

The Impact of School Dress Codes on the Quality of Student Life at a Selected High School

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that school dress codes have on the quality of life in a senior class at Elizabethton High School. Archival data were obtained from the Elizabethton School District outlining the dress code violations of the class of 2016. Eight participants from the class completed a Likert scale opinionnaire. The archival data and resulting opinionnaires were analyzed. While the archival data revealed a mere 10 dress code violations over a four-year period, the responses to the opinionnaire highlighted the impacts of a school dress code on students' quality of life. Students suggested that they understood the school's purpose for implementing a school dress code (25% Neutral; 50% Agree; 25% Strongly Agree) and yet teachers were inconsistent in their enforcement (62.5% Strongly Agree; 37.5% Neutral). In addition, the students disagreed with the argument that dress codes promote a safe learning environment (12.5% Strongly Disagree; 12.5% Disagree; 50% Neutral; 25% Agree). Finally, the results revealed that 90% of dress code violations were incurred by female students. Future studies would benefit from considering gender discrimination and dress code policies.

Keywords: dress code, self-expression, gender discrimination, religious expression


IRB Exemption



Institutional Review Board Decision Tree

Based on your responses, you do not need approval from the IRB.

It looks like your study is exempt because it does not meet the definition of a research activity. Therefore, it does not require approval by the IRB. However, you should follow ethical practices even when just practicing or demonstrating research.

 [Refer to 45 CFR 46.102\(d\)](#)

Student researchers may benefit from going through the IRB process even if they are only collecting data to learn techniques.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The topic of dress codes has become increasingly contentious in recent years leading to protests and multiple court cases. This is not an isolated issue. Schools across the globe are faced with this dilemma. A Toronto school experienced protests in response to dress code violations in 2015 (Pinto, 2016). Hundreds of women participated in this protest which came to be known as “Crop Top Day” after a senior was disciplined for wearing a crop top to school. Later that same year in Tennessee another protest erupted on social media referred to as #FreeTheLeggings. This campaign was fueled by the disciplinary action taken against 40 young female students who were sent home for wearing leggings.

While Kiracofe (2010) approached the topic of dress codes from the perspective of the teacher, her observations are also applicable to the student. Kiracofe specifically considered the constitutional rights of teachers referencing the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and religious garb statutes of individual states. Teacher dress codes have come a long way since the “Rules for Teachers” document which required female teachers to wear two petticoats and males to wear a coat with suspenders (as cited in Kiracofe, 2010). Today schools, however, are tasked with the challenging job of establishing dress codes in light of a variety of different religions represented in the classroom.

These dress codes often become a balancing act between the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment (Kiracofe, 2010). The Establishment Clause asserts that laws cannot be passed that establish a religion. At the same time, the Free Exercise Clause asserts that no law can be passed that hinders an individual’s free exercise of their religion. States like Oregon and Pennsylvania have passed strict garb statutes. In Oregon, nothing

about a teacher's attire can hint at their faith. A similar statute exists in Pennsylvania. Court cases have arisen in response to both statutes and yet the court still maintains the constitutionality of these statutes. The courts and schools believe that the district's right to a religious statement of neutrality supersedes the rights of the teacher. The case has been made that children are highly impressionable and that while in the classroom they are literally a captive audience.

Lunenberg (2011) built off of the ideas found in Kiracofe's (2010) study and asserted that while the student has First Amendment rights those rights must be viewed in light of the rights of the school to establish a safe learning environment that is free of distractions. He outlined three reasons which provide schools with just cause to enforce dress codes. First and foremost, school dress codes should be established that promote the safety of the student. In addition, these regulations should promote the health of the student. Lunenberg also asserted that school dress codes should meet the standards of community decorum. He expanded on this idea by suggesting that the student's attire should not draw attention to their anatomy. Finally, Lunenberg addressed the reason most often cited by other school officials: school dress codes should be enforced in such a way that prevents the potential disruption of learning that can result from inappropriate classroom attire.

Pinto (2016) found fault with this notion that the rights of the school supersede the rights of students' freedom of expression. She asserted that clothing choice is a direct component of freedom of speech. With so many conflicting outlooks on dress codes, school officials face the nearly impossible task of establishing dress codes that allow for freedom of expression while also maintaining a professional and safe learning environment.

Statement of the Problem

While a great deal of research has been conducted on the topic of dress codes, very few studies have given any consideration to the student response to dress codes. Therefore, the problem of this study was to investigate the impact of school dress codes on the quality of student life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that school dress codes had on the quality of life in the Elizabethton High School Class of 2016.

Significance of the Study

This study provides essential insight into the topic of dress codes through the perspective of the student body. A study designed with this approach is incredibly important in light of the ever present debate revolving around this topic. This unique perspective can provide helpful insight to school officials who are struggling to establish and implement a school dress code.

Limitations

The following limitations were encountered throughout the course of this study:

1. The sample for this study comes from one class and therefore hinders the generalization of results.
2. The method of data collection was designed by the researcher and was not tested for reliability and validity.

Definition of Terms

The following operational definitions were used for this study:

1. School Dress Codes: “The school discourages the wearing of clothing that may be disruptive, cause health/safety problems or disrupt class or school/school-sponsored activities. The wearing of personal adornments or embellishments that may be disruptive, cause health/safety problems, or may be related to gang attire is not acceptable” (EHS Handbook, Online).
2. Quality of Student Life: In this study, the quality of student life was defined as the ability of students to freely express themselves through their clothing choices. The actions that were taken in response to dress code violations were also considered. For example, a student that was sent home because of a dress code violation had a definite impact on that student’s life.
3. Dress Code Violation: Elizabethton High School prohibits the following: headgear, the absence of shoes, attire that implies sexual, drug or gang-related messages, clothing that exposes undergarments, sleeveless shirts, leggings, clothing that is shorter than 4” above the knee, trench coats, sleepwear, distracting hair styles, facial piercings, and unnatural contact lenses (EHS Handbook, Online).
4. Consequences of Dress Code Violation: “If a student comes to school inappropriately attired, he/she will be asked to correct the problem at school or will be sent home to fix the problem. If a parent cannot be reached, the student will spend the day in ISS. If a student refuses to remedy his/her inappropriate

attire or comply with the dress code policy, the student is subject to disciplinary action, including suspension” (EHS Handbook, Online).

Overview

This study consists of five chapters. Chapter one provides an introduction to the study, a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, an acknowledgment of limitations encountered, operational definitions, and an overview of the entire study. Chapter two consists of the review of literature and chapter three outlines the methods of the study. Chapter four contains an analysis of the data collected during the course of the study and the concluding chapter, chapter five, conveys the conclusions reached by the researcher. The final chapter also addresses the implications of this research and provides recommendations for further study.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

At first glance, the topic of dress codes may sound straightforward. After further consideration, however, it becomes obvious that the controversy surrounding dress codes is rooted in a deep history. Many students and teachers assert that dress codes impede their constitutional freedom of expression. Historically, the court has not shared the viewpoint of the teacher and student. Instead the court has determined the rights of the school, to create a safe and distraction free learning environment, outweigh the rights of the teacher and student (Lunenberg, 2011). The controversy surrounding dress codes does not end there. Arguments have been made suggesting that dress codes perpetuate gender discrimination (Smith, 2012). Female students are viewed as a source of distraction for the males. In recent years, dress codes have faced opposition from individuals wishing to express their religious affiliations through their attire (Kiracofe, 2010). Dress codes clearly face many obstacles and yet the arguments for dress codes remain strong.

Constitutional Freedom of Expression

While the implementation of a school dress code faces many obstacles, perhaps the argument that a dress code impedes an individual's freedom of expression poses the greatest challenge (Killen, 2000). The way in which a person dresses is a form of nonverbal communication. For young people, in particular, clothing serves as a means of expressing one's individuality (Pinto, 2016).

This theme of individuality was highlighted in research conducted by Kneia DaCosta (2006) who interviewed students in a Midwestern urban school that recently established a

uniform policy. According to DaCosta, 75% of students were opposed to the uniform policy. By elucidating the themes of their interviews DaCosta was able to determine the reasons for students' opposition and found that 56% of students were in opposition because they felt the uniform was a restriction of their freedom. Many students opposed the uniforms because they viewed high school to be a space of independence and freedom and yet with the uniforms they felt they were denied this. While DaCosta's research considered student attitudes towards a uniform policy, similar reactions can be observed in a school with a dress code policy. While a dress code does not outline the specific items students are allowed to wear, it does provide strict guidelines by which students are expected to dress. With this in mind, one can understand why some students would feel that a uniform or dress code policy infringes upon their freedom of expression.

Unfortunately, the student must realize that all forms of self-expression are not inherently protected. The argument that dress codes hinder constitutional freedoms and the proceeding court cases are not new. In 1948, an eighth-grade girl and her family saw the ban against slacks for female students repealed ("Teenager Wins," 1948). In 1969, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* went down in history as a landmark case for student expression ("Constitutional Law," 2010). In this court case, the court ruled in favor of students who had been suspended for wearing black arm bands in protest of the Vietnam War. The court's ruling stated that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969). Unfortunately for the students wishing to express themselves through their clothing choices, this court case ruling did not set a precedent that would allow students to express themselves in any manner they saw fit. Instead, this court case has assisted in the formulation of three different tests

which can be used to determine if a student's form of self-expression is constitutionally protected.

These series of tests can best be illustrated by outlining the proceedings of the *Chalifoux v. New Caney Independent School District* (1997) case in which students were prohibited from wearing rosaries because they were identified as gang-related apparel. The students in question, however, were not affiliated with any gang and wore the rosaries to express their faith. To reach a decision, the court first applied the *Spence* test (Killen, 2000). According to this test, the rosaries had to convey a specific message that would likely be understood by other students. The court concluded that the rosary passed this test as most students would recognize the crucifix as an emblem of the Catholic faith. The second analysis to be performed was the *Tinker* test; the rosary could only be prohibited if it caused a disruption in school discipline. In this case, no problems in school discipline occurred. Finally, the *O'Brien* test suggested that the rosary could only be banned if it promoted a government interest.

While the court may have found the wearing of a rosary to be constitutionally protected, one can determine that in the presence of these three forms of analysis many forms of self-expression are not constitutionally protected. For example, a student with facial piercings and dyed hair may be trying to send a specific message. It is more probable, however, that the student is merely attempting to express their individuality. An expression of individuality cannot pass the *Spence* test because the student is not attempting to express a particular message.

Purpose of a School Dress Code

Many schools observe a great number of disciplinary problems linked to dress and appearance. Holloman, LaPoint, Alleyne, Palmer, & Sanders-Phillips (1996) have identified

three problem areas that are connected with appearance. First, these researchers acknowledged that problems stem from a materialistic mindset that translates into judging others for their appearance. This faulty thinking leads to other behavioral problems such as shoplifting, stealing, and violence towards other students in an attempt to fit in. Finally, dress-related behavioral problems are not limited to the school. Rather, these problems permeate the home, community, and school. Those in favor of dress code guidelines in schools assert that dress codes promote a safer learning environment for students (Lunenberg, 2011).

This argument suggests that dress codes can aid in improving attention in the classroom and reducing rivalries based on physical appearance (Holloman et al., 1996). It can also benefit the classroom climate by allowing for social integration. When students are expected to wear similar attire regardless of social class, individuals are less likely to feel like outsiders. Schools in France have embraced this idea to the point that they assert that the student must shed their identity at the entrance of the school so that they may be exposed to various lifestyles and beliefs. They reason that pursuing this objective will create open-minded students who have a greater understanding of what it means to be French (Gereluk, 2006).

While dress codes may intend to promote a safe learning environment free of distractions, they are not inherently free of inconsistencies. These inconsistencies are perhaps the largest and most easily tackled obstacle that dress codes face. One could even argue that disciplinary problems are more a result of how those problems are addressed rather than the misconduct itself (Thornburg, 2007). When a dress code is not consistently enforced, it leads to student confusion. In this confused state, students are left wondering how the rules actually apply to them. This can lead to perceived injustice on the part of the teacher for addressing some violations but ignoring

others. Students are then left with negative attitudes towards the dress code policy and can even develop critical attitudes towards their teachers.

In light of this information, it is important for educators to recognize that dress codes while beneficial may not achieve the desired goal. To determine if a dress code would achieve the goals that a school is striving for, the means/ends test can be conducted. This test determines if there is a correlation between the means used and the ends sought. Therefore, if a school implements a dress code in hopes of decreasing disciplinary problems this test will determine if