

Mierzwinski, Mark, Green, Matthew and Fletcher, Alice (2026)
Reconfiguring girls' disengagement in secondary Physical
Education: applying established-outsider relations to peer relations,
emotions and behaviour. Sport, Education and Society.

Downloaded from: <https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/15786/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If
you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2026.2736646>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of
open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form.
Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright
owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for
private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms
governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repositories Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at
ray@yorks.ac.uk

Reconfiguring girls' disengagement in secondary Physical Education: applying established-outsider relations to peer relations, emotions and behaviour

Dr Mark F Mierzwinski, m.mierzwinski@yorks.ac.uk

Senior Lecturer in Sociology of Sport, York St John University, ORCID 0000-0002-9751-5865

Dr Matthew J Green*, m.green2@yorks.ac.uk

Lecturer in Children, Young People and Education, York St John University, ORCID 0000-0002-8065-0446

Alice Fletcher, alice.fletcher@yorks.ac.uk

Research Assistant, York St John University

*Corresponding author

m.green2@yorks.ac.uk

Abstract

The *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Tackling Teenage Disengagement* report identified self-consciousness, body image and peer judgement as key factors for girls' disengagement in sport. However, research on girls' disengagement in secondary Physical Education (PE) tends to focus on gendered disparities, activity choice and biological reasons (i.e. puberty/period). Therefore, this article utilises the model of established-outsider relations to analyse how social processes and peer-group dynamics shape girls' (dis)engagement in secondary PE. Data from five focus groups with 13-to-14-year-old girls in a coeducational secondary school in northern England is thematically analysed. Building upon individualised explanations (i.e. motivation, enjoyment, confidence), findings show girls' disengagement is socially produced as competence, appearance and legitimacy are continually judged and negotiated. Whilst generally taught in single-sex classes, many girls' self-consciousness, inferiority and outsider status were informed by their experiences of mixed-sex PE and the positioning of boys as an established group. As an outsider group, peer comparison and self-surveillance contributed to competence and appearance-informed hierarchies among girls. Visibility and perceived judgement were described as being intensified during individual activities, with team games diffusing responsibility, but not offering an escape from evaluation. Navigating such dynamics, some girls reported using hiding techniques as a form of disengagement. Demonstrating how outsider 'group disgrace' was internalised and reproduced between girls differently extends work on emotions, embodiment and peer relations in secondary PE. Tackling girls' disengagement requires more than improving motivation, enjoyment and confidence, but also reconfiguring relational conditions within PE.

Key Words: girls, gender, physical education, disengagement, judgement, established-outsider relations.

Introduction

The *Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Tackling Teenage Disengagement* report presented survey data from 2,291 girls and 2,024 boys aged 11–18 (Women in Sport, 2022). Teenage girls reported lower levels of confidence, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation than boys and increasing concern about their appearance, often associating physical activity with self-consciousness and vulnerability (Women in Sport, 2022). These gender disparities were attributed to girls' heightened self-consciousness, body image concerns, and fear of peer judgement, which become intensified with age. The finding that 88% of girls who previously identified as 'sporty' reported that their relationship with sport has changed since primary school is important as for 63% of girls, secondary school PE was their sole engagement with organised sport (Women in Sport, 2022). Therefore, secondary PE is significant in shaping girls' sporting experiences and dispositions, providing a crucial social context for understanding and addressing teenage girls' disengagement in sport.

Research conducted in secondary schools in England examining girls' experiences of PE often focuses on femininity, embodiment and body image (see Kerner et al., 2017; Metcalfe, 2018; Porter et al., 2025; Roberts et al., 2020). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to how same-sex peer relations shape girls' self-consciousness, fears of judgement, and feelings of vulnerability. Hills (2007) demonstrated that friendship, peer scrutiny and social exclusion were associated with girls' (dis)engagement, challenging assumptions that single-sex PE spaces are inherently supportive. Considering how girls navigated such relational dynamics, Green and Mierzwinski (2025) discovered that girls' peer relations were negotiated through banter, gossip and avoidance behaviours. Whilst banter fostered social cohesion within small friendship group, humour was also interpreted as 'blame gossip' between different peer groups, contributing to heightened suspicion of rumour circulation. Offering an activity-based example, Green and Mierzwinski (2026a) detailed how the process of changing for, transitioning to, and participating in swimming shaped girls' self-consciousness, fears of judgement and feelings of vulnerability.

Building upon this England-based literature, this article examines how social processes and peer-group dynamics shape 13–to-14-year-old girls' experiences of self-consciousness, body image and peer judgement within secondary PE. Whilst girls are not a homogenous group and may hold different attitudes towards sport (Cameron & Humbert, 2020; Lamb et al., 2018), they often share experiences that impact their (dis)engagement (Women in Sport, 2022). Focusing on the processual and relational nature of these experiences and emphasising interconnections between emotion, identity and power, we apply Elias and Scotson's (2008) model of established and outsider relations. This model provides an analytical lens for

understanding how some groups of girls occupy marginalised positions and internalise feelings of inferiority, contributing to heightened self-consciousness and disengagement. In doing so, we draw on Velija's (2012) seminal theorising concerning divisions within outsider groups to advance understandings of how peer relations underpin girls' disengagement in secondary PE.

