gossiping styles may also be explained by ethnographic data that younger boys were more likely to play team sports outside of school compared with their female peers. Therefore, when considering Adams (2020) and Booth et al. (2023), it is possible that sporty boys have become exposed to banter, used banter to strengthen social ties and, therefore, come to view it positively. However, with age, boys' and girls' definitions of banter became more aligned, with many older pupils sharing Annie's (Year 10) belief that banter is 'with your friends and it is like joking around'. Whilst difficult to determine exactly how many older girls came to share this view, possible reasons could include evidence that banter becomes more prevalent with age (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025c; Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020) and older girls' peer relations in single-sex PE become more friendship-orientated (Barr-Anderson et al., 2008; Green & Mierzwinski, 2025d). Moreover, greater alignment of boys' and girls' understandings of banter not only demonstrates banter as a socially constructed communication style, but also evidences how banter becomes deeply engrained in pupils' habitus and relations.

Despite many older pupils sharing similar definitions of banter, older boys' and girls' descriptions of bantering often differed. Indicative of most older boys' responses:

- Ryan: It [banter] is like an insult but shaped into a joke. It's like with your friends but you don't care as you know they are not meaning it.
 Mickey: It's having a laugh, people getting the piss taken out of them and giving it back. (Year 10)

Similar to adult males' bantering in sporting environments (Budden et al., 2022; Nichols, 2018), most older boys described banter as involving reciprocated mockery, jovial and humorously framed insults, and laughter amongst friends. In contrast, older girls never referenced mick-taking, ribbing, or insulting. Instead, most older girls described banter as inoffensive joking with friends, as denoted below in a Year 11 focus group discussion:

- Ellie: Banter is joking with your friends when it is not going to cause offence, and everyone finds it funny.
 Nicola: Yeah, you just do it with your friends.
 Amiee: Yeah.
 Ellie: Like inside jokes.

Comparatively, older girls understood banter to be amicable collegiate inoffensive joking *with* friends, whilst older boys described it as being competitive, ribbing-centred, and back and forth *between* peers. Seeking to understand this comparison, pupils and teachers were probed concerning this gendered difference. Having studied co-educational assessment PE, four Year 10 girls detailed their thoughts:

- Natalie: You tend to see the boys more often bantering
 Fern: Yeah, guys [boys] just take banter because it's a guy thing to do. Boys are always like bantering and making fun out of each other.
 Author One: *Why do you think that is?*
 Jasmine: They just seem, they are, they are more confident with each other.
 Abbie: I am just saying this from a stereotypical point of view, but the boys are more interactive and like to joke around quite a lot, whereas girls are a lot more picky.

Similarly, Mr Wharfedale discussed how, compared with girls, 'boys are more confident in sport, might be a bit more showie-offie, and make sure that they are the main people that are getting the most attention'. This difference was deemed to be more apparent with age, with Miss Turner reasoning, 'I would say boys is more, well as they get older anyway ... getting a bit too competitive or seeing it more as like a social'. Perhaps partly explaining this age-based development, Mr Wilkin-son noted, 'more as they [boys] get older because they play with each other outside of school in

various teams and that is part of their culture'. It is important to note that whilst pupils and teachers generalised 'boys' and 'girls', they were not homogenous groups in respects to bantering. However, when discussing banter, girls and female PE teachers often referenced boys' bantering. Many older, particularly sporty, boys were observed using banter as a means of self-promotion in front of their peers, to gain attention from their peers and embody competitiveness over their peers. Whilst it is difficult to explain why this difference is more pronounced with age, as Mr Wilkinson notes, it may be linked boys' greater exposure to or longer immersion within competitive single-sex sporting environments (Adams, 2020; Booth et al., 2023; Hague & Law, 2022). Similarly, as noted by Fern and Abbie, it may also be linked to cited boys' bonding rituals of mick-taking, ribbing and tomfoolery (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2024), banter as a form of boys' gender expression (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020), and banter as a significant aspect with boys' peer-group dynamics in PE (Green & Mierzwinski, 2025d). To further explore such dynamics, the following section focuses on how banter featured within boys' peer- and teacher-pupil relations.

Older boys' and male PE teachers' bantering within their peer- and teacher-pupil relations

Amongst older boys, performative errors, sporting failures and sportswear were frequently observed as catalysts for banter:

Fieldnote 17th February 2022 – Year 11 Boys' Football

Liam's corner hitting the side netting evoked many peer comments, including 'my nan could have whipped in a better corner than that' (Jack). Laughing, Liam raised his hand to apologise, then when Jack took a corner, commented 'let's see what your nan can do then'.

Reflecting on what evokes such performance-related banter in PE, several Year 10 boys noted:

Thomas: It is just mistakes, isn't it? Just silly little things.

