

Uniforms in the Middle School: Student Opinions, Discipline Data, and School Police Data

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This study investigated public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform. A review of related literature is provided along with results of the opinions obtained from 604 seventh- and eighth-grade middle school students attending a public school in Nevada that had recently initiated a school uniform policy. Improvements in discipline data and school police data were also examined. Results highlighted the perceived benefits (i.e., decreases in discipline, gang involvement, and bullying and increases in safety, ease of going to school, confidence, and self-esteem) of wearing a uniform to school, as reported by students through a survey instrument. The results focus on gender, grade level, and racial/ethnic differences in students' responses. Few significant differences were found. One benefit was found between genders, six benefits between grade levels, and three benefits related to racial/ethnic groups.

KEYWORDS *middle school, school uniforms, benefits, student opinions, discipline*

Over the last two decades, the debate over the implementation of school uniform policies in public schools has been a consistent presence in schools and districts around the United States. When uniform policies are implemented they often elicit strong reactions from parents, students, educators, and scholars on both sides of the issue (Bodine, 2003; Brunsmas,

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2004; Brunnsma & Rockquemore, 1998; Firmin, Perry, & Smith, 2006). Yet, the empirical research regarding the effectiveness of uniforms to improve schools is limited (Brunnsma, 2004; Holloman, LaPoint, Alleyne, Palmer, & Sanders-Phillips, 1998; Kohn, 1998; Murray, 1997; Yeung, 2009). For example, a search for articles written between 2000 and 2010 using Academic Search Premier and the keywords “school uniforms” provided only 34 results, not all of which were related to U.S. public middle schools.

Uniforms and School Safety

For the majority of the last century, many countries around the world have had mandatory uniform requirements for students. The more privileged classes often adopted dress codes in private schools that have been called *preppy*, consisting of khaki or grey pants, white or light blue Oxford-style shirts, and sometimes coats and ties (Dussel, 2005). This style became the basis for many public school uniform codes. Dussel pointed out that, historically, no uniform style of dress had been adopted in public schools in the United States, but schools do have policies that convey the expectation of acceptable appearance, such as attending school in a clean and properly dressed manner.

One of the rationales given for dress codes and uniform policies is, purportedly, to improve school climate and student deportment, which in turn is thought to affect school safety and student achievement. Dinkes, Kemp, and Baum (2009) recognized that “our nation’s schools should be safe havens for teaching and learning, free of crime and violence” (p. iii). Robers, Zhang, Truman, and Snyder (2012) reported indicators for U.S. school crime and safety and indicated that there were 33 school-associated violent deaths from July 2009 to June 2010. Also, in 2009, 22% of students attending public schools reported that there was a gang presence at their schools, with 33% of Hispanic students reporting a gang presence (Robers et al., 2012). Furthermore, an estimated 1.9 million school crimes were reported, with 85% of the public schools reporting one or more crimes (Robers et al., 2012). In addition, 28% of students ages 12–18 indicated being bullied at school during 2009. At the middle school level, 33% of seventh graders and 32% of eighth graders reported being bullied. These were only some of the many key findings identified by Robers et al. With such findings in mind, administrators might consider implementing school uniform policies to lessen the potential for school violence and improve school safety.

As many as 25% of elementary and middle schools require uniforms for students in the United States (Bodine, 2003; Key, 2000), which is similar to the 26% that Yeung (2009) reported for public and private schools. In the 2009–2010 school year, 35% of city schools reported requiring students to wear uniforms and 19% of middle schools reported having a uniform requirement (Robers et al., 2012). Long Beach Unified School District was

one of the first and largest districts in the United States to mandate school uniforms in 1994, and after one year the district reported improvements in student behavior and attendance (Firmin et al., 2006).

Yeung (2009) indicated that the “transformative power of clothing provides the theoretical rationale behind school uniforms, though acceptance of this particular maxim is far from universal” (p. 847). Individual displays of flashy adornment, including makeup, bareness, miniskirts, and earrings are seen in schools (Cruz, 2001). Moreover, adolescents face peer pressure to wear specific labels, styles, and name brands (Murray, 2002). In Swain’s (2002) study, “styles of dress formed a part of how the pupils wished to be publicly represented, and the designer labels and names so prominently displayed were a vital visible component in that promotion” (p. 60). Also, students may display specific colors and attire to represent gang affiliation (Darden, 2008). Clearly, clothing plays a prominent role in adolescents’ lives and is frequently used to show affiliation to a particular group or style.

