

Running Head: SCHOOL UNIFORMS

School Uniforms: A Conflict between Individual Freedom and Collective Equality

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## **Introduction**

There is a fundamental ideological clash between freedom and equality, which appears in many facets of life and particularly in politics. Socialism and capitalism, autocracy and democracy, government and anarchy; each of these contentions comes down to equality, the good of the many, versus freedom, the good of the one. Socialist states in particular have struggled with the need to enforce stability to protect their power and the need to allow their citizens as much personal freedom as possible, in order to avoid revolution or external intervention. The U.S. is currently dealing with a significant clash, the latest battle in this great war, over surveillance and whether personal privacy or collective safety is more important to the American people. School uniforms are yet another small part of that universal struggle.

## **Peer Pressure and Self-Expression**

School uniforms may limit individual freedom and self-expression but they may also help to level the social playing field between students coming from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. As a young person in today's society, the pressure to wear the right thing is often overwhelming. A person's social group, political ideology, socioeconomic class, and more, can often be easily determined based solely on their outfit. In high school in particular, cliques are often identified by the kinds of clothes their members wear and those at the top of the social ladder are those who have the money to spend on the costume for that part. In a way students develop their own dress-code by which they segregate themselves and exert their early attempts at social control (Craik, 2005).

It is questionable how much individual expression is actually involved in students' fashion decisions. With peer pressure and the need to 'be cool' dominating most aspects of their lives, children's personal preferences often play a very small role in their clothing choices. Rather, the urgency behind students' need to wear a specific type of clothing is a reflection of the social pressure being exerted on them by their peers, indicating that already they have been trained to know their place in the social strata and have been instilled with an acute fear of stepping outside that assigned place. In this case students' individuality may actually be preserved by preventing them from conforming to this external symbol of the social control they exert over one another. School uniforms are one means that has been effective in achieving this end (Lumsden, 2001).

The use of school uniforms is supposed to suppress internal stratification of children by prohibiting variations of dress and ensuring that behavior aberrations are obvious and discouraged. It has been observed, however, that students who are forced to wear uniforms often find other means of segregating themselves based primarily on socioeconomic class. Students may focus attention on shoes, accessories, or the ways that certain items are worn, necessitating even stricter control of student behaviors in order to prevent such delineation from occurring (C. Caputo, personal communication, June 25, 2006). While it remains questionable whether such goals can actually be achieved, preventing students from stratifying themselves based on social status is an ostensibly admirable goal, as far as it promotes the value of equality.

The uniform as an entity encourages students to adhere to the values that it represents. As Nathan Joseph states, "conformity imposed by a uniform stems from its

symbolization, and individual deviations from norms are much more visible when the individual is in uniform” (1986, p.68). As a symbol of group identity the uniform has the desired result of producing a feeling of team membership and loyalty as well as the less desirable effect of highlighting behavioral differences and leading to ostracism of those who will not or cannot conform.

### **Student Safety**

Traditionally school uniforms have been associated with religious private schools and the reproduction of behaviors consistent with high class standing. However, starting with President Clinton there has been a movement to bring uniforms into the public school system as a proposed solution to a range of social and educational problems. The U.S. Department of Education states in its *Manual on School Uniforms* that “the adoption of school uniform policies can promote school safety, improve discipline, and enhance the learning environment“ (1996, p.1). Clearly student safety is of primary concern to parents and the culture of fear that has been on the rise has increased support for any measure purported to decrease the risk of violence in schools.

Especially with the rise of school shootings and other violent crimes, concern for students’ safety has overridden many arguments about their freedom of expression, arguably a right guaranteed by the First Amendment (Lumsden, 2001). The Department of Education states that uniforms are primarily useful as a means by which to decrease violence in schools. Some benefits touted for the use of school uniforms include: decreasing violence and theft -- even life-threatening situations -- among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers; helping prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school; instilling students with discipline; helping parents and students resist peer pressure; helping students concentrate on their school work; and helping school officials recognize intruders who come to the school. (1996, p.1)

These are all important factors in ensuring a safe educational environment, yet there remains little hard evidence that these changes have resulted from school uniforms and not other factors that have happened to coincide with the use of uniforms in some situations.

### **Behavioral Control**

The benefits of adopting school uniforms have been very clearly articulated as a tool for decreasing social pressures and promoting an environment conducive to student learning. However, the dangers of school uniform usage have not been as thoroughly scrutinized. Those who protest the introduction of school uniforms often find little need to express their concerns beyond a desire to allow students to express their distinctiveness. The cult of individuality prevalent in American culture makes such a desire largely beyond reproach and so the debate becomes simply a matter of prioritization. However, there is more to the uniformity produced in our schools than clothing that deserves a closer look.

Students are instructed in many ways throughout their school experiences and not all of the education that goes on has anything to do with the three R's, or any academic subject for that matter. Standards of behavior and social conformity are both actively and unintentionally pursued by peers, teachers and administration as students are carefully molded into mindless automatons, imitators and perpetuators of the status quo. In the U.S. Department of Education's *Manual on School Uniforms*, their goal of shaping future "good Americans" is clearly stated. "Young people...who learn basic American values and the essentials of good citizenship, are better students" (1996, p.1).

Early indoctrinate of students into the accepted American lifestyle and value system is touted has having educational benefits, presumably by instilling a sense of civic duty to perform well in school.

The suppression of individuality through the use of uniforms in a variety of contexts has been thoroughly examined by Jennifer Craik in her book, *Uniforms Exposed* (2005). Craik analyzes the use of uniforms throughout history as a means of training the body and enforcing certain standards of thought and behavior. Students, especially in the early grades, absorb the information presented to them, yet that information is not all a part of the selected curricula and thus is not scrutinized in the same way to determine the potential effect it will have on students. For example, students who observe their white teacher talk down to a black cafeteria worker have just learned a very important lesson, yet their teacher is not likely to have even realized what he or she was doing, let alone included it in his or her lesson plan. Such education is constantly taking place and is one of our most valuable and dangerous tools of social reproduction.

### **Conclusion**

The debate of school uniform use in Mississippi is far from over. In Rolling Fork and other small rural towns public school administrators continue to struggle, with varying degrees of effort, to enforce uniform codes while the white private schools have only the bare minimum in terms of dress code (K. Tankson, personal communication, June 24, 2006). This may simply represent a difference between public and private educational philosophies approaches to discipline. However, it could also symbolize a more significant difference in terms of the perceived need to exert more social control

over minority students' behavior or their perception as wilder or more in need of the socialization and training encouraged by the use of school uniforms.

## References

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