Mickey: Just like mental boots or something.

Brad: Say like ... someone made a mistake or something, one of your mates might say something to you and you would say something back, that is where the banter would start. Maybe you have missed a penalty, you can have a laugh about them missing a sitter, then they would say it back.

Aware of older boys' peer-group dynamics, Mr Walker stated, 'you will find that boys are quite quick to take the mick out of each other if someone has done something wrong in a particular activity'. Performative errors were observed evoking more banter if they came from a confident and over-exuberant pupil or teacher, a pattern recognised by Nick (Year 11):

Especially with the ones who like to give it large before the game ... Mr Wharfedale, we like to banter him because he gives it large and then when he messes up it makes him look like a clown.

Within physical and competitive PE lessons, inevitable errors, contrasting footwear, and egotism are highly visible, providing boys many opportunities for performance-related banter. As reported by Nick, male PE teachers were not exempt from older boys' bantering:

Fieldnote 17th February 2022 – Year 11 Boys' Football

Six sporty boys mocked Mr Wharfedale's football boots, labelling them 'Sports Direct specials', making Mr Wharfedale laugh before retorting, 'at least I can use my boots, unlike you lot'.

Many older boys felt able to and confident in gently ribbing their PE teachers, whose retorts often involved performance-related putdowns. Partially explaining this teacher-pupil dynamic, Mr Wilkinson reported:

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

As Head of Boys' PE, Mr Wilkinson legitimised ribbing, with male PE teachers viewing banter as fair game (i.e. retort rather than reprimand) within this more informal setting than classroom-based lessons. Indeed, male PE teachers were often observed initiating banter with older boys, as illustrated below:

Fieldnote 1st April 2022 – Year 10 Boys' Basketball

Preparing to take a free-throw shot, Sammy shouted, 'Jordan!!!!'. As Sammy's shot missed the hoop, several teammates bemoaned his failed attempt, as his team was rotated off the court. Whilst Sammy exited the court, Mr Shaw gestured, 'don't worry, 'Jordan'. You can still come warm the bench tomorrow night' [referencing an interschool fixture], evoking laughter from many boys, and a wry smile and shake of the head from Sammy.

Sammy's perceived performative error evoked frustration, disdain and comments from teammates, which were not reprimanded by Mr Shaw, who instead used banter to make light of Sammy's miss, seeking to diffuse any peer tension and animosity. Emotions such as these can be heightened during team-based sport, with banter also used for competitive purposes. For example, Mr Wilkinson noted how, 'it [banter] makes it a challenge and makes it more competitive', whilst Mr Wharfedale suggested that performance-related banter adds 'a bit of competitiveness, adds a bit of interest'. Sharing similar sentiments, Sean (Year 10) described how, 'it (banter) can be used to try and wind up my mates on the other team, because it is more intense', before Ben added:

Yeah, if you are playing a game or something there will be more banter there, whereas if you are doing a drill or something you will focus on that and there won't be as much.

Collectively, these quotes evidence how older boys' banter was explicit, intuitively received, combative and used for competitive advantage during team sports. These findings resemble Duncan's (2019) description of sport-related sledging, and Green et al.'s (2025) and Mierzewski and Velija's (2020) suggestions that performance-related commentary is understood as an extension of physical competition in boys' PE.

Older girls' and female PE teachers' bantering within their peer- and teacher-pupil relations

In older girls' PE, banter was observed and reported as being exchanged within small group conversations, as noted by a group of Year 10 girls:

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Eleanor: | In PE, banter is mostly between your close friends. You don't really say it with people who you aren't friends with. |
| Alice: | When you do something wrong and they [friends] shout at you for it. Like your teammates are like 'no, that was wrong' [laughs loudly] that is a great one. They shout, 'catch the ball' and I am like 'I can't' [laughs again]. |
| Author One: | <i>Interesting, when is that most likely to happen?</i> |
| Annie: | When we are all sitting in groups or like standing waiting to bat. |

Annie's example was also observed, as captured within the following fieldnote:

Fieldnote 5th May 2022 – Year 11 Girls' Rounders

Queuing to bat, four girls chatted and laughed about dropping catches, mimicking their techniques. When batting, Jess's three friends encouraged her to 'whack it', and Louise jibed 'you can't do any worse than when you were fielding', evoking laughter. When Louise batted, Miss Turner advised that, 'unlike Jess, you need to hit the ball'. Laughing, Louise replied, 'you just watch this Miss. I am going to smash it miles'.

Banter in the form of mimicking and making light of performative shortcomings took place within girls' friendship group interactions, with female PE teachers occasionally joining with humorously

framed encouragement. Such bantering was also evident in individual physical activities, as evidenced below:

Fieldnote 21st March 2022 – Year 11 Girls' Fitness

As five girls used dumbbells one at a time, their technique evoked jokes and collective laughter. When Sophie performed a bicep curl, three girls posed like bodybuilders, eliciting further laughter, mimicking, and commentary.