In light of the increasing challenges confronting school administrators, it is no wonder that many schools and districts are turning to school uniforms. School safety and an orderly environment are foremost in the missions of public schools (Draa, 2005). For example, Daugherty (2002) described a pilot school uniform program and noted the program goals were: (a) to increase school safety, (b) increase attendance, (c) more readily identify nonschool students, (d) decrease the theft of clothing, and (e) prevent gang attire. Ultimately, four of these five goals were related to safety. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools have been under pressure to improve student achievement. Unfortunately, an unsafe school environment and ongoing disciplinary problems may impede efforts toward improvement in student achievement. Robers et al. (2012) noted that 34% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior interfered with their teaching, especially secondary education teachers. Indeed, schools might consider the use of school uniforms to help ameliorate these and other school concerns.

Study Purpose

Research on current school uniform efforts is minimal, especially when considering students’ opinions and the link of uniforms to school violence and safety issues. According to DaCosta (2006), when it comes to implementing uniform policies, “Officials have tended to omit youths from the decision-making, as if the latter were walls idly waiting to be decorated” (p. 50). The current study addressed this limitation by surveying students’ opinions about the benefits of school uniforms at a middle school that recently implemented a uniform policy. The primary questions that guided this descriptive study were: (a) Are there gender differences in students’ opinions on the benefits of wearing school uniforms?; (b) Are there grade-level differences

in students' opinions on the benefits of wearing school uniforms?; (c) Are there racial/ethnic differences in students' opinions on the benefits of wearing school uniforms?; and (d) How have school uniforms impacted school violence and safety?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were seventh- and eighth-grade middle school students attending an urban public school in Nevada. The school was selected because of the enactment of a policy for wearing school uniforms. The school uniform policy was prompted by the staff's frustration over trying to implement the existing school district dress-code policy, which was considered ambiguous and difficult to enforce. Many female students sometimes wore very revealing tops and shorts, while males often wore sagging jeans or shirts topped with inappropriate images or messages. In addition, there was a high incidence of gang-related activity and gang-related attire being worn by students. Attempting to enforce a stricter dress code for certain students who were dressing inappropriately or were officially identified as gang members by the gang task force was difficult and ineffective. Essentially, the primary intent for implementing the school uniform policy at this school was to eliminate competition, teach young people to dress appropriately, decrease nonacademic distractions, and lower the parental clothing costs. Additionally, an objective was to improve school safety through the decrease of behavior incidents related to dress, such as sexually inappropriate behaviors, gang involvement, and bullying.

The process for implementing the uniform dress code started with a staff survey to assess their support, which was unanimous. After the staff survey, the administration proposed the idea to the district administration that gave the approval to move forward with the implementation by getting parent feedback. A series of three parent meetings were held to present arguments that had been compiled for and against school uniforms. Parent and student feedback was encouraged and noted in the minutes of the meetings. At each meeting a vote was taken of those parents present. It was a nearly unanimous vote in favor of uniforms at every meeting by those present. After it was decided that the school would implement a uniform policy, a committee of faculty, parents, and students was formed to choose the new uniforms.

The school's population was about 700 students, with many students from families experiencing low socioeconomic circumstances—about 64% of the students qualified for free and reduced-cost lunch. Altogether, 604 students participated in the study, which accounted for an 86% response rate of the overall school population. Of the participants, 50% were male and 50%

were female; approximately 50% were in seventh grade and 50% were in eighth grade. Of the students, 30.0% were White, 57.4% were Latino/a, 6.1% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 4.4% were African American, and 2.2% were Native American/Alaskan Native. The eighth graders had not worn uniforms at this middle school during the prior year. The policy was implemented upon promotion to eighth grade; the seventh graders had not worn uniforms during sixth grade but entered middle school knowing that this was the new policy.

Uniforms were sold through the school, priced at \$10 for a shirt and \$10 for an optional sweatshirt. Pants were sold through local vendors priced at \$10 or more. Although these prices were deemed inexpensive, a work-exchange program was developed for underprivileged students; they received a uniform in exchange for various tasks to complete at the school. Students were credited \$5 per hour for work around the school toward the cost of the school uniform. Although the cost of a shirt was \$10, the policy included those families whose students were moving on to high school or not returning for some other reason could donate shirts back to the school at the end of the year. Parents were very enthusiastic about the program and wanted their students to work off the cost of a uniform when the family was struggling financially. Many parents with students on free and reduced-cost lunch took advantage of this program, and they preferred to have their students work to earn the uniform, instead of accepting a free uniform.

