AN EXPLORATION OF TEACHER AND STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT STANDARD
UNIFORM POLICIES IN AMERICAN PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

MARCUS S. LEAKE. An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard
Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools
(Under the direction of DR. WALTER HART.)

This study explored teachers' and students' perspectives on mandated school uniforms. Debate exists over the appropriateness of uniforms, with some stakeholders suggesting positive outcomes while others bemoan limits on student expression. This study sought to fill a gap in research specific to middle school uniform use by exploring teachers' and students' perceptions. This research also considered the intersection of gender and diversity issues with uniform policies because these topics are becoming more prominent in the discussion. Four focus groups were conducted, two at a suburban school and two at an inner-city school. Findings suggested that teachers and students at the suburban middle school experienced uniforms more positively than their counterparts in the inner city. Additionally, findings indicated that female students had more negative experiences with uniform policies and their enforcement. From a social identity perspective, this study suggests that the group experience of the same uniform could have a positive or negative impact. When people feel the need for a positive group self, they demonstrate ingroup bias, which could help or hamper the implementation of school uniforms. This research helps bridge the gap in empirical literature within the context of social groups and critical theory to offer recommendations for administrators and policymakers regarding school uniforms in public middle schools. Results can direct further research while raising awareness of issues administrators should address when considering the implementation of a school uniform policy.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Schools have long restricted the dress and attire of their teachers and pupils. Today, most schools provide their stakeholders with some definition and clarification about what constitutes appropriate and acceptable wear versus what presents as unacceptable clothing that students may not wear at school. In the last 30 years, school uniforms have gained popularity sufficient to manifest in public schools and the American collective consciousness. On January 3, 1996, President Bill Clinton endorsed the idea of school uniforms in public schools during his State of the Union address to Congress (The State of the Union, 1996). This comment and level of widespread attention arose from increasing levels of violence in American schools, and the U.S. Department of Justice (1996) promoted school uniform policies as a means to enhance school safety and improve the learning environment.

The rationale for school uniforms has varied across communities. As public sentiment increasingly supported the idea, public school administrators considered uniform policies to improve the overall school environment and, in turn, academic achievement (Brunsma et al., 1998). Between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of schools nationally that had a uniform policy increased from 12% to 20% (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), this has held relatively constant, with 18.8% of all public schools requiring uniforms during the 2019-2020 school year. This trend aligned with assertions that school uniforms can improve behavior and safety in a school. Relevant student behavior could be reflected in measures like attendance rates, teacher-reported infractions, and incidents of bullying.

A review of the literature identified no consistent results regarding the impact of school uniforms. Reidy (2021) observed that the school uniform debate occurs superficially in terms of

good or bad, and that discussion rarely relied on empirical evidence. While Sowell (2012) suggested better attendance and fewer suspensions, others have reported no increase in positive behavior (Brunsma et al., 1998) or even a potential barrier to academic access from uniforms' effects on physical and socio-emotional readiness to learn (Reidy, 2021).

Perceptions can formulate reality, and some school stakeholders still associate school uniforms with safety. The adults—parents, teachers, and administrators—have demonstrated more support for the school uniform policies than the students who wear them. Bodine (2003b) reported support in adult sentiment about safety (86% and 88% from parents and teachers, respectively) but less so from the students (only 43% reported that uniforms increased school safety). Grades and student behavior can provide objective research measures, but many school and teacher efforts beyond uniforms can influence these measures. School uniforms certainly make for a highly visible change; perhaps that perceptive quality lends more consistency to the school climate research. Some students have reported associations of their school uniforms with better relationships with teachers and among each other, and some have experienced less bullying and teasing about clothing (Murray, 1997). The school uniform proponents, then, champion a better environment for students that can lead to academic success. By further understanding stakeholders' perceptions of school uniforms, it may be possible to positively impact policies and practices affecting students, parents, and school communities.

Statement of the Problem

Research on school uniforms is inconclusive. Some research suggests positive impacts on student behavior and acceptance of others (Murray, 1997; Bodine, 2003a; Edwards et al., 2020). By contrast, some researchers have noted that uniforms can infringe upon students' freedom of expression (DaCosta, 2006). Also, much of the research about school uniforms occurred when

less attention was paid to the potentially negative interaction between uniform policies and growing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Given these differing findings and beliefs about school uniforms, additional current studies about the perceptions of school uniforms from students and teachers are relevant and warranted. This research will have practical importance because of the potential to impact policies and practices affecting schools. This topic will also add to existing research that has largely focused primarily on the opinions and perceptions of adults.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools. This study employed focus group conversations to understand school uniforms from the students' and teachers' viewpoints. This qualitative interpretation research sought to collect rich data by eliciting attitudes, opinions, and perspectives on a specific school uniform experience with teachers and adolescents in grades 6-8. With a multitude of information available on school uniforms at the elementary level, this study also aimed to add to the literature base specific to middle schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do teachers experience school uniform implementation and enforcement?

2. How do students experience school uniform implementation enforcement?

3. What do teachers identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

4. What do teachers identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

5. What do students identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

6. What do students identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

7. What similarities and differences exist in the perceptions of school uniforms among students of different genders and cultural backgrounds?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the conceptual framework involves understanding students' and teachers' opinions as a determinant of policy effectiveness. Students' and teachers' perceptions can provide different insights into school policy and operations, and previous research suggests students perceive school uniforms much differently than adults within the same school ecosystems (Firmin et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2001). Still, students must form a vital stakeholder base for information about any policy implementation that can affect constructs like school climate and school community.

Previous studies have primarily focused on measures like school safety and violent crime data. Some others have explored achievement marks like grades and test scores, yet other research studies have delved into constructs like school climate and environmental influences. This study will also employ a social theory and critical lens to examine uniform use in schools, aiming to discover how teachers and students perceive school uniforms. Social identity theory suggests that people inherently desire to distinguish themselves from others based on group memberships (Harwood, 2020). In addition to functionally simplifying our environment, this categorization can lend to a social identification. For example, if a student body identifies partly through its uniform attire, then positive (or negative) feelings can manifest from this group experience. Sentiment can extend further into negative beliefs and attitudes about other groups as well (Harwood, 2020). When individuals sense a strong sense of purpose amongst group members, that becomes part of a person's own sense of individual identity (Tajfel, 1979). As individuals function within a group, there is a process of "self-stereotyping" that enables a

person "to understand oneself and others in terms of the norms, beliefs, and values associated with that particular group identify" (Verkuyten, 2021, p.321)). When people feel the need for a positive group self, they demonstrate ingroup bias. This could help or hamper school uniform implementation. This research should bridge the gap in empirical literature within the context of social groups and critical theory to offer worthwhile recommendations for administrators and policymakers regarding school uniforms in American public middle schools.

Overview of Research Methodology

This study utilized focus group methodology to gather data. Two focus groups were conducted within each of two middle schools with uniform policies for a total of four focus groups. One of the focus groups in each school consisted only of student participants for a total of two student groups. The other focus group in each school consisted of only teacher participants for a total of two teacher groups.

This study targeted teacher and student participants in two school uniform programs, and the research data provided extensive information about students' and teachers' perceptions of school uniforms in the context of the overall school experience. In each school, 10 teacher participants came from a volunteer teacher pool. Purposive sampling with the assistance of each school's principal ensured that teacher participants were representative of their respective schools; data about teachers' perspectives, therefore, came from 20 teacher participants. Student participants were also produced through purposive sampling, utilizing teacher familiarity to glean information from a representative sample. Each sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teacher participant identified three students who were capable and comfortable with conversing about the school uniform. From this sum of 30 students, the evaluator selected three students from each grade level while ensuring that at least one within each grade-level group was female and at least

one was non-White. This nine-student group within each school represented the focus group sample that provided its data regarding school uniforms through the methodical focus group protocol. A tenth student from any grade capped the focus group as necessary to satisfy research domains. Student perspectives, therefore, came from 19 student participants. By intentionally accounting for race and gender, the representative sample provided meaningful results in the context of the relevant discussions in the focus group.

One school (Suburban Middle School) represents a high-performing middle school within a relatively affluent suburb, and the other (Central Middle School) represents a low-performing middle school in a central urban area. The schools are within different counties of North Carolina, but both are in the state's Southwest region. The contrast between schools is a potentially confounding variable, but the differences allow comparisons of teachers' and students' perceptions in very different settings.

The study was conducted to ensure the protection of all participants. Participation was voluntary, and participant identity was not revealed. Parent/guardian consent for students' participation was secured, and parents were made aware of all aspects of the study.

Each adult participant received an email or equivalent electronic message inviting them to participate in a group conversation about the school uniform. Each student participant received a printed student contact protocol with accompanying parent consent information. The focus group conversations occurred among the same school peers, and teachers and students conversed only to whatever extent they were comfortable. The purpose and importance of the research were shared with participants to demonstrate transparency and a sense of partnership. Effectively communicating with and involving stakeholders in the evaluation process ranks highest as it relates to respondents' perspectives of the evaluator (Fleischer, 2010).

Significance of the Study

Past researchers have provided information regarding school uniform successes and failures but less insight into the experience of adorning a uniform in middle school (Brunsma, 2004). Variance among clothing and styles in middle schools without uniform policies can serve—accurately or not—as apparent indicators of socioeconomic standings. This study examined gender and diversity issues related to school uniforms because these topics are becoming more prominent in the discussion of school uniforms. The conversations are political and bounce from the board room and legislative assembly to the judicial system and back (Brodrick, 2023; *Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001*;* Edwards, 2020). Courts have recognized school uniforms' legality and have insisted that any clothing/attire suppression be viewpoint-neutral and restrictive only to legitimately further government interest (*Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001). Within that decision, the Fifth Circuit veered from previous reasoning and distinguished hair as communicative. As recently as January 2024, a Texas judge ordered a trial date to determine whether a Black high school student in the Houston area can continue being punished by his district for refusing to change a hairstyle (Duster, 2024). Independent of First Amendment protection, the student's family has argued that the district rule violates the Texas CROWN Act, signed into Texas law by Governor Greg Abbott on May 27, 2023. This law makes it illegal in Texas schools, employment, and housing to discriminate based on hair texture or hairstyle (Brodrick, 2023). This component of the conversation extends beyond clothing and into the person, but this domain is part of the school uniform conversation because it is part of some policies (Brodrick, 2023; *Karr v. Schmidt*, 1971). Exploring middle school teachers' and students' attitudes and perceptions about the school uniform experience can inform community discussion and policy implementation.

This study employed focus group discussions and interviews with teachers and students working within two middle schools with uniform policies. Interviewing students currently participating in a uniform program can provide a deeper understanding of school uniform issues that concern students. Results can help guide the development of a standard measure of student opinion about school uniforms that can direct further research while raising awareness of key issues school administrators must address when considering the implementation of a school uniform policy. This student perspective can also assist in developing and maintaining holistic student development conducive to intellectual growth.

Limitations

The study provided data related to school safety, egalitarianism, academic achievement, and even school spirit. The study relied, however, on the perspectives of teachers and students. Teachers spoke about safety and shared their understanding of how uniforms may have affected conflict among peers and the distinction of socio-economic groups. Students talked about attire preferences and how they managed uniform requirements, and some focus group contributors offered passionate opinions. Still, this qualitative study was limited in its analysis of objective measures. When individuals shared personal sentiments about this topic, it required some moderator management to maintain a productive flow to the conversation. One limitation to any such discussion is the moderator fluidity. While the researcher had more familiarity with and exposure to participants in one school that might have aided that school's conversation, the other school's focus groups occurred only during singular days. The researcher's familiarity with one school compared to the other also manifests a potential for bias, and it was important to consider the data independent of any professional role.

The verbal contributions of up to 10 focus group participants proved challenging to analyze, and discernment proved necessary in distinguishing individual from group opinions. Steps were taken in the research methods to produce representative samples. Still, there were no efforts to solicit specific experiences with the uniform, so the randomization may fail to produce an accurate representation of the population. Those contributors provided all of the study data, so the researcher relied on these participants to extrapolate meaning about their school uniform experience. As the aim involves gauging student and teacher perceptions of the school uniform programs, this study also required familiarity with an ongoing school uniform program. This means that both schools functioned with uniforms in place for at least each of the last three years. The study involved perhaps the most vested school stakeholders by including teachers and students, but the research does not include a means for direct parent input. The study also relied on two schools in total. They differed by many measures sufficient to provide a worthwhile comparison, but the schools represented different cultures through their communities and past performance. Therefore, the experiences with the uniforms represented different cultural experiences beyond the school uniform. By using exploratory focus groups in just two schools to suffice for comparison/contrast, the rich data may prove difficult to extrapolate to other schools.

Assumptions

The focus group protocol presumably gathers teachers' and students' perceptions of the school uniform program, thereby addressing the stated research questions. The study also assumed that the focus group conversations could manifest criteria affecting participants' perceptions regarding school uniforms. In other words, the researcher assumed that the planned discussion would elicit genuine feedback about the effects of a school uniform program. The study assumed that students and teachers would respond openly and honestly to questions and

conversation prompts, so candid conversation was a foundational assumption. The research also presumed that pre-collected data about each school from local and state databases were accurate regarding gender, ethnicity, etc. The study assumes that this available data and the focus group conversations can reliably reflect actual teacher and student conditions.

Definition of Terms

cultural bias. Sheth (2017) termed cultural bias the manifestation of people from one culture making assumptions about the behavior of those from another culture based on their own cultural norms and practices.

discrimination. The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the basis of race, age, or sex (Pager, 2006).

First Amendment. An amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights, prohibiting Congress from interfering with citizens' freedoms of religion, speech, assembly, or petition (Wolf, 2018).

freedom of expression. The right to freely have the authority to have an opinion or idea concerning anything in any society, including the idea to freely express this idea through available modes. Limitations to this freedom arise, however, if it is falsely derived and/ or purposely intended to cause harm and inflict damage upon a personality different from your own (IvyPanda.com, 2018).

mandatory uniform policy. The written policy and program created by the governing body of a school or school district that allows a school or schools within its governance to implement a dress code of prescribed clothing that is required for students to wear during regular school hours (Brunsma, 2006).

uniform schools. Schools that have adopted and implemented a mandatory uniform policy (Roe,

2018).

Organization of the Study

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study, purpose of the study, study background, statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framework methodology, significance of the study, limitations and assumptions, and term definitions. Chapter 2 includes a literature review beginning with the history of the school uniform and through legal challenges up to and including current cases. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in gathering and analyzing the data to answer the research questions guiding this study. Chapter 4 presents the results and analysis of the data collected. Chapter 5 includes a summary and discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for practice, policy, and further study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

American public schools serve an ever-widening array of student needs that demand a vast teacher skill set. Administrators position faculty and staff members to serve developmental levels from the intellectually disabled to the academically gifted. In some cases, equipped with nursing services and social work access with links to mental health therapy, schools provide holistic wraparound services to support their growth. Although school uniforms became popular and garnered national attention in response to school-related violence as early as the 1980s, their mention and association with school safety and threat assessment—still active topics across America—has declined (DaCosta, 2006; Yeung, 2009; Yoh, 2001).

Safety and mental health remain at the forefront of the American public school consciousness, and school uniform supporters point to uniform program implementation as a support for safety, a symbol of unity, and a tangible source of pride. School community and school climate are constructs through which principals and educators aim to intersperse positivity and motivation for their students, and school uniforms can facilitate and enhance that influential effect (Bodine, 2003a; Edwards et al., 2020). As the current judicial and political landscape leans toward more inclusivity and individual liberty to express oneself freely in schools and other public environments, school uniforms might still find stakeholder and other community support to help keep students safe and interactive in a productive manner. The best means to gauge the actual sentiment on and utility of a school uniform should surely include input from perhaps its most vested constituents, the teachers and the students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

This chapter discusses the literature on both the positive aspects of school uniforms and the negative associations of such policies. It also provides a legal background from the well-established relevant precedents to the ongoing and active cases involving student dress at school. This review of literature is divided into five sections: historical background on school uniforms, positive aspects of school uniforms, negative aspects of school uniforms, legal background and implications, and the theoretical framework. Figure 1 provides an outline of this literature review.

