THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL DRESS ON BEHAVIOR

OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN:

ONE SCHOOL EDUCATOR’S VIEW

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

The topic this researcher chose is the impact of school dress on behavior of elementary school children. Points discussed regarding this topic will be exploring the views of teachers and how they feel dress effects student behavior. The participants were elementary teachers. In this report, questionnaires were distributed to elementary teachers. The purpose of the study is to explore the feelings of teachers regarding the link between student dress and student behavior.
DEDICATION

To my husband David and my children
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my husband, David for the sacrifices and support given. Thank you for keeping the house quiet and for being the excellent father that you are.

I would like to thank my children, Hannah, Hayden, and Hope for being understanding when I have had to research and write. Thank you for helping around the house and doing extra chores while I have been busy working and studying.

Thank you to my mother, for all the time she spent babysitting and for all of the meals that she has cooked for my family.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All students start their day by deciding what to wear to school. Some school children are limited to specific regulated clothing such as uniforms, and others can wear almost anything. With the recent impact of school violence and awareness of academic standards, uniforms and strict dress codes in public schools have become topics of interest to school boards and administrations. School districts want reform to improve school climate. They want test scores to rise and behavior problems to deescalate. Are mandatory school uniforms the answer? Will there be less behavior problems in the classroom if a strict dress code is in place?

Some have linked clothing with violent school crimes. For example, the school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 were committed by students wearing trench coats. These coats are conducive for concealing weapons or even drugs. People also associate gang type clothing such as color coded bandanas, and coats that display gang emblems with violence. Sometimes the color of clothing that students wear can result in becoming targets of intentional or unintentional violence. Also children may envy other children’s clothing and find they can not afford clothing of similar styles. This can result in feelings of inferiority and resentment. Much violence and theft has been associated with coveting designer clothing, shoes, or professional sport paraphernalia.
This study looked at the views and outlook of teachers regarding feelings and attitudes of dress codes and student behavior. The views and attitudes were examined via a questionnaire, which was completed by teachers in one elementary building in the Marietta City School District. The questionnaire was evaluated and reported by the researcher who sought to find if the teachers felt that there is a link between behavior and dress at the elementary school level.
Impact of School Dress on Behavior

Statement of the Problem

Clothing can be used as a status symbol with students. It also has been linked with violent school crimes and gangs. Therefore, an attempt was made to explore the views of teachers and to find if elementary teachers felt that student behavior would improve with a strict dress code or uniform policy.

Purpose and Research Questions

According to recent research, school uniforms and strict dress codes are not clear cut answers to behavior issues in the classroom. It is obvious however, that the use of school uniforms or strict dress codes is an attempt to improve the overall school climate. The purpose of this study was to explore the feelings of teachers regarding the link between student dress and student behavior.

This study uncovered the views of teachers and to find if they felt that student behavior would improve with a strict dress code or uniform policy. It also sought to find views of teachers regarding how dress effects student behavior. Data was collected through a survey distributed to teachers in one elementary building at Marietta City School District. The teachers were asked to provide feedback on their personal views of how behavior and dress are linked.

Central Phenomenon

Does dress have an impact on behavior? What differences does dress make?

What do teachers say about dress?
Definitions of Terms

STRICT DRESS CODES- mandatory requirements for clothing at school.

SCHOOL UNIFORM- an identifying outfit or style of dress worn by an individual.
Limitations of the Study

This is a qualitative study and it is limited by the demographic region in which the sample was collected. The researcher sampled one public elementary school in the Marietta City School District. One open-ended question was asked only to teachers in this elementary school. This study examined the views of the teachers and their opinions regarding the impact of school dress and behavior. The researcher had difficulty getting responses to the questionnaire. Teachers are extra busy during the end of the school year with final assessments and duties, and many did not take the time to respond.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Do uniformed students have better behavior? At John Adams and Truman Middle Schools of Albuquerque Public Schools, the data showed during the first semester of 1998-99 school year, after the implementation of uniforms, both schools experienced a clear improvement in student conduct from the previous year. At John Adams Middle School, discipline referrals fell from 1,565 during the first semester of the previous year to 405. At Truman, referrals dropped from 1,139 to 850. Students at both of these schools were surveyed before and one year after uniforms were implemented. Before the use of uniforms the survey showed 25.2% of the students felt uniforms decrease violence. A year later after wearing the uniforms the belief dropped 4.5%, with only 20.7% of students agreeing that uniforms decrease violence (Elder, 1999). This was attributed to comments made by the majority of the students that they did not like wearing uniforms.

