Do Uniforms Teach Students Conformity or How to Dress Appropriately?

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The implementation of school uniforms has increased in the past two decades as society started to use clothes as a way to express themselves. Uniforms were created as a way to deter teenagers from wearing clothes that were revealing or had messages on them that could offend someone else. Schools in the United States implemented school uniforms, mainly after they were endorsed by former President Bill Clinton in the 90s, and have only increased as time has progressed. However, what has the implementation of uniforms done to stop this problem? Uniforms are a common occurrence in many modern-day schools, but are they solving the problems that they have set out to fix, or have they created even more problems that haven't been overlooked?

Uniforms can be traced back to 1222 "when the Archbishop of Canterbury mandated that students wear a robe-like outfit called the cappa clausa."[1] However, the more modern uniform that we see today comes from 16th century England "when the impoverished "charity children" attending the Christ's Hospital boarding school wore blue cloaks reminiscent of the cassocks worn by clergy, along with yellow stockings." This uniform was created so the children could have clothes that weren't old and dirty and made them feel welcomed in the school as the school took in poverty-stricken children only. Uniforms were then formally introduced in the United States public school system on February 25th, 1996 when President Bill Clinton "...ordered the distribution of a school uniform manual to the country's 16,000 school districts."[2] The implementation of uniforms was created to stop unnecessary killings and violence in youths, stop children from wearing inappropriate outfits, and wearing gang colors and symbols.

In this argument with how school uniforms are beneficial or not, psychology brings a new perspective by adding the argument of conformity vs individuality. Conformity is "a type of

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[1] https://school-uniforms.procon.org/history-of-school-uniforms/
[2] https://school-uniforms.procon.org/history-of-school-uniforms/

social influence involving a change in belief or behavior to fit in with a group."[3] Uniforms create neutrality within a school community and bring the idea that everyone is equal and everyone is the same, similar to conformity where everyone has the same ideals. Individuality, however, is "total character peculiar to and distinguishing an individual from others."[4], as stated by Merrian-Webster Dictionary. Individuality isn't similar to uniforms because uniforms show everyone as one, whereas individuality teaches uniqueness and acceptance of one's self. Uniforms can be harmful as they can limit the amount of self-expression and self-identity one has in school. We want children to be unique and express their thoughts and opinion, but in school, we restrict them from expression because we confine them to uniforms. We ask them to express themselves, but don't allow them to express it through their clothes. Uniforms do have many advantages to them such as stopping children from wearing clothes that are too inappropriate for school, but many disadvantages come with them that aren't talked about enough.

The benefits behind school uniforms have been argued that it is beneficial to not only students but the overall school environment as it improves the morale of the students. Studies have shown that after school uniforms were implemented into schools, the school's morale increased. The morale of the school consists of classroom discipline, student safety, the image in the community, school pride, student achievement, and attendance, which all improved after uniforms were implemented, found in a study conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in 2013[5]. This shows that uniforms can have a positive impact on schools and improve schools in places that have low attendance rates and an

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https://www.simplypsychology.org/conformity.html#:~:text=Conformity%20is%20a%20type%20of,norms%20%2F%20expectations

4 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/individuality

5 https://www.naesp.org/national-survey-school-leaders-reveals-2013-school-uniform-trends

unwelcoming environment with things such as bullying. It shows that uniforms can solve some of the problems that they aim to fix. Parents have also shown favorable attitudes towards them as uniforms are more inexpensive compared to regular street clothes. The NAESP has estimated that parents spend on average $150 or less on uniforms per child, compared to families spending on average $388 on shoes alone.[6] Uniforms are an inexpensive way to improve schools and have shown improvement, making them very effective in that aspect.

Uniforms also stop children from wearing clothes that are too inappropriate for school such as gang colors and symbols and clothes that don't cover up what should be. Uniforms take away any gang colors or symbols that could cause conflicts within school communities and stop children from feeling the need to wear more expensive or revealing clothes to impress others. Everyone looks the same and no one is trying to outdo each other with who has the better and more expensive clothes. It simply evens out of the playing field and doesn't make clothes feel like a competition. If someone didn't have the best clothes, they were subjected to criticisms from their peers, often time bullying because your family couldn't afford the more expensive name-brand clothes or didn't want to buy them in my personal experience. Uniforms help students focus on their academics rather than worry about what someone else is wearing and adds a sense of community as well and increases the overall morale of the school amongst students as uniforms helped reduce bullying and after school discipline such as detention as found in a report done in 2013 from researchers at the University of Nevada.[7]

As there are many benefits to school uniforms, there are also harms that haven't been taken into consideration and are often overlooked. One of those harms being with too many

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https://www.creditdonkey.com/average-cost-clothing-per-month.html#:~:text=The%20average%20household%20spends%20around,teens%20have%20more%20expensive%20tastes.
7 https://www.unr.edu/nevada-today/news/2013/school-uniform-study

restrictions, it doesn't allow enough self-expression and slows down the process of finding one's true identity. If students aren't allowed to express themselves through their clothes, which is a form of outlet for some people, it can cause a drop in student morale and cause consequences between students and administrators. As some children will act out and rebel because they may not feel comfortable enough to say it out loud. Another one of the main concerns is that students don't get a say in what they wear to school. School uniforms are dictated by school officials, typically principals, superintendents, or school boards. Those who dictate what students wear don't ask whether students want to wear uniforms or not and don't work with them to meet common ground. Specifically, at my old elementary school, Martha Washington Elementary School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the 7th and 8th graders didn't want to wear the same uniforms as the lower grades and campaigned against the school to change their colors. The colors were changed after students campaigned for it, but this is just one example of how student input can also increase morale in schools.

