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Green, Matthew and Mierzwinski, Mark (2026) A figurational analysis of changing processes and swimming in secondary Physical Education. *European Physical Education Review*. (In Press)

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A figurational analysis of changing processes and swimming in secondary Physical Education

Abstract

Whilst not a statutory component, swimming can be taught during Physical Education (PE) lessons in secondary schools in England. Therefore, this article presents ethnographic accounts of pupils' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of swimming in PE in one state-funded secondary school in northern England. Drawing on participant observations, 14 focus groups with 49 pupils, and interviews with nine PE teachers, this paper details how pupils navigated the embodied, relational and emotional dimensions of swimming lessons, and the extent to which these differed between boys and girls. Empirical findings included pupils' heightened feelings of embarrassment when changing into swimming attire, intensified social awkwardness through peer gaze when walking to the swimming pool, and, participation avoidance strategies, particularly among girls. The way teachers accommodated, regulated and disciplined boys' and girls' feelings, preferences and behaviours differed. Pupils' and teachers' perceptions, experiences and behaviours, and gendered differences within these, are indicative of Elias's (2012) conceptions of (gendered) civilised bodies in relation to the schooling of pupils' bodies through structural, behavioural and relational social constraints. By examining data concerning pupils' and teachers' perceptions, experiences and behaviours, this article highlights the importance of PE teachers being alert and accommodating cultural and gendered sensitivities associated with nakedness to mitigate boys' and girls' displeasure, fears, and avoidance of swimming.

Keywords: Physical Education, Swimming, Changing rooms, Gender, Figurational sociology, Embarrassment.

Introduction

Deemed as essential life skills, swimming competence and water safety feature across multiple national curricula and global public health guidance (for example, see Department for Education, 2013; Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training, 2020; World Health Organization, 2023). In England, despite swimming being a statutory component within primary Physical Education (PE) curricula, only 71% of 11-12 years-olds (Year 7) meet the national benchmark of being able to swim 25 metres competently, confidently, and proficiently (Sport England, 2023). Whilst not statutory, secondary schools are encouraged to teach swimming to 'compensate for foundational competences and water safety' (Department for Education, 2023: 11). However, pupils' exposure of their semi-naked bodies during secondary PE swimming lessons causes challenges, apprehensions and tensions (Fisette, 2011; Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; James, 2000). Bodily exposure heightens many girls' feelings of self-consciousness and vulnerability during puberty and within often tension-laden peer group dynamics

(Fisette, 2011; Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; Youth Sport Trust, 2023). Adding to such knowledge, this article presents ethnographic insights of changing processes, moving to the swimming pool, and pupils' poolside and swimming behaviours. Guided by figurational sociology, we adopt Elias's (2012) concepts of (gendered) civilised bodies, shame and embarrassment to explain pupils' and teachers' perceptions and experiences of swimming processes during secondary PE. Focus is given to answering the following questions:

- 1) What are secondary school pupils' experiences of changing for, moving between spaces, and participating in swimming during PE?
- 2) To what extent do boys' and girls' experiences of changing for, moving between spaces, and participating in swimming differ during secondary PE?
- 3) How do PE teachers accommodate pupils' preferences concerning changing for, moving between spaces, and participating in swimming?

Literature review

During secondary PE, changing attire, moving to the swimming pool, and participating in swimming lessons exposes pupils' bodies. Derived from Australian secondary schools, James's (2000) survey data revealed that many 15-16-year-old girls felt uncomfortable with how they looked in swimsuits. Discomfort was largely attributed to a pervasive sense of 'being watched', a concern many girls felt affected them more than their male peers (James, 2000: 270). This feeling was discussed in relation to male gaze and how boys viewed their bodies. Navigating such gender dynamics, some girls sought to minimise bodily exposure by swimming in tee-shirts, whilst others feigned injury to be excused from participation (James, 2000). Demonstrating how such a sense, concern, and feeling was apparent amongst girls' peer groups, Fisette (2011) provided focus group and interview data gathered from schools in mid-Western United States. Findings revealed that in comparison with other activities in PE, swimming amplified girls' bodily self-scrutiny and concerns regarding peer gaze and judgement. However, girls' behaviours when changing varied with some seeking privacy by using curtains or friends holding towels and/or wearing more modest attire, whilst some girls changed in front of others and wore more revealing swimwear (Fisette, 2011). Further evidencing the global nature of such findings, Camacho-Miñano and Aragón Herraiz (2014) examined girls' social physical anxiety during PE-based swimming lessons in Spain. Observational and interview data with 12 teenage girls and teachers revealed that processes of bodily exposure and evaluative gaze, especially male gaze, heightened many girls' social physical anxiety. In response to such feelings, girls adopted a variety of coping strategies including concealing their bodies, reassuring themselves it is a normal situation, and refusing to participate in swimming (Camacho-Miñano and Aragón Herraiz, 2014).