Historical Background on School Uniforms

Rationale for and Emergence of Uniform Policies in American Public Schools	Anderson, 2002; Bodine, 2003; Brunsma, 2004; Hesapcioglu et al., 2009; Bryck et al., 1993; Dussell, 2005;Walmsley, 2011; Kaiser, 1985
American School Uniform Implementation with Early Aims and Evaluation	Musu-Gillette, et al., 2017; Reidy, 2021; Sowell, 2012; Holloman, et al., 1996; Stanley, 1996; Anderson, 2002

Positive Aspects of School Uniforms

Safety, Discipline, and Behavior	Department of Education (DoE), 1996; Firmin, 2006; Murray, 1997; Portner, 1996; Kaiser, 1985; Holloman, et al., 1996;
Academics and Culture	Kommer, 1999; Loesch, 1995; Harris, 1989; McManus, 1987; Anderson, 2002; Kennedy, et al., 1994; Erikson, 1995; LaPoint et al., 1997; Murray, 1997; Elder, 1999

Negative Aspects of School Uniforms

Free Expression and Student Development	Vopat, 2010; McCarthy, 1996; Howe, 1996; Holloman, et al., 1996; Thomas, 1994; Wexler, 1995; Gereluk, 2007
Race, Gender, and Subgroup Consideration	Caruso, 1996; Reidy, 2021; DaCosta, 2006; Happel, 2013; Edwards, 2020

Figure 1, *Literature Review Topics*

Legal Background and Implications

Student Expression and the First Amendment	Mitchell et al., 2003; Anderson, 2002; Deane, 2015
Case Law and Current Circumstances	Vopat, 2010; Anderson, 2002; Mitchell et al., 2003; Edwards et al., 2018

Theoretical Context and Approach

Roles and Social Identity Theory	McAuliffe et al., 2003; Tarrant et al., 2009; Yoh, 2001
Gender, Race, and Critical Theory	Edwards, et al., 2018; Foucault, 1980; DaCosta, 2006

Figure 1, *Literature Review Topics* (continued)

Perhaps the very first foray into standardized attire at schools occurred in 13th century England when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langston, declared that students would wear a "cappa clausa," a robe-like outfit (sewn up the front) to align with the tunics and hooded cloaks commonly worn by clerics and other university gatherers associated with the Catholic Church (Brunsma, 2004). More a religious garment associated with stature and esteem in Middle Age England, the garb more indicative of modern school uniforms emerged a few centuries later. The most enduring school uniform—from its origins in 16th century England to its flourishing today—emerged in 1552 at Christ's Hospital in London, although the school is now in Southeast England on the English Channel coast (Christs-School.org.uk, 2022; ProCon.org, 2018). In contrast to the archbishop attire of only black and white to symbolize purity of life and humility (Hespacioglu et al., 2009), the Christ's School uniform provided its students with blue cloaks with yellow stockings (Christs-School.org.uk, 2022). The children who attended Christ's School were of lower socioeconomic status, and some have labeled the garments social identifiers (Brunsma, 2004). The school recognized speculation over the colors' origins and offered its own credence to these possibilities: the popular (colorful) Tudor style at the time of its inception, the

relatively low cost of those particular dyes (yellow and blue), or perhaps to distinguish children under Christ's School care from students in other schools (Christs-School.org.uk, 2022).

Fast-forwarding centuries in England, school uniforms increasingly became associated with the upper class. After the Elementary Act of 1870 provided free primary school to all children in England, school uniforms increased in popularity (K-12Academics.com, 2022). According to Brunsma (2004), uniforms in British schools encouraged obedience and compliance with authority. Uniforms in British schools from the 1880s through the mid-1900s reflected trends of the time: boys wore short trousers and blazers until puberty, with long trousers through young adulthood; girls mainly wore blouses and tunic dresses, transitioning to gymslips towards the beginning of the 20th century (K12Academics.com, 2022). Students at one of the country's most prestigious schools, Eton, wore black top hats and tails (reminiscent of tuxedos)—on and off campus—until 1972, when the dress codes began to relax (Brunsma, 2004). With its foundations established in religious influences at the earliest universities in Europe, the uniform has developed associations with images of social prestige and relative affluence. From its inception at Christ's School in London for fatherless children and other men's poor children (ChristsSchool-org.uk, 2022), however, the school uniform has also conjured connotations with lower class or charity children (Brunsma, 2006). When school uniforms migrated to the United States, their use began with private and parochial schools that adopted the practice from the English upper class (Brunsma, 2006).

As uniforms transitioned from the markings of the poor and orphaned to the elite and privileged in American private schools, the clothing represented norms established within early American Catholic, Protestant, and British rule (Brunsma, 2004). One notable exception involved government-run boarding schools for Native American children established in the late

1800s. These assimilation model schools required military-style uniforms with multiple years of boarding (ProCon.org, 2016; Reyhner et al., 2017). Little (2017) called it cultural genocide, noting that the Native American children adopted Anglo-American names, cut their hair, and abandoned their own prior religious and cultural practices. Similar to the juxtaposition between Christ's School and later British schools like Eton, uniforms at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania represented something much different from those with religious roots at early American Catholic schools.

By the 1950s and 1960s, early protests and concerns played out among the Catholic laity and other influential decision-makers regarding school uniforms and fundamental issues that would continue to reemerge today. Those concerns included: (a) invasion of rights (whether student or parent); (b) aims for conformity and/or similarity were inherently wrong; (c) school uniforms were not cheaper (a particular concern of poorer families the Catholic church was trying to serve); and (d) children must eventually confront the boundaries uniforms may be aiming to hide (Brunsma, 2004). These conversations previewed later discussions in American public schools, but the right for students to express themselves at school—even by dress— emerged before the first American public school considered a uniform. In 1969, the United States Supreme Court interpreted student dress as a protected form of expression, famously pronouncing, "Students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District*, 1969). As public schools continued to operate with dress expectations—a basic practice that, like uniforms, came to America from British cultural norms—their leaders needed justification for prohibitions or mandates (Brunsma, 2004). Whether prohibiting expression by means of a dress code or dictating what students wear via

school uniform, policies needed to support the learning process without unduly infringing on student rights.

In 1983, a committee appointed by Ronald Reagan published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a response to public perceptions about "something remiss" in our "educational system" (United States, p.7). The report prompted attention to and perhaps context for change to current practices. In an oft-quoted line, the authors identified "a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people" (United States, 1983, p.9). In a Cold War period of economic challenges (high inflation and unemployment, rising homelessness) and increasing global competition (Japanese automobiles, South Korean steel), the report summoned all Americans to help schools overcome inferiority (Richards, 2021; United States, 1983). Perhaps this context contributed to the timing of America's first public schools instituting a uniform policy in the fall of 1987 (Brunsma, 2004). These early uniform programs were voluntary, but parent support was so strong that almost all of the students wore the uniforms (Daniels, 1987). Although some linked a uniform policy at Cherry Hill Elementary School in Baltimore, Maryland to a 1986 shooting of a local public school student over a $96 pair of sunglasses, school officials and other advocates credited the school uniforms with improved mental states and reduced discipline problems (Brunsma, 2004). School leaders credited the help to families because uniforms had "already reduced the preoccupation of students with expensive designer clothing" (Daniels, 1987, p.32).

This theme would continue into the Bill Clinton era of the 1990s, and other schools in Baltimore and Washington, DC followed the lead on uniforms. By the next fall, some schools in the nation's capital mandated the once-optional school uniforms (Brunsma, 2004). Urban schools began adopting uniform policies to combat student fights and gang activity, and school uniforms

spread beyond these initial states (McDaniel, 2013). Following a public proclamation by New York City Mayor Ed Koch supporting school uniforms, the New York City Department of Education introduced a pilot uniform program in 1988 (Brunsma, 2004). In the fall of 1994, California Governor Pete Wilson signed into a law a bill that allowed public schools in his state to require mandatory school uniforms (Weintraub, 1994). That year, the Long Beach Unified School District in California became the first school district to require all K-8 students to wear school uniforms. In the state law—passed after the declaration by the local school district, seemingly out of sequence—California mandated an opt-out provision for parents. With this effort to balance the rights of parents with the demands on school leaders, a spokesperson for the district articulated the impetus for action across America: "Every large city in the U.S. has been concerned about the gangs. Their clothes really are an unofficial uniform of intimidation" (ProCon.org, 2016, p. 3).

In his *State of the Union* address to Congress, President Bill Clinton (1996, para. 38, as cited in the Clinton White House Archives, 2022) endorsed the idea of public school uniforms: "If it means that teenagers will stop killing each other over designer jackets, then our public schools should be able to require their students to wear school uniforms." President Clinton repeated this message about school uniforms in his weekly radio addresses and during a series of media appearances; in February, he ordered a school uniform manual to be delivered to each of the country's 16,000 school districts (ProCon.org, 2021).

As endorsements continued and popularity grew throughout the year, some media individuals estimated that by the end of the 1997 academic calendar, half of America's urban school districts had adopted a school uniform policy (Brunsma, 2004). However, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1998) revealed that only three percent of all public

schools required students to wear uniforms during the 1996-1997 school year. These data suggested that although a relative few were experiencing the school uniform policies, many were engaging in conversations and controversies about them. Political resistance to public school uniforms also emerged quickly, as U.S. Senator Phil Gramm responded to President Clinton's enthusiasm by warning of the Democrat's tendency to overstep the bounds of government (Mitchell, 1996). Nonetheless, the public school uniform movement and its battle cry to reduce school violence was underway in America by the 1990s.

In 1994, the Long Beach, California school uniform policy became the largest such mandate, with 58,500 students from kindergarten to eighth grade wearing uniforms. According to the *Manual on School Uniforms* (1996) distributed by President Clinton to American public school districts, the overall results with suspension and school crime after only one year in Long Beach were impressive: fights dropped by 51%, suspensions dropped by 32%, sex offenses fell by 74%, and overall crime decreased by 36%. The policy was popular in Long Beach, as less than 1% of the parents utilized the opt-out program required by California law (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). With parents on board and some convincing results after the inaugural year, the uniform program was regarded as a success. Principals and teachers also cited significantly higher achievement in some cases (Polacheck, 1996).

A multitude of factors might have contributed to the safety statistics, and Paliokas and Rist (1996) suggested efforts like community policing practices and other school security measures contributed to the change in Long Beach. With alarming levels of violence as an enticement for quick action, these authors also proposed that regression to the mean and Hawthorne effects could skew the Long Beach uniform results. In a twist of perspective, others have pondered the possibility that adults perceived the Long Beach students differently because

they were in a uniform (Posner, 1996). Reducing school violence has long been an aim of American school uniforms, and most of the literature has maintained that focus while using observational studies or attitude/perception surveys from school stakeholders (Yeung, 2006).

Having arrived in America by way of private and parochial schools, uniforms seem to have appeared in American public schools for vastly different reasons. In addition to safety-related outcomes, uniform proponents have credited their contributions to academics and a positive learning environment. Kaiser (1985) suggested that uniformity helped maintain academic standards and disciplined respect for the teacher while also limiting "fashion statements" and thereby de-emphasizing socioeconomic differences. In some cases, uniforms contributed to less strain on parental budgets because their children's clothing was less likely to indicate status or wealth (Yeung, 2006). By not fixating on what to wear each day, uniform advocates argued, students could shift their attention to bridging differences and promoting peer acceptance (McManus, 1987). In addition to addressing the gang crime and school violence that might monopolize media airways, uniform advocates cited other motives in their efforts to implement school uniform policies.

Positive Outcomes Associated with School Uniforms

Within the political fervor supporting school uniforms in the 1990s and into the 21st century, their use grew from 3% of public schools in 1996 to 14% by 2005 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). By 2017, approximately 20% of public schools utilized school uniforms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). As such, studies have identified positive factors associated with implementing school uniforms. These studies will be described in this section.

Stanley's (1996) research championed the district-wide uniform implementation in Long Beach Unified School District. Data over the first two years of implementation suggested decreases in fights, assaults, weapons, and vandalism. Administrators reported fewer classroom disruptions, and teachers and other adult stakeholders reported positive perceptions of the uniforms. In addition to the direct improvement of making it easy to identify unauthorized visitors and preventing the use of gang colors and insignia, uniforms may have instilled respect for authority in students, thereby improving their behavior (Gentile et al., 2011).

Han (2010) analyzed data from the 2003-2004 School Survey on Crime Data to determine that urban schools with uniform policies experienced fewer safety problems than similar schools without them. This proved particularly true in elementary and middle schools, whereas there was less correlation between behavior and uniform policies in high school (Han, 2010). Reed (2011) conducted a meta-analysis that also provided evidence suggesting that school uniforms decreased g the frequency of student behavior incidents in elementary and middle school but not in high school. This aligned with Alleyne et al., (2003), who found that younger students were more obedient to parents and teachers and, therefore, the younger ones proved more receptive to school uniforms.

Johnson (2010) directly examined school uniforms and violence in North Carolina public high schools over a five-year period. Although there was no significant change in safety measures like suspensions and crime, school administrators did report a positive impact on school safety related to uniforms (Johnson, 2010). A common thread across this research emphasized that cooperation among uniform policymakers and school stakeholders predictably improved the results of policy implementation (Reed, 2011; DaCosta, 2006; Alleyne et al., 2003; Stanley, 1996).

Although school safety concerns pushed school uniforms into the schools, uniform advocates have noted other worthwhile outcomes. In addition to safety, Anderson (2002) identified other potential benefits: improved learning climate, higher student self-esteem, and reduced stress on families. Some parents have embraced some school uniform policies as a means to avoid expensive clothing and redirect focus to purposeful learning (Stevenson et al., 1991). Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) also reported an indirect relationship between school uniforms and attendance, and Williams (2003) attributed a net decrease in truancy and absenteeism to the improved attitude and spirit of a school uniform policy. Without significant data to support hypotheses about uniforms increasing achievement or decreasing behavior problems, Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) speculated that uniform policies have provided visible and public symbols of commitment to school improvement and learning reform, and perhaps the perceptive changes from stakeholders have indirectly affected the school environment.

Uniforms have provided highly visible changes for schools and their students, and stakeholders have attributed positive outcomes to that tangible school adjustment. Stevenson and Chunn (1991) found no direct effects of uniforms on academic achievement but suggested that their use affected school climate, safety, and student self-perceptions. During focus group conversations with middle school students, they consistently linked positive associations about the uniform to easier social interactions and less frustration about what to wear. While all students exhibited difficulty understanding the connections between school uniforms and academic achievement, multiple students identified the ease of dressing each morning as a benefit of the policy (McCarthy et al., 2001). Bodine (2003a) and Wade (2003) reported perceptions of increased safety, with Bodine (2003a) providing substance to egalitarian outcomes

related to the dress requirements. This supported the uniform advocates' arguments about increased student self-esteem and lessened social pressure.

During conversations with parents, teachers, and students, some argued that clothing exacerbated isolation and social ostracism at school, and "common dress can help protect against violence resulting from the experience of ostracism" (Bodine, 2003a, p.51). In a telling story of disconnect between parent and child in a public school, a father reported that his two children play with and get along with all students; his twelve-year-old son, however, offered this opinion of students who lack the money to buy school clothes: "they're dorks…just dorks" (Bodine, 2003a, p.56).

Two factors about uniforms made them uniquely powerful among societal markers of economic inequality: they sufficed for an item (clothing) that students simply must have, and they minimized the ability to exclude others socially based on attire (a hallmark activity of public crowding among school-age mates) (Bodine, 2003a). In a qualitative study of Christian schools—one with a uniform requirement and one without—Firmin et al. (2006) found that adults believed uniforms served their intended purposes: eliminate competition, teach appropriate dress, and decrease non-academic distractions. Students gravitate toward peers of a similar socioeconomic status, with dress being but one such marker; if uniforms eliminated this most obvious social marker at school, then students relied on clues beyond clothing to make decisions about their social interaction selections (Anderson, 2002; Jones et al., 2020). In a survey with charter school students evaluating perception differences of uniforms in students with varying levels of socioeconomic status, results suggested a wider range of socialization; this wide socialization range might bolster students' sense of belonging and evidence less fear of social exclusion from groups of a different economic status (Jones et al., 2020).

Negative Associations with School Uniforms

A body of research suggests that student uniforms do not generate the positive outcomes espoused by proponents (Brunsma, 2006; Draa, 2005; Stanley, 1996; Stevenson and Chunn,1991; Wade, 2003). Even the overwhelmingly positive early study about impressive results from Long Beach reported uncertainty about the uniform. Specifically, students did not feel that uniforms reduced school fights or made school safer (Stanley, 1996). Additionally, Stevenson and Chunn (1991) found no direct effect of uniforms on academic achievement. Brunsma (2006) observed some counterintuitive negative effects related to some standardized achievement scores, but Yeung (2006) clarified that there was no established causality. Draa (2005) conducted some quasi-experimental designs and found inconsistent effects on reading and mathematics achievement. Gentile and Imberman (2011) reported no statistically significant effect on disciplinary infractions or achievement, and Wade (2003) suggested uniforms actually reduce self-esteem by restricting self-expression. Wade's (2003) perception results aligned with other evidence that older students—specifically high school students—would not accept a school uniform policy as readily. DaCosta (2006) interviewed middle school students representing major urban districts in the American Midwest and confirmed that high school students met uniform policies with resistance. Sigel (1996) and Alleyne et al. (2003) also observed less receptiveness to uniforms in high school, and DaCosta (2006) warned further about potential discriminatory practices as an impediment to success, particularly with older students.

With less tangible evidence and no straightforward link between uniforms and positive student outcomes, critics have decried the advancement of uniform policies in communities desperate for positive change. For example, based on student interviews and parent surveys, Eppinger (2001) argued that uniforms can fail if they do not improve school climate but instead

camouflage real problems with behavior and learning. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) cited that too little research exists to justify school uniforms, deeming a causal relationship between uniforms and positive student behavior impossible to determine (King, 1998). Yeung (2006) built upon Brunsma and Rockquemore's (1996) work by analyzing two large data sets published by the National Center for Education Statistics. With remarkably consistent results for both the elementary and secondary data sets, there was little evidence that uniforms improved student achievement (Yeung, 2006). Less substantive data support could quiet the crowd of political endorsements and legal challenges commonly centered on either this notion of free expression or concerns about discriminatory practices.