Measures

A self-report survey questionnaire was developed to obtain general information about students' opinions on the benefits of wearing school uniforms. The survey was developed based on a literature review, and content validity was established with feedback from professors in the field of educational leadership, a school principal, a group of middle school teachers, and a group of student council middle school students. The survey began by asking the students three general questions about school uniforms:

1. How much do you like or dislike wearing a uniform to school? (1 = *strongly like it*; 4 = *strongly dislike it*)
2. Do you like wearing a uniform to school? (1 = *strongly like it*; 4 = *strongly dislike it*)
3. How often do you see the following issues (bullying, teasing, gang activity, drugs, and violence/fighting) occur at your school? (1 = *always*; 5 = *never*)

The primary portion of the survey referenced wearing school uniforms and asked students to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed (1 = *strongly*

disagree; 4 = *strongly agree*) with particular statements related to the association between wearing school uniforms and behavior problems, self-esteem, confidence, feeling equal to others, feeling accepted by others, ease of going to school, and school safety. Reliability was established with a Cronbach's alpha of .93, which was only used to identify that survey items were highly related to one another, for the primary items that served as the main portion of the survey. In addition, school police records and disciplinary data were collected from the year prior to the implementation of the uniform policy. The same data were collected at the end of the first year of implementation of the uniform policy.

Procedure

The survey was completed toward the end of the school year during which the school uniform policy was implemented. Two researchers (one for the seventh graders and one for the eighth graders) administered the survey within the school's core English classes. The surveys were anonymous and confidential. Some students questioned whether the results would influence the school uniform policy, and students were assured that this survey was only to obtain their opinions of the benefits of wearing school uniforms rather than to change school policy. The survey was read verbatim to all students and their voluntary completion of the survey served as assent. Furthermore, the University of Nevada Reno's Institutional Review Board granted a waiver of parental consent because requiring positive consent would have required a signature from every parent, separating students with permission from those without it, and identifying different locations and times to survey the students with permission. This process would have been more disruptive to the school's educational environment, so parents were informed of the survey and given the option to opt out.

Data Analysis Approach

Univariate statistical techniques were utilized, including descriptive statistics and chi-square tests. Descriptive statistics were used to organize and summarize data to provide an overall understanding of the information (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Also, chi-square tests were used to assess potential differences in frequencies; this analysis is typical when there are two nominal variables with categories (Aron, Aron, & Coups, 2006). For chi-square tests, Cohen's Phi (Φ) value was used as an effect size value, where 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 indicate a small, medium, or large effect size, respectively (Cohen, 1988). The Bonferroni correction was used to control for alpha slippage with a family-wise alpha using $.05/45$, giving $p = .0011$. These quantitative methods guided the data analyses.

RESULTS

All Students

Missing responses within each survey were removed from analyses. However, for every survey item, less than 5% had missing values. In response to how much students like wearing uniforms, 1.7% indicated they strongly like it; 17.6% indicated they like it, 36.4% indicated they dislike it, and 44.4% indicated they strongly dislike it. When asking students to provide a yes/no response to whether they like wearing a uniform to school, 12.7% of the students responded *yes* and 87.3% responded *no*. The students indicated the following particular issues occurred at school always or almost always: 15% reported drugs, 20% reported bullying, 20% reported gang activity, 26% reported violence or fighting, and 34% reported teasing.

Students indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with particular statements related to: behavior problems, self-esteem, confidence, feeling equal to others, feeling accepted by others, and ease of going to school. There were only two statements with which a majority of students agreed or strongly agreed: there were behavior problems at the school and there was less gang activity with uniforms. The perceived benefits that did not receive a majority response in agreement but reached percentages of 30% to 40% included: uniforms reduced behavior problems and that school is safer, along with worrying less about their appearance by wearing uniforms, worrying less about how others look, and making it easier for them to go to school. Nonetheless, the majority of the students indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with almost all of the statements pertaining to perceived benefits of wearing school uniforms.