Whilst there is a paucity of research focusing on swimming in secondary PE, there is literature concerning pupils' experiences of changing attire and showering, two necessary processes during

swimming lessons. Gerdin's (2017) visual school-based ethnographies in New Zealand evidenced how many 14-to-15-year-old boys experienced bodily insecurities when changing and showering. Some boys' apprehensions were driven by their inability to express confident masculinities, whilst also informed by uncomfortable and confronting experiences associated with inferiority and inadequacy (Gerdin, 2017). Positioning changing rooms as a 'disciplinary' space, Gerdin (2017) found that the absence of teacher surveillance enabled some boys more freedom to regulate gender performances. Drawn from the same ethnographic study from which this article was developed, Green and Mierzwinski (2026: 68) found that male PE teachers supervised changing rooms due to perceived needs to socially constrain boys' 'boisterous behaviour', whilst female PE teachers did not enter changing rooms to appease girls' concerns about adult gaze. Reporting further gendered differences, seeking to get changed in private was viewed as shameful for boys, but socially acceptable and expected for girls (Green and Mierzwinski, 2026).

Discussing ethnographic findings from three Swedish secondary schools, Forsberg et al. (2025) found that showering amongst peers amplified pupils' fears of bodily exposure. Pupils' fears were associated with degrading treatment and appearance-related bullying. However, many pupils still showered post-PE participation to avoid peer judgement relating to hygiene or rumours concerning puberty. Presenting observational and pupil focus group data from two Danish secondary schools, Frydendal and Thing (2020) revealed that many pupils consciously conserved effort during PE lessons to prevent sweating and the perceived need to shower. Pupils' strategies to avoid showering meant that they did not conform with 'common' Danish customs regarding open changing processes, undressing close to others, and 'showering next to other people' (Frydendal and Thing, 2020: 169). Shame and embarrassment were identified as key barriers for pupils not adhering to the traditional showering culture, feelings experienced by boys and girls (Frydendal and Thing, 2020). Collectively, these studies highlight international patterns concerning secondary school pupils' fear of, and efforts to avoid, bodily exposure when changing and showering during secondary PE.

There is some evidence that bodily exposure and self-consciousness in secondary PE can differ between boys and girls due to biological differences. UK-based surveys conducted by Women in Sport (2018) and Youth Sport Trust (2023) report that experiencing menstrual cycles during secondary PE heightens many girls' bodily insecurities, contributing to avoid strategies and disengagement. Depicting menstruation as a 'female issue', Böhlke et al.'s (2025: 614) discourse analysis of online PE forum content demonstrates how girls' worries concerning exposing swimwear, being in water and visibly leaking when swimming. Discussing such worries, forum content included advice for girls to avoid school on PE days, whilst parents and teachers debated whether period-related discomfort justified being excused from PE (Böhlke et al., 2025). Presenting focus group responses from 46 13-to-15-year-old girls in England, Harvey et al. (2020) discovered that for some girls, cramps, fatigue, and low mood resulted in non-participation, whilst those who participated experienced heightened self-consciousness due to revealing clothing requirements (i.e. swimsuits). Harvey et al. (2020) also revealed that although

girls felt less comfortable approaching male teachers about menstruation, they believed male teachers were more likely than female teachers to excuse non-participation in PE due to period-related discomfort. Presenting sport-specific findings, Zipp and Hyde (2024) suggest that swimming coaches often have limited knowledge on what can be done to assist athletes who are negatively affected by their menstrual cycle. Collectively, these findings demonstrate how for biological reasons swimming in secondary PE can disproportionality affect girls more than boys, whilst also revealing how teachers may adopt differing accommodations.

This review reveals that across diverse geographical locations changing into PE kit, participating in, and showering after, secondary PE often heightens girls' and boys' self-consciousness. In this respect, pupils' psychological states and emotions are biologically (i.e. puberty, menstruation) and socially (i.e. peer gaze, peer judgement) driven. The extent to which these states and emotions differ amongst boys and girls is difficult to ascertain given that only a few studies offer pupils' experiences of swimming processes. Furthermore, no articles present comparative data concerning gender differences or teachers' experiences of teaching swimming during secondary PE. Therefore, this article seeks to address these empirical gaps, as well as offering theoretically informed analysis.

Figurational sociology

In this article, we adopt a figurational sociological perspective to analyse boys' and girls' experiences of changing for, moving between spaces, and participating in swimming during secondary PE. Drawing upon Elias's (2012) discussions concerning Western civilising processes, we consider how contemporary sensitivities around nudity may influence pupils' and teachers' behaviours and emotions during school swimming. Viewing socio- and psycho-genesis as interrelated processes, Elias (2012) mapped how changes in state-formation (i.e. centralised monopoly of violence and taxation) enabled, and were part enabled by, shifts in how people related with each other (i.e. denser and more complex relations requiring greater degrees of mutual identification between different social groups). Within more pacified nation-states, behavioural standards and expectations gradually became more refined, including outward bodily propriety (i.e. certain public displays shifted towards more private domains, including sleeping, urinating/defecating, and dressing). Such shifts were part enabled by, and contributed to, changing attitudes in terms of increasing sensitivities towards bodily conduct and expectations concerning emotional and behavioural self-restraint (Elias, 2012). Demonstrating how civilising processes underpinned the development of competitive swimming in England, Cock (2012) identifies several trends between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century, including what people wore, where they got changed, and who they swam with. Changing arrangements and the practice of swimming have increasingly become gender-segregated, with male and female changing rooms and single-sex swimming contests (Cock, 2012). As such, we consider how long-term shifts in bodily conduct and emotional and behavioural constraints are embodied by boys and girls within changing rooms, during transitions to the swimming pool, and whilst participating in swimming.