While critics have argued that disguising individual differences of students at school fails to address other more legitimate issues (Deane, 2015), others have opposed uniforms on ethical and legal grounds (DaCosta, 2006; Edwards, 2020; Holloman et al., 1996). Perhaps the most fundamental issue underlying opposing viewpoints on uniforms has involved the right of students to express themselves through dress and adornment. Schools have the right and responsibility to implement policies that promote student safety and health needs. However, parents and organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have defended parental rights to raise their children in accordance with family values that might conflict with educational policies. The ACLU aims to protect the rights of students to look and dress as they choose (Holloman al., 1996).

As uniforms gained political momentum from what appeared as early success at urban schools in the 1990s and the turn of the century, policies spreading into suburban and rural areas suggested uniforms might have purposes beyond addressing school violence and gang activity. Although rhetoric denouncing gangs and violence accompanied pushes for uniforms, some have

warned about gangs earning an unfair association with—and even code talk to mean literally—ethnic minorities (DaCosta, 2006). Uniform skeptics have also noted that crime and violence associated with gang activity probably reached peak levels during high school, but most uniform programs have occurred in elementary and middle schools (DaCosta, 2006). Wade et al. (2003) reported how teachers perceived a decline in gang activity whereas students did not, speculating that students more easily identified other markers beyond the traditional clothes (e.g., tattoos, hairstyle, name brand, etc.). Distinguishing potentially dangerous affiliations versus a teen's establishing self-identity and independence crossed paths again, and students remained most skeptical of those intended outcomes.

Any imposition of uniforms necessitates inhibition of expression, and critics often note how such policies might violate inherent student rights. Edwards (2020) has reported on legal challenges that overly restrict the established right to student self-expression. Although King (1998) insisted that the lack of empirical evidence supporting school uniforms does not mean that uniforms do not work, he recommended incorporating the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students. Applying this strategy of soliciting stakeholder input proves particularly important when considering the varied context and constituent makeup of the communities schools serve. When their growth occurred most rapidly to spawn safety for American public school children, it became evident that uniforms were increasingly associated with urban, lower socioeconomic, minority communities. Throughout the United States, Hispanic and Black students more commonly wear school uniforms than White students (Bloom et al., 2015). The racially disproportionate implementation of school uniform policies has potentially penalized minority students, thereby violating the Civil Rights Act (Bloom et al., 2015).

Loren Siegel, American Civil Liberties Union President when Bill Clinton endorsed school uniforms in 1996, disputed their ability to resolve school violence, suggesting from her focus group research that instead, schools should confront racism and cultural conflict head-on. Her recommendations included "safe corridor" programs to protect students to and from school, assemblies during which they could express themselves, and more extracurricular activities with part-time job support (Siegel, 1996). Labeling uniforms a diversion, other ACLU representatives have described the policies as anti-democracy and impediments to teaching young people how to make choices (Anderson, 2002).

In addition to concerns about the potentially negative relationship between uniforms and students of color, concerns have been expressed that uniforms also contribute to gender-based inequities. Some students have experienced uniform policies they felt forced unfair gender or sexuality expectations, and Levi (2007) observed legal precedent in the workforce for protection against any type of sex- or gender-based clothing. Dussel (2005) referenced white smocks in Argentinean schools as among the first school uniform implementations, regarding such policies as a means through which the established power structure normalizes control. The smocks—white and symbolic of plainness and purity—emerged after a 1904 school visit by General Inspector of Schools Pablo Pizzurno, during which he complained about luxurious garments girls wore to school (Dussel, 2005). Reasoning that these material belongings could provoke socially unacceptable activities like prostitution to maintain their expense, Pizzurno recommended an apron-like uniform to endorse moral, economic, and aesthetic order (Dussel, 2005). Spencer (2007) identified school uniforms as "one of the technologies of power within the cultural history of schooling…which demanded that an individual's appearance should reflect his/her position in society" (p.236). Dussel (2005) wrote of early American uniforms tied to the disciplining of

unruly bodies and untamed savages and aligned that with uniform implementation targeting

those who could not self-regulate or self-govern: women, Black individuals, Indians, people in

poverty, and immigrants. Happel (2013) warned of gender-specific requirements and, in

particular, skirts for girls as part of a ritualized "girling," a process by which gender performance

is "perpetuated and molded" (p.94). Deane (2015) observed how the attempt to uniform students

immediately meant one group is "marked" in context to the other, and this extension of

institutional control serves as a means to regulate and define student interactions (p.113). She

continued by emphatically offering that the problem with schools is not the uniform but the

reason for requiring uniforms. This discussion involving the intersection of fundamental rights

with governmental control would inevitably navigate its way through the legal system.

Legal Background

Controversies surrounding school uniforms have found their way into the courts,

resulting in a cloudy concoction of case decisions. While the United States Supreme Court has

not directly addressed school dress codes, Supreme Court decisions related to the issue of student

expression, discrimination, due process, and violating the rights of others have been applied to

legal challenges related to student expression through their attire. This section describes

overarching legal issues surrounding school uniforms and dress code policies. An overview of

pertinent cases related to student expression and dress code policies is provided.

Free Speech and Uniforms

Tinker v. Des Moines, litigated from 1966 to 1969, proved a landmark case as the first

U.S. Supreme Court case concerning student expression (Vopat, 2010). When Jonathan Tinker

and Christopher Eckhardt were sent home and suspended from school for wearing black

armbands to protest American hostilities in Vietnam, they alleged a violation of their free speech

rights as provided by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (*Tinker v Des Moines,* 1969). With *Tinker,* the court pronounced that students do not "shed constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the school-house gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines,* 1969, para. 506). Prior to this establishment of students' constitutional rights at school, public school personnel operated with an entitlement to limit students' rights as they deemed appropriate (LaMorte, 1999). Although the court firmly established a First Amendment right for students, justices noted with the decision that districts and their representatives (principals) can prohibit expression if justified by significant interference to or disruption of school operations (Vopat, 2010). The U.S. Supreme Court had designated public school students as worthy of constitutional rights to expression but did not determine whether dress codes or uniforms infringed upon those rights.

In determining what constitutes free speech expression, judges have identified two broad umbrella terms to define speech: pure and symbolic. All speech classified as pure or verbal speech received some type of First Amendment protection. The courts have limited these free speech protections in some cases, such as in the case of obscene or defamatory words (Mitchell et al., 2022). Defining symbolic speech, which involves expression through a behavior, has required a two-question test: Did the expression intend to convey a particular message, and did those who experienced the message have a high likelihood of understanding that message (Mitchell et al., 2022). Therefore, nonverbal acts or conduct in the absence of sound or words have sufficed for symbolic speech (Tiersma, 1993; *Texas v. Johnson,* 1989). With the two-prong test about message delivery and audience, clothing and dress have long served as symbolic speech among people. In fact, how students dress can convey many messages about self or attitudes about seemingly anything; therefore, the next legal consideration involves governmental rights to restrict symbolic speech and the context that justifies that.

Over time, courts have oscillated such that expression gives way to school authority and back. During the 1970s, students became confident in a post-*Tinker* world, subsequently suing and winning contests involving free speech (*Healy v. James,* 1972; *Papish v. Board of Curators of the University of Missouri*). Even with its judgment in *Tinker*, however, the Court upheld the students' right to politically oppose the Vietnam War with a wristband as First Amendment speech and not as a right to some student attire or appearance (Anderson, 2002). Still, the precedent established by *Tinker* did not embolden school administrators to proscribe restrictive dress codes or comprehensive uniform policies (McCarthy, 2001).

In a 1986 case related to student speech, the Supreme Court reversed a lower court ruling in favor of Matthew Fraser. He had campaigned for a peer to win student office using an abundance of sexual imagery and innuendo, and the Supreme Court ruled to uphold the rights of school officials to prohibit and punish the student for lewd or vulgar speech communications (*Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser*). Two years later, a principal outside St. Louis, Missouri removed articles about teen pregnancy and divorce from a special teen-issue section of the school newspaper (Anderson, 2002). On appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, justices again ruled in favor of schools by dubbing the school-sponsored newspaper a "closed forum" entity over which the school had the right to exercise control (*Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier,* 1998). The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals would soon face a decision specific to school uniforms.

Content-neutral Restrictions

After the well-publicized success in Long Beach and President Clinton's nationwide distribution of the *Manual on School Uniforms* to all public school districts, Louisiana's legislature passed a law in 1997 allowing local boards to mandate school uniforms (Anderson,

2002). During the 1999-2000 school year, the Bossier Parish School Board implemented

mandatory school uniforms in all of the parish public schools. The uniform consisted of a choice

of two colors of polo or oxford shirts and navy or khaki pants; schools informed students and

parents by letter about the uniform specifications and provided them a list of local vendors who

could supply the school-approved attire (*Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001). Parents

filed suit against the school system by claiming the policy violated free speech and liberty rights.

Legally, the district court had already concluded that clothing choices are a matter of personal

taste and style that do not warrant First Amendment protection (*Karr v. Schmidt,* 1972).

Although the 1970s-era court ruled that local school agencies should dictate what public school

students wear, more modern judicial decisions have provided some important distinctions. The

point of contention in *Karr v. Schmidt* (1972) was that the school deemed the boy's hair too long.

However, the court adopted the rationale for local regulation of pupils' attire, distinguishing

some hairstyles as communicative in nature and, therefore, expressing a viewpoint (*Canady v.

Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001). This distinction proves relevant later in cases involving due

process and equal protection claims.

The key with free speech, then, involves content-neutral restrictions. In the uniform case

within Bossier Parish, the courts ruled that schools may legally restrict student expression only to

the extent that it sufficiently facilitates an important or substantial government interest unrelated

to the suppression of student expression. With the relatively plain, viewpoint-neutral Parish

uniform requirement, the Fifth Circuit Court upheld on appeal that the school uniform policy did

not violate students' free speech rights (*Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001).

Distinguishing between the free speech allowed by *Tinker* and the legal restrictions on

expression as categorized in *Canady* required a differentiation among types of speech and expression, as well as the forum in which said expressions occur.

Not long after *Tinker*, the Supreme Court determined that any restriction to First Amendment-protected symbolic speech would manifest as a content-based or a content-neutral restriction (*Spence v. Washington,* 1974). Courts have held content-based restrictions to the tightest scrutiny (*Texas v. Johnson,* 1989). This strict scrutiny required the government to demonstrate that any restriction or regulation is necessary because of a "compelling state interest…narrowly drawn to achieve that end" (*Widmar v. Vincent,* 1981). Since statutes and policies related to school uniforms prohibit choice by delineating what students must wear, the school uniform mandate proved a content-neutral restriction. Such a restriction uniformly applied to all students failed to justify First Amendment protection (*Spence v. Washington,* 1974). Letting the legal logic unfold, the next step to consider involved determining how and when a content-neutral restriction violated free speech rights.

After David O'Brien publicly burned his draft card in violation of a law criminalizing draft card destruction, the Supreme Court set standards for analyzing governmental restrictions to symbolic speech. Any such governmental restriction or regulation must fall within governmental interest, further an important or substantial government interest, exist unrelated to the suppression of free expression, and restrict First Amendment rights incidentally and to no extent further than the interest necessitates (*Unites States v. O'Brien,* 1968). This four-pronged O'Brien Test applied to uniforms satisfied governmental interests and the notion that uniforms further governmental interests pertaining to student safety and schoolhouse order. The third prong begged the question of whether uniform implementation served to quell all free expression; though policies intend to eliminate gang behavior and eradicate school violence,

uniforms did not force abandonment of all student expression (Mitchell et al., 2020). The final

O'Brien prong required that uniforms be no more than that which is necessary to further the

interest. Largely because the appellant did not take issue with school district claims that the

uniforms furthered school district interests, the court ruled that school uniforms satisfied the full

O'Brien Test (*Canady v.Bossier Parrish School Board,* 2001).

School uniforms overcame legal challenges again after an eleventh grader in Las Vegas,

Nevada sued the school district for refusing to permit her to wear a religious message on her

clothes at a mandatory uniform school. Although plaintiffs correctly observed the religious

messaging was neither lewd nor school-sponsored—and, therefore, should be considered legally

in the context of *Tinker* more so than *Bethel* or *Hazelwood*—the speech need not be evaluated at

the same level of scrutiny as *Tinker* (*Jacobs v. Clark County School District,* 2008). The Clarke

County case involved a student at Liberty High School, which required a school uniform

comprised of khaki-colored bottoms and solid-color tops, with no writing other than the

approved school logo (Egelko, 2008). The school repeatedly suspended a student who repeatedly

wore a shirt expressing her Mormon beliefs, with the school emphasizing its content-neutral

school uniform application. The content-neutral approach requires less legal scrutiny, and the

uniform's existence serves the government's legitimate goal of educating its populace. The court

ruled that the uniform policy was valid because it promotes this goal and applies equally to all

written expressions on clothing, regardless of content (*Jacobs v. Clark County School District,*

2008). Despite allowing some school and spirit-related logos, the Clark County uniform policy

proved both content- and viewpoint-neutral. As such, the U.S. Ninth Circuit of Appeals ruled 2-1

that the mandatory uniforms did not restrict any one viewpoint in particular, required only an

intermediate rather than a strict standard of interpretation, and were not infringing on pure

speech (*Jacobs v. Clark County School District,* 2008). After a series of significant legal

victories, the conformity that accompanies school uniforms has again begun to encounter more

challenges.

Due Process, Equal Protection, and School Uniforms

In addition to free speech prohibitions, school uniform opponents have pointed to due

process problems with the implementation of such policies. Perhaps the first establishment of

due process rights in schools involved *Goss v. Lopez,* a Columbus, Ohio case in which ten

students were given suspensions from school without holding a hearing (1975). In a 5-4 decision,

the Court held that Ohio had extended the right to an education to its citizens and, as such, could

not withdraw that right on grounds of misconduct unless there were "fundamentally fair

procedures" to determine the extent of misconduct and, in fact, if it had occurred (*Goss v. Lopez,*

1975). During the 2001-2002 school year, the student/parent handbook at Jack Jouett Middle

School (Jouett) in Albemarle County, Virginia, prohibited "messages on clothing, jewelry, and

personal belongings that relate to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, sex, vulgarity, or that reflect adversely

upon persons because of their race or ethnic group" (*Newsome v. Albemarle,* 2003). That year, a

student wore a shirt depicting men with guns and the abbreviation "NRA." An assistant principal

directed the student to change or to wear the shirt inside out. A dialogue continued, and the

school amended the code during the summer of 2002 to include prohibitions of "weapons" and

"violence" (*Newsome v. Albemarle,* 2003). Even bolstered by this better due process protection

that specified the prohibitions of weapons, the school failed to sufficiently protect the liberty of

its students because it did not adequately justify the suppression of this particular student's

expression. The court ruled in this case that "there simply is no evidence suggesting that clothing

containing messages related to weapons worn by students at Jouett ever substantially disrupted school operations or interfered with the rights of others" (Newsome v. Albemarle, 2003).

During the 1993-1994 school year, a student named Richard Bivens was repeatedly suspended from school for violating a school dress code against wearing sagging pants. Although his suit legally argued for this style as protected free speech, he argued for equal protection by asserting that the wearing of sagging pants is part of his hip-hop style, rooted in African-American culture and part of a fashion statement by Blacks and Hispanics extensively (*Bivens v. Albuquerque,* 1995). The school explained the prohibition as part of addressing a gang problem at the school, and even Mr. Bivens acknowledged a gang problem at his Del Norte High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He nor the school claimed he was associating with gangs, but he sued the school with assertions that wearing his sagging pants served as a statement about his identity as a Black youth and a way to express his Black culture with the styles of Black urban youth (*Bivens v. Albuquerque,* 1995). In its ruling, the District Court of New Mexico recognized the suppression of student expression as incidental (contrasting sagging with relatively permanent hairstyles) and justified in response to the perceived gang problem and efforts to improve the learning environment at school (*Bivens v. Albuquerque,* 1995). Specific to due process and appeals, the court referenced a copy of the student behavior handbook and notice of the hearing process following the suspension. Although a more specific restriction, the school implemented its dress policy legally. When the dress code specifics have involved discriminating by gender, however, some schools have fared less well in judicial settings.

Students at Charter Day School in Leland, North Carolina, successfully challenged a uniform policy that required female students to wear skirts, jumpers, or skorts. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented the families challenging the policy, the skirt

requirement prevented the girls from being active in recess, and it posed a problem during emergency tornado and fire drills when they would crouch down in tight spaces (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). On June 14, 2022, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in Richmond, Virginia voted 10-6 that the skirt requirement violated students' Title IX rights and the Equal Protection Clause (Procon.org, 2022). It recognized that Title IX and the Fourteenth Amendment, federal laws prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, apply to dress codes (American Civil Liberties Union, 2024). In the fall of 2022, Charter Day School petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to review this decision; in June, it declined (Brown, 2023). The school attempted to defend the policy and its design to support discipline and foster respect between boys and girls, with notions that girls are "fragile vessels" that deserve "gentle" treatment by male students (*Peltier v. Charter Day School,* 2022). Charter Day attempted to deny accountability under the Equal Protection Clause by maintaining they are not state actors, but the Fourth Circuit affirmed the district court's reasoning otherwise (*Peltier v. Charter Day School,* 2022). Not only is Charter Day School a public school law under North Carolina law, but its skirt requirements based on gender stereotypes about the "proper place" for females in society are founded in ideology that violates the Equal Protection Clause. When the State of Texas passed the CROWN Act to ban racial discrimination based on hair texture or hairstyle in places like schools, it sought to establish similar equal protections for Black and other non-white cultures (Brodrick, 2023). The arguments continue, however, as a student at Barbers Hill High School has faced disciplinary action all school year because he has refused to cut his dreadlocks; the school district claims its issue is the student's hair length and not his hairstyle, the latter of which is protected by the new Texas law (Zuvanich, 2024). Research from the turn of the millennium through the current skirt and Barbers Hill hair cases suggests that women and other previously

marginalized groups might warrant extra attention as the school uniform conversation continues (Deane, 2015; Dussel, 2005; Edwards, 2020; Zuvanich, 2024).