Data collected from California’s Long Beach Unified School District showed that the requirement of school uniforms was beneficial. Since 1994, when mandatory uniform policies were adopted, district officials found that violence and discipline problems dramatically decreased. In the first year following the implementation, overall school crime decreased by 36%; sex offenses, by 74%; physical fights between students, by
51%; weapons offenses, by 50%; assault and battery offenses, by 34%; school suspensions, by 32%; and vandalism, by 18% (King, 1998). It should be noted that this district also enforced other policies along with the school uniform policy. They placed more hall monitors and teachers on duty. These are the variables that need to be taken into consideration when looking at the outcomes of this data. However, the data showed that the use of school uniforms was beneficial.

Brunsma & Rockquemore (1998) conducted an intense quantitative study surrounding school uniforms. The researchers used the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to test the relationships of uniforms and substance abuse, behavioral problems, school attendance, and academic achievement. The data used for the analysis came from the first follow up of when the students were in the 10th grade. Many variables were taken into consideration and factored in the study. They concluded that student uniforms were not significantly correlated with any of the school commitment variables such as absenteeism, behavior, or substance abuse. In fact, they found a negative effect of uniforms on student academic achievement. The 10th grade students who were required by school policy to wear uniforms had almost a 3 point decrease in standardized test scores. This may have been attributed to the fact that the students were found to be absent from school more often.

Most studies show that improved behavior was shown after implementing school uniforms. There were other changes to the schools along with the uniforms. This
researcher feels that one can not conclude that the improvement of behavior is only due to the implementation of uniforms, due to the above mentioned studies.

Is mandating a school uniform the answer to better behavior, or is a strict dress code sufficient? Some school personnel believe students and teaches tend to behave the way they dress. Instead of adopting a policy for mandating school uniforms, several schools have adopted a mandatory dress code policy for students as well as teachers. They claim this establishes clear behavior and appearance standards for all. Dorothy Behling (Mancini, 1997), who is retired from the Family and Consumer Sciences Department at Bowling Green State University, has verified the mythical impact of uniforms and casual dress. She found that teachers and students believe that uniformed students are better behaved and more academically successful that students who do not wear uniforms. She states a “halo effect” may ensue in which every one looks as though they have conformed, so the impression is their actions and behavior has conformed also.

Norman L. Sommers (2001), an associate professor at Ashland University conducted a study during the 2000-01 school year on the effects of dress on school discipline. Participating school principals were asked to conduct two or three sets consisting of three days each. One day was to be a dress-up day, one a dress-down day, and one a regular dress day. The acceptable school dress and behavior were relative to the school standards. Formal School uniforms were not part of this study. From the study,
Sommers concluded that the type of dress does have an effect on school discipline. He found that students tended to act the way that they were dressed. In every instance and at every grade level there were less discipline cases on days that students dressed up and more discipline cases on days they dressed down. This study shows school dress is relevant to behavior. A uniform was not used in this study, but a more formal dress day made a difference in the outcome of the study. Students were able to choose their clothes on the dress-up days long as it was within the dress code requirements, and there were less discipline cases in every grade level.

While most parents and teachers are proponents of school uniforms many students are not. Most research has shown that the elementary students embrace the uniform policy more than the middle and high school students. The adolescent years bring a time of self expression and exploration. Some opponents insist that uniforms squelch free expression and it violates the students’ right. The Millikan Middle School, in Sherman Oaks, California has not adopted a school uniform. The faculty and parents believe that schools should teach students how to handle decisions about appropriate dress. Students are given the opportunity to work and earn money to buy new clothes that are acceptable. When a student violates the dress code, photographs are taken and the pictures are sent home after the second infraction. This district also believes that an adolescent’s choice of clothing provides clues to emotional well-being. If student’s clothing style changes dramatically the staff in this district takes note. It could be an
indicator of a drug problem, financial problem, or a gang related problem. The use of school uniforms would mask these clues.

*Positive Aspects of School Uniforms*

First, proponents of school uniforms claim that the use of school uniforms simplifies dress codes. Students that wear uniforms know what clothes are acceptable and do not spend extra time each morning preparing for school. Next, uniforms reduce peer pressure. With society putting much emphasis on the outward appearance, uniforms are a way to avoid the competition of wearing the latest fashion trends. Uniforms also encourage distinction of character and personality instead of appearance. What truly matters about a person is not what brand of clothing he or she is wearing, but the character of that person. Another positive aspect of school uniforms is that uniforms place an emphasis on learning, not on clothing. Students go to school to learn, and the distraction of trendy clothing can take away the focus of learning. Parents enjoy the benefits of lower long term clothing costs and simple laundering that uniforms bring. School shopping can be done quickly and at a lower cost each year. Uniforms also allow for a cohesive presentation as a group. When uniformed students are on a field trip they are able to find each other quickly and appear as a bonded group. School spirit is also enhanced by wearing uniforms. Uniforms help students to feel as an important part of the school. Students feel as though they belong to a group, and there is a sense of pride by all. Another important aspect of uniform use is that uniforms can decrease property
theft. When students go to school each day with designer clothing and expensive shoes theft occurs. Finally, uniforms help facilitate security by identifying outsiders on school grounds. It is much easier to spot an outsider on school property if the student is dressed much differently (Flynn & O’Hara, 2005).