Elias's (2012) analysis also provides a useful conceptual framework to consider why momentary nakedness and bodily exposure have increasingly become tabooed, often inducing feelings of embarrassment and shame. Given reported tensions associated with changing, showering, and swimming processes (Fisette, 2011; Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; James, 2000), Elias's (2012) conceptions of shame and embarrassment provide a useful theoretical lens through which to examine young people's experiences of swimming in secondary PE. For Elias (2012: 292), shame is 'a kind of anxiety which is automatically reproduced in the individual', triggered by fears of social degradation and socially informed feelings of inferiority. Similarly, embarrassment is understood as 'displeasure or anxiety which arises when another person threatens to breach, or breaches, society's prohibitions' (Elias, 2012: 296). From a figurational perspective, it is important to acknowledge that feelings of shame and embarrassment arise through social interactions, which are indicative of broader long-term social processes and shifts from emotional and behavioural constraints towards more self-restraint (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024). Using these conceptions, Frydendal and Thing (2020) identified how within Danish upper-secondary schools many young people experienced heightened feelings of shame and embarrassment at the prospect of appearing naked or witnessing the nudity of others, contributing to some students deliberately avoiding excessive physical exertion to avoid post-lesson showering. As acknowledged by Frydendal and Thing (2020), different countries and/or cultures may have differing prohibitions and attitudes towards nudity, hygiene and the need for self-regulation. Therefore, in this respect, this article explores nuances concerning cultural relativity from the perspective of a secondary school in England.

In many Western societies, schools function as social institutions whereby children are educated into 'civilised' forms of behaviour and emotional self-restraint (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024: 53). In this sense, children's bodies are viewed as malleable entities that can and *should* be regulated, disciplined and emotionally constrained (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024). This schooling process is structurally informed as evidenced through differing toilet arrangements for boys (i.e. shared urinals) and girls (i.e. individual cubicles), which Slater, Jones and Procter (2018: 958) suggests evidence how 'gender is one axis along which civilising lessons or shame and privacy are learnt'. This schooling process is also relationally informed with teachers routinely socially constraining pupils' emotional expressions and behaviours in line with schools and often broader societal expectations (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024). Examples within secondary PE include female teachers offering girls greater agency (i.e. less teacher supervision), comfort (i.e. sit with friends), and preference (i.e. allowed to change in toilets), compared with male teachers who enforced a seating plan, communal changing, and constant supervision (Green and Mierzwinski, 2026). Furthermore, male teachers have been observed gender-shaming boys into embodying more effort during physically exerting tasks (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020). These examples demonstrate the institutional context of schooling as indicative of what Elias (2012) referred to as Western civilising processes, whereby teachers shape pupils' embodied conduct, emotional regulation, and shame dynamics (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024). Therefore, this article explores

how boys' and girls' perceptions, experiences and behaviours during swimming differ, and the extent to which differences can be explained by the concept of gendered civilised bodies.

Research methods

Data presented in this article is drawn from a broader ethnographic exploration of peer group dynamics and teacher-pupil relations in one state-funded secondary school in northern England, pseudonymised as Lord Taylor's School (LTS). Largely representative of schools within the region (GOV.UK, 2019), pupil demographics included approximately 20% eligible for pupil premium funding¹, 15% Black or Minority Ethnic, and 10% with a special educational need or disability. AT LTS swimming was taught in core PE and there was a 25 metre by 12.5 metre swimming pool, used exclusively for PE lessons. Whilst not mandated within the national curriculum for secondary PE (see Department for Education, 2013), all Key Stage Three (KS3, 11-14 years) pupils were timetabled for a minimum of 12 one-hour swimming lessons per academic year. Aligning to national provision trends (Hingley et al., 2023), this offering stopped at Key Stage Four (KS4, 14-16 years); therefore, only younger pupils were observed swimming. Each swimming lesson involved approximately 25 pupils grouped in single-sex and mixed-ability classes.

During these lessons, changing into swimwear, moving to the swimming pool, and participation in swimming were observed and discussed with pupils and teachers. Due to safeguarding expectations (see NSPCC², 2022), department routines, and approved ethical practices, as a male researcher, Author One only observed boys' changing rooms. During this time, Author One accompanied a teacher, avoided observing toilets, and suspended notetaking during potentially sensitive moments (e.g. momentary nudity). Author One also observed 20 boys' and 16 girls' swimming lessons, positioning himself on the periphery of the pool, and recording observations in a pocket-sized notebook, before writing up detailed fieldnotes after each lesson. Pupils' perceptions and experiences of swimming processes were gathered during 14 focus groups with 49 pupils (24 girls, 25 boys), which ranged between 19 and 48 minutes. Akin to PE lessons, all focus groups were single-sex, year group specific, and involved between three and seven pupils. To avoid evoking distress or embarrassment, Author One did not ask questions or probe responses concerning menstruation, puberty or body exposure. Furthermore, no targeted questions and personal explanations were sought to avoid possibly discussing sensitive topics and, therefore, evoking distress. Instead, pupils were asked generalised questions relating to their swimming experiences, such as, 'please can you describe how pupils get changed for

¹ The pupil premium grant provides funding to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in state-funded schools in England (GOV.UK, 2019).