Theoretical Context and Approach: Roles and Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory involves a personal sense of identity based on group associations and memberships. Tajfel (1979) proposed that groups like families, social classes, and sports teams provided their members with a strong sense of purpose, pride, and self-esteem. Our understanding of the world around us, in essence, becomes a series of social groupings characterized as familiar or foreign.

School uniforms relate to social identity theory because they add a unique dynamic to traditional school groupings, and an inherent conformity exists if pupils all adorn essentially the same attire. Already designated symbolic speech with some established constitutional protection, school uniforms strongly emphasized student memberships and necessitated extreme conformity (Yoh, 2001). Uniforms contributed to a high level of alignment with appearance and compliance with behavioral expectations, thereby serving a function of discipline. The similar attire visibly united membership students and distinguished them from students at other schools. Given the context of human growth in schools, the social identity approach can allow for consideration of school uniforms in the context of identity production in a factory of social, cultural, and political circumstances (Verkuyten, 2021). Social identity theory emphasizes how psychological processes unfold depending on the social structure contributing to them.

School uniforms uniquely categorize the students to any casual observer, and social identity theory demonstrates that how people perceive themselves and the people around them depends partly on their own social group memberships (Tarrant et al., 2009). As a group grows its collective identity, self-personalization and individualist behaviors decrease. Interpersonal

dynamics between in-group and out-group members change. Miron and Branscombe (2008) argue that identifying a person as an outgroup member activated pro-ingroup bias amongst the ingroup members. If true, students and others experiencing school uniforms might prove more resistant to a suggestion that school uniforms are not a worthwhile endeavor. This notion counters some piece of their identity as students, so perhaps such an inquiry rightly warrants further deliberation.

School environments provide a myriad of variables to contribute to student identity formation, and any theory applied to its production requires some context-based perspectives. In line with social identity, sharing the same visible uniform among students may contribute to collective pride and allegiance to the school. The prosocial factors increase the possibility of peer acceptance and harmonious relations among peers (McVeigh, 1997). When teachers and other school authorities associate expectations and student outcomes with a school uniform, that collective sense of identity contributes to group understanding of the student experience (Yoh, 2001). Tarrant (2009) described an emergent empathy from ingroup members with a stronger sense of collective identity, suggesting even that the more alike people are, the more willing they are to help one another. The uniform serves as a consistent and ever-present reminder of the role of the student, and clothing can be used intentionally to validate social roles (Yoh, 2001). As identity builds through a series of interactions with others, people view themselves in the context of these interactions and their perspectives on others' perceptions of self. Interactions inevitably involve perceptions, and identity theory also considers the position of the interpreter (DaCosta, 2006). For example, DaCosta (2006) specified that for some African American public school students, concerns about status, authority, and self-representation manifest alongside the conversation about school uniforms.

Group identity expands beyond shared rules and procedures and includes stereotypical expectations and behavioral consequences that provide shared content and meaning (Verkuyten, 2021). The social identity approach focuses first on the processes involved in defining people as members of social groups. If individuals change how they think and act based on a group, then group identity is what makes group behavior possible. Collectivist behavior can bolster the unity and productivity of the group (McAuliffe et al., 2003). With normative group understandings established, self-stereotyping occurs such that students understand their place in the world. There exists an urge for a positive group self, so people demonstrate in-group bias. In educational settings, in-group meanings can be prosocial and establish favorable distinctiveness of one's own group to contribute to a positive self-identity (Verkuyten, 2021). Any shift from individual to collective thinking occurs gradually, and perspective remains a complicated variable within any group dynamic. Even with group identity intact, a school uniform may represent learning and safe, anti-gang values to public school officials but embody something entirely different to students (DaCosta, 2006).

Gender, Race, and Critical Theory

Friedrich and Shanks (2021) identified dress codes and uniform policies as techniques through which key power institutions like schools enact political power. If groups of adults are in control and require distinct and uniform attire among the children for whom they are responsible, the social groups become visibly distinct. Social theorists would note the tangible distinction between the adults in charge and the pupils under governance. Not only do the uniforms create contrast between the teachers and the students, but they also create equality and an air of conformity among the students. Dussel (2005) similarly observed an equalizing apron from 1904 Argentinian schools as rooted in rationales of weak women, superficial in nature, who needed

regulation. Happel (2013) also utilizes a critical theory and gender performance lens to challenge the socially-constructed nature of binary gender and sex categorizations with school dress codes and uniforms, particularly those that enforce skirt-wearing. Morris (2005) demonstrated how poorer pupils of color must sometimes conform to dress codes to their detriment, and Rudd (2014) exposed some disciplinary inequities with Black females and the rules pertaining to attire.

Feminist critical policy analysis questions the inherent biases in public policies (Edwards et al., 2020). This approach challenges the notion of gender-neutral policies and instead calls for transformative practices to recognize gender as a dynamic categorization that molds experiences. Claiming either race or gender neutrality fails to respect core components of identity, and such neutrality is a means by which cultural institutions like schools have historically exercised power (Foucault, 1994). This critical theoretical approach also assumes that uniform policies depend on identity and behavior assumptions birthed from White male heteronormativity (Edwards et al., 2020). Intentionally neutral policies that regulate dress may also suppress opportunities for cultural, racial, or ethnic expression. In schools and prisons, uniforms comprise part of a regulatory set that specifies expected behavior and conveys a general sense of discipline imposed by a ruling body (Friedrich et al., 2021). The idea of impartiality in school uniform policies reveals a blindness to difference; disadvantaged students expected to assimilate do not have a ready means to discuss differences (Deane, 2015). When policies are written without identifying racialized or gendered elements of their identity, female students of color are doubly marginalized (Edwards et al., 2020).

School uniform programs aim to capitalize on concepts of social identity theory by uniting students into a proactive and productive social group worthy of prideful association. If discipline is a technique to govern individuals, governments establish laws and enforcement

policies to govern entire populations at once. The aim changes from control to manage (Foucault, 2007). Instead of a disciplinary tool of subjection and surveillance, a uniform policy can appear as a governmental tool for shaping student confidence and preparing its citizenry for professionalism (Friedrich et al., 2021). When the uniform manifests as a prosocial tool for desired group identity, it becomes an attractive and marketable product provided by the school. Rather than social groups of authoritarian teachers juxtaposed against governed student savages, the theoretical framework for uniforms instead involves a sense of unity, pride, and purpose. The school uniform programs still, however, constrain individual student expression.

When school rules regarding attire apply any sort of stringent regulation of girls' bodies in particular, the rules lie in a historical vacuum. With heteronormative ideals of Whiteness as a guide, some dress codes are ignorant of historical enslavement and devoid of women's equality. While girls encounter antiquated expectations of submissiveness and propriety with modern-day dress codes that heavily focus specifically on girls' dress and behavior, race remains unnamed and only indirectly referenced (Edwards et al., 2020). Although theoretically neutral and more practically vague, dress code policy language reinforces historical and institutional control by baselining Whiteness without regard for other race, gender, or sexual identity/orientation considerations. For them to value the intersectional realities of all students—and to assist in reducing disproportionality in all public schools—school leaders can apply critical perspectives to build common ground across diverse cultural perspectives.

Summary

Modern-day schools face more challenges among more diverse student needs than ever before in American history. Individual freedom of expression and anti-racism are popularly

championed like never before, and school uniforms might still serve a positive and multi-faceted purpose for their student wearers and school stakeholders.

This chapter introduced school uniforms from their origin as black and white cloths based on religious sacraments through the colorful display of the poor and orphaned at 15th century Christ's School in London and then to the prestigious private schools of England and elsewhere in Europe. Although some Catholic- and Protestant-based private schools implemented uniform use before their American public counterparts, the American federal government introduced its use in the 1800s at boarding schools serving Native American pupils in schools that some critics have likened to assimilation camps. The more recent rise of uniform use in American public schools followed the Reagan-era *A Nation at Risk* report and growing concern among the public about violence and gang activity in and around our schools.

The literature reviewed in this chapter outlines some positive aspects of uniform use, including improvements to safety and discipline at school. Other research suggests worthwhile by-products of improved school climate, easier stakeholder decisions regarding school attire, and even school pride as depicted in the tangible symbol that is the school uniform. Other literature reviewed in this chapter suggests some adverse outcomes of school uniforms, including the possibility of oppression and restricted freedoms among America's historically most disenfranchised groups. Student and parent rights groups like the ACLU have fought against school district and school administrator invasion of rights, at times criticizing such policies as a distraction or even a mask to the real problems that plague our public schools.

This chapter also provides a history of legal challenges related to uniform policies and an update on cases currently making their way through the American legal system. From the landmark *Tinker v. Des Moines* case that established constitutional protections for students up

through the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit's ruling in June 2022 against female-specific uniform requirements in North Carolina, the American judiciary has confirmed a delicate balance exists between school authority and student freedom.

Previous studies have primarily focused on measures like school safety and violent crime data. Some others have explored achievement marks like grades and test scores, and yet other research studies have delved into constructs like school climate and environmental influences. The literature reviewed in this chapter also introduced a social theory and critical lens to examine uniform use in schools, and this study aimed to discover how students and teachers specifically—the most vested of school constituents—perceive and value (or not) the school uniform. This study aims to bridge the gap in empirical literature within the context of social groups and critical theory to offer worthwhile recommendations for administrative and policymaker decision-making regarding school uniforms in American public middle schools. An overview of the methodology used in this research is provided in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Uniform implementation in American public schools has met an array of different outcomes as measured by a diverse set of variables, including student achievement, student discipline, and community reception (Brunsma et al., 1996; DaCosta, 2006; Gentile & Imberman, 2011; Wade, 2003; Yeung, 2006). As with many efforts, the success of school-related initiatives might rely most on how they affect and influence the experience of those directly involved: teachers and students.

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools, and it employed focus group conversations to understand school uniforms from the students' and teachers' viewpoints. This qualitative exploratory esearch sought to collect rich data by eliciting attitudes, opinions, and perspectives on a specific school uniform experience with teachers and adolescents in the sixth through eighth grade. With a multitude of information available on school uniforms at the elementary level, this study also aimed to add to the literature base specific to middle schools. The methodology for investigating the perceptions of teachers and students in this research dissertation is outlined in the sections that follow.

Research Design

This study was a focus group exploratory study. According to Creswell (2013), interacting with people within their professional environments can reveal an understanding of the nuanced experiences of targeted groups. A qualitative design was selected for this study to ascertain genuine human feelings and feedback within an active learning environment. The focus groups suited this research because they explored these groups' experiences and generated more discussion than possible from an interview-style approach (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). What

teachers and students think about school uniform policies and how they influence their experiences would prove challenging to gauge with only a statistical analysis, so focus group conversations better served the purpose (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The qualitative research was a dual-focus group design. Ravitch and Carl (2021) credit focus groups for generating groupthink, whereby an individual introduces a topic to facilitate the rest of the group's focus on said topic to produce a collective group understanding. With the school uniform experience, the participants commented about each other's thoughts and experiences, and their discussion extended beyond the stated questions on the instrument. Patton (2015) noted how focus groups serve as a control because participants check and balance each other's comments while mediating extreme views. Focus groups also encourage various kinds of communication from participants, which helps participants reveal and discuss group norms and embedded cultural values (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

This study explored the perceptions about school uniforms from two groups of students and two groups of teachers from two different schools. The uniformed school experience is a collective one, and focus groups yielded sought-after data from these discussions.

Research Questions

The research questions stemmed from the study's purpose and provided specificity about the research goals. These qualitative research questions facilitated open answers that fostered discussion about the school uniform experience. Seven research questions guided the implementation of these qualitative focus group conversations. These research questions facilitated the expression of ideas beyond just the stated question, providing a rich assortment of language from which the research produced data to analyze. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do teachers experience school uniform implementation and enforcement?

2. How do students experience school uniform implementation and enforcement?

3. What do teachers identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

4. What do teachers identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

5. What do students identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

6. What do students identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

7. What similarities and differences exist in the perceptions of school uniforms among students of different genders and cultural backgrounds?

Setting

The setting for this study involved two different traditional public middle schools in North Carolina. A pseudonym was used to protect each school's identity. Suburban Middle School is in an affluent area approximately 30 miles from a large (250,000+ people) city, and Central Middle School is located within a small (approximately 50,000 people) city. These sites served the research purpose for several reasons. First, both schools operated during the time of this study as traditional middle schools, serving students in Grades 6-8 within an environment consisting of a school-imposed uniform policy. Second, both schools were accessible. Less than 50 miles apart, the schools were close enough to provide physical access as necessary, and both middle school principals and the relevant district officials welcomed the research. Lastly, the schools starkly contrasted one another regarding several demographic characteristics and achievement outcomes.

Suburban Middle School (SMS) is a traditional public middle school serving 1,425 students in grades 6-8 in North Carolina. Per the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the school demographics included approximately 70% White, 12% Asian, and just under 10%

student composition for both Black and Hispanic subgroups. There were 100 more males than females. The school historically performs well as measured by accountability outcomes established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021), and those measures contributed to its recognition as a top middle school in the state. According to its student manual, the school partners with families and the community to create a positive learning environment that will challenge students to realize their full potential as lifelong learners and responsible citizens in a global society (Suburban Middle Student Agenda, 2021).

The dress code/uniform program provides a standard dress policy for all students. Permitted attire includes khaki or navy bottoms with solid tops in one of the following colors: white, navy, green, and khaki. T-shirts and collared/polo shirts must remain tucked into bottoms, and uniform spirit wear provided by the Parent Teacher Student Organization and Athletic Booster Club is permissible as approved by the principal. Parents and the school's Site-based Committee voted to implement the standard dress policy to provide students with an environment conducive to learning and without disruption because of student dress or appearance. Reference Appendix A for the comprehensive Suburban Middle School uniform/dress code rules and requirements.

Central Middle School is a traditional public school serving 1,344 students in Grades 6-8 in North Carolina. Per the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the school's population includes approximately 29% White, 28% Black, and 35% Hispanic students. Central Middle School is designated a Title I School because approximately half its student population receives free or reduced-price lunch. The school has typically not performed well as measured by outcomes identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2022). In

the 2021-2022 school year, the school received an "F" letter grade and did not meet its growth target (NCDPI, 2022).

The Central Middle School uniform policy requires collared shirts or school spirit wear for tops and solid-colored bottoms consisting of black, khaki, navy, or gray (excluding athletic material or jeans) (Central City Schools, 2022). The policy was revised as recently as the 2020-2021 school year, and items that previously met the dress code were excluded from the current policy. However, this new policy does provide expanded options. See Appendix B for the comprehensive Central Middle School uniform policy in both English and Spanish.

Participants

This study targeted two teacher participant groups and two student participant groups involved in a school uniform program at two different schools, and the research data provided extensive information about student and teacher perceptions of school uniforms in the context of the overall school experience. Each group included diversity as it relates to gender and to race. Participants emerged through purposive sampling, utilizing principal familiarity with teachers and teacher familiarity with students to glean information from representative samples. The researcher established school administrative contact via an established contact protocol. See Appendix C for the entire administrative contact protocol.

Following Krueger et al.'s (2015) suggestion that focus groups not extend beyond 10 participants, 10 teacher participants came from a volunteer teacher pool in each school. See Appendix D for the recruitment email for teachers. Using available staff demographic data about teacher participants, the researcher facilitated diversity of race, gender, and grade level taught within the pool.

With the assistance of each school's principal, purposive sampling helped ensure that teacher participants were representative of their respective schools. Only one male was willing to participate at Central, and one teacher was absent on the day of the teacher focus group at Suburban. Student participants also emerged through purposive sampling, utilizing teacher familiarity with students to form a representative sample. The researcher established student contact through an established protocol and similarly collected demographic information. See Appendix E for the student contact protocol.

Each teacher participant at both schools identified three students who were capable and comfortable with conversing about the school uniform. The researcher sought to include three teachers from each grade level, with each of the three participating teachers selecting three students capable of and comfortable with conversing about the uniform. This produced a 30-student pool at each school from which the researcher selected 10 students for each of the two student focus groups. The researcher then selected three students from each grade level, ensuring at least one male and one female student from each grade level. A tenth student from any grade capped the focus group to satisfy these domains.

This nine- or ten-student group represented the focus group sample that provided the data regarding school uniforms through the methodical focus group protocol. By intentionally accounting for race and gender, the representative sample provided meaningful results in the context of the relevant discussions in the focus group. All participant selection in each of the four total focus groups involved informed consent through teacher-appropriate and student-appropriate written documentation and verbal consent before starting the focus group conversations. See Appendices H and I, respectively, for the adult consent and minor consent

information. A detailed participant summary and individual participant profiles are provided in Chapter 4.