Girls' disengagement in secondary PE

Often synonymous with sport (Hingley et al. 2023; Smith & Parr, 2007), secondary PE constitutes many girls primary site of engagement with organised physical activity (Women in Sport, 2022). However, engagement in secondary PE can heighten self-consciousness, body image concerns, and fear of peer judgement for many girls (Women in Sport, 2022). For example, in sporting environments, 65% of girls felt self-conscious, possibly due to 45% identifying as being watched and 61% feeling judged by others (Women in Sport, 2022). Collectively, these concerns can impact body image, which is significant given that 45% of girls reported dissatisfaction with their body shape (Women in Sport, 2022). Such findings help explain why 60% of girls categorised as 'never sporty' reported disliking/hating PE, alongside 27% of those who 'used to be sporty' (Women in Sport, 2022). This survey data provides a valuable overview of issues contributing disengaged girls' negative experiences of secondary PE, although the following sociologically informed qualitative research demonstrates how girls' disengagement cannot be understood in isolation from the relational contexts in which they occur.

Girls' heightened self-consciousness, body image concerns and fear of peer judgement are socially produced through everyday interactions, social comparisons and the negotiation of identity within friendship groups. Interviewing Year 9 (13-14 years) pupils, Cockburn and Clarke's (2002) study found that many girls felt embarrassed during PE, mainly due to how wearing sporting attire accentuated their perceived lack of feminine ideals concerning body shape and size. These girls expressed how embarrassment informed their avoidance of, or lack of effort in, PE. Furthermore, drawing on a 12-month ethnography of 12–13-year-old girls in England, Hills (2007) demonstrated how engagement was closely tied to both perceived competence and the anticipated social consequences of taking part. Identified 'sporty' girls accrued social rewards through displays of sporting competence, particularly in team games, where peer recognition and teacher approval reinforced their status. Contrastingly, less confident girls with lower competence often experienced PE as a site of potential embarrassment, especially in activities involving more individualised performance such as gymnastics. Such findings illustrate the centrality of friendship dynamics, social status and

peer approval in girls' engagement, findings which challenge the assumption that single-sex PE environments are supportive.

Subsequent research has explored how girls negotiate gendered expectations, dominant discourses of femininity, and active identities in secondary PE. Drawing on focus groups with 13–14-year-olds, Hill (2015) shows that girls were acutely aware of how their bodies and behaviours were evaluated by peers. This evaluation led to girls' carefully managing their engagement, often ensuring that they did not appear too sporty or insufficiently feminine. Such evaluation and negotiation contributed to heightened self-consciousness, whilst demonstrating the narrow boundaries within which acceptable identities were constructed. Similar to Hills (2007) findings, friendships offered many girls emotional support and a sense of belonging, but also served to regulate 'acceptable' appearance, competence and behaviour (Hill, 2015). Conforming to peer expectations to maintain social status, some girls disengaged or downplayed their sporting competence (Hill, 2015). Here, Metcalfe's (2018) survey and interview data from 15–16-year-olds boys and girls reveals gendered differences between how sporting competence, identity and self-worth were socially constructed. Whilst boys' identities and self-worth were centred upon sporting competence, girls tended to regard sport as something they could do rather than something central to their sense of self (Metcalfe, 2018). This distinction may explain why for many girls maintaining an appropriately feminine appearance may be prioritised over demonstrating athletic ability (Hill, 2015; Hills, 2007; Stride et al., 2022). In Metcalfe's (2018) study, this prioritisation was linked to the peer-policing of normative femininity, a regulative process which was normalised and internalised by many girls.

Demonstrating Western trends, the relationship between girls' disengagement in PE and their emotions and peer groups have been found in Europe and North American. For instance, Åsebø et al.'s (2022) ethnography of ninth-grade students (14-15 years) PE experiences in Norway, evidence how many girls felt uncomfortable exposing their bodies, especially when wearing tight-fitting attire. Discomfort was informed by girls' bodily exposure and worries concerning how their peers judged their bodies. Providing insight into peer-group dynamics within co-educational PE lessons in Sweden, Fargell et al. (2012) found that girls were less engaged than boys due to self-preservation from perceived performance inadequacy. In such instances girls' attitudes and behaviours were viewed by peers as the key explanation for disengagement, rather than pedagogical approaches or gendered peer groups dynamics. Similarly, observing co-educational PE in the USA, Fisette (2013) found that many 14- to 16-year-old girls felt ignored and invisible due to male dominated lessons. To actively participate, girls felt that they had to prove themselves to boys in terms of skill and game play, often awaiting peer approval of their sporting prowess. However, girls also expressed how they felt

that that had to maintain perceived feminine ideals to avoid potential public embarrassment (Fisette, 2013).

Taken together, this body of research highlights the central role of peer relations in shaping girls' experiences of secondary PE. Across these studies, (dis)engagement appears to be negotiated in relation to being physically competent whilst managing normative femininity, with girls attempting to balance fears of judgement against the desire for acceptance. In this sense, girls' PE experiences are inherently relationally, shaped by the interplay of identity, embodiment, and peer dynamics. Friendships emerge as both enabling and constraining, simultaneously providing belonging and reinforcing norms that limit the range of acceptable identities and behaviours. It is necessary to note that these dynamics are not static but are continually (re)produced through everyday interactions, contributing to patterns of (dis)engagement over time. Studies reviewed were also informed by sociological perspectives, with Hills' (2007) work drawing implicitly on embodiment and interaction to show how friendship groups and physical competence are co-constructed within PE. By contrast, Fisette et al. (2013) and Hill (2015) utilise a poststructural feminist lens, specifically Butler's (1990) theorising concerning gender identity, to explain how girls negotiate dominant femininities. Utilising Bourdieu's (1980) logic of practice, Fargell et al. (2012) and Metcalfe (2018) draw on habitus, capital and field to explain how gendered identities and dispositions towards sport are reproduced through socialisation and peer interaction.