² The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the United Kingdom's leading child protection charity.

swimming?’ and ‘what are your thoughts on swimming in PE?’. Whilst such questions were positioned as gender-neutral when asked to boys and girls, it is necessary to acknowledge possible constraints of a male researcher interviewing teenage girls (Archer, 2002; Jachyra et al., 2014). Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine PE teachers (three female, six male) ranging between 14 and 75 minutes. Interviews pursued similar lines of enquiry, seeking insights into changing room supervision, swimwear expectations, moving between spaces, and pupils’ engagement and avoidance tactics. Focus groups and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Upon leaving the field, the data was thematically analysed following Braun et al.’s (2016) reflexive guidance. During Phase One, Author One re-familiarised himself with data by reading and re-reading the fieldnotes, focus group and interview transcripts, recording initial analytical thoughts. Phase Two involved the creation of initial codes, which amongst other things, included dual use of spaces (e.g. toilets as changing areas), male PE teachers normalising changing attire, and older girls avoiding swimming participation. All codes were reviewed during Phase Three, which led to Author One developing several gendered patterns in relation to pupils’ emotion-laden responses towards (semi)nudity, pupils’ efforts to avoid peer-gaze and/or participation, and PE teachers’ pedagogical practices. From here, Authors One and Two discussed themes in relation to the theoretical concepts of gendered civilised bodies, shame and embarrassment. This iterative and dialogic process involved both authors discussing, (re)considering, and further developing themes (Phase Four). This analytical process culminated in the following themes being agreed: Pupils’ heightened shame and embarrassment when changing for swimming; peer gaze and gendered civilised bodies, and emotion-laden avoidance and teachers’ gendered pedagogical practices (Phase Five). Collectively, these three themes foreground an empirically focused findings section whereby boys’ and girls’ experiences are presented separately to highlight differences. Differences in boys’, girls’ and teachers’ perceptions, experiences and behaviours are then thematically discussed and analysed using Elias’s (2012) concept of gendered civilized bodies (Phase Six).

Findings

Whilst at LTS most core PE lessons were delivered by one same-sex teacher, swimming also involved a female PE technician being present to adhere to pupil-teacher ratios (see Swim England, 2024). When swimming, girls wore a swimsuit, with bikinis prohibited, whilst boys wore either normal PE shorts or Hawaiian-style shorts, never trunks. Boys’ and girls’ changing rooms were 20 metres long, seven metres wide, and two metres high, with a hard-wearing non-slip floor, no windows, and cream-coloured exterior walls, a seemingly globally standardised architectural design (Forsberg et al., 2025; Fusco 2006; Gerdin, 2017). Fixed wooden benches and metal clothing racks created four changing bays, whilst there was also a walk-in shower containing eight shower heads. The boys’ washroom included a toilet cubicle and urinal, whilst girls had two cubicles. Due to the delivery of two simultaneous single-sex PE lessons per year group, a class of up to 30 pupils changed into swimwear alongside up to 30 pupils

changing into standard PE kit. When changing, boys were expected to adhere to an alphabetically informed seating plan, a teacher-implementation not enforced in the girls' changing room. This was largely based on male PE teachers' concerns about boys' boisterous behaviour, and female PE teachers' appreciation of girls' peer group preferences (see Green and Mierzwinski, 2026). For swimming lessons, pupils were granted 10 minutes to change into swimwear, and 10 minutes to dry and redress post-participation. During these periods, male PE teachers observed boys when changing, whereas female PE teachers remained in the PE office in earshot of the girls' changing room (see Green and Mierzwinski, 2026).

Boys' experiences of changing attire for swimming

Discussing boys' behaviours and peer relations when changing into swimwear, Head of PE, Mr Wilkinson explained:

There is definitely a difference [from when changing into PE kit]. When it is swimming, they keep themselves to themselves a lot more. They are hunched over protecting themselves. It is crazy really because in a normal PE lesson they are stripping off to their boxers and putting their tee-shirt back on. But in a swimming lesson they can be just as covered up with a towel. But it does calm them down. I think it is because they are so intent on no one seeing them naked that they just don't talk. Swimming does cause an issue, or it does have an impact.

This comparative portrayal was also observed with usually expressive boys being more reserved when changing for swimming. These behavioural and relational shifts appeared to be underpinned by momentary semi-nakedness, possible exposure of genitals, and visibility of torso. Such reservation and preferences for privacy led to some boys seeking alternative changing arrangements, an observational pattern depicted by Mr Wilkinson:

I have found more and more [boys] have come to the office and say, "I don't want to get changed in front of all of the other people, can't I get changed somewhere else?" Our [male PE teachers] answer is always, yes. But we would always say that you have a towel, so wrap it around your waist. I don't know if a lot of them know that you can get changed with a towel wrapped around your waist. There is still a number of kids who aren't bothered about it, but I would say at the moment we have 15 to 20 kids per class who don't feel comfortable.

Sharing similar experiences and perceptions, Mr Walker considered how:

Some [boys] become more sensitive or body conscious when changing for swimming and more will go in the showers or the toilets, whereas you might not see any in a lesson

that isn't swimming. So, there is an element that some pupils become a lot more self-conscious.