Data Collection

This focus group study used a multiple-category design involving two categories of participants: teachers and students. See Appendix J for the comprehensive focus group protocol. This study also entailed a double-layer design to enable comparisons across layers (Krueger et al., 2015). With two categories of teachers and students, the data produced the following analytical layers: race and gender.

Focus groups occurred in phases, beginning with Central teachers followed by transcription, Suburban teachers followed by transcription, Central students followed by transcription, and Suburban students followed by transcription. The responsiveness and availability of groups formed the foundation of this sequence, with adults preceding students to ease and enlighten the discussion. By conducting the focus groups in phases with transcription and reflection along this sequence, analysis, and adjustments were readily available (Krueger et al., 2015). With a semi-structured focus group protocol to include the research questions and subsequent commentary from group member participants—all recorded and transcribed—the study also utilized a lead teacher from each of the two teacher groups who read and reviewed the focus group transcripts. These member checks m increased accuracy and minimized bias within the researcher transcription process (Ravitch et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

Facilitating productive focus groups generated transcription results worthy of meaningful coding (Kreuger et al., 2015). With the exploratory nature of this study, the general analysis of giving meaning to the words began from the ground up and utilized the constant comparative

method based on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967). After two rounds of manual coding, the

analysis progressed from the granular round of coding into a more thematic clustering of

concepts (Kreuger, 2015). While analyzing the categories of responses in each focus group, the

research considered frequency, extensiveness, intensity, specificity, internal consistency, and

participant perception of importance (Kreuger, 2015). Codes were grouped into categories that,

once finalized, illustrated connections and manifested themes related to the research questions.

The fourth phase of data analysis included writing a thorough description of the collective focus

group studies. This analysis included comparing and contrasting the institutions under study,

their participants' responses, and the identified themes and supporting quotations that emerged

from the rich conversation (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Some peer debriefing with Dr. Cassie

Eley, Piedmont Middle Principal in Union County, NC, bolstered the data analysis. The

comprehensive written description, the study results, and the findings are described in Chapter 4.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness involves credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability

(Lincoln et al., 1985). Several strategies recommended by Lincoln et al. (1985) were employed

to maintain quality in this focus group study and increase its credibility and trustworthiness.

First, a subjectivity statement is included in this chapter to acknowledge and demonstrate

transparency about potential researcher bias (Creswell, 2013). Second, data analysis involved

member checks and peer debriefing throughout the multi-phase transcription process.

Additionally, by using multiple readings followed by multiple rounds of coding, the researcher

improved dependability. Raw data in the form of direct quotations provide direct evidence for

the relevant themes established. Third, in order to increase reliability, the focus group protocol is

outlined in this chapter. Incorporating an external audit to review the coding and study protocol

also bolstered dependability and confirmability (Lincoln et al., 1985). Finally, as a novice researcher, the peer and university supervising guidance lent expertise to this research on middle school adolescents.

While these qualitative findings do not allow for statistical generalization, analysis of the interaction within focus groups and the comparison amongst them manifested new information to better understand and perhaps refine school uniform policy implementation.

Ethical Considerations

This study posed minimal risk to participants. The study's intent, time commitment, voluntary nature, and ability to withdraw at any time were provided in writing to all potential participants. The conversation involved school uniforms in the context of the overall school experience, but sharing personal thoughts and feelings on this particular topic did not emerge as overly sensitive or hurtful to the participants. As an extra precaution, participants could abandon the conversation at any point and without cause or question. The names of all participants in this study were replaced with numbers or pseudonyms. Research procedures did not vary from those that received specific approval from the UNC Charlotte IRB review protocol.

Subjectivity Statement

I am currently the principal at Suburban Middle School. I arrived there with only high school professional experience, and I encountered the uniform policy there with curiosity and skepticism. Over eight years, I have made my own observations which potentially contribute to bias as it relates to this topic. Although my role provides convenient access to this school's teachers and students, I have to offer some degree of neutrality regarding the true expression of their sentiments on uniforms. Experience working with these teachers and students contributes to some preconceived notions, and that made ground-up and objective analysis of the data these

conversations produce increasingly important. I have no other personal or professional associations with school uniforms, and my familiarity with the policy relates only to my current position.

I am a White male who attended relatively white, relatively high-performing public secondary schools in South Carolina. I attended North Carolina's flagship university, and I have spent 22 years serving as a teacher or principal in Charlotte-area secondary schools. I have no familiarity with Central Middle School or the City of Central beyond casual travels in this state and the information I have learned in pursuing this research.

I have mostly favorable experiences with middle school uniforms as a professional in my own school. However, I remained open-minded when listening to and analyzing the responses from participants in this study. The lack of familiarity contributes to more contrast, as the Central student body appears to be a much different student demographic than the student body at Suburban. This makes the potential comparison and contrast between schools and the various subgroups within them even more fruitful for analysis. I nevertheless acknowledge that my background can potentially influence how I interacted with and interpreted the data I encountered in conducting this research.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodology the researcher used to conduct focus group discussions about school uniforms within four different groups (Suburban students, Suburban teachers, Central students, and Central teachers). The qualitative nature of these focus group conversations was described, including the setting, participant selection process, and data collection and analysis techniques. Strategies to enhance quality were also described. Risk-management techniques for participants and ethical considerations were included. A subjectivity

statement provides the reader with an understanding of the frame in which the researcher might

view this work. Comprehensive findings and their interpretations are in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, the researcher's goal was to examine students' and teachers' perspectives and understand their experiences with their middle school uniforms. Using a dual-focus group design, the researcher focused on how teachers and students experience the uniform, the outcomes associated with its implementation at school, and the variance in the perspectives of students from different cultural backgrounds.

In this chapter, the researcher provides findings from the focus group discussion data, information about the codes and categories established through data annotation and analysis, and details from each of the two school uniform environments. The researcher used pseudonyms for the school sites and numbers to represent individual students and teachers, thereby providing anonymity and maintaining confidentiality. The researcher termed the higher-achieving school in a more affluent area Suburban Middle School and the lower-achieving school in a working-class community Central Middle School. Once the researcher conducted the four focus group conversations, the discussions were transcribed and then annotated. The researcher read through the focus group conversations multiple times and established codes to describe the words and phrases taken from transcription. The raw data in the form of words and phrases with accompanying codes were entered into a *Microsoft Excel* digital database. The codes were further organized into categories and then reexamined and reorganized, color-coded by categorization. The researcher then created thematic sentences to provide meaning to the coded data set. Using the thematic sentences, the data were grouped into large, broad themes. Each school was examined in the context of its teachers' and students' perspectives of their own

schools, and then those results were compared across schools. The implications and comments for further discussion are presented in Chapter 5.

Recruitment Results

Four focus groups were conducted in this study. Teacher focus groups and student focus groups were each conducted at Suburban and Central Middle Schools. Each school's principal provided teachers with a contact protocol that explained and invited them to the study. Teachers at both schools who were selected for the study then provided students in their first block class with the student contact protocol that explained and invited them to the study. This means that only the students whose teachers elected to participate were included, but this still provided a pool of approximately 300 students from which to select focus groups (10 teachers with roughly 30 students per class). Interested students facilitated researcher access to their parents through email, and selected student participants received and provided documentation of proper informed consent. Each focus group was considered a representative sample of teachers or students at their schools. A description of each focus group is provided in the sections that follow.

Central Middle School Focus Groups

Ten teachers participated in the Central Middle School focus group. The researcher initially intended to include only core content teachers from across the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades at Central Middle School. This was because related arts/electives teachers typically have no students and no homeroom class. However, the researcher included a male physical education teacher at Central Middle School to include some gender diversity. This group consisted of two 6th-grade teachers, four 7th-grade teachers, three 8th-grade teachers, and one male PE teacher. Nine participants were women, and one was a man. Eight of the participants were White, and

two women participants were Hispanic. All participants were fully certified teachers who began the year teaching students in a school that has adopted a school uniform policy.

The Central Middle School student focus group also originally had ten members, but one did not attend school on the day of the focus group. The final Central Middle School student group consisted of five females and four males. Five White students and four students of color participated. The Central Middle School student group comprised four 8th graders, three 7th graders, and two 6th graders.

Suburban Middle School Focus Groups

Ten teachers agreed to the focus group conversation at Suburban Middle School, but one teacher was absent on the day of the discussion. The nine-member Suburban Middle School teacher group consisted of two 6th-grade teachers, four 7th-grade teachers, and three 8th-grade teachers. Six participants were women, and three were men. Seven teacher participants were White, and two teacher participants were people of color. All teachers at Suburban were core content teachers who began the year teaching at Suburban with the uniform policy intact and operational.

The Suburban Middle School student focus group consisted of ten students. Four male students and six female students participated. This group comprised three 8th graders, four 7th graders, and three 6th graders.

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Major Findings

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Schools reflect their communities, and each one has a unique culture that shapes the experiences of those who function within it. Uniforms can serve as an integral piece of that school culture, as the perspectives on school uniforms from the two participating schools reflect each school's unique culture.

Teachers want to maximize available time for teaching and learning, and virtually any focus group discussion about pupil dress requirements aligned with that prioritized focus. Suburban Middle School teachers lauded the uniform and credited its use with some of the school's well-established and well-publicized success. Central Middle School teachers, conversely, perceived their school uniform as a symbol of inconsistency and an impediment to functional learning. Suburban Middle teachers praised the ease of enforcement, while Central Middle teachers bemoaned the abundance of violations and lobbied to abandon the uniform.

Student perspectives paralleled the teachers' experiences. Suburban students voiced some complaints about the discomfort of khaki pants and keeping shirts tucked in, but they also acknowledged experiencing some pride when wearing their school gear, particularly when representing a sport or other favorite activity. Central students confirmed lax enforcement of the uniform policy and shared tips like zipping up outerwear to disguise a t-shirt out of compliance. Students and teachers at both schools acknowledged that conflict about clothes can hamper relationships, and seemingly everyone involved recognized how important good relationships were to effective learning environments. Suburban teachers credit the uniform for setting the standard for focus because it is tangible, it is at the forefront of school preparation at the beginning of the year and with all newcomers, and it is such that nearly all students choose to wear the same thing. Suburban students even remark about how the uniform "creates an equality."

Central students dubbed enforcement "lenient," but still developed some consensus that teachers more commonly addressed female students for uniform violations. Teachers did not share this perspective, but even Suburban students reported that female violations were more common. This means that students at both schools observed that teachers are more likely to

confront female students about uniform violations. Although focus group members did not produce evidence to suggest different experiences for students of different cultural backgrounds, the schools themselves represent different cultural experiences. Bloom (2015) noted that Black and Hispanic students more commonly wear school uniforms than White students, and Suburban Middle School proves an outlier as a predominately White, high-performing middle school that utilizes uniforms.

Ease was viewed as more important than safety; no one really wanted negative issues related to student attire. Therefore, clarity, community understanding, and support are key. That makes a mechanism for input and evolution a key necessity. Under ideal circumstances, a school uniform can function as a source of pride that makes school attire morph from a battle between adults and students about what to wear each day into a simple and even spirited representation of the school. In both environments, students made clear that they were much more receptive to adorning the school name or mascot than they were to wearing a relatively plain and non-expressive shirt that might be more traditional school uniform wear. Collared shirts were less concerning to student participants if they can wear school gear.

Minor Sub-findings

Enhancing instructional focus is indeed a possible indirect outcome, and it is rare that teachers or students would welcome conflict about things like pupil attire. Some students and teachers credited the uniform for a sense of professionalism and unity, and nearly everyone acknowledged some benefit to minimizing the matters (like what students are wearing) about which adolescents may argue. Although a mechanism for community input and evolution must exist even amidst significant support, it is particularly important to monitor the manner in which a uniform policy can restrict student expression. According to students in these focus groups,

female students experience more challenges regarding the dress expectations. Teachers and

students did not directly voice concerns across cultural barriers, but each school's constituents

contributed from their school's cultural perspective. These schools, in essence, represented

different cultures, and their comments about their school uniforms reflected that.

Manifestation of the Codes

After correctly transcribing and formatting the focus group recordings, the researcher

read and then annotated the transcripts to extract meaning from the words and phrases

contributed by the focus group participants. Teachers more commonly mentioned any academic

ties to uniforms, but both "focus" and "ease" manifested as codes coming from the Suburban

Middle School conversation. Both schools provided commentary reasonably categorized under

"safety," and then the researcher reserved a code for "neutral to negative" associations within

each of the three major identifications: safety and health, professional and community, and pride

and expression. See Table 1 for coding categorized as "Safety and Health."

Table 1

Safety and Health Codes

	Focus	Ease	Safe	Neutral to Negative
SMS student	0	1	3	2
SMS teacher	14	14	4	0
CMS student	0	1	1	2
CMS teacher	5	6	1	7
Total	19	22	9	11

"Ease" proved a common trend during conversations with both groups, reflecting more of a mental health component than the physical safety of school uniforms endorsed by the Clinton Administration (ProCon.org, 2021). "Focus" served as a code for comments reflecting the uniform's positive impact on maintaining student engagement and/or eliminating distractions. Professionalism emerged as a code in conversations at both schools, but constructs like "community" and egalitarianism ("level field") emerged only at Suburban Middle School. Table 2 posits this information against other codes within the "Professionalism and Community" categorization.

Table 2

Professional and Community Codes

	Community	Environment	Professional	Level Field	Neutral to Negative
SMS Student	2	1	1	3	1
SMS Teacher	10	0	2	5	1
CMS Student	0	2	0	0	0
CM Teacher	0	8	4	0	5
Total	12	11	7	8	7

The third and final categorization involved pride, school spirit, and modes of student expression. Suburban Middle focus group participants emphasized some sense of pride in the context of their school uniforms, particularly when the attire related to a favored activity. Central Middle students referred to available spirit wear permissible within their school uniform policy, but school-specific clothing was less integrated into the populace at Central Middle School. Participants from every focus group voiced concerns about the uniform's restrictions on

student expression, and the majority of those centered on discrepancies in gender experience.

Participants from every group also voiced reservations about how uniforms—or more pointedly,

conflict over uniforms—could hamper the relationships necessary for learning. The researcher

coded "neutral to negative (N/-)" contributions specific to gender, relationships, or other items.

Table 3 presents these codes.

Table 3

Pride and Expression Codes

	Pride/Spirit	N/- Gender	N/- Relations	Other N/-
SMS Student	5	3	2	4
SMS Teacher	18	2	4	1
CMS Student	0	14	5	6
CM Teacher	0	1	1	1
Total	23	20	17	12

The Teacher Experience

Both teacher groups identified a sense of professionalism and a goal of reducing conflict

as a part of their school uniform experience. What constitutes professionalism has varied within

each school over time, and both teacher groups described considerable adaptation as schools

progressed through the COVID-19 pandemic. Central Middle School teachers remembered an

environment prior to uniform adoption when the school sought "a common language" for "how

to ask our kids to pull pants up, make sure shirts were down, how to be covered, and how to

prepare them for a job that would also want them to dress a certain way." Policies in both

schools were nearly 20 years old, and school experiences differed in part because Central

students wore the uniform in elementary school as part of a K-12 system-wide policy, but the Suburban Middle School policy is unique to Grades 6-8 in its school district.

Four of the Central Middle School teachers were also parents and two of those expressed some disappointment with their uniform experience in contrast to what they expected. A 7th-grade female teacher "found it more frustrating…we are having a large number of kids that are consistently coming out of dress code." Another teacher-parent, who came to the middle school after teaching at the feeder elementary, said, "There's a lot less of a value on [the uniform] here for sure compared to the elementary." A teacher new to Central, but an experienced educator of 23 years, noted that this was her first-time teaching in a school with a uniform, and she really liked it: "I feel like I spend a lot less time addressing students for, you know, showing bad language…or, you know, body parts." This comment illustrated the general notion from teachers at both schools that they prefer to focus on teaching and learning and relationships that uniform policy enforcement. Therefore, participants' responses suggested that a successful dress/uniform policy is one in which the intersection of violation and enforcement proves relatively easy, straightforward, and impersonal.

A policy with clarity and consensus support makes it more effective, and the Suburban Middle School teachers consistently credited the school uniform policy for its ease and simplicity. While spotting sweatpants at either school might be easy, inconsistent policy enforcement made sweatpants a more common occurrence among the students at Central Middle. For example, the male PE teacher at Central admitted that he knows the rules, but he rarely demands that students change their sweatpants. He summarized his reaction to this circumstance with a question: "Like if I'm enforcing it, but my partner teacher is not, then how will I ever make a difference?"

At Suburban, a 7th-grade female teacher admitted some uncertainty about the uniform and its purpose when she arrived four years ago, but observation with and among her peers made it obvious. "It's very objective," she said, "I think it actually helps clarify it that if you're breaking it, it's obvious." An 8th-grade White female who had two daughters come through the school within the last five years said, "It simplified [my] life." A male Suburban teacher with two daughters currently enrolled in the school agreed, stating, "It does take a lot of that middle school drama that I think tends to ruin a kid's morning." Three of the nine Suburban teachers were also Suburban parents, and all agreed with the idea that the uniform eased the daily attire choices.

Despite its relative ease, Suburban teachers introduced the idea of "selling" and "pitching" the uniform to stakeholders. As such, there was more of a teacher effort at Suburban behind the idea of getting students "to buy into it." Both teacher groups lamented some of the more recent, post-COVID relaxations to the school uniform policy, and a Suburban 7th-grade female teacher did "play devil's advocate" by sharing that some students "do feel like they don't have the freedom to express themselves like they haven't got the buy-in yet."

