

The Trouble with School Uniforms (*)

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By Alfie Kohn

Satire became obsolete, Tom Lehrer remarked, on the day that Henry Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. We might add that the redundancy of satire is confirmed every time people earnestly propose ideas like this one: *The best way to help children learn – or to improve their character – is to force them to dress alike.*

The appeal of school uniforms is based less on the likelihood of realizing any long-term benefits than on the nostalgic yearning for a simpler and less dangerous age. To imagine that telling students what to wear will bring back those days is to engage in wishful, if not fuzzy, thinking.

For some people, however, the good old days symbolized by uniforms were characterized not only by simplicity but by obedience: those were the days when kids did what they were told and kept their mouths shut. Here, the question is not so much whether uniforms can make this happen, but whether the goal itself is legitimate.

If we want students to grow into critical thinkers and ethical people, then we have to aim higher than mere conformity. Children, after all, learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. If we want them to take responsibility for their behavior, then we have to *give* them responsibilities; we have to join them in asking “What kind of school do we want to create?”

Thus, if T-shirts contain slogans that offend us, or gang colors threaten to be inflammatory, school administrators might invite students to participate in analyzing the problem and constructing a solution. Apart from being more respectful, this approach is also more effective over the long run (and better preparation for life in a democratic society), than issuing a decree (“Wear this”).

Just as the proponents of “school choice” never talk about how much choice students have about what happens in the classroom, so the advocates of uniformity assume that the only objection to dress codes is that kids want the freedom to wear whatever they wish. Overlooked is the more substantive argument, that kids don’t learn much of value in an environment where they are excluded from decision making.

A search for data supporting the use of uniforms turns up a single study finding that teachers and others *believed* students in uniforms were more successful than their peers. But this suggests nothing more than a prejudice on the part of these observers, analogous to attributing various qualities to students on the basis of race or gender. [Addendum 2007: Subsequently, a large study, using National Educational Longitudinal Study data, found that uniforms provided absolutely no benefit, either academically or with respect to such variables as absenteeism, behavior, or drug use. See David L. Brunσμα and Kerry A. Rockquemore’s report, which appeared in the Sept.-Oct. 1998 issue of the *Journal of Educational Research* – volume 92, no. 1, pages 53-62. A local investigation by *The Tennessean* (published in March 2007) likewise found no difference in suspension or attendance rates between Nashville-area schools with and without uniform policies. Its reporters checked in with Professor Brunσμα, who said it remained the case that not a single controlled study has supported the use of uniforms.]

In the absence of real research, many news stories have cited anecdotal claims, notably from Long Beach, California where school uniforms are alleged to have instantly produced positive results. However, as that district’s superintendent acknowledged to the *Harvard Education Letter*, programs to promote conflict resolution, peer mediation, and parental involvement have also been implemented there recently and “it is really hard to know exactly what is producing the positive effect” – assuming that a meaningful effect really does exist, and persists.

Is it even reasonable to expect uniforms to solve the problems for which they are recommended? Can violence be reduced by borrowing an idea from the military? Can class differences be smoothed over by making kids dress identically? (In any case, those very real differences ought to be addressed openly rather than camouflaged.)

And what about the pressure some students feel to dress better than their friends, which can drive parents to distraction (if not bankruptcy)? This is just a symptom of a broader social disease called competition. If we were serious about dealing with the underlying pressure on students to triumph over their peers, we might begin by challenging school-sponsored practices such as awards assemblies and spelling bees.

Complex problems will not disappear just because we demand that students wear what we tell them.

Relying on power to induce conformity rarely produces lasting solutions. The real alternative to uniforms is not merely to allow different clothing styles: it is to work with students to transform schools into democratic communities where everyone’s voice counts.

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