Whilst changing into swimwear seemed not to affect all boys, around half were considered to feel uncomfortable, with a few avoiding this discomfort by seeking alternative spaces. Supporting Frydendal and Thing's (2020) discussion that Western cultural sensitivities towards nakedness and bodily exposure are not static, Mr Wilkinson's reflection that such requests have become more prevalent may be part informed by teachers' accommodation, but also speak to general trends regarding boys' body image concerns (Ahuja et al., 2025; Allen et al., 2019; Cohane and Pope, 2001). Some boys' displeasure at changing in front of peers may also be part-driven by fear of peer judgement, commentary, and social degradation (Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; Green et al., 2025). Providing an example of such discomfort and desire for privacy, a relatively quiet slightly framed sporty boy, Owen (Year 7), stated:

I do use them [disabled toilet] in the swimming pool because I get really uncomfortable around people [in the changing room], especially when, you know, getting changed into swimming trunks and all that. I kind of get it. I don't like getting all of my clothes off and that is why I have quite a lot of trouble in PE swimming, I guess that's just how it is.

The experience of such feelings may have been relatively new to Owen if he, like many others, learnt to swim at a leisure centre that had individual and/or family cubicles, facilities often used by primary schools (Swim England, 2024). Whilst Head of PE Mr Wilkinson suggested that all teachers would accommodate pupils' privacy preferences, enabling up to 20 pupils to change in one toilet cubicle, a small shower and a disabled toilet was unrealistic. This may explain why some teachers sought to either educate boys on changing discreetly or sought to normalise momentary nudity in front of peers. For example, Mr Wharfedale detailed:

I do understand the issues with swimming and getting changed for swimming, but I do try and make it seem, if anyone is ever funny about it, just try and make it seem normal. Because it is a normal thing to do. Wrap a towel around you and change your trunks. If anyone is ever funny about it, I just make it clear that it is a normal thing to do. Getting changed shouldn't be an issue because when you make it an issue, it is seen, and people jump on it.

Whilst sympathetic to some boys' feelings of discomfort, apparent embarrassment, and heightened self-consciousness, Mr Wharfedale sought to de-taboo this process. This normalising process of encouraging boys to be more emotionally resilient and socially trusting demonstrates a relationally informed example of schooling boys' bodies in PE, adding nuanced empirical insight into existing literature (see Davison, 2000; Gerdin, 2017; Kirk, 2012).

Girls' experiences of changing attire for swimming

Whilst no observational data was gathered from the girls' changing rooms, girls and female PE teachers reported similar sentiments to those observed and discussed by boys and male PE teachers. For example, when discussing some girls' disengagement in PE, Miss Turner stated:

Sometimes it is like the pressure of it, girls especially don't like swimming because they don't like the pressure of getting changed and being in front of others and being literally open to everyone to see what you have underneath your clothes.

Expressing this displeasure, a group of Year 10 girls reflected upon their PE swimming experiences:

Fran: I hate swimming because you literally have to get fully changed.

Ellie: Because that is when getting changed is literally the worst.

Alice: You can come to school in your swimming costume [under your uniform], but obviously you can't wear it after swimming. Like some people just don't get fully changed and they like wear their wet swimsuit. Getting changed for swimming is really bad.

Descriptions such as 'the worst' and 'really bad' when referring to the idea and reality of momentarily being naked in front of peers demonstrates how, whilst well accustomed to changing into PE kit, many girls felt more displeasure and heightened self-consciousness when changing into swimming attire. Such feelings appear relatively common amongst teenage girls and are cited elsewhere (for example, see James, 2000; Tavakolizadeh et al., 2012; Whitehead and Biddle, 2008).

To avoid momentarily revealing their naked bodies and associated emotions, many girls described arriving for PE lessons already wearing swimwear under their uniform. Indeed, such could be the level of distress caused, some girls also reported keeping their swimsuit on post-swimming participation. Corroborating this process, Miss Jones explained:

A lot of them already have their swimsuits on. You get a lot of them with their friends holding towels around each other to cover them up. But then you have got some kids, not many, who have got no issues. You know, just go for it. We have a lot of them asking to get changed separately. So, we have the toilets, and we have the disabled toilet in the swimming pool.

This depiction evidences the normality of planned preservation tactics which many girls utilised to avoid bodily exposure and subsequent embarrassment. Although it is unclear why a minority of girls were described as not experiencing feelings of displeasure, this contrast to the majority may be due to psychological (i.e. personality traits), sociological (i.e. habitus), and biological (i.e. maturation) factors

(Abbott and Barber, 2011; Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; Kerner et al., 2018). Girls' willingness for friends to 'cover them up' (Miss Jones) may be culturally informed by social norms requiring girls to conceal their chest, something boys are not socially expected to do (Elias, 2012). This willingness was also enabled by teachers allowing girls to sit and change in friendship groups, limiting girls' fear of non-friend's perceived judgement, commentary, and social degradation (Fisette, 2011; Forsberg et al., 2025; Wei and Graber, 2023). Detailing the impacts of many girls' attitudes towards and preferences when changing for swimming, Mrs Hanson explained:

There are a lot of queues [for the toilets] when it comes to swimming. So, they [girls] do try and hide away, a lot of them. They just try and shy away from each other. The amount of kids that I have had in Year 7 come and ask where the cubicles are for swimming [laughs, ironically] "we haven't got any, just get changed". It is probably a bit quieter as everyone is trying to do the sneaky trick of getting your swimming costume on without taking your underwear off, it is probably a lot quieter actually.