Central Middle teachers similarly remembered a pre-COVID era in which the uniform was "very strict." Some of the more recent years' changes to the district policy relevant to Central have included changes to the mandatory colors by grade level (now any grade level can wear the permissible colors), and leggings are permissible under approved bottom wear. Belt loops once required belts to go through them, and khakis and collared shirts remained the policy requirement. With some of these significant changes, Central teachers pointed to a lack of community involvement as a factor leading to the current ambiguity. An 8th-grade female teacher said, "Last year…the district said, oh leggings if this or cargo if that; so if we keep the uniform policy, I would like it to be a little more clarified and simplified." The sole Central male teacher

participant, who had taught at Central for the last 10 years, pointedly offered that "If we're not enforcing it, then it has no validity to it." Both teacher groups recognized that the uniform/dress code conversation continues within the school and out in the community, but one 8th-grade Central teacher seemed to express the commonly acknowledged notion that "I don't think [we] could go back to the stricter dress code."

The Student Experience

Students provided much more commentary than teachers about the gender-related nuances of experiencing a middle school uniform policy. Both student groups offered consensus about female students experiencing more general attention about attire, and the data revealed mention of the word "girl" much more frequently than the term "boy" within the focus group conversations. Central and Suburban students uttered those words 53 and 34 times, respectively, whereas Central and Suburban teachers collectively incorporated those terms only 15 (girl) and 13 (boy) times.

The researcher made note of any "neutral to negative (N/-)" commentary that was designated as potential for problems with the school uniform. Of the 20 terms categorized as potential for gender-related problems specifically, 17 of those concerns came from students. Further analysis with terms like "hoodie" (male) and "cover" (female) also revealed some consistent gender associations, and those terms emerged 45 times with students as compared to 20 times total with the teachers. Students made comments like "I feel like most teachers go to girls" and "It isn't fair to girls." A couple of female students from Central opined very directly, calling the experience "disheartening" while adding, "Boys don't have to cover their butts…it's just girls…the boys they need to teach them how to keep their mind focused on getting straight to the problem instead of dealing with what they're attracted to." A 7th-grade peer followed that

with "mostly girls get…sexualized out of the whole entire thing." These comments centered around a discussion of leggings and the perception that school staff were less likely to confront students about leggings (a violation) so long as female buttocks were covered. Central Middle School students observed this as a stark contrast to the male students who could regularly wear sweatpants (also a violation) without any additional expectations or consequences. Even the relatively few teacher comments involving gender referenced females more often, with comments like "mid-riff," "cleavage," and "short-shorts" occurring more frequently than male-associated phrases like "the boys with the hoodies."

While most Suburban students described a degree of conformity with the school uniform policy, Central students were more likely to note lax enforcement and subtle means to circumvent staff notice. For example, one Central student described how his Wakanda t-shirt was hidden by his zip-up jacket outerwear even though plain collared shirts were the expectation. A simple zip allowed conformity, whereas a similarly simple unzip would allow student expression. Several Central students endorsed this technique to hide or disguise prohibited attire, and that group shared the observation about inconsistent uniform enforcement by staff. An 8th-grade Black female student said about one teacher she deemed an inconsistent enforcer: "With certain people she doesn't but with certain other people she does." As the conversation continued, Central students revealed this as a gap between male and female students. A 7th-grade female pointedly offered that staff would almost assuredly address girls with ripped jeans, but maybe not boys: "But I feel like if boys wore ripped jeans and they wore it where the thigh was, then it wouldn't really matter." These types of comments manifested the "neutral to negative (N/-") associated with gender.

Suburban students shared this observational disparity with their peers from Central but to a lesser degree. Suburban students agreed that girls generally experienced more challenges with attire at school (and in society). One of the Suburban female students described the uniform as "more unfair to girls because like, if we wear shorts, then apparently they're too tight or too short…so when boys wear the shorts, it's fine for some reason." In addition to this type of gender-based comment, Suburban students described the inhibition and discomfort caused by their school attire. For example, a 6th-grader new to the uniform said, "They're uncomfortable in general…so it becomes harder to tuck in your shirt as you move around, and it's just a pain to constantly take your time out to tuck in our shirt." Despite these restrictions, both student groups expressed some willingness to don school gear. At Suburban Middle School, the ability to wear clothes representing preferred school activities like sports enhanced the uniform's appeal such that it became a source of pride.

Particularly for student-athletes, attire associated with sports teams proved desirable to students. An 8th-grade White female student at Suburban said, "If you play the sport, you should be able to wear the like shirt with the sport on it, but for your school (not for club)." Her classmate of color emphasized, "If you play the sport, then only you can have that sweatshirt and like your other teammates." An 8th-grade baseball and basketball player said, "I think being able to wear your sport on your shirt is kind of a pride thing…so if you work for it, then you should be able to wear it." A Central student also referenced school-specific spirit wear that was permissible to wear, literally pointing to a glass-cased display of "eagle shirts" in the school lobby and explaining, "You can wear anything in that case right there." Such a practice appeared much less integrated into the student populace at Central, and the Central students identified the cost of such attire as a factor in why more of them were not wearing that school spirit wear.

Both student groups acknowledged the school uniform's aim to enhance the environment by requiring students to go beyond the "inappropriate comfort clothes" that they were accustomed to wearing outside the school. However, an 8th-grade female student at Central expressed concerns, suggesting "We're not here to be like oh put this dress code on so you can be like part of the whole entire working facility." She elaborated to say teachers explained the uniform as if it were part of the student's job as a student; the 8th-grader, still, was unconvinced: "So you better pretend like this is a whole entire job and pretend like your life is on the line for which it's not—I'm not buying it." Students also observed how the uniform was sometimes expensive, exasperating a cost issue because they did not wear the uniform clothes outside of school. A 6th-grade female at Central said plainly, "I would change the uniform and then you can just wear the clothes you have at home." A 7th-grade peer quickly echoed that comment, stating, "It's about like if you just want to wear something that's at your house." Suburban students also recognized the cost burden with school-specific attire, but those students admitted more likelihood in wearing their uniform wear outside of the school environment. The fiscal reality of clothes, however, was not lost on either student group. In reference to the cost and practicality concerns, one Central student focus group member offered the somber observation, "The last thing we need to worry about is buying clothes…when we already got water bills, food, taxes stuff like that."

Positive and Negative Aspects and Outcomes

Both teacher groups identified multiple goals and outcomes associated with their school uniform policies. Setting expectations and creating a focused learning environment were priorities among the educators, and a teacher at Suburban Middle School praised its student uniform for maintaining engagement and eliminating distractions. The teacher credited the attire

for establishing those expectations "right from the get go," leading the pupils to "a lot less of that kind of banter" that leads to "middle school drama." Part of this involves the egalitarian function of the uniform policy in which it is less likely for students to display differences that could lead to confrontation. A potential downside of this more aligned appearance is that students are less likely to confront the differences that are inevitable part of their lives, so an argument remains about when and how pupils are to face in school some of these stark differences among one another. It is noteworthy that both sets of teachers attributed more value to the ease of morning routines than they did to student safety. Still, all the focus group participants recognized the value of safety a uniform provides by increasing the likelihood of spotting an outsider on campus.

Although Central Middle School teachers described some benefits related to the ease of morning routines and safety, there existed within the group perspective a longing sentiment for the uniform policy of yesteryear. Students at Central once had designated colors per grade level, and a pair of teachers jointly expressed missing this: "It was really easy to tell if somebody was where they weren't supposed to be." Another teacher quickly followed that comment by remarking, "In terms of student safety, I feel like we lost it a little bit there." The Central teachers described a "suitable professional environment" that was no longer present at the school. They described how "behavior was different" and changes over the years have left "a lot of gray area in the middle school field." This variable of district declaration on the school uniform at Central served as an impediment to its acceptance, as the teachers experienced a disconnect. In addition to elementary students wearing the same attire, Central teachers described how the district just recently—and, from their perspective, without notice—eliminated high

school students from the policy. These district variables manifested some unique challenges to the Central Middle School leadership.

Members from all four focus groups recognized the need for clarity not only with the written policy, but also—and more importantly—the enforcement and experience. Students acknowledged that "rules are upsetting" and school dress codes "depress creativity," but they also recognized the equality and collective identity the uniform aimed to impart. A Central student, an 8th-grade White male, offered that the biggest reason Central Middle School had a uniform policy was "bullying." When asked if it has helped, he said "not really" and explained, "If you just mind your business and go on about your day and be respectful to somebody, I think it doesn't really matter." Another Central student, an 8th-grade Black female, then took a different position: "It's more about what kids are wearing these days at school and how they're not appropriate." An 8th-grade Suburban teacher offered that the goal of the uniform policy involved eliminating distractions: "No differentiation between the haves and have-nots…and to have some uniformity." An 8th-grade Suburban male student of color admitted, "At first, I wasn't a very big fan of [the uniform], but as I got used to it, I think it just kind of creates an equality." A 7th-grade male peer agreed, "It provides a sense of unity between all the students." A 7th-grade female added that the uniform functioned by "stopping groups from forming and from bullies and things like that." A 7th-grade Suburban female teacher commented on this, offering, "As a teacher, I have no idea which kids have money and which don't; I have no idea, and so I think that says something!"

Both student groups acknowledged the likelihood of a different environment were the uniform not in place at their respective schools. While one insisted that the uniform has "negatively like depressed our creativity with our clothing," another admitted, "If we did wear

what we wanted, the level of discipline would definitely go up." Uniform and dress code relaxations during and beyond the pandemic have attempted to make the requirement more bearable for students. Under ideal circumstances, a school uniform can serve as an advertisement for the school and even as a source of school pride for its constituents. The mechanism for that seemed to exist in providing students with school-specific clothing with mascots and school activity affiliations.

Particularly along the lines of sports attire, commentary associated with "pride and spirit" manifested from some of the focus group conversations. Some of the comments also lent to a "community" construct, as this involved community sports and the notion of representing the school. When they began to discuss their sports attire and school-specific uniform wear—in contrast to the plain clothes permissible within both uniform policies—students more eagerly embraced the idea of a uniform. Suburban students admitted a high likelihood of wearing their uniform when outside the school and in the community. After a 7th-grader said, "The majority of time people would be wearing school gear," a Suburban 8th-grader agreed, "If we could wear whatever we want, I'd probably be wearing this." The conversation did reveal some social structuring even within uniform specifications, as one 7th-grade White female observed, "The sweatshirts are like a hierarchy, and if you have a certain sweatshirt, then you're more popular than another person." This sentiment is juxtaposed against the community associations that stem from representing the school.

Conversations about attire between teachers and students can commonly involve conflict, and all focus group participants recognized the importance of relationships in teaching and learning. Even the teachers who most strongly endorsed the uniform emphasized how delicate its enforcement can be as it pertains to their relationships with students. Teachers freely shared

strategies to "make it less personal" while celebrating the "mindset" that accompanies the school-designated clothing. Clarity in the policy facilitated its enforcement and acceptance, and participant commentary revealed this as a relative weakness at Central Middle School.

With deference to the community and the requisite support necessary for its schools to flourish, both groups of teachers realized the uniform policy's success with students depended on the community's reception of them. The uniform is essentially a medium of interaction between the school and the community. A Central teacher described this observation by saying, "It starts with the teachers and adults in the building." A Suburban teacher articulated it by offering, "We really need to sell them on the benefits of what this does to our school climate." At some point, the uniform had the potential to unify and symbolize a positive association with the school, and that is among the most ideal positive outcomes of a school uniform policy. An 8th-grade Suburban male teacher observed, "There is a genuine sense, someone mentioned it, of camaraderie, the brand like, you know, we're you know, we're Suburban Middle School; we wear this stuff!" A 7th-grade colleague bolstered this comment, saying, "You can go out on the weekends and kids are wearing their uniform!"

Variance in Perspectives—Gender and Cultural Backgrounds

This study's two featured schools represent two distinctly different cultural backgrounds. Although both institutions are North Carolina public middle schools, Central Middle is its district's sole middle school located within an old mill town. The historically low-performing school serves mostly students of color and a high percentage of students in poverty. Suburban Middle School is one of its district's multiple middle schools, and it is the only traditional school in the district with a uniform policy. The school serves mostly White students from a relatively affluent community, and the school is historically high-performing. These dynamics make the

schools a cultural contrast, a matter worth considering when comparing their uniform policies and the perspectives of their local stakeholders. When a Central teacher comments, for example, that "Khakis don't equal good grades," there exists inherent in the remark a greater challenge for the teacher at Central to facilitate academic success for students than there is at Suburban. Similarly, uniform requirements that minimize social stratification might manifest differently within these environments. Also, argument remains about the role of educators in helping students confront and address these differences. As one Central Middle teacher commented, "The uniform tries to establish an equal playing field, but in reality, that's not it."

Restrictions to student expression can affect students from different backgrounds differently. Whether from the resourcefulness of its community, the wider assortment of available styles, or via the means by which the school marketed the uniform, teachers and students at Suburban Middle School better accepted the policy. A 7th-grade Suburban teacher emphasized, "It takes effort to get the kids to buy into this." The teachers described how they heap praise upon Suburban students as compared to their out-of-uniform, cross-county counterparts. "We wear uniforms" becomes the mantra, and it's spelled out literally in student handbooks the children receive at the start of the year and upon enrollment. A Suburban teacher observed, "We deal with no issues related to people wearing clothing that in other schools might be gang-related…so we deal with no gang issues." While he credits the uniform, it might also prove true that gang issues are generally less prevalent in the area surrounding Suburban Middle School. "Also," he continued, "we have very few issues with people of different incomes…because of that, you have an atmosphere in the classroom where you can teach." An 8th-grade Suburban male teacher of color added, "It helps in that regard as well as in terms of just

overall issues and things popping up because of what somebody has in the world." Again the Suburban Middle School teachers credited the uniform policy with causality.

Students voiced with frequency and intensity that females experience uniforms—and seemingly dress requirements of all kinds—differently than their male counterparts. Students consistently reported that females were more commonly required to change clothes because they were not in compliance with the uniform policy. One Central female student mimicked the interactions they encountered from teachers upon wearing attire in violation of the uniform policy: "You can't wear that…take that hood off…you need to change." She reasoned that Central Middle staff must think, "You have to look like everybody else to be learning." Suburban teachers described over the years some amendments to the uniform policy to eliminate requirements like no unnatural hair color, no multiple piercings, and the distinction between male and female expectations. Both hair color and piercings were only recently deemed more relatively permanent and personally expressive and, therefore, uniform-permissible. According to Suburban staff, these changes resulted from awareness about the cultural and legal challenges to dress codes and uniform policies elsewhere. Although this is also true regarding the abandonment of gender-specific requirements, a philosophy exists that gender-neutral policies simply employ vagueness disguised as neutrality, but it is not neutral (Edwards et al., 2020).

Neither student group identified overt biases in their schools' written policies, but students at both schools consistently expressed the opinion that females encountered more challenges with school uniform requirements. The fact that teachers more commonly referenced female behaviors in the context of this conversation lends credence to this shared student observation. Although cultural differences in the two schools manifested nuanced perspectives on the uniform policies, none of the focus group participants provided evidence that students of

different cultural backgrounds experienced the uniform differently within their own schools. In other words, there were no discernible differences between the comments from White participants and from participants of color. Perhaps there is too little diversity within each individual school, or perhaps this topic proved too sensitive to emerge within these discussions.

Like the amendments made more recently at Suburban because of an awareness of legal and cultural evolutions, both schools' leaders should maintain a watchful eye on these sensitive and potentially contentious issues. As observed multiple times from both teacher groups, a mechanism for input and change is necessary for any successful dress policy. When considering student expression, school uniforms can help balance students' rights to freely express themselves with schools' obligations to maintain an environment conducive to learning. The dialogue between school and community, though, must involve mutual respect and trust that includes a means to adapt the policy. A Suburban teacher who championed the uniform's 20-year existence at the school offered with emphasis, "It's not been static for 20 years, but we've had it for 20 years."

Summary

This chapter included an introduction to the data collection and a summary of recruitment results. The research questions examined teachers' and students' experiences with school uniforms at two different middle schools. The chapter contained an overview of major findings as well as minor sub-findings. The manner in which codes manifested was described, and a description of each of the four focus group sets was provided. In line with the research questions, this chapter reviewed how teachers and students in these schools experienced their uniform policies. A description of positive outcomes and negative aspects was provided. Student focus groups perceived a more challenging experience for female students. Each school's focus group

represented the unique cultural nuances of its school, but there was no evidence from these focus group participants that students of different cultural backgrounds experienced the uniform differently within the same school. The next chapter includes further discussion to include implications corresponding with the study findings and recommendations for future studies, research, and practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The Chapter 5 discussion includes a review of the research study problem, the purpose and methods, and the significance of the research results. This chapter will also address key findings in the context of the legal and policy frameworks around dress codes and school uniforms. The research's key findings are examined in the context of the individual schools studied and in relation to the existing research about school uniforms. The chapter concludes with implications and recommendations for further research.