Whilst reviewed literature provides valuable insight, it leaves space for a more explicitly processual and relational account of how power operates within girls' peer groups. In particular, there has been limited consideration of how female PE is positioned in relation to male PE, and of how distinctions between more and less socially valued groups of girls are formed, maintained and experienced. Addressing this gap requires a framework capable of accounting for the interconnections between power, identity, and emotion within peer relations. Therefore, we draw on figurational sociology and, more specifically, the model of established-outsider relations.

The model of established-outsider relations

Elias and Scotson (2008) developed the model of established-outsider relations from their ethnographic exploration of power relations within a community. Amongst two similar demographic residential groups, power advantages were driven by one group's ability to monopolise resources and utilise communication networks. Established group members used gossip as an effective power resource to distinguish themselves from outsider group members. Distinction, prestige, and stigmatisation was often based on contrasting the behaviours of the 'minority of the best' established group members against the 'minority of the

worst' outsider group members (Elias & Scotson, 2008). These contrasting behaviours were referenced by established group members when circulating praise and blame gossip through strong social ties, strengthening their positive 'we-image' and 'group charisma' (Elias & Scotson, 2008). Comparatively, outsider group members had weaker social ties, rendering gossip ineffective as a power resource, and nullifying the potential to reject their negative 'they-image' and 'group disgrace' (Elias & Scotson, 2008). Outsider members often internalised their 'group disgrace' and negative 'they-image', whilst some aspired to embody established members 'group charisma' and positive 'we-image' (Elias & Scotson, 2008). Providing a critical appraisal of this model, Bloyce and Murphy (2007) acknowledge that such concepts are useful for explaining how and why power differentials between two groups are particularly wide and can be internalised by the inferior group. However, they also argue that group dynamics within communities are usually more fluid as individuals often occupy multiple group memberships, overlapping identities and changing affiliations. In this sense, established–outsider relations, they argue, should not be viewed as fixed categories but as dynamic, changing power balances (Bloyce & Murphy, 2007). Furthermore, Bloyce and Murphy (2007) also warn against assuming that or seeking to fit all unequal relationships into the established–outsider model.

The model of established–outsider relations has been used to examine how women are marginalised in many adult sporting environments. Marginalisation has often been due to historical legacies portraying sport as a male preserve, biological essentialism, and men monopolising key power resources within sporting governance (see Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017; Liston, 2014; Velija, 2018; Velija & Flynn, 2010). Velija (2012) developed the model of established-outsider relations by examining social divisions between outsider group members. Velija (2012) evidenced how sexuality and social class underpinned fragmented social ties and uneven power relations within an under 15 girls cricket team. Within male dominated cricket figurations, some girls closely aligned with established norms, whilst others were further stigmatised and marginalised by outsider group members (Velija, 2012). Velija's work demonstrates how girls' sport teams are not always cohesive but can be characterised by internal hierarchies, peer regulation, and unequal access to peer group status.

There have been two recent reviews of the value of figurational sociology within PE research (Scanlon et al., 2025; Williams et al., 2026). As well as illustrating its adoption, both reviews argue that concepts within the model of established-outsider relations offer useful tools to examine sociality within PE. However, despite secondary PE's often being sex-segregated, few studies have applied established–outsider relations to young people's peer-group dynamics and gender performances. Exploring peer relations within a school-based Danish health-promotion intervention, Nielsen et al. (2016) detailed how established groups-maintained cohesion, status and mutual identification through embodying dominant physical

and behavioural expectations. Students unable to conform with a positive we-image were marginalised and experienced reduced influence over peers (Nielsen et al., 2016). Similarly, Green et al. (2025) detail how bullying in English secondary PE was often informed by pupils' ability to embody competence and gain 'we-group' status. Indicative of outsider group membership, pupils perceived as less competent were more vulnerable to blame gossip, stigmatisation, and social exclusion. From this, Green et al. (2025) contend that the model of established-outsider relations provides an effective lens to explain the interplay between identity, emotion, behaviour, and power relations. This section illustrates the value of established-outsider relations for understanding how peer dynamics are structured through relational power balances, where gender, embodiment and social status intersect to shape experiences of inclusion, exclusion and disengagement.

Methods

The study adopted an exploratory qualitative case study design (Yin, 2014) at one coeducational secondary school in northern England. Pseudonymised as Knights Lane School (KLS), this Church of England academy had approximately 1,800 pupils (aged 11-18 years). Largely representative of secondary schools within the region (see GOV.UK, 2025), the pupil demographic at KLS was approximately: 20% pupil premium eligibility, 10% with special educational needs support, and 5% English as an additional language. Like many secondary schools in England (see Wilkinson & Penney, 2024, 2025), core PE lessons were sex-segregated and mixed-ability consisting of between 25 to 30 pupils and guided by the National Curriculum for Physical Education (Department for Education, 2013). This curriculum is organised around four key aims; developing competence, sustaining physical activity, competitive sport participation and leading healthy lifestyles. At KLS, Key Stage Three pupils (11-14 years) participated in two core PE lessons per week, which usually entailed a sporting activity. Pupils were exposed to eight sports per year, the majority of which were team-based, and included in-house sporting competitions every six weeks.