Despite being sat with friends, many girls' shyness and quietness evidence tensions that changing into swimwear evokes, which helps explain girls prioritising task-orientation over sociality. Given possible unhygienic or cramped conditions (see Green et al., 2025), girls' desire to queue and use two toilet cubicles as alternative changing spaces further illustrates many pupils' hypersensitivities towards momentary nakedness in front of peers. In a changing room containing 60 girls, the popularity of this practice also impacted the use of toilets for their intended function, as well as detrimentally affecting time spent swimming, which is significant amid concerns about the time pupils spend being physically active during PE lessons (Hingley et al., 2023).

Moving between spaces, semi-nakedness, and peer gaze

After spending around 10 minutes within changing rooms, pupils moved to the swimming pool. Upon exiting changing rooms via a single door, pupils walked swiftly in pairs or small groups for 25 metres to the swimming pool entrance and waited for the teacher to lock changing rooms and unlock the door leading to the swimming pool. During this two-minute process pupils were bare-footed, with all girls wrapping towels around their torso, whilst most boys draped towels over one shoulder. This transition involved passing opposite sex peers, as depicted below:

Fieldnotes 11th February 2022 – Year 9 Boys' Swimming

Leaving the changing room, most boys quickly and quietly walked across to the swimming pool building with their loosely draped towels over their shoulders. As boys began to enter the swimming pool, girls exited their changing room and headed for the field. Noticing girls looking in their direction, several boys moved their towels to cover

their torsos, whilst three boys ran towards the swimming pool entrance. Noticing these boys running, several girls giggled and whispered behind their hands.

Describing such experiences, Freddie (Year 11) reflected:

When we go swimming and the girls come out [of the changing rooms], we [boys] run across to the pool and that's like quite embarrassing in a way. Because the number of lads that I have seen go across to the swimming pool and go like this [demonstrates a deep inhalation of breath, pushing his chest out and pulling his shoulder back] because they have tensed up as there are girls there. I have seen that loads.

Similar effects were observed when girls moved to the swimming pool:

Fieldnotes 18th March 2022 – Year 7 Girls' Swimming

Exiting the changing room, girls walked across to the swimming pool door where Miss Turner was stood. All girls had their towels tightly wrapped around their torsos, with many tightly holding the top of their towels. As some girls entered the swimming pool building, boys began exiting their changing room. Noticing this, the girls still in the corridor screamed and hurried to the swimming pool door. Reacting to this, Miss Turner pointed and shouted to the boys "get outside now!", whilst moments later Lydia shouted, "quick, let me in Miss. Callum saw me".

Feelings concerning this type of situation were expressed during a Year 10 focus group:

Fran: Even though the pool is right next to the changing room, when you are having to walk there it is really bad because the boys come through.

Annie: I think I would just die.

Molly: It is really bad if you are swimming.

Whilst this transition and such encounters were brief in time, the momentary shift from single-sex to opposite-sex gaze heightened many boys' and girls' body consciousness, fostered feelings of embarrassment, and led to avoidance. Collectively, the psychological, emotional and behavioural reactions demonstrate effects of heteronormative gaze (Larsson et al., 2011; Forestier and Larsson, 2023; Paechter, 2012). Unlike girls, although boys were rarely observed commenting or giggling, female PE teachers often reacted like Miss Turner by ordering boys away, whilst not commenting on or seeking to change girls' reactions (i.e. screaming). This reaction may be informed by broader concerns and fears regarding sexual harassment of girls in secondary schools and zero tolerance attitudes towards such behaviours (see Department for Education, 2025; Horeck et al., 2024; Krebbekx, 2021).

Participation trends, teachers' accommodations, and pupils' peer-group dynamics

Observations of 36 (20 boys' and 16 girls') core swimming lessons evidenced a pattern in pupils' participation. For each lesson there were 12 to 18 girls participating and seven to 13 not, whereas there were 19 to 25 boys participating, with one to five not. These participation rates differed from the 98 non-swimming PE lessons observed, with these lessons having between two to five girls and up to two boys not partaking. During focus groups, pupils were not directly asked about this pattern due to swimming (or any other sport) not being a central research focus of the broader ethnography. However, teachers referred to swimming when discussing participation and engagement in PE, with Mr Wharfedale stating:

I have done swimming lessons when I have had more pupils [girls] on the side than those who are actually in the pool. That quite often happens, with one person who says they aren't doing it and then the others tend to follow. So, as soon as one person starts doing it, you have another four or five that jump on that bandwagon as well. So, it can be difficult for girls in core PE, definitely.

Female PE teachers also acknowledged how several girls consistently provided parental notes which, as the main evidence needed, excused them from participation. Citing common reasons provided by girls and their parents, Miss Jones stated:

Period pains, even though it is proven that exercise helps period pains. There is a lack of resilience, but that stems from parents as well. So, their parents don't give them any motivation to do it as well, they just write them notes, the girls write their own notes...they say they are allergic to chlorine or they have a verruca, they are the common ones. Ear infections as well.