Gender

The survey data were disaggregated by gender to further inform concerns about school climate and student experiences, and chi-square tests were conducted to identify potential differences in responses from male and female students. The results were similar to the overall school results in that most males and most females indicated that they did not perceive benefits from wearing uniforms. After using the family-wise alpha, the majority of the tests for gender differences were not significant. For results that were significant, the findings revealed that females attributed only one benefit to uniforms when compared against males. Specifically, more females (68 observed, 50 expected) than males (33 observed, 50 expected) responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that wearing a uniform made students treat them better than before, $\chi^2(3, N = 591) = 16.36, p = .0009$. The next area in which females (65 observed for *true*, 86 expected) and

males (106 observed for *true*, 85 expected) differed, even though it did not represent a benefit, was in response to whether students had gotten detention for not wearing a uniform, $\chi^2(1, N = 596) = 14.57, p = .0001$. The third area of significant difference between females and males was whether students had gotten detention because they wore the uniform inappropriately, $\chi^2(1, N = 598) = 21.92, p = .0000$. Fewer than expected females (102 observed for *true*, 130 expected) received detention for wearing their uniform inappropriately as compared to males (157 observed for *true*, 129 expected).

Grade

The data were also disaggregated by grade and chi-square tests were conducted to identify potential differences in responses based on grade level for seventh- and eighth-grade students. Again, the results were similar to those for gender, as most seventh and eighth graders responded that they did not benefit from wearing uniforms. After using the family-wise alpha, the majority of the tests for grade differences were not significant. For results that were significant, the findings revealed that seventh-grade students identified six benefits to uniforms when compared to eighth-grade students. More seventh graders (67 observed, 55 expected) than eighth graders (45 observed, 56 expected) responded that they liked or strongly liked uniforms, $\chi^2(3, N = 585) = 16.73, p = .0008$. More seventh graders (42 observed, 59 expected) than eighth graders (77 observed, 60 expected) noted they saw less gang activity with uniforms, $\chi^2(4, N = 584) = 39.51, p = .0000$. Results were similar with whether students saw drugs, as fewer seventh graders (31 observed, 41 expected) than eighth graders (52 observed, 42 expected) indicated they saw drugs on campus, $\chi^2(4, N = 578) = 19.12, p = .0007$.

The remaining three benefits were in reference to safety with uniforms associated with perceptions that it makes it easier to go to school. For safety, more than expected seventh graders (155 observed, 121 expected) as compared to eighth graders (88 observed, 122 expected) indicated school is safer because of wearing uniforms, $\chi^2(3, N = 584) = 33.21, p = .0000$. Similarly, more than expected seventh graders (100 observed, 75 expected) as compared to eighth graders (53 observed, 77 expected) indicated school is safer because of wearing uniforms, $\chi^2(3, N = 582) = 22.28, p = .0001$. Lastly, more than expected seventh graders (124 observed, 103 expected) as compared to eighth graders (83 observed, 104 expected) indicated individually feeling safer because of wearing uniforms, $\chi^2(3, N = 580) = 17.35, p = .0005$. These significant differences were found just when comparing seventh graders against eighth graders; overall, however, most seventh- and eighth-grade students responded that they did not perceive benefits from wearing uniforms.

Race/Ethnicity

The data were also disaggregated by race/ethnicity and chi-square tests were conducted to identify potential differences in responses. Other than the Latino/a and White groups, the sample sizes were not large enough for a statistical significance. Therefore, only the Hispanic/Latino/a and White students were considered. The results were similar to the prior analyses, as students from these ethnic groups equally responded that they did not benefit from wearing uniforms. After using the family-wise alpha, the majority of the tests for race/ethnicity differences were not significant. For significant results, however, it was found that Latino/a students attributed three benefits to wearing uniforms when compared against White students.

First, fewer than expected Latino/a students (57 observed, 65 expected) than White students (40 observed, 33 expected) indicated they always and almost always saw bullying, $\chi^2(16, N = 590) = 41.40, p = .0005$. In addition, more than expected Latino/a students (103 observed, 81 expected) than White students (21 observed, 42 expected) reported feeling more confident at school because of wearing uniforms, $\chi^2(12, N = 588) = 33.40, p = .0008$. As the third benefit, more than expected Latino/a students (147 observed, 122 expected) than White students (30 observed, 63 expected) responded they agreed or strongly agreed that uniforms made it easier for them to go to school, $\chi^2(12, N = 587) = 37.63, p = .0002$. Yet above all, most Latino/a students and most White students responded that they did not perceive benefits from wearing uniforms.