Many older girls attached comedic value to performative aesthetics, which in this case seemed to evoke laughter by mimicking bodybuilding behaviours often considered by young females as gender deviant (Gorely et al., 2016). Probing reasons many older girls often engaged in performance and/or aesthetic-related bantering in PE revealed reasons of enjoyment and engagement, as described by two Year 10 girls:

Lydia: It makes it like more fun and makes you want to do sport.

Abbie: I think it can be quite motivating, almost. Like if someone is making a joke about it [your performance], it makes you want to do better.

Seemingly aware of such reasons, when explaining her use of banter, Miss Jones noted:

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

Girls' and female PE teachers' bantering was considered an effective means of fostering an enjoyment-engagement nexus. As noted by Barr-Anderson et al. (2008), this nexus is premised on a prevailing philosophy that PE for girls should, and needs to, be fun and enjoyable to generate, maintain and increase engagement. Probing how older girls respond to teacher-initiated banter in PE, Miss Jones evaluated:

Nine times out of ten they love it. They absolutely love it. Not in a way that somebody else would hear to make fun out of them, it is usually in a one-on-one type of situation, where I might say something, and it gets them going.

As well as banter being an amicable and enjoyable form of communication for many girls, banter also served as a motivational tool within peer- and teacher-pupil relations. In terms of the latter, female PE teachers described intentionally using banter in a person-specific appropriate manner for pedagogical purposes. Interestingly, older girls were seldom observed initiating banter with female PE teachers. Probing this pattern, Head of Girls' PE Mrs Hanson stated:

This is a controversial statement, I don't tolerate it [banter]. Sometimes it is a different dynamic between a male teacher in a class and a female teacher in a class. It drives me nuts, so I don't tolerate it.

Whilst not discussed by other female PE teachers, Mrs Hanson's account demonstrates attitudinal (i.e. tolerance towards banter) and references relational (i.e. teacher-pupil dynamic) differences between male and female PE teachers. This may help explain why many girls did not initiate banter with their female PE teachers.

Discussion

Ethnographic data revealed similarities and differences in how boys, girls, male PE teachers and female PE teachers defined, described and socially constructed banter. Boys and girls provided similar definitions of banter, but older pupils were more able than younger peers to define banter. Older girls' descriptions of banter tended to include negative connotations compared with male peers. This difference is despite older girls describing banter as amicable inoffensive joking and never associating it with mick-taking, ribbing, or insulting, unlike older boys. Viewing

banter through a more positive lens, older boys' and male PE teachers' bantering was more competitive, combative and openly delivered compared with older girls. Female PE teachers were less tolerant of such forms of banter, with older girls' bantering tending to be more friendship-based, light-hearted mimicking, seldom involving female PE teachers. However, aware of how many girls enjoyed such bantering, female PE teachers occasionally initiated banter to engage and motivate girls. Meanwhile, male PE teachers more frequently initiated and engaged in banter to foster competition and re-exert their authority when it was deemed to be momentarily challenged.

Seeking to explain these key comparative findings through the concept of figuration, it is necessary to consider how banter was often enabled within secondary PE at LTS. Contrasting to individualistic knowledge-based subjects delivered in classrooms with constrained behavioural expectations, PE lessons provided pupils and teachers opportunities to be social, competitive and jovial. However, it is important to acknowledge that PE figurations are not fixed or static but can vary across ages and sexes. Therefore, the finding that pupils' abilities to define, describe and socially construct banter developed with age can be partly explained by structural, relational and behavioural changes across secondary PE figurations. For instance, at LTS, older pupils had more opportunities to observe and comment upon a peer's performance due to a shift from skill acquisition tasks during Key Stage Three PE to competitive team-based games in Key Stage Four PE. Indeed, many sporty older boys used sledging as one of a 'variety of tactics and strategies [used] to overcome opponents in team and individual games' (Department for Education, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, compared with younger pupils, many older pupils had formed closer, established and often more informal peer- and teacher-pupil relations, which often involved bantering within the PE figuration. Combined, these structural and relational changes may explain why banter was a more legitimate form of communication within older pupil-peer and teacher-older pupil relations.