After receiving university ethical approval (ETH2425-0184), data was gathered via focus group discussions with Year 9 girls (n=25). When conducting exploratory research, focus groups are particularly useful for exploring attitudes, opinions, and behaviours that are influenced by social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moreover, this research method has proved the most common form of data collection across figurational-informed research in PE (Scanlon et al., 2025). Year 9 girls were selected for the following reasons: a) they had experienced two years of single-sex secondary PE, b) the Women in Sport (2022) survey findings revealed girls' disengagement intensified with age, c) comparative research has also focused on this year-group (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Fisette, 2013; Hill, 2015), and, d) this year group were more

accessible than those completing formal examinations. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling in liaison with the Head of Physical Education, ensuring a range of sporting competence and engagement levels. This resulted in 25 girls volunteering to participate in the study. To minimise feelings of discomfort when discussing disengagement, girls were consulted on group personnel and had the option to switch focus groups or withdraw. The flexibility provided by focus groups enables how people think about particular issues, such as some girls' disengagement in PE. Five focus groups involving between four to six girls were moderated by the third author (a female researcher), with discussions conducted in the gymnasium, ranging between 21 and 37 minutes. During these audio-recorded conversations, girls were asked a series of open-ended questions relating to findings from the Women in Sport (2022) report and existing literature concerning peer judgement, heightened self-consciousness, and avoidance behaviours (see Hills, 2007; Hill, 2015; Kerner et al., 2018). Girls' responses to these questions were the focus, not how they interacted as a small group. Due to ethical sensitivities and gatekeeper preference, no specific questions on body image were asked and participants were informed of the confidential nature of focus groups discussion. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and anonymised with pseudonyms used for pupils, teachers, and organisations mentioned.

All authors (one female, two male) analysed data utilising Braun, Clarke and Weate's (2016) guidance on reflexive thematic analysis. The process began with authors individually familiarising themselves with data and independently recording initial ideas (Phase One). Once familiar, authors worked collaboratively to begin coding the data, creating initial codes including impact of mixed-sex PE lessons, concerns of peer judgement, and efforts to avoid participation (Phase Two). During a series of meetings, the authors reviewed codes, before discussing and agreeing on recurring patterns across the data set (e.g. the significance of same-sex peer gaze, avoidance strategies to minimise self-consciousness) (Phase Three). Phase Four involved utilising Elias and Scotson's (2008) model of established-outsider relations as an analytical tool to explain meanings attributed to the identified patterns, before developing into themes. Following this development, authors discussed and critiqued the developed themes, before agreeing upon; (a) gendered power relations and girls' internalisation of outsider group status; (b) single-sex PE, peer comparison and girls' internalisation of group disgrace; and (c) exposure, 'we-image' pressures and the organisation of disengagement (Phase Five). The process culminated in the writing up of agreed themes in the following results and discussion section of this article (Phase Six).

Gendered power relations and girls' internalisation of outsider group status

Focus group data illustrated that girls' disengagement from secondary PE should not be reduced to individual differences in confidence, motivation or competence. Instead, disengagement is also influenced by relational processes whereby girls anticipate, experience and internalise peer hierarchies. At KLS, influences of relational processes extended beyond sex-segregated classes, with many girls referring to mixed-sex lessons when describing their experiences and status. Evidencing how many girls evaluated their competence, visibility and legitimacy in relation to boys, Jasmine stated, 'its fine when we do PE with like just the girls but when it's with the boys it's a bit like, I don't know, I feel like they are watching'. Whilst research evidences how girls' self-consciousness is often tied to explicit incidents of ridicule (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Green et al., 2025; Wei & Graber, 2023), Jasmine's self-consciousness appeared heightened by the anticipation of being watched, judged, and potentially objectified by boys. Other girls linked this sense of exposure more explicitly to assumptions about competence, often implying that boys occupied stronger positions within PE. For instance, Cynthia commented, 'most of the boys probably think that they are better than the girls...99% of the time the girls will be picked last'. Recalling such experience, Tamzin stated, 'if it's like other boys picking the teams, they will pick all the other boys first'. Indicative of Velija's (2012) theorising, these accounts concerning surveillance, competence and marginalisation demonstrate how boys functioned as a powerful reference group. Presented data also illustrate elements of boys' 'group charisma' and girls' 'group disgrace' (Elias & Scotson, 2008), as girls were positioned as a homogenous group presumed to be less capable, rather than individuals with varying abilities. In this sense, boys' assumed sporting competence operates as the dominant evaluative measure against which girls are judged.

The extent some girls realised this hierarchy was evident in comments regarding the unfairness of competence-based judgements. Beth commented, 'some boys are like, "well they are girls, they can't play football, boys are just better at it", even though they don't know if you are any good'. Similar to Velija's (2012) findings concerning girls' cricket, this reflection demonstrates how generalised assumptions about girls' incompetence often rest on selective evidence or taken-for-granted beliefs rather than direct experience. Indicative of established-outsider relations (Elias & Scotson, 2008), this process evidences how differentiation, distinction and stigmatisation can be based on contrasts between 'minority of the best' and 'minority of the worst' categorisations, which reinforces outsider group inferiority. For girls, challenging such stigmatisation can be emotionally precarious and burdensome. For example, Leah disclosed, 'if you like play football with the boys and you make one mistake, they judge you for it... I feel a lot of pressure to show them that I am good enough to play'. This feeling of pressure and desire indicates how some girls actively negotiated their outsider group status by attempting to gain recognition from boys. Previous research also demonstrates this trend

of outsider members seeking legitimacy from established group members (see Liston, 2014; Velija 2012; Velija & Flynn, 2010). Yet, Leah's example illustrates the precariousness of seeking such recognition as a single mistake potentially aligns with established members' perceptions of outsider group members. This process further evidences how the terms of competence and acceptance are set by established group members.

