



## **CREATING CULTURE: DRESS CODES AND UNIFORM POLICIES IN US PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Dress codes and uniform policies in public schools have been hotly debated in recent years across the US. As scholars in the field of textiles and clothing, ITAA members can enhance this dialogue by drawing on the growing number of studies conducted in our field of textiles and clothing. What is evident across these studies is that new cultural environments are being intentionally and unintentionally created and transmitted through both formal and informal means. Panel participants explored the creation and communication of culture that occurs when dress codes or uniform policies are considered and implemented in US public schools.

Culture is an interesting phenomenon that surrounds us all. According to the anthropologist James Spradley, culture can be understood by examining its constituent parts, mentifacts, sociofacts, and artifacts. Mentifacts include attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, and values. Applied to dress codes and uniform policies, mentifacts embrace views held by both opponents and proponents of dress code and uniform policies, include the values that contribute to positive school learning environments, and incorporate dress codes and rules that are formally constructed and implemented.

Sociofacts refer to how human beings organize themselves. In terms of dress codes and uniform policies, sociofacts are evident in the manner in which school uniforms reflect gender, age, social class, and schools themselves.

Finally, artifacts are the physical objects produced or manufactured by a culture representing its unique characteristics and traits. Thus, artifacts can be the uniforms themselves, the manner in which they are worn, or the manipulation of them and their related dress elements that produce meaning.

With this understanding of culture each panel member addressed a unique perspective concerning the role of dress codes and uniform policies in the creation of educational culture. Codes in public schools were examined.

As of late 1992, school districts in at least 23 states had established strict dress codes in some public schools. Since 1992, that number has grown dramatically.



The structure of the US court system has contributed to the development of distinctly different legal precedents by state, resulting in caselaw regarding school dress codes varying dramatically depending on geographic location and legal jurisdiction. However, certain rules regarding student dress codes do apply throughout the US.

Dress codes in schools are considered legitimate throughout the US when they are related to the educational mission of the school and if they (1) promote student safety, (2) pre-vent disruption, or (3) prevent distraction of fellow students. School rules are also based on legitimate school interests, that is, if the purpose of the rule is unclear, then there should be no rule.

School dress codes have been over-turned if wording is vague, difficult to under-stand, or not specific. Moreover, school dress codes may be overturned if deemed to have no legitimate basis, such as the prohibiting of girls from wearing fly front jeans. However, court decisions have been mixed, suggesting that varying values and beliefs held by presiding judges or cultural norms can influence court rulings.

Historically, during periods of unrest, courts have also limited the wearing of divisive insignias and emblems that cause disruptions in schools.

Another legitimate basis for regulating student behavior is to provide safe learning environments. Some states have adopted laws that allow schools to adopt uniform codes that may hinder students from being associated with any particular gang. Additionally, the adoption of a specific uniform makes it possi-ble to recognize non-students on campus, pro-moting safety. The safety issue appears to be founded in the idea that one's clothing may affect the behaviors of others rather than oneself.

After examination of research on dress and human behavior, literature indicates that dress can be a distraction for students, suggest-ing that it is reasonable for schools to regulate dress for purposes of creating a more con-ducive environment for students.

Based upon the results of this review of literature, the authors note that particular prob-lems associated with appearance do exist in US public schools. Although dress codes are unlikely to resolve the issues, a uniform code may contribute to a solution.

Dress codes and school violence. Agreement does not exist concerning the impact of school uniforms on academic achievement and behavioral offenses or safety in schools. While various reasons are offered for supporting the use of uniform dress codes for students in public schools, some significant factors tend to be overlooked.

Because of recent press surrounding school violence-especially the violent attacks resulting in murder-many schools are consid-ering uniform or dress codes as a requirement, assuming they will contribute to a solution. However, other forms of violence must be considered. For example,



larceny, sexual assault, simple assault, and social and emotional abuses are prevalent forms of violence today in US public schools. In particular, social and emotional abuse (i.e., the intentional or unintentional humiliation of a person) is usually not considered as violence, but in most of the recent high profile media incidences of murder in schools, social and emotional abuse played a primary role in inciting the violent acts and thus should not be overlooked.