**Negative Aspects of School Uniforms**

Opponents of school uniforms claim that the use of uniforms create resentment and conflict with the school administration and this leads to an erosion of discipline. Furthermore, opponents state that uniforms squelch free expression and self-esteem. Opponents claim that students should be able to dress as they wish and learn to dress appropriately without a uniform mandate. Finally, uniforms do not serve as an emotional barometer like regular clothing does. Students that become involved with drugs, gangs, or students who have personal issues often change the way that they dress. Change of dress or style can be one of the first signs that indicate a problem with a student.

**Dress of Students in the Marietta City School District**

Marietta City Schools has a dress code policy for all buildings. The interpretation of the dress code could possibly be handled differently in each building. Students may be able to wear different clothing or shoes in one building, but students in another building may be held to the dress code to the word. For safety reasons, students at Phillips Elementary School are not permitted to wear open toe shoes like sandals, but students at Washington Elementary School are allowed to wear this type of shoe. This being the
case, the researcher needs to ask, “How does the dress of elementary school students affect their behavior?”
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Study Design

This study of the impact of school dress on behavior in the elementary school will be done using the qualitative method. This will be accomplished with open ended questionnaires. The results of the questionnaires will be placed into themes for reporting. The researcher will attempt to record teachers’ reactions to the effects of school dress on behavior of the elementary school student.

Participants

The participants in this study will be elementary teachers of Phillips Elementary of the Marietta City School District. The participants teach Kindergarten through Fifth grades, special education, music, physical education, and art.

Procedure

The researcher developed a qualitative questionnaire with one open-ended question. The principal was contacted to determine if the teachers were willing to assist with the project. The teachers were also be notified of the study. Then questionnaires were sent out with a cover letter explaining in more detail the purpose of the study. All questionnaires were done anonymously. Finally, the questionnaires were
completed, the data was collected by the researcher, and themes from the data were formed.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

There were twenty-eight surveys distributed to regular education and special education teachers. Sixteen surveys were answered and returned. The results of this study indicate that teachers of Phillips School feel that dress affects student behavior. Overall, teachers claimed that self-esteem was impacted the most. Students that dress trendy and with the current styles fit in better socially and seem to have better self-esteem than the students who wear outdated “hand me downs”. The participants believed that this fashion peer pressure is present even in the early years of First and Second grades, but is most evident with older students.

Another outcome of this study revealed that immodest dress is a factor that affects student behavior. Teachers stated that mainly girls dress provocatively in the elementary school. One participant stated, “It can be very distracting. Low rise jeans, short skirts, and short shorts can be revealing.” Some girls dress too old for their age and this influences the younger girls to imitate this behavior. At times, students are more focused on clothing than academics.

The third outcome of this study was that students wore poorly fitted and out of
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season clothing. The teachers indicated that this was a major problem. Students come to school with poorly fitted clothing; therefore they are constantly rearranging their clothing during class and missing out on directions and the objective of the lesson. Shoes were also mentioned as a main issue. Some students are forced to wear siblings’ shoes that do not fit correctly, thus they are unable to participate in activities to the full extent. It was also noted that students wear flip-flops all year long. This obviously is an issue during the cold winter months. Children are expected to play outside at recess time year round, but many students do not wear appropriate garments. Students are then too cold or even too warm causing them to not be focused during class.

Themes

Teachers felt that dress effects student behavior because of the following qualitative statements:

**Improved self esteem:**

“Feeling like the “others” is important to learning and dress plays a part in this.”

“Older students are more socially aware of style and who has the “in” look.”

“Poorly dressed students are shunned by classmates and are not asked to be part of a group- in the class or at recess.”

“Breeds competition”

“The ways kids dress also affects how their peers react to them, either positive (wearing “cool” styles), or negatively (wearing “hand me downs”).

“Perhaps some students stand out because they can’t keep up with the latest trends and are forced to wear whatever is “handed down” to them.”
“It can be an economic status for older children, causing prejudice towards those who can’t afford the high priced clothes.”

“Kids who are not able to afford, or whose parents choose not to buy brand name clothing, can be made to feel bad about themselves.”