School Discipline Effects

It is also important to consider the school's total discipline data and school police data after having implemented the school uniform policy. Compared to the year prior to the uniform policy being implemented, the total discipline referrals at this middle school were reduced by 102 (9.7%). Inappropriate behavior referrals were reduced by 121 incidents (a 33% reduction). For school police data, the total police log reports decreased from 200 the year prior to implementing the uniform policy, to 75 the year of implementing the uniform policy (63% reduction). Gang-related reports decreased from 12 to 4; affray reports decreased from 20 to 8; graffiti decreased from 26 to 2; property damage to school decreased from 10 to 1; threats decreased from 18 to 4; battery decreased from 25 to 3, and administrative assists decreased from 17 to 5. Although the accompanying changes in disciplinary incidents might reflect a potential impact of wearing school uniforms to aid in and improve the school climate and students' experiences, student beliefs were not consistent with these changes.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate public middle school students' opinions on the benefits of wearing a school uniform. An overwhelming majority of the students (87%) clearly indicated that they did not like wearing a school uniform. Despite an overwhelming majority of students against uniforms, some benefits to wearing uniforms from the students' perspective were observed. For example, in reference to gender, more than expected females than males indicated students treated them better with uniforms. Also, fewer females than males got detention for not wearing a uniform or for wearing a uniform inappropriately. From a meaningful perspective, this means that administrators, teachers, and parents may need to focus more on males to ensure they remember to wear their uniform or that it is worn appropriately.

Based on grade level, more seventh graders than eighth graders reported agreement with statements about the benefits of wearing school uniforms. On six significant items, it appeared that seventh and eighth graders had opposing beliefs. As a result, seventh-grade students perceived more benefits from uniforms than eighth-grade students. As noted, eighth-grade students' might have deliberately provided more negative responses against uniforms with hopes of trying to affect the policy. Above all, students from both grade levels predominantly reported a lack of perceived benefits of wearing uniforms.

Race/ethnicity was also an important aspect to consider when identifying potential benefits of school uniforms. Results revealed that Latino/a students believed they attained more benefits from uniforms than White students.

Considering all students' responses, most responses were against wearing school uniforms, but 30% to 40% of students did indicate various benefits to wearing school uniforms. At the same time, although females, seventh-grade students, and Latino/a students tended to voice greater benefits than their counterparts, it is important to note that the opposing groups (i.e., males, eighth grade students, and White students) tended to disagree with the benefits. From a practical perspective, considering the positive impact on 30% to 40% of a school's population and the noted improvements in discipline data and school policy data, school stakeholders might deem the policy effective. In other words, if a simple change in attire can positively influence the opinions of one third or even one fourth of a school's student population, administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders interested in implementing a school uniform policy might believe it is worth the effort. However, our results were not compared against school achievement, so the uniform policy's full effectiveness still remains inconclusive.

Limitations

The middle school students were in a public middle school in Nevada. They were selected because the students are required to wear uniforms and were a sample of convenience. The results obtained for this study are not widely generalizable. Furthermore, although students were encouraged to be as honest as possible, some students' responses may not have been truthful. Additionally, students were reminded that their responses would not be used to influence the school uniform policy, as there was no administrative intent to change the policy, but students may have believed that their responses could influence the policy and may have purposefully altered responses. This could be particularly applicable to the eighth-grade students, who had not previously worn a uniform during their seventh grade year at this middle school. Finally, the study examined only the first year after the implementation of the uniform policy and it is possible that its full effects may take longer to occur.

Conclusion

This study informs future research on school uniforms, with a particular focus on students' opinions. Recently, additional schools have followed suit and implemented school uniform policies in Nevada. Therefore, we anticipate replicating this study at those schools to identify year-by-year changes. However, it could also be beneficial to administer the survey at the start of the year and then at the end of the year in order to analyze within-group changes of students' opinions. Further, it is essential to note that the school uniform implementation was a collaborative and informative effort among school staff, district administrators, and parents. The uniform initiative was certainly a process that was not abruptly implemented. Again, perhaps from a practical perspective, the efforts might have paid off because simply changing the clothes they wore to school positively impacted some students.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

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