Discussion of Findings

Research on school uniforms is inconclusive because some research suggests that they positively impact student behavior and egalitarianism (Gentile et al., 2011; Bodine, 2003a), while other research criticizes school uniform policies for their infringement on student expression (DaCosta, 2006; Edwards et al., 2020). Safety and mental health remain a priority for American public schools, and school uniforms can helpfully contribute to the school constructs of climate and community that serve to motivate and positively reinforce student behavior. Teacher participants in this study's focus groups credited their school's uniform policies for at least the effort in maintaining student engagement and minimizing environmental distractions. Both teacher groups, for example, mentioned professionalism, community, and bullying. Although some dispute existed among individuals about the extent to which the uniform addressed these items—and there was variance between school groups—there was a general belief that the policy helped (or at least did not hurt) school efforts within each of these domains. Student groups acknowledged a need for them to have some basic dress requirements. As one Central student verbalized, "It's more about what kids are wearing these days at school and how

they're not appropriate." Suburban students referenced a sense of unity with the uniform, and

one 7th-grade White female proposed as its purpose "stopping groups from forming and from

bullies and things like that." This aligns with the social identity theory in that the uniform attire

contributes to an identification of group membership. The idea is that once students belong to

this group, they seek ways to gain positive feelings from that group membership (Harwood,

2020).

Studies in the early 1970s demonstrated people's inherent desire to distinguish

themselves from others based on group memberships (Tajfel, 1979). The uniform experience in

the context of school provides students a social reality in the form of shared

meanings…enshrined in…rules, regulations, symbols, collective representations, and cultural

narratives (Verkuyten, 2021). Students confirmed such an experience, as when Central students

described their zip-up jackets hiding rogue t-shirts or when Suburban students identified leggings

that looked sufficiently enough like khakis to pass the teacher check. The uniform becomes a

shared experience on which the teachers can capitalize. For example, when teachers playfully

ridicule the out-of-uniform, untucked status at Suburban's rival middle school, they are

contributing to a sense of ingroup belonging. This sense that "we" wear uniforms fuels their need

for a positive group self, resulting in a tendency to show ingroup bias (Verkuyten, 2021). A

Suburban teacher observed about the uniform, "In addition to its ability to ease identification of

who is part of the student body...it's bringing about a collective identity and it gives students a

feeling of belonging to a whole." With the status of their attire positioned more to bring them

together than to become a source of strife, students are less likely to shun peers because of

clothing (Bodine, 2003a). Other researchers have also suggested that if uniforms can decrease

the likelihood of young people using clothing as social status indicators, then students are more

agreeable to interaction revolving around shared interests (Anderson, 2002). Using surveys, Jones et al. (2020) determined that uniformed students utilize a wider socialization range. This suggests that students were more comfortable with themselves and experienced less fear of exclusion from other groups (Jones et al., 2020).

When establishing expectations and developing that shared student experience, teachers methodically introduced the uniform at the beginning of the year and praise student compliance. A Suburban teacher explained, "One of the key things that we do is enforce the nitpicky kinds of things—shirt tucked in, whether or not it is an appropriate color—all at the beginning of the year." The teacher believed that effort set a standard to begin the academic year. With success and buy-in, a "camaraderie" and "personal pride" manifested such that students voluntarily wear the school unform. When one Suburban teacher was describing how the uniform provided less distinction between wealthy and poor students ("I know a lot of us alluded to the whole social-economic piece…sometimes things pop up from that space because of jealousies"), he later described how the school name had become a brand. A colleague agreed, "You've got school branding everywhere."

Tarrant (2010) suggested that the more alike we are—the more we share some brand or distinction—the more willing we are to help a member of our ingroup. According to social identity theory, some of this in-group bias allowing people to self-categorize in terms of group membership motivates them to conform to the group's norms (Tarrant, 2010). When they conform to norms, that conformity is an important means by which group members assert their social identity (Jetten et al., 2006). However, while teachers and other educators expect some degree of conformity, it remains important to consider the legalities of student expression and how these dress requirements might impose on those firmly established constitutional rights.

Teachers aim to provide a learning environment in which they can facilitate instructional activities with minimal distraction for their students. The school uniform policies at both schools specify permissible attire, and both teacher groups emphasized the importance of clarity to aid enforcement. When establishing the acceptable attire and identifying counter-examples to prohibit, the school must not cast too restrictive a policy that could inhibit free speech, due process, or equal protection rights as provided by the United States Constitution. Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) regularly defend parental and student rights in situations like these, as the ACLU supports the notion that parents and students should dictate what they wear to school (Holloman et al., 1996). Constitutional rights advocates also pay attention to the predominance of school uniforms in the high-minority, low-socioeconomic communities. In fact, DaCosta (2006) suggested that the association of uniforms with quelling gang activity led unfairly to uniform endorsements throughout ethnic minority communities (2006). Central Middle School fit this mold more readily than Suburban Middle, and it is noteworthy to again recognize Suburban as a relative outlier in the context of school uniforms because it is a mostly White, historically high-performing school. Bloom opined that the disproportionate implementation of school uniforms in minority communities is a violation of the Civil Rights Act (2015). Much like the top hat at Eton or the blue cloaks and yellow stockings at Christ's School in England, the uniform can still represent the regalia of prestige or the shame of the stigmatized.

Just as school uniforms made their way to America by way of Catholic and Protestant private schools, resistance to and fights against the restrictions debuted in those environments (Brunsma, 2004). As early as *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District* in 1969, the United States Supreme Court confirmed that public school students maintain their constitutional

rights while on campus. Later in 1972, the district court ruled that the federal courts lacked the

power to mandate how the states operate their schools and dictate pupil dress (*Karr v. Schmidt)*.

That case involved hair length, although the courts later established some hairstyles as

communicative and expressive, and therefore protected (*Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,*

2001). Clothing is symbolic speech in the eyes of American law, and the Supreme Court has

established that restrictions to this kind of speech are either content-neutral or content-based

(*Spence v. Washington*, 1974).

The uniform policies at this study's focus schools are content-neutral and thus are subject

to less scrutiny than content-based restrictions (*Texas v. Johnson*, 1989). Both schools allowed

for relatively plain clothes that conform to the uniform policy, as well as spirit-wear clothing that

represents the school name and/or mascot. Although the school-specific clothing appeals to

students and can even bolster the ingroup bias as a part of the experience, it is important to note

that neither school should mandate the spirit wear. In *Jacobs v. Clark County School District*, the

court upheld the relatively plain polo shirt and khaki requirement as a legal, content-neutral

restriction on student wear; in *Frudden v. Pilling*, however, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled that the

mandated school uniform's logo—"Tomorrow's Leaders—" was an illegal compulsion to adorn

the school motto (Walsh, 2014). This same panel also held that an exception to this mandate

allowing Boy or Girl Scouts to wear uniforms on meeting days was a content-based restriction

that also implicated the free speech clause (Walsh, 2014). This means that even if school-specific

spirit wear is popular and readily available to the student body, the school uniform policies

should allow these as options available daily in addition to the traditionally plain clothing

commonly permissible.

In addition to content neutrality, uniform policies should consider how requirements and enforcement could affect students of different genders and cultural backgrounds. Enforcement issues have wound up in a myriad of court cases, but some school dress policies are conceived of and written in racially coded language (Bodine, 2003a; Edwards et al., 2020). Following the Clinton-era rhetoric of gang prevention, some school policies have focused on clothing associated with African-American gang activity (Edwards et al., 2020). Bodine similarly suggested that such policymakers might use a threat of gang violence as justification for the prohibition of certain attire even if the organization does not experience such a threat (Bodine, 2003a). If uniform policies serve as a technique through which schools enact power (Friedrich and Shanks, 2021), then school leaders must bear in mind that restrictions may not function solely to suppress expression (*Canady v. Bossier Parish School Board,* 2001). District leaders and principals can establish rules to further the governmental interest of educating its populace, but the rules may not unfairly suppress racial or ethnic expression. This has led schools to trend toward neutrality, but even neutral policies can impose unfair expectations and consequences (Edwards et al., 2020; Friedrich et al., 2021).

Morris (2005) demonstrated how poorer children of color must sometimes conform to dress codes to their detriment, and others have revealed how Black females in particular receive inequitable disciplinary responses related to attire (Edwards et al., 2020; Happel, 2013). Happel (2013), in fact, used a critical theory and gender performance lens to challenge binary gender categorizations, particularly as it relates to females wearing skirts. This perspective aligns with Title IX and Fourteenth Amendment rulings that deemed the skirt-wearing requirement of Charter Day School in Leland, North Carolina illegal (*Peltier v. Charter Day School*, 2022). Teachers at Suburban Middle School mentioned uniform adjustments in recent years that strayed

from gender-specific requirements, and the neutral approach appears to be the safer stance in the context of this district court ruling.

Even with neutrality, however, dress codes can institutionalize and reinforce dominant narratives of traditional gender conformity. For example, a neutral policy requiring blazers might confuse such a traditionally masculine choice for professionalism (Behling, 1994). Policies should also avoid rationales to cover the female body, as that presupposes that sexual morality depends on protecting innocent boys and male teachers from becoming victims of female sexuality (Edwards et al., 2020). Even with conscientious neutrality, school leaders and policymakers should apply these critical perspectives to best serve their students and stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Study

Student contributions to this study revealed a perspective that female students experience more challenges at school with dress codes and uniforms. That means that school stakeholders and policymakers should pay particular attention not only to the written code and which prohibitions might affect which groups in different ways but also the enforcement experience and how that affects student learning. Focus group participants also acknowledged the concept of professionalism, one that presupposes notions of what is appropriate in public places like schools (Edwards et al., 2020). All school stakeholders appreciate clarity, and the uniform experience can contribute to an easier experience for parents and adolescents selecting clothes each morning, and the parent perspective available from some teachers confirmed this value could not be overstated. If uniforms make it easier for students and teachers to direct mental efforts elsewhere, educators applaud policy efforts to influence instructional focus. Clarity and ease are abstract concepts that manifested from the focus groups, but perhaps future research could

explore more objective measures that might capture these characteristics. Another important feature of a successful policy involves its ability to incorporate community input and adapt over time.

During the uniform's inception at both focus group schools, teachers described the widespread support the policies garnered. A Central Middle School teacher described the principal at the time treating the policy like "his baby" and how the uniform aligned with clothing expectations at the district's elementary and high schools. Three principals later, Central staff collectively observed less clarity with what constitutes the school uniform and less consistency with enforcement by teachers and adherence by students. Additionally, both schools described significant changes with their uniforms after the COVID-19 pandemic. At Suburban Middle School, though, teachers utilized the school-based leadership team to discuss and adapt the relevant requirements as society turned to traditional schooling. Minus an existing team that already includes parent representatives, schools should consider a uniform-specific advisory board that assists school leaders with definitions and considerations for improvement.

Students expressed a willingness and even a fondness for adorning their school gear, and school leaders should capitalize on this. Social identity is based on group associations and memberships, and the Suburban Middle School uniform has capitalized on the strong sense of purpose and pride manifesting from the school and its assorted activities. With their visible difference in attire from students in other schools—even within their own county that has multiple other traditional but non-uniformed middle schools—a membership unites them such that they positively promote their own group identity (Tarrant et al., 2009). Central Middle School students spoke fondly about their school—and the case-displayed school spirit wear—so the potential also exists there. When teachers comment about how good their students look

compared to other schools' students who have no uniform, the students experience a pro-ingroup bias that strengthens their relationships with each other and their school (Miron et al., 2008). Future researchers might explore how school-specific spirit wear affects learning environments, and perhaps more study is warranted in higher-performing schools that utilize a uniform policy. Considering even some student voices in uniform policy formulation might also prove a worthwhile move. If students more readily accept the requirements, the uniform can manifest as a prosocial tool for desired group identity (Friedrich, 2021).

Regardless of what students wear at school, the school personnel must clarify requirements that the community supports. Whether through a site-based leadership team or other mechanism, the local community must help define the expectations and professionalism that should dictate student clothing. School personnel must champion the uniform to garner and sustain community support. A school uniform's success depends on a means to incorporate community feedback for policy evolution. Established this way, school uniforms can help balance students' rights to freely express themselves with schools' obligations to maintain environments conducive to learning.

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APPENDIX A: SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL DRESS CODE

Suburban Middle has a standard uniform policy for students. This policy was voted on by parents and the Site Based Committee to contribute to a school environment conducive to learning. Students and parents need to be familiar with the policy as students are required to adhere to the policy while on school grounds. *Field trips will be addressed on an individual basis depending on the nature of the trip.*

TOPS:
Tops students MAY wear:
- must be solid navy, green, white, or khaki—no gray
- cotton or cotton blend fabrics
- crew neck tee shirts, polo shirts, golf shirts with collar, mock or turtleneck shirts
- must have long sleeves or regular length sleeves - no cap sleeves
- boys may wear white, navy, or dark green dress shirts
- monograms of students' initials are allowed, but must be navy, dark green, khaki, or white
- "Suburban Spirit Wear"* tops: in addition to the guidelines listed above, spirit wear shirts may include lettering and/or accents of solid navy, dark green, white, khaki, or gold

Tops students MAY NOT wear:
- V-neck or scoop-neck shirts
- button front blouses or tops with sheer fabric
- tops that allow colored undergarments to be visible
- logos of any type except Suburban logos
- tops with graffiti or writing of any type
- booster club uniforms
- "Suburban Spirit Wear"* tops with team rosters or student names other than the owner's first initial and last name

Please note: shirts must be tucked in at all times

BOTTOMS:
Bottoms students MAY wear:
- solid navy or khaki color
- must be a cotton twill or cotton blend
- shorts to the knee or below the knee
- girls may wear skirts, jumpers, and skorts that are to the knee or below with no slits above the knee

Bottoms students MAY NOT wear:
- denim or jeans of any kind
- leggings worn as pants, jeggings, or legging-like pants
- sweatpants or knit pants of any type
- pajamas, flannel pants, or lounge wear
- bottoms that sag or are baggy in the seat
- velvet or velour fabrics
- graffiti or writing of any type

OUTERWEAR (SWEATERS, SWEATSHIRTS, JACKETS, AND VEST):

Outerwear students MAY wear inside school:
- must be solid navy, green, white, or khaki—no gray
- monograms of students' initials are allowed but must be navy, dark green, khaki, or white
- "Suburban Spirit Wear"* outerwear: in addition to the guidelines listed above, spirit wear may include lettering and/or accents of solid navy, dark green, white, khaki, or gold

Outerwear students MAY NOT wear inside school:
- outerwear with logos of any type except for Suburban logos
- outerwear with graffiti or writing of any type

Note: Coats and jackets that do not meet these guidelines may be worn only before school, during commons, and after school. Items not meeting dress code shall be put in the locker, and may not be worn to class.

ACCESSORIES:
- belts are optional; if worn, they may not have spikes, studs, large belt buckles, or any other items deemed inappropriate
- boys may wear neck ties; ties must be navy, dark green, khaki, or white or any combination of these colors
- girls may wear neck scarves; scarves must be navy, dark green, khaki, or white or any combination of these colors
- hats, hoodies, and other headwear shall remain off student heads while inside the building during the instructional day

STUDENTS MAY NOT WEAR:
- bandanas, hats, sunglasses, collars/bracelets/necklaces/belts with spikes, gloves, or bedroom shoes
- PE uniforms outside of gym class
- clothing with rips, holes or tears
- clothing that causes a disruption in the learning environment

Clothing may be purchased wherever the parent chooses as long as the items meet the school dress code guidelines. For religious observances, students are allowed to wear yarmulkes and headscarves. Provisions will be made for students in need of financial assistance to adhere to the dress code.

Approved "Spirit Wear" vendors are SMS PTSO and smsabc.com

Students who come to school dressed inappropriately will receive two warnings. In addition to the second warning, parents will be notified. The third and fourth offense will result in 45 minutes of detention before or after school. The fifth, sixth and seventh offense will result in in-school suspension. After three times in in-school

suspension, the next step will be out-of-school suspension. Any further violations, the student will continue to receive out-of-school suspension.

*Suburban Spirit Wear vendor logos are allowed as approved by the principal

APPENDIX B: CENTRAL MIDDLE SCHOOL DRESS CODE

TOPS

• Collared shirts in short or long sleeves

• Shirts with a CMS school logo

• Shirts shorter than mid-thigh if untucked

• Collared dresses or tunics are permitted and should be mid-thigh or longer in length

• Cover shoulders, chest, back and midriff completely

• Undergarments are not to be visible

BOTTOMS

• Shorts, pants, capris, skirts (does not include athletic/exercise pants or jeans)

• Solid navy, black, khaki or gray

• Worn at waist level

• Shorts, skirts and dresses reach mid-thigh or longer

• Tights, leggings or other form fitting attire may be worn under approved bottom wear

• Undergarments are not to be visible

OUTERWEAR - JACKETS, COATS, SWEATERS, PULLOVERS, SWEATSHIRTS, HOODIES, and VESTS

• Hoods must be removed from the head while inside the school building or on the school bus

• If outerwear is removed, approved top must be worn

SHOES

• Worn at all times

• Tied or properly fastened

• Bedroom slippers, flip-flops and athletic slides are not appropriate footwear

APPENDIX C: CONTACT PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

"An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perspectives about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools"
Marcus S. Leake / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Hello . . . this is Marcus Leake and I am completing a research project entitled "*An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perspectives about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools.*" The purpose of this project is to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

In your role as an American public school administrator for a middle school with a standard uniform policy, I would like to ask you to facilitate access to appropriate teacher and student participant candidates. The study design includes 10 teachers and 10 students per school, with at least 3 representatives per grade level. Teacher candidates should be capable and comfortable conversing about the school uniform, as well as identifying student participants capable of the same.