Most often a rationale for recommending uniform dress is the need to remove the importance or emphasis placed on obtaining and wearing fashionable apparel. However, in instances in which schools choose dress codes based on colors (e.g., blue and white) or styles (e.g., oxford shirt) without consideration of the impact and importance of brand names in framing interactions among adolescents, one should not expect uniform dress to make a difference in behavioral offenses. Brand names serve as status indicators which form status hierarchies easily recognized by students. Such items mark group membership and are used by adolescents to distinguish the "haves" and the "have nots." Brands are also used to establish and maintain one's image or identity, influence peer acceptance, and impress others, as well as to avoid humiliation, that is, social or emotional abuse. When the focus is on avoiding social or emotional abuse, decisions might be made by the adolescent to obtain status items by "any means necessary" including committing criminal acts. Thus, forms of dress that do not eliminate status hierarchies will do little to solve the problems of violence in schools. Instead, such dress codes may contribute to the problem.

Students' perceptions of school uniform policies. This study was the basis of the participant's Master's thesis. Data was collected from middle school students at a large urban, multi-ethnic school in New York City that had an existing school uniform policy.

Students were very aware of the intentions behind the uniform policy that included promoting equality, unity, and pride. Regularly subjects reiterated the formal rationale for the uniform policy; however, repeatedly, students recognized that socioeconomic status was readily apparent although the uniform policy was in place. In fact, the most prominent marker of social status mentioned by students, sneakers, was not regulated by the uniform policy in place at this middle school. The expense of school uniforms was still thought by some students as being high since parents had to purchase two wardrobes rather than one.

Unity and pride were also issues mentioned by these subjects. That is, school uniforms did provide a sense of group identity during school outings, but the colors of the uniform, (black and white) could also be a catalyst for public comments provoking a sense of embarrassment, rather than pride among students. Also, students perceived inequity regarding the consequences of non-compliance among their classmates that fostered a sense of injustice and disunity.

It is evident from the formal goals held by this school's administrators that eliminating socioeconomic distinctions based on clothing and appearance and fostering unity and pride on the part of students was very different from the educational culture actually perceived by



students. Socioeconomic distinctions largely based on branded and designer apparel underscored social inequalities between students and created additional opportunities for ostracism directed at less fortunate students. Moreover, the present uniform policy created a culture of control and disempowerment resulting from perceived arbitrary allocation of rewards and punishments. The accumulation of demerits by students due to non-compliance to the uniform policy resulted in the denial of certain school privileges that directly contradicted the stated goals of the policy, which was to create a cul-ture in which pride and a sense of belonging existed.

If a school administration desires to mold the organizational culture of the school to one that is more conducive to learning, rigor-ous research should precede any policy change initiative to ensure success. Careful attention must be paid to the design and implementation of such policies and they must be considered in the context of the existing educational culture. In this case, exploring students' opinions shed light on the effectiveness of existing policies that can guide development of new policies in the future.

From these presentations, it is evident that the implementation of dress codes and uni-form policies are complex, involving many players and issues in the US educational sys-tem. With increasing attention nationwide paid to dress in public schools, clothing and textiles scholars have an opportunity to share their expertise in a forum that can benefit from a multidisciplinary approach such as ours. Whether dress codes or uniform policies should be instituted appears to be a continuing question in the future of public education. Sharron Lennon's paper largely reflected mentifacts, that is, the actual laws that exist addressing dress and uniform codes in public schools today. Gwen O'Neal's presen-tation addressed mentifacts and sociofacts that included the valuation of branded dress items by students and how social status is reflected in dress, both of which can contribute to inten-tional and unintentional acts of violence in US public schools. Teresa McCarthy's study cov-ered students' perceptions of school culture that included all three components of culture.

US law concerning dress and uniform codes. Law is one of the strictest types of cultural norms-norms being the attitudes, values, and beliefs of a culture. Cultural norms are prominent in the discourse surround-ing dress and uniform codes.

This presentation is based on a study conducted with Kim K. P. Johnson and Theresa L. Schultz that sought to identify legal information regarding dress codes across the US. Statues, caselaw, and legal histories related to dress variations in law and the social acceptance of branded apparel dress codes and uniforms have the potential to be both effective and ineffective towards resolving educational problems in public schools today.