A further way to explain older pupils' use of banter is through the concept of habitus. Compared with their 11-year-old peers, pupils aged 14 years and over were more aware of banter and felt more confident in and willing to recognise, interpret and exchange banter as a socially acceptable communicate style with peers and teachers. This ability may be developed experientially by entering more diverse figurations (i.e. from sport clubs to social media) and a greater cognitive understanding and emotional awareness of the complexity of humour (i.e. banter for social bonding and social exclusion). However, despite similarities, how older boys and older girls understood and socially constructed banter differed, differences which may be explained through the concept of shared gendered habitus. Generally, older girls' shared tastes and preferences towards banter were more circumspect (i.e. inoffensive joking) and selective (i.e. with friends) compared with older boys' more competitive (i.e. combative) and open (i.e. between peers and teachers) shared dispositions. These nuances in boys' and girls' embodied social learning of banter may have been informed by their developing understanding and perceptions of how teenage boys and girls should behave and relate with each other, and teachers, within single-sex environments, such as secondary PE.

Within this PE figuration, boys' and girls' social constructions of banter could also have been informed by same-sex PE teachers. Despite similarities, male and female PE teachers held different tastes, preferences and embodiment of banter. For instance, female PE teachers were less tolerant of banter as a legitimate form of communication, whilst male PE teachers bantering appeared more personality-based (i.e. second nature). More reflexive and critical of banter as a social bonding tool, female PE teachers valued and used light-hearted forms of banter as a motivational tool to engage older girls. This difference may be explained by considering reported male and female gendered habituses and single-sex peer relations (Green & Mierzewski, 2025b; Gorely et al., 2016; Mierzewski & Velija, 2020). The development and embodiment of a gendered habitus through secondary PE and other sporting figurations (see Adams, 2020; Booth et al., 2023; Green & Mierzewski, 2025d) may help explain why sporty older boys held more prosocial attitudes towards banter and were more confident and likely to use it in their interactions with peers and teachers.

The development, embodiment and sharing of a gendered habitus also explain the role of banter within pupils' peer- and teacher-pupil power relations within secondary single-sex PE figurations. When bantering, many older girls placed importance on friendship groups, with sporting excellence not featuring as a distinguishing or significant factor. This finding is not dissimilar to Velija's (2012) reporting of peer relations amongst young female cricketers, whereby sexuality and social class, rather than cricket ability, were key distinguishing factors in forms of blame gossip exchanged between girls. Comparatively, at LTS, sporty older boys were more likely to initiate and exchange performance-related banter with their sporty peers and male PE teachers in a competitive manner. In this sense, sporty older boys' bantering served as a form of blame gossip (i.e. criticising sporting failures) and praise gossip (i.e. using ribbing and sledging for competitive purposes). Showing nuance, male PE teachers' blame gossip was more centred on making light of sporting failures (i.e. mocking an overly confident or exuberant sporty boys) and praise gossip aimed at heightening competition (i.e. fuelling older sporty boys' competitiveness). Whilst male PE teachers' use of banter has been reported elsewhere (Mierzwinski & Velija, 2020), at LTS, they did not weaponize performance-related banter by gender-shaming boys. Contrastingly, female PE teachers did not engage in banter as a form of blame gossip for fear of its divisive effects on and between girls' friendship groups and concerns regarding its detrimental effects on girls' engagement in PE.

Conclusion

This article aimed to explore gendered differences in how banter is socially constructed in secondary school PE in England. In doing so, this article addresses an absence of research concerning how young females socially construct banter within single-sex sporting environments, and the extent that this focus offers potential to demonstrate gendered differences. Becoming more evident with age, girls' bantering involved amicable collegiate inoffensive joking *with* friends, whilst older boys' bantering was competitive, ribbing-centred, and back and forth *between* peers and teachers. Age-based differences reflect young people's developmentally and experientially informed learning of banter as a complex form of communication available to use within pupil peer- and teacher-pupil relations. This learning process reflected broader differences in boys' and girls' shared gendered habitus, which were further embodied by PE teachers who legitimised banter as a socially acceptable and enjoyable form of communication. However, female PE teachers' embodiment tended to be more sensitive towards the emotional effects of banter. Within single-sex PE figurations at LTS, girls' banter served as a social bonding tool amongst friends, with female PE teachers using banter to motivate and engage girls in PE. In contrast, for boys and male PE teachers banter served to gain competitive advantage and maintain competitiveness, respectively. These key findings derived from examining single-sex figurations as separate yet interconnected, whilst understanding banter as being enabled within PE figurations, but primarily learned and experienced within and across numerous figurations. Within PE figurations at LTS, banter impacted pupil-peer and teacher-pupil power relations by adding to collegiality, heightening competition, and occasionally causing momentary conflict (borne from frustration, disdain or challenging teacher authority). Given our focus, findings and theorising, future research should examine how banter is socially constructed in mixed-sex sporting settings, as well as the role of banter within girls' friendship groups. Emphasis could be placed on examining the role of banter within male-female power relations and exploring the extent to which characteristics within established-outsider relations in sport are present.

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Ethical statement

This project received ethical approval from the University Research Ethics Committee – reference STHEC0057.

Consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent in written and oral forms.

Data availability

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

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