Your participation in the project will involve sharing the Contact Protocol for Teachers with your certified classroom teachers. That document establishes communication with the teachers that will comprise the 10-teacher focus group. Teacher participation in the project will take approximately 1 hour; approximately 15 minutes to complete brief demographic data and to share Parent or Legal Guardian Consent for Child/Minor Participation in Research with appropriate students, and approximately 45 minutes in the focus group conversation itself. Student participation in the project will take approximately 45 minutes; 5 minutes for a brief demographic survey and approximately 40 minutes for the student focus group conversation. If you allow your teachers and students to participate, I am happy to arrange both focus group conversations at a time and place that is convenient for you.

To ensure confidentiality, information about individuals participating in this study will not be shared. The data collected by the researcher will not contain any personal identifying information or reveal anything beyond the identity of the public school and its publicly available dress code policy. We request participants support confidentiality efforts by not identifying specific students or teachers during the conversations. Please let me know if you have any questions.

At this point, you have three options. First, if you are ready to agree to facilitate access to appropriate teacher and student participant candidates, please confirm with me now. Second, if you would prefer not to facilitate such access, please confirm with me now. Third, if you have questions or need additional information before assisting with this study, I can provide more information and time to review it. You may follow up with me via phone and/or email to then indicate your decision.

APPENDIX D: CONTACT PROTOCOL FOR TEACHERS

"An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in
American Public Middle Schools"
Marcus S. Leake / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Hello . . . this is Marcus Leake and I am completing a research project entitled "*An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools.*" The purpose of this project is to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

In your role as a public middle school teacher in a school with a standard uniform policy, I would like to ask you to participate in an audio-taped focus group conversation on this subject. You have been selected because of your status as a certified classroom teacher in your school and your administrator identified you as capable and comfortable with conversing about the school uniform. The research design involves your selection of 3 students capable of the same, from which the researcher will produce a pool for the 10-student focus group from your school. If you choose to participate, there will also be 10 teachers in the teacher focus group from your school.

Your participation in the project will take approximately 1 hour. This allows 15min to share the C Parent or Legal Guardian Consent for Child/Minor Participation in Research with the appropriate adults, the Contact Protocol for Students with the appropriate students, and approximately 45 minutes in the focus group conversation itself. Each of your responses will be recorded verbatim by me following the conversation and an interview transcription will be shared with you via email. You will have the opportunity to verify your comments as they appear in the final work product or to follow up on any details. I will also take a few field notes during the conversation to ensure clarity and understanding. If you choose to participate, you will be one of 10 teacher participants from your school. I will work with you and your school to identify a time and place that is most convenient for the group.

Any information about your participation, including your identity, will remain confidential. The data collected by the researcher will not contain any identifying information or any link back to you or your participation in this study. Also, I request that you not use identifying information of other students or specific teachers during the conversation to ensure anonymity. Please let me know if you have any questions.

At this point, you have three options. If you are ready to agree to participate, please confirm with me now. Second, if you would prefer not to participate, please confirm with me now. If you have questions or need additional information to consider participating in this study, please confirm with me now. Third, if you have questions or need additional time to consider participating in this study, I can email you the consent form that outlines study participation. You would then be free to follow up with me via phone and/or email to indicate your decision.

APPENDIX E: CONTACT PROTOCOL FOR STUDENTS

"An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools"
Marcus S. Leake / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Hello . . . this is Marcus Leake and I am completing a research project entitled "*An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools*." The purpose of this project is to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

In your role as a middle school student, I would like to ask you to participate in an audio-taped focus group conversation on this subject. You have been selected because you are a student in grades 6-8 and your teacher has identified you as a student who is capable and comfortable with conversing about the school uniform experience.

Your participation in the project will take approximately 45 minutes; approximately 5 minutes to complete a very brief demographic survey and approximately 40 minutes to participate in the focus group conversation itself. Each of your responses will be recorded verbatim by me following the conversation and a focus group transcription will be created and shared with you via email. You will have the opportunity to verify your comments as they appear in the final work product or to follow up on any details. I will also take a few field notes during the conversation to ensure clarity and understanding. If you choose to participate, you will be one of 10 student participants from your school. I will work with you and your school to identify a time and place that is most convenient for the group.

Any information about your participation, including your identity, will remain confidential. The data collected by the researcher will not contain any identifying information or any link back to you or your participation in this study. Also, I request that you not use identifying information of other students or specific teachers during the conversation to ensure anonymity. Please let me know if you have any questions.

At this point, you have three options. If you are ready to agree to participate, please confirm with me now. Second, if you would prefer not to participate, please confirm with me now. If you have questions or need additional information to consider participating in this study, please confirm with me now. Your parent/guardian has provided a consent form that outlines study participation, and you can review that document to make an informed decision. You would then be free to follow up with me via phone and/or email to let me know whether or not you would like to participate.

APPENDIX F: ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools
Principal Investigator: Marcus Leake M.Ed, UNC Charlotte

You are invited to participate in a research study as a part of a dissertation research at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to examine students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

- We are asking public middle school teachers and students to discuss in focus groups their experience with school uniform implementation and enforcement, and to converse with one another about the positive and negative associations with this school policy.

- Some of the conversations we'll have are personal and sensitive. For example, we'll ask you about your school environment, analyze experiences you've had with administrators in context of discipline in your respective schools, and discuss how different student groups might experience the school uniforms. These conversations can be personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to cease the conversation at any time. You will not personally benefit from taking part in this research but this study's results might help inform future policy and program decision-making as it relates to the uniform experience.

- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?
- The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to examine students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study.
You are being asked to be in this study because you are a public middle school teacher who has had meaningful experience with a standard uniform program in your school.

What will happen if I take part in this study?
If you choose to participate you will complete one 45 minute focus group at school. We will start the interview with questions about your background (age, ethnicity, etc.), along with your experiences involving school uniforms in context of your respective positions. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be less than an hour on the selected day chosen.

What benefits might I experience?
You will not benefit directly from being in this study. This study's results might help inform future policy and program decision-making as it relates to the uniform experience.

What risks might I experience?
The discussions could involve personal experiences at school. For example, we'll talk you about your school environment, experiences you've had with uniforms in your respective positions, and questions about your diverse populations in your respective school. You might experience some mild emotional discomfort when answering these questions. We do not expect this risk to be common and you may choose to skip questions you do not want to answer.

How will my information be protected?
We will initially use your name and record the conversation about school uniforms. Once we have completed our study and transcription we will delete the recording. We will use initials in the transcription and keep all identifiable information private in the study. While the study is active, all data will be stored in a password-protected database that can be accessed by the primary researcher. Only the research team will have routine access to the study data. Other people with approval from the Investigator, may need to see the information we collect about you. Including people who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

How will my information be used after the study is over?
After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?
At this time there will be no incentive for taking part in the study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?
For questions about this research, you may contact Marcus Leake, msleake@uncc.edu, 704-821-7372.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____
Name (PRINT)

_____
Signature   Date

_____
Name & Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

APPENDIX G: PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT FOR CHILD/MINOR
PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Title of the Project: Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform
Policies in American Public Middle Schools
Principal Investigator: Marcus Leake M.Ed, UNC Charlotte

Your student is invited to participate in a research study. Your student's participation in this
research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to
allow your student to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

<u>Important Information You Need to Know</u>

- The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to examine students' and teachers'
  perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

- We are asking public middle school teachers and students to discuss in focus groups their
  experience with school uniform implementation and enforcement, and to converse with
  one another about the positive and negative associations with this school policy.

- Some of the conversations we'll have are personal and sensitive. For example, we'll ask
  your student about the school environment, analyze experiences the student has had with
  administrators in context of discipline in their respective schools, and discuss how
  different student groups might experience the school uniforms differently. These
  conversations can be personal and your student might experience some mild emotional
  discomfort. Your student may choose to cease the conversation at any time. Your
  student will not personally benefit from taking part in this research but this study's results
  might help inform future policy and program decision-making as it relates to the uniform
  experience.

- Your student will still take part in normal classroom learning and activities, even if you
  decide to not let them participate in this study.

- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to
  participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?
The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study is to examine students' and teachers' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools.

Why is your student being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to allow your student to participate in this study because they are capable and comfortable conversing about their school uniform experience.

What will children do in this study?
If you allow your student to participate, then the student will complete one 45 minute focus group at school. We will start the interview with questions about your background (age, ethnicity, etc.), along with your experiences involving school uniforms in context of your respective positions. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be less than an hour on the selected day chosen.

In addition, information from your child's educational record will be used to examine if certain student groups experience the school uniform differently based on gender or racial identification. By consenting to allow your child to participate in this study, you are giving permission for your child's demographic data to include information on gender and on racial identity to be shared with the Investigator by the school.

What benefits might children experience?
The benefits of participation in this study are providing your child with access to the general education elementary science curriculum. This study will also provide them with the same opportunities as their general education peers in a regular science classroom, but with more explicitly-directed instruction.

What risks might children experience?
We do not believe that there are any risks to your [child/legal ward] because this study will occur as part of routine classroom teaching.

How will information be protected?
We will initially use the student name to converse and record the conversation about school uniforms. Once we have completed our study and transcription we will delete the recording. We will use initials in the transcription and keep all identifiable information private in the study. While the study is active, all data will be stored in a password-protected database that can be accessed by the primary researcher. Only the research team will have routine access to the study data. Other people, with approval from the Investigator, may need to see the information we collect about you. This might include people who work for UNC Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations.

How will information be used after the study is over?
After this study is complete, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies without asking for your consent again or as may be needed as part of publishing our results. The data we share will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will students receive an incentive for taking part in this study?
Your student will not receive any payment for being in this study.

What other choices are there if I don't want my [child/legal ward] to take part in this study?
If you decide not to let your student take part in this study, they will still take part in the routine classroom activities as they would on a normal day. The classroom teacher will still teach all students the daily lessons. Your student would not be recorded and no other information about them would be collected.

What are my student's rights if they take part in this study?
Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to allow your student to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop their participation at any time. You and your [child/legal ward] will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

Who can answer my questions about this study and participant rights?
-For questions about this research, you may contact Marcus Leake, msleake@uncc.edu, 704-821--7372, or his university supervisor Walter Hart, whhart@uncc.edu, 704-687-8539.

If you have questions about your student's rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Protections and Integrity at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Parent or Legally Authorized Representative Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to your student's participation in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree for my student to take part in this study.

_____
Participant Name (PRINT)

_____
Parent/Legally Authorized Representative Name and Relationship to Participant (PRINT)

_____
Signature   Date

_____

Name and Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Project Title

An Exploration of Teacher and Student Perceptions about Standard Uniform Policies in American Public Middle Schools

Structure

This is a semi-structured focus group conversation with three opening and introductory questions that initiate discussion before the next three questions segue into key research topics, all guided by and directly linked to the seven research questions that are themselves potential fodder for group discussion. The researcher will allow group interaction to include participants' own questions and answers to capitalize on identifying and clarifying shared participant perspectives. The interviewer might also ask probing questions before a concluding inquiry provides participants a final opportunity for contributing to the conversation.

Procedure

1. The researcher will find and secure an appropriate area within the school premises to facilitate the focus group conversation.

2. The researcher will provide time necessary to complete the appropriate demographic survey.

3. The researcher will ask participants if the conversation can be audio recorded.

4. If participants confirm consent (paperwork has already been collected), the recording will begin.

5. The researcher will initiate the focus group question protocol.

Focus Group Guidelines

Thank you for agreeing to a focus group conversation as a part of this project. As you know, the purpose of this study is to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on the school uniform experience in their respective schools. I am going to ask a series of questions, and I encourage your free engagement. If you would please say your name (or a pseudonym) before commenting, that will allow me to align participant commentary with the correct participant (if using a pseudonym, please adhere to the same one for the conversation duration). Your name will not be reported and there are no wrong answers, so speak as freely as you can. You do not need to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with. No penalties will be applied if you decline to participate now or at any point during the conversation. You may voluntarily withdraw from the conversation at any time. If you are embarrassed about anything you may tell me at the end and it will not be a part of the transcript. You may stop at any time for any reason. Please confirm you understand these guidelines and are ready to begin.

    • If no, the researcher will stop the focus group and allow the participant to exit.

    • If yes, the researcher will continue with the focus group protocol.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers experience school uniform implementation and enforcement?

2. How do students experience school uniform implementation enforcement?

3. What do teachers identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

4. What do teachers identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

5. What do students identify as positive outcomes associated with school uniforms?

6. What do students identify as negative aspects associated with school uniforms?

7. What similarities and differences exist in the perceptions of school uniforms among students of different genders and cultural backgrounds?

APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

RQ: How do teachers experience the uniform implementation and enforcement?

I.   Why do you think your school has this uniform policy and what was your experience when you learned about it as a teacher and began to enforce it?

    A. How did your expectations about the uniform policy differ from your experience?

        1. What was it like?

        2. How did you feel about the policy?

        3. Was administration clear with the expectations for the policy?

        4. How were you expected to enforce it?

        5. How do you agree or disagree with policy implementation?

II.   How did your opinion about the uniform policy change and develop once you started working with students and confronting students in violation of the policy?

    A. Describe your experiences enforcing the uniform rules—what violations do you and colleagues most address?

    B. How often do you devote your attention to the uniform rules and enforcement?

    C. How do these experiences compare to your expectations about the uniform?

    D. How has enforcement and your experience with uniforms changed your thoughts about the uniform?

    E. How do students learn about the uniform policy and how would you describe their understanding of and experience with the uniform?

RQ: What do teachers identify as positive outcomes associated with the school uniform?

I.   In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy positively impacted behavior for students?

II.   In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy positively impacted achievement for students?

III. In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy positively impacted school climate?

RQ: What do teachers identify as negative outcomes associated with the school uniform?

I.   In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy negatively behavior for students?

II.   In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy negatively impacted achievement for students?

III. In your opinion, how has working in a school with a uniform policy

negatively impacted school climate?

<u>RQ: What similarities and differences exist in the perceptions of school uniforms among teachers of different genders and cultural backgrounds?</u>

    I.   Do some groups of students get in trouble more for uniforms more than other groups?

          A. Why do you think that is?

    II.   How is the policy enforced?

    III.   What are the challenges associated with uniform policy enforcement?

          A. What are your perceptions of the consistencies or inconsistencies of enforcement?

               1. How frequently do you observe shirts too long or untucked?

               2. How frequently and with what consequence do you address shirts that are too long or shirts that are untucked?

               3. How frequently do you observe bottoms or tops that are too short?

                   a. How do you address those?

                   b. Do those violations occur more with some students than others?

               4. How might white students and non-white students experience the uniform differently?

    IV.   How would you feel about the uniform policy if you were a student?

          A. If you could change anything about the uniform policy, what would you change?

               1. Why would you make that change?

          B. How might the uniform policy benefit some students more than others?

               1. If so, who?

               2. If so, how?

          C. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not already discussed today?

APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

RQ: How do students experience the uniform implementation and enforcement?

I. Why do you think your school has this uniform policy and what was your experience when you learned about it and experienced it?

A. How did your expectations about the uniform differ from your experience?

1. What was it like?

2. How did you feel about the policy?

3. Were administrators and teachers clear with the expectations for the policy?

4. How do students experience enforcement—what happens when students violate the rules?

5. How do you agree or disagree the uniform policy and how it is enforced by adults at the school?

II. How did your opinion about the uniform change and develop once you started wearing it and experiencing it at school?

A. Describe your experiences with the uniform rules—what violations do you see teachers or others most address?

B. How often do you devote your attention to the uniform rules and enforcement?

C. How do these experiences compare to your expectations about the uniform?

D. How has enforcement and your experience with uniforms changed your thoughts about the uniform?

E. How did you learn about the uniform and how would you describe teachers' understanding of and experience with the uniform?

RQ: What do students identify as positive outcomes associated with the school uniform?

I. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy positively impacted behavior for students?

II. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy positively impacted achievement for students?

III. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy positively impacted school climate?

RQ: What do students identify as negative outcomes associated with the school uniform?

I. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy negatively behavior for students?

II. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy negatively impacted achievement for students?

III. In your opinion, how has going to a school with a uniform policy negatively impacted school climate?

RQ: What similarities and differences exist in the perceptions of school uniforms among students of different genders and cultural backgrounds?

IV. Do some groups of students get in trouble more for uniforms more than other groups?
    A. Why do you think that is?

V.   How is the policy enforced?

VI.   What are the challenges associated with uniform policy enforcement?
    A. What are your perceptions of the consistencies or inconsistencies of enforcement?
        1. How frequently do you observe shirts too long or untucked?
        2. How frequently and with what consequence do students experience regarding shirts that are too long or shirts that are untucked?
        3. How frequently do students wear bottoms or tops that are too short?
            a. How do teachers address those?
            b. Do those violations occur more with some students than others?
        4. How might white students and non-white students experience the uniform differently?

VII.   How would you feel about the uniform if you were a teacher?
    A. If you could change anything about the uniform policy, what would you change?
        2. Why would you make that change?
    B. How might the uniform policy benefit some students more than others?
        3. If so, who?
        4. If so, how?
    C. Is there anything else you would like to add that we have not already discussed today?