Power imbalances extended beyond sporting competence to encompass appearance and bodily self-consciousness. For example, Molly stated, 'the things I hear from the boys are more about appearance than performance... when we do get put together in PE, it makes you even more nervous about doing stuff in front of them'. Similarly, Steph noted that many girls, 'didn't like doing high jump with boys present because they were performing in front of them'. Extending examples beyond PE lessons, Katie discussed sports day and how 'because it's boys and girls watching you get I more insecure then... it's why I usually go with the field events because they can't see you doing it as much'. Reinforcing evidence that PE is a social context in which girls' bodies become more visible and open to evaluation (Hill, 2015; Hills, 2007; Porter et al., 2025), these accounts demonstrate how girls' self-consciousness can be relationally-informed and negatively impacted by established group members' presence, gaze and perceived judgements concerning appearance and competence. The outsider group psyche evident here may help explain why some girls choose less visible activities or attempt to minimise exposure, two trends identified elsewhere (see Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Fisette, 2013; Women in Sport, 2022). Therefore, in this case, girls' disengagement is not a matter of lack of interest or passivity, but rather their navigations of an unequal social environment.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that girls' disengagement from PE is embedded within gender power relations that shape competence, embodiment, and legitimacy. Internalising experiences of comparison and judgement, many girls come to understand themselves in relation to norms that position them as less capable, less legitimate, and more exposed to evaluation. Therefore, disengagement is not motivation based, but a relationally informed response to emotional and symbolic risks attached to outsider group status.

Single-sex PE, peer comparison and girls' internalisation of group disgrace

Whilst mixed-sex PE intensified girls' awareness of boys as an established group, focus group data also demonstrated that single-sex PE did not alleviate these pressures. Instead, girls' self-consciousness was shaped by peer comparison, evaluation, and judgement within same-sex peer relations. Despite not being asked questions concerning body image, a distinctive feature of these processes was girls' heightened awareness of their and peers' bodies. For instance, Sophie stated, 'in other subjects you just don't think about your body or anything like that, but you do in PE... I compare appearance a lot in PE'. Similarly, Taylor noted, 'PE

highlights it [body] more... you think more about what you are doing and what people are like watching you'. Whilst boys' perspectives were not sought, insights provided by Sophie and Taylor may be indicative of gendered trends. For instance, Women in Sport (2022, p.9) found that 45% of girls compared with 35% of boys believe that they 'don't have the right body shape', and 65% of girls compared with 44% of boys 'don't like others watching them'. Such findings are significant given literature which identifies secondary PE as a setting whereby the body becomes more visible and often scrutinised (Green & Mierzewski, 2026b, 2026c; Kerner et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest these processes are more prevalent and more aesthetically focused in girls' PE compared with boys' PE (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Fisette, 2013; Hill, 2015). For example, data from one focus group included:

Cynthia: that standard you kind of need to meet to and look like whilst doing sport

Interviewer: please can you tell me a bit more about the standard?

[Short pause]

Tamzin: girls who look so good doing a sport

Interviewer: how would a girl not meet this standard?

Tamzin: when they are all sweaty and not all pretty.

Tamzin's insight appears indicative of gendered trends considering Women in Sport's (2022, p.9) finding that 50% of girls 'don't like getting hot and sweaty', compared with 37% of boys. More broadly, this discussion demonstrates the socially produced gender ideal based on the often fine and precarious line of embodying dominant femininity alongside displaying sporting competence when engaging in PE (Fisette, 2013; Hills, 2007; Hill, 2015). Similar to studies detailing girls as an outsider group (Velija, 2012; Velija & Flynn, 2010), this gender ideal could reflect girls' internalisation of a positive 'we-image' associated with competence, attractiveness, and elegance. However, those girls perceiving themselves as unable to embody this image may experience heightened self-consciousness, evidencing how this psychological process is socially produced.

Further exploring the influence of peer relations, data revealed how girls' peer groups were not cohesive or equal. Comparing herself to others, Sydney stated, 'ability wise... especially when someone is my age but is really good at something... maybe I am a bit jealous'. These thoughts demonstrate how peer comparison can contain aspirational elements, which may provide motivation, whilst also evidencing peer evaluation and self-judgement. Evidencing