Another harm is that school uniforms stop self-discovery and self-expression. One way people express themselves is through what they wear. When someone is wearing all black, we typically associate that with mourning or sadness and if they are wearing a pride shirt or accessory, it means they are a member of the LGBTQ+ community or an ally to the community. Clothes help s express ourselves in a way that we sometimes can't through words. We wear clothes and accessories sometimes to show off something personal like identifying ourselves as a part of the BLM Movement, as a feminist, or a part of other social movements. Uniforms limits self-expression in school and gives off the impression that expressing yourself through your clothes is a bad thing in certain environments when it shouldn't be. Wearing clothes that show off who you are, has shown that it makes you feel much happier, comfortable, and confident,

something we should teach our children. According to Prof. Carolyn Mair Ph.D., who is a behavioral psychologist, says that "When you wear clothes that make you feel confident, happy and empowered, they can act as armor, shielding you from negative feelings and experiences."[8] This shows that wearing the clothes that make you happy and confident, can help improve your mental health and allows you to feel good about yourself and help express your identity and not allow others' opinions to affect you. We should teach our children at an early age that you can dress however you want and you shouldn't feel bad about what makes you happy. Instilling those values and ideas at an early age can be beneficial to them, but uniforms take away that opportunity as most children are wearing them 5 out of 7 days a week.

Lastly, there have been many times where school officials have prioritized the rules and policies over students and the curriculum. A story from a teacher who runs a blog recounted the time a school official worried more about what someone was wearing than an argument between two students. They stated "At the end of class, an administrator stormed in. There was an urgent problem that needed solving immediately. It wasn't that the emotionally disturbed students were misplaced in the regular education setting. It wasn't that the other students had needed redirection. It was the girl in the front row. She was wearing a pink shirt!"[9] Schools were designed to be a place to learn and it shouldn't matter what a student has on, as long as it isn't bothering anyone else. With the implementation of school uniforms, the focus is shifted away from the purpose of school and it causes the school to be less effective on students as the curriculum isn't prioritized above everything else. Schools also will send students home for what

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https://www.stylist.co.uk/fashion/style-wellbeing-clothes-happiness-dopamine-dressing/421073#:~:text=The%20answer%20is%20a%20resounding,more%20confident%2C%E2%80%9D%20says%20Mair.

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https://gadflyonthewallblog.com/2014/09/13/standardized-dress-school-uniforms-and-conformity-as-social-norm/

they are wearing if it isn't the uniform they have put in place. This causes the student to miss school and miss out on learning, negatively impacting the child.

Despite uniforms originally being created for impoverished children, it has now become an obsolete way to stop children from expressing themselves. Uniforms confide people and uniforms were created as a temporary solution to an overall problem but then turned into a permanent solution. The changes that have been seen when uniforms were implemented inside schools could have been made from other types of policies that don't restrict students as much, but still have the same results. A better and more permanent policy that could replace uniforms is a dress code that has strict guidelines. A dress code is better compared to a uniform because it allows much more self-expression and isn't as confining as it allows students to show their feelings and express themselves. Dress codes allow a good mix between dressing appropriately and self-expression and self-identity.

Some schools with uniforms however do allow their students to wear regular street clothes that are appropriate up to several days out of the year including my elementary school. Those days were called "Dress Down Day". It was a specific day where students could wear the clothes they liked and paid the school to do it as it was also a fundraiser for the school. It was always a great day when we were allowed to do that and the feeling of everyone being the same was gone and it allowed our personalities to come out in new ways that couldn't be verbally expressed and that should be something highlighted. Having a dress code compared to having a uniform allows more individuality, more freedom, and more creativity, which schools should teach and encourage. With a dress code, certain rules should be enforced such as no gang symbols or colors, no short-shorts, no mini-skirts, etc. and all of that can be a solution to what uniforms were trying to do. It shows that you don't have to strip away a child's personality and

creativity to teach them how to dress appropriately. However, dress codes have their own set of problems as they can be discriminatory towards girls more than boys as more restrictions are often placed on them compared to boys. A gender-neutral dress code should be implemented to stop possible discrimination if dress codes are being enforced as opposed to uniforms.

The way schools have taught students hasn't changed for a long time and students are being taught with outdated methods and policies and uniforms are one of them. Schools are a place where children are taught how to function and live in a growing world, but with the many innovations and technology in the ever-changing world, schools have been left behind and are sticking to outdated methods. Uniforms are one of those outdated ways that have shown the results that schools want without considering the harms that I've highlighted. If schools put more effort into understanding students and their needs, it would help the overall school environment. The only problem is that schools are underfunded, especially public schools, and uniforms are the easiest and cheapest way to achieve the result they want. A way to make uniforms feel more personal is allowing students to be able to wear accessories such as bracelets, necklaces, rings, jackets, sweaters, etc. with them to make them feel more comfortable.

In conclusion, uniforms have their benefits and harms to them and can teach children conformity or how to dress appropriately and it truly comes down to the child and the school. Some schools will benefit from having uniforms and others wouldn't and uniforms should be implemented on a school-to-school basis. Uniforms were originally designed for poor students who couldn't afford clothes and were given to them so they could have fresh clean clothes to wear and that original idea should be kept. Uniforms do have harms that aren't discussed enough that could also hurt a child's way to finding their self-identity and self-expression, but with the limited amount of resources many schools have, uniforms are an effective and easy way to solve

some of the problems. Moreover, uniforms should only be a temporary solution and schools should move towards having a dress code and other ways that better suit students on their self-discovery journey, when schools get the proper funding they need.

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