“Some comparisons are made between haves and have nots (effects self esteem).”

**Teachers feel that immodest dress is very inappropriate:**

“Girls show off or let body parts show. This is a lack of self respect.”

“These low pants on females have caused a lot of butt cracks to show, especially during tornado drills!”

“I feel immodest dress promotes inappropriate behavior in both boys and girls, thus affecting their academic achievement.”

“It can be very distracting. Low rise jeans, short skirts, and short shorts can be revealing.”

“Some of the girls are dressing too old for their age. By doing this, they try to act older than they are. The younger girls see this, and flock around them reinforcing the behavior.”

**Students wear poorly fitted and out of season clothing:**

“I feel that some students who wear clothes that are too tight, too loose, too long, too uncomfortable, too revealing are constantly readjusting so that the clothes feel/look better! They are not focused on directions being given, thus act out because they might not understand what task is at hand.”
“They should feel comfortable according to temperature, and ready to play on the playground wearing the right shoes, girls in pants, etc."

“Students don’t dress for the weather- no coat or mittens. They wear shorts and flip flops year round-can’t focus, too relaxed and comfortable.”

“Inability to run and play with inappropriate clothing – especially shoes.”

“Some don’t dress for the weather so they’re too hot or too cold, thus inattentive.”

“Sometimes the kinds of clothes kids wear are too small or too big and may cause them to constantly fuss over them, so they can’t pay attention in class.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants in this study agree that dress does affect student behavior. The way students dress at school can cause different emotions and actions. Students seem to feel better about themselves when they are dressed to fit in with the crowd that they want to be associated with. Some students dress in an immodest way, therefore distracting themselves and others from learning. Also, students may wear poorly fitted or out of season clothing that is distracting and uncomfortable. This causes them to be unfocused and it could lead to behavioral issues.
Over the years there has been much research regarding school dress. The debate over school uniforms peeked in the 1990’s when President Clinton suggested the idea of school uniforms in his 1996 State of the Union Address. President Clinton (1996) stated that school uniforms would help deter violence and promote discipline; therefore, a better learning environment would be present. Many school districts that enforce a strict dress code or even uniforms also have made many other changes to the school environment. One can not be certain that a strict dress code or even school uniforms have changed behavior positively.

The purpose of this study was to explore the feelings of teachers regarding the link between student dress and student behavior. The researcher sought the responses of elementary teachers through an open ended survey.

Just as some prior research has shown, this study supports the idea that dress in fact affects behavior. The results stated that self esteem was linked with how students dressed. Students with the “hand me down” clothing appeared to have more of a risk of low self esteem, than the students with the name brand and in style clothing.
It was also noted that immodest dress effected behavior. Students that wore this type of clothing distracted themselves as well as others. Even as young elementary students, low rise jeans and short skirts were noted as distracting. Many young children wear clothing that is too “old” for their age, and this can distract from the learning in the classroom.

Finally, it was pointed out that students who wore poorly fitted and out of season clothing were not as focused as their properly dressed peers. Teachers felt this was a major issue in the elementary school setting. Students were often too cold or too hot for the environment. Children wore poorly fitted clothes and shoes making performance limited. The constant readjusting of clothing made listening and focusing a challenge.

On the whole, like the research that has been done before, this study has shown that student dress does affect behavior of students. One can not forget that there are many environmental factors that affect student behavior, and dress is just one of them. It is this researcher’s opinion that students need to come to school ready to learn with a positive attitude, good hygiene, and dressed in modest apparel.

Future Implications

In the future, the researcher would expand the sample area to a private or public elementary school that uses uniforms. The researcher would hope that the responses would be more specific about behavior, and the outcomes of uniformed students would be more diverse.
APPENDIX
Dear Mr. Arnold,

I am currently working toward obtaining my Masters of Education degree this summer. The subject of my research is how dress impacts the behavior of elementary school students. I am asking for your teachers to help me out with the research part by answering one question. Attached, you will find a copy of a questionnaire that I will distribute to your teachers of all grade levels. The questionnaire is completely anonymous. I appreciate your help in this matter as I look forward to compiling the results and finishing my project.

Sincerely,

Sara Perry
Dear Phillips Teachers,

I am currently working toward obtaining my Masters of Education degree this summer. The subject of my research is how dress impacts the behavior of elementary school students. I am asking for you to help me by answering one question on the attached form. This will be done anonymously, so please put the questionnaire in my box when you are finished. I appreciate your help with this matter, as I am looking forward to compiling the results and finishing my project soon.

Sincerely,

Sara Perry
How does the dress of elementary school students affect their behavior?

Thank you for your help! Please put this form in my box.

Sara