Much to the frustration of female PE teachers, at LTS, more girls than boys were observed and reported to provide reasons for non-participation in swimming. This finding is contrary to a government-funded report that indicates female pupils are more likely than male pupils to prefer swimming in secondary PE (Hingley et al., 2023). Whilst Miss Jones believed that activities such as swimming alleviate period pains, the fact that menstruation was the most frequent excuse for non-participation perhaps links to findings concerning period-related discomfort and fears of leaking (Zipp and Hyde, 2024). However, it is important not to gender essentialise non-participation as this reason does not explain some boys' consistent avoidance, nor more gender-neutral explanations. For instance, whilst not discussed by PE teachers, non-participation could have been due to some pupils contributing to the 29% of children nationally who start secondary school unable to meet the national benchmark of swimming 25 metres competently, proficiently, and confidently (Sport England, 2023). Considering this statistic, across the 36 lessons observed, nearly all children were water confident and demonstrated swimming competence.

This majority meant that the few who lacked competency drew peer and teacher attention, possibly heightening some pupils' self-consciousness.

There were differences in how boys and girls entered the swimming pool area and awaited teacher instruction. Almost all participating boys placed their towels on benches surrounding the pool, before sitting on the edge of the pool. Wearing PE kit, non-participating boys were asked by Mrs Walters (PE technician) to gather equipment. Contrastingly, participating girls kept their towels wrapped around them and sat in friendship groups on benches, and often had to be invited, encouraged and sometimes persuaded to enter the pool. Non-participating girls remained in their school uniform, sat on the benches and chatted until a teacher occasionally separated them, a process detailed below:

Fieldnotes 11th March 2022 – Year 7 Girls Swimming

Entering the swimming pool building, 15 participating girls sat on benches surrounding the pool in groups of four to seven pupils. Nine non-participating girls sat away from the rest of the class. Entering the pool, girls positioned themselves along the shallow- or deep-end according to their swimming competence and began a six-minute swim. Miss Turner told those not participating to stop chatting and tasked each pupil with recording the number of widths each swimmer completed. As the girls were swimming, Miss Turner (teacher) and Mrs Walters (technician) were asked why so many girls were not participating, to which Miss Turner replied, “well, eight of them are supposedly on their periods and one girl suffers from body confidence issues, so she doesn't swim”.

Whilst it could be viewed as inconsiderate, Miss Turner's use of the word 'supposedly' may well have been informed by a frequently cited teacher frustration (see Miss Jones quote above as further example) concerning a few girls regularly using periods or period pains to be excused from PE. In such circumstances, whilst sceptical, teachers felt unable or unwilling to question girls' repeated use of this reason. Similar teacher frustrations and feelings were also noted by Harvey et al. (2020), who also reported that girls perceived male teachers as being more likely than female teachers to excuse participation in PE due to period-related discomfort.

At LTS, observations and teacher interview responses revealed notable differences in pupils' peer-group dynamics during swimming lessons compared with non-swimming PE lessons. The main differences were that pupils were more reserved, less competitive and more task oriented. Evidencing this contrast, Niamh (Year 7) believed, 'less banter happens when we are swimming because you are trying to focus on doing well in the water, so you don't drown'. Citing one perceived reason for this contrast, Miss Turner stated, 'sometimes it is like the pressure of it [swimming]... whereas team sports I think are more popular for the girls because they can be with their friends and they enjoy it'. Different peer-group dynamics were also determined by more constraining teacher approaches concerning pupils'

behaviour. The following fieldnote was indicative of a broader observational pattern of teachers' desires to constrain pupils' levels of social interaction:

Fieldnote 18th March 2022 Year 7 - Girls' Swimming

As the girls were swimming, I asked Mrs Hanson about why the nine non-participating girls had been asked to sit alone on the benches surrounding the pool, Mrs Hanson replied "we make them sit apart when they aren't doing it as a bit of a punishment, a lot of them are in the same friendship group so they would just sit and chat".

Further evidencing how teachers socially constrained participating pupils more physical peer exchanges, Angus (Year 7) stated, 'in the swimming pool you could be wrestling or something and the teacher is like "stop" as they think that someone is getting hurt'. As well as safety concerns, teachers also constrained inappropriate pupil behaviour to avoid causing embarrassment and shame, with Freddie (Year 11) recollecting how, 'I de-kegged [pulling a peer's swim shorts down] someone once (laughs), and I think I got like a detention for it'. Teachers were observed being more vigilant and responsive to peer commentary or physical playfulness during swimming compared with other PE activities. This difference may have been informed by greater need for safety (Swim England, 2024), awareness of pupils' heightened sensitivities, social awkwardness, and fears that sociality may lead to social degradation (Allen et al., 2019; Green et al., 2025).