how self-judgement impacts disengagement, Imogen stated, 'If I didn't know how to do it, then I just don't do it'. Similarly, Tamzin noted that some girls 'don't try just because they think they are going to do bad', whilst Sydney reported, girls are 'less willing to do stuff if they know people are judging them'. Disclosing possible social consequences, feelings associated with poor performance, and fear of peer judgement, Molly stated, 'the really sporty people who are good at PE... if I mess up... I feel like some of them get really annoyed at us... I'm scared that they will shout at us and that I'm going to let them down'. In some respects, these accounts speak to Women in Sport (2022, p.14) findings that 66% of 'never sporty' girls 'don't feel good enough' compared with 38% of 'sporty now' girls, and 76% of 'never sporty' girls felt judged by others compared with 49% of 'sporty now' girls. Reflecting existing literature (Hill, 2015; Hills, 2007; Mierzewski and Green, 2026c; Stride et al., 2022), less competent girls' disengagement is not determined by PE activities or lack of choice per se, but the anticipated social consequences and potential embarrassment. In response to such fears and pressures, many girls described passive participation, withdrawal, or non-participation as strategies for self-preservation, minimising exposure to embarrassment, criticism, or failure. Such responses demonstrate how peer judgement is not only externally imposed but internalised through ongoing processes of self-surveillance. In this respect, these findings mirror those concerning adult sport environments whereby differences in status and recognition shape emotional experiences and possibilities for belonging within outsider groups (Black & Fielding-Lloyd, 2017; Velija, 2018; Velija & Flynn, 2010). Indeed, echoing Velija's (2012) argument that outsider groups are internally differentiated, sporty girls at KLS appeared to occupy relatively stronger positions within girls' PE.

Considered alongside findings from mixed-sex PE, this theme reveals the layered nature of girls' experiences within secondary PE. Whilst boys functioned as an established reference group, similar dynamics were also reproduced among girls themselves. Some girls accrued status through competence, confidence, or alignment with normative feminine ideals, whilst others internalised inadequacy and anticipated judgement. This indicates that disengagement emerges not as an individual deficit, but as a relational outcome of unequal and shifting power balances operating within outsider groups.

Exposure, 'we-image' pressures and the social organisation of disengagement

Across focus groups, girls regularly drew distinctions between how individual and team-based activities connected to their feelings of pressure and how exposed they felt. For instance, Katie felt that in athletics 'there is more pressure to do well... it is just you and there is no one to help you along, whereas in team sports you have more people around you and they can help you.' Making a similar point in relation to dodgeball, Sacha described how the pressure

intensified 'when loads of people are out and you are one of the last people, everyone is watching you.' These comments serve as a reminder that secondary PE involves several team-based and individual sports and physical activities, which appear significant in terms of girls' heightened self-consciousness. When probed on this possible difference, Steph, Beth, and Lilly answered:

Steph: everyone is focusing on the same thing... whereas in individual sports, everyone is watching you.

Beth: if one person messes up then they will think it's like the whole team's fault instead of one person's.

Lilly: there is less pressure on yourself [in teams game]... as you are all on the same team.

Alternatively, Sydney reflected that in individual activities such as high jump, 'everyone thinks that everyone is judging them.' Whilst not entirely free from scrutiny, these accounts suggest that team games can minimise exposure and diffuse personal blame, making judgement less concentrated. However, Sydney's reflections also reveal how self-consciousness is not always tied to peer behaviour, but can be produced through assumptions that they are being judged by peers. As noted by Fisette (2013), Hill (2015) and Lyngstad (2018), activities and situations in secondary PE prove more physically demanding for some girls compared with others, inducing feelings of pressure to perform, and greater self-regulation in anticipation of how they might be seen. The importance of such pressures and the degrees to which girls internalise them do not feature in ethnographic studies of boys' secondary PE (Mierzewski & Velija, 2020; Green & Mierzewski, 2025; Gerdin, 2016). In one respect, some girls' fears concerning peer judgement replicate their described experiences and impact of mixed-sex PE alongside the established group. However, these findings also demonstrate the importance placed on perceived peer evaluation whereby some girls' have internalised a negative outsider group disgrace to the extent that it is functioning as a self-stigmatizing 'I-image' (Elias & Scotson, 2008).

The behavioural consequences of such fears were evident in girls' descriptions of passive participation and emotion-based avoidance. Reflecting on how they navigated individuality-conformity and exposure-anonymity, Imogen, Steph, Katie, and Sydney described:

Imogen: I just want to look like everyone else, just not really draw attention to myself

Steph: in netball some of the girls just don't want to be passed to at all but this can draw attention to them

Katie: people want to win but they don't want to put themselves out there... the pressure of it is really quite big.

Interviewer: How do these girls avoid being noticed in individual sports?

Sydney: they keep going back to the end of queues so that they don't have to go, or they stand and talk at the back trying to hide from the teachers

These reflections suggest that girls' disengagement is not merely due to disinterest, but a deliberate strategy to reduce exposure, avoid the possibility of public failure and blame. Here, disengagement reflects Lyngstad (2018) discussions of hiding techniques adopted by pupils to avoid feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability. The extent to which such fears are driven by paranoia or previous experiences which induce higher levels of anxiety was difficult to determine in focus groups. However, there was reference made to discreet peer commentary. For example, Jasmine explained that 'people say things about other people... you would just say a comment about them with your group of friends, not in front of them,' to which Molly added, 'they wouldn't say it to your face.' Such perceptions may inform performance anxiety, as Beth noted, 'they might talk about you.' These accounts demonstrate how peer dynamics extend beyond fears concerning direct observation to more subtle forms of social regulation and stigmatisation manifested through real or perceived gossip. Whilst some girls' responses spoke to unjustified suspicion and mistrust of peers' thoughts and discussions, some girls' disengagement could be also understood as a rational response to their outsider positioning within girls PE at KLS.

Taken together, the data suggest that girls' disengagement from PE is closely tied to the social organisation of participation, the peer dynamics that structure it, and some girls' self-preservation. Individual activities intensify exposure, whilst team-based activities provide only partial protection, however the anticipation of judgement remains central in both contexts. Therefore, avoidance, passivity, and self-surveillance are better understood as socially meaningful responses to emotionally risky environments rather than as evidence of personal deficit.

Conclusion

Examining disengagement in secondary PE, this article demonstrated how social processes and peer-group dynamics shape girls' experiences of self-consciousness, body image and peer judgement. This demonstration moves beyond explanations of girls' disengagement often centred on low confidence, poor motivation, or lack of interest. Applying the model of

established–outsider relations, girls’ disengagement is analysed through unequal power relations in which competence, appearance and status are continually negotiated, judged, and internalised. Even though PE was often delivered in single-sex classes, boys frequently appeared as an established reference group whose presumed sporting superiority informed girls’ feelings of exposure, inferiority, and outsider group status. However, single-sex PE did not necessarily remove such feelings as real or perceived judgement was evident through peer comparison, self-surveillance, and self-stigmatization. These findings illustrate how self-consciousness, body image and fear of peer judgement are socially produced within mixed-sex and single-sex PE, albeit through differing relational dynamics.

Our findings extend existing work showing that girls’ experiences of PE are shaped by embodiment, visibility and anticipated social consequences of participation (Hill, 2015; Hills, 2007; Littlefair et al. 2025; Metcalfe, 2018; Porter et al. 2025). By drawing on the model established–outsider relations, we offer a more explicitly processual and relational analysis of girls’ disengagement whereby some girls come to occupy relatively secure positions within PE, while others become more vulnerable to embarrassment, blame and (self)exclusion. There was little evidence that peer hierarchies were sustained through bullying or performance-based banter (Green & Mierzewski, 2025; Green et al., 2025). Instead, findings revealed more subtle processes of self- and peer-evaluation and judgement, real or perceived gossip, and marginalisation through team selection and hiding techniques. In this respect, findings that girls do not occupy a singular outsider position in secondary PE support Velija’s (2012) argument that outsider groups are internally differentiated. Therefore, understanding girls’ disengagement requires attention to layered and shifting power balances, rather than treating girls as a homogeneous group.

Despite these findings, it is necessary to acknowledge that data was derived from 25 girls attending one secondary school in northern England. As focus group questions were centred on peer judgement, heightened self-consciousness, and passive participation, teachers’ role within peer group dynamics was not explored. Furthermore, as no observational data was attainable, findings are derived from girls’ described experiences and self-perceptions. Despite not collecting comparable data from boys, these findings were positioned alongside gendered trends identified in the Women in Sport (2022) report and existing literature. Finally, whilst focus groups elicit shared experiences and recognised norms, they can also constrain more ambivalent or divergent views. Therefore, future research would benefit from ethnographic and longitudinal approaches, as well as comparative work across schools with different grouping practices (i.e. co-educational and ability setting), curricular arrangements (i.e. core, assessment, and extra-curricular PE) and schools’ emphasis (i.e. performance and participation). There is also scope to explore how class, ethnicity, sexuality, neurodiversity,

and disability intersect with girls' outsider positioning, peer-group dynamics and (dis)engagement in PE.

Despite identified limitations, findings presented in this article have important implications for practice. Given that girls' disengagement is relationally produced, interventions should move beyond attempts to improve girls' confidence, motivation, and activity choice. Attention should also focus on reconfiguring how PE is socially organised by reviewing team selection practices, minimising unnecessary individual exposure, challenging gossip and peer-policing, and broadening the forms of participation that are valued within PE. Collectively, these practices may help reconfigure relational conditions whereby disengaged girls may feel more able to participate without the emotional burden of judgement, stigmatization, and belonging.

Funding details

This article received no funding.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

References

- Åsebø, E.K.S., Løvoll, H.S. and Krumsvik, R.J. (2022) Students' perceptions of visibility in physical education. *European Physical Education Review*, 28(1), 151-168.
- Bloyce, D. & Murphy, P. (2007) Involvement and detachment, from principles to practice: A critical reassessment of The Established and The Outsiders. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 16(1), 3-21.
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. and Weate, P. (2016). "Using Thematic Analysis in Sport and Exercise Research." In: *Routledge Handbook of Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*, edited by B. Smith and A. Sparkes, pp. 191–205. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Cameron, N. & Humbert, L. (2020) 'Strong girls' in physical education: opportunities for social justice education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 25(3), pp.249-260.
- Cockburn, C., & Clarke, G. (2002). "Everybody's looking at you!": Girls negotiating the "femininity deficit" they incur in physical education. In: *Women's Studies International Forum* (Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 651-665). Pergamon.

- Creswell, J. & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. 5th ed. Sage Publications.
- Elias, N. & Scotson, J. (2008) [1965]. In *The Established and the Outsiders* (Collected Works of Norbert Elias), vol. 4, ed Cas Wouters. Dublin: UCD Press.
- Fargell, B., Larsson, H. & Redelius, K. (2012) 'The game within the game': girls' underperforming positions in Physical Education. *Gender and Education*, 24(1), 101-118.
- Fisette, J. L. (2013) 'Are you listening?': adolescent girls voice how they negotiate self-identified barriers to their success and survival in physical education. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 18(2), 184–203.
- Gerdin, G. (2016) A 'culture of everyone doing it' and 'playing games' – discourses of pleasure in boys' physical education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 7(1), 55-75.
- GOV.UK (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>
- Green, M.J. & Mierzwinski, M. (2025) A figural analysis of boys' and girls' banter in secondary Physical Education. *Sport, Education and Society*. ePub ahead of print 25 November. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2592842>
- Green, M.J. & Mierzwinski, M. (2026a) A figural analysis of secondary Physical Education gendered changing room procedures and practices in England. *European Physical Education Review*, 32(1), 57-72.
- Green, M.J. & Mierzwinski, M.F. (2026b) A figural analysis of changing room processes and swimming in secondary Physical Education. *European Physical Education Review*. ePub ahead of print 30 May 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X261454969>
- Green, M.J. & Mierzwinski, M.F. (2026c) Extra-curricular sport: A figural analysis of gendered activity provision, behavioural expectations, and peer group dynamics in one secondary school in England. *European Physical Education Review*, 32(3), 547-563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X251374603>
- Green, M.J., Mierzwinski, M.F. & Haines Lyon, C. (2025) Conceptualising and navigating bullying in English secondary schools: A figural analysis of power imbalances in

- physical education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 30(3), 340–352.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2024.2315175>
- Hills, L. (2007) Friendship, physicality, and physical education: An exploration of the social and embodied dynamics of girls' physical education experiences. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12(3), 317–336.
- Hill, J. (2015) Girls' active identities: Navigating othering discourses of femininity, bodies and physical education. *Gender and Education*, 27(6), 666–684.
- Hingley S, Gaskell E, Lane W, et al. (2023) Parent, pupil and learner panel 22/23: Recruitment wave 1. February 2023. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63f4d3dc8fa8f56137df3b3e/Parent Pupil and Learner Panel 2022 to 2023 Recruitment wave 1.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63f4d3dc8fa8f56137df3b3e/Parent_Pupil_and_Learner_Panel_2022_to_2023_Recruitment_wave_1.pdf) (accessed 10 March 2026).
- Kerner, C., Haerens, L. & Kirk, D. (2018) Understanding body image in physical education: Current knowledge and future directions. *European Physical Education Review*, 24(2), 255–265.
- Lamb, C.A., Oliver, K. & Kirk, D. (2018) 'Go for it girl': Adolescent girls' responses to the implementation of an activist approach in core physical education programme. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(8), 799–811.
- Littlefair, D., Jopling, M. and Kelly, N., (2025). Pupil voice in physical education and the desire for (in)visibility. *Sport, Education and Society*, 30(6), 728–741.
- Lyngstad, I. (2018). Hiding techniques in physical education—categories, causes underlying and pedagogy. In: *Reimagining new approaches in teacher professional development*, edited by Vimbi Petrus Mahlangu. 107.
- Liston, K. (2014). Revisiting Relations between the Sexes in Sport on the Island of Ireland. In: *Norbert Elias and empirical research* EDITED BY (pp. 197–217). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Metcalfe, S. (2018) Adolescent constructions of gendered identities: The role of sport and (physical) education. *Sport, Education and Society*, 23(7), 681–693.
- Nielsen, S.F., Ottesen, L. and Thing, L.F. (2016) Established and outsider relations among students involved in a health promotion intervention in a Danish high school. *Historical Social Research*, 41(3), 101–119.

- Porter, A., Cawley, E., Chapman, L., Crisp, C., Wadman, R., Barber, S., Penton-Voak, I., Attwood, A.S., Jago, R. & Bould, H. (2025) A qualitative study in UK secondary schools exploring how PE uniform policies influence body image attitudes and PE engagement among adolescent girls. *BMJ Open*, 15: e099312.
- Roberts, J.S., Gray, S. & Miñano, M.J.C. (2020) Exploring the PE contexts and experiences of girls who challenge gender norms in a progressive secondary school. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*, 11(1), 3–17.
- Scanlon, D., Alfrey, L. and Ovens, A. (2025) The role of theory in physical education research: An exploratory case study of figurational sociology in physical education research. *Sport, Education and Society*. Epub ahead of print: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2025.2537953>
- Smith, A., & Parr, M. (2007). Young people's views on the nature and purposes of physical education: a sociological analysis. *Sport, Education and Society*, 12(1), 37-58.
- Sport England (2022) *Reframing sport for teenage girls: Tackling teenage disengagement*. London: Women in Sport.
- Stride, A., Brazier, R., Piggott, S., Staples, M. & Flintoff, A. (2022) Gender power alive and kicking? An analysis of four English secondary school PE departments. *Sport, Education and Society*, 27(3), 244–258.
- Velija, P. (2012) 'Nice girls don't play cricket': The theory of established and outsider relations and perceptions of sexuality and class amongst female cricketers. *Sport in Society*, 15(1), 28–43.
- Velija, P., & Flynn, L. (2010). "Their bottoms are the wrong shape" female jockeys and the theory of established outsider relations. *Sociology of Sport journal*, 27(3), 301-315.
- Wei, M. & Graber, K.C. (2023) Bullying and physical education: A scoping review. *Kinesiology Review*, 12(3), 217–234.
- Wilkinson, S.D. and Penney, D., (2024). A national survey of ability grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England. *Research Papers in Education*, 39(5), 732-751.
- Wilkinson, S.D. and Penney, D., (2025). A national survey of gendered grouping practices in secondary school physical education in England. *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 30(4), 480-495.

Williams, J., Hughes, J., Velija, P., Cruickshank, V., Dunning, M., Iannucci, C., Mainsbridge, C. & Rojek, C. (2026) A systematic review of figural sociology within physical education research. *Sport, Education and Society*, 31(6), 1086-1102.

Yin, R. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods*. London, Sage Publications.