Discussion

In relation to the three research questions, at LTS, for many pupils changing into swimwear was embarrassing, socially awkward, and possibly shameful. These experiences were often described and observed as heightening such emotions compared with those felt when changing for and participating in non-swimming PE lessons. Such feelings contributed to greater levels of apprehension, self-management and self-preservation, evidenced through pupils adopting different strategies to avoid peer gaze over their exposed bodies. There were notable contrasts in how boys and girls experienced, felt and behaved during swimming lessons. There were also differences in how male and female PE teachers instructed, empathised with, and accommodated pupils' behaviours, feelings and preferences. Collectively, these findings demonstrate Western attitudes and sensitivities towards public displays of (semi)nudity and momentary exposure of 'private' body parts (Green and Mierzwinski, 2026; Slater et al., 2018). Pupils' heightened sensitivities, refusal to shower, and teachers' accommodations may have also been informed by legislation concerning public nudity, as well as school safeguarding practices, such as the PANTS policy (see NSPCC, 2023). These episodic sensitivities may have been relatively new to the many pupils who may have experienced more private changing facilities during primary school swimming and/or leisure-centre-based swimming classes (Sport England, 2023).

Girls', boys', and PE teachers' perceptions and experiences of changing for, moving to, and (non)participating in swimming lessons are indicative of Elias's (2012) discussions concerning the increasing social constraints and expected emotional and behaviour self-restraints within contemporary Western societies. In relation to Elias's (2012) concept of civilised bodies, schools functioning as social institutions (Gillam and Gulløv, 2024), and schooling bodies through PE (Kirk, 2012), this article demonstrates how PE teachers at LTS regulated, disciplined, and emotionally constrained pupils' bodies in line with LTS's and broader societal expectations, conventions, and customs. Pupils were observed and reported as engaging in processes of peer- and self-regulation, discipline and bodily restraint, a finding which demonstrates pupils' internalisation of social constraints, peer-group power dynamics, and embarrassment avoidance. These findings illustrate cultural similarities to those presented in Frydendal and Thing's (2020) Danish study, although at LTS pupils held differing attitudes towards hygiene and did not feel ashamed not showering post participation.

Girls', boys', and PE teachers' perceptions and experiences of changing for, moving to, and (non)participating in swimming lessons were also indicative of Elias's (2012) concept of gendered civilised bodies. As within many secondary schools (Harvey et al., 2020; Kerner et al., 2018; Slater et al., 2018), at LTS, girls' and boys' bodies were experienced and treated differently. As well as being sex-segregated, compared with boys, girls wore more modest swimming costumes, were permitted alternative changing arrangements, covered their bodies more, were three times as likely not to partake in swimming, and panicked more when momentarily observed by the opposite sex, despite greater protection from female PE teachers. These original findings arguably speak to societal trends whereby, compared with boys, girls are often required to display bodily modesty and prudence to avoid stigma (Böhlke et al., 2025) and sexual harassment (Horeck et al., 2025), and increasingly experience body dissatisfaction (Allen et al., 2019). However, boys are often expected to embody physically competent bodies (Kerner et al., 2018) and emotional resilience (Mierzwinski and Velija, 2020), despite increasing awareness of boys' body image concerns (Kirk, 2012), and evidence of weight-related bullying in secondary PE (Wei and Graber, 2023). Elements of these trends perhaps explains why male PE teachers enforced strict seating plans and normalised changing in a communal area, whilst boys were more comfortable than female peers exposing their semi-naked bodies in front of same and opposite sex peers, with some showing off their physiques. These discussions demonstrate gendered differences in how boys' and girls' bodies are regulated, disciplined and emotionally constrained, further demonstrating how 'gender is one axis along which civilising lessons or shame and privacy are learnt' (Slater et al., 2018: 958).

Conclusion

Within English secondary schools, swimming is not mandatory and many schools do not have a swimming pool, which may explain the paucity of literature in this area. This article presents original ethnographic findings concerning pupils' perceptions and experiences, as well as demonstrating

differences in how male and female PE teachers regulated, disciplined and accommodated boys' and girls' bodies. Explaining these findings, our figurational analysis considers the impact of long-term Western civilising processes in respect to bodily conduct, peer relations, and feelings of embarrassment and social awkwardness evoked through bodily exposure. Whilst there was evidence of adult-informed structural, relational, and behavioural schooling of pupils' bodies at LTS, pupils were also observed and reported engaging in peer- and self-regulation and bodily restraint. These processes often differed between boys and girls, as did female and male PE teachers' socially constraining practices, indicative of Elias's (2012) concept of gendered civilised bodies. Therefore, as was often evident at LTS, PE teachers should be alert and accommodating towards gendered sensitivities associated with bodily exposure to mitigate boys' and girls' displeasure, fears, and avoidance of swimming. It is necessary to note that LTS was a relatively homogenous White British pupil and teacher population, with nearly all participating pupils meeting national benchmarks for swimming. Sport England's (2023) statistics reveal that 80% of Black children, 78% of Asian children, and 58% of children from the least affluent areas cannot swim 25 metres unaided by the time they enter secondary school. Given this, future ethnographic research should be conducted in culturally diverse schools and/or leisure centres to examine disparities in young people's perceptions and experiences, and the extent to which Elias's (2012) concept of civilised bodies can be used to analyse gendered, racialised, and (dis)abled bodies. Furthermore, there are growing concerns regarding gender diverse students' experiences during secondary PE (see Haase et al., 2026; Neary and McBride, 2025; Wilkinson & Penney, 2026) and in recreational swimming (see Caudwell, 2022; Jones et al., 2017). Therefore, future research should also explore how transgender and non-binary students perceive and experience changing for, moving to, and participating in school-based swimming, and social processes in which PE teachers accommodate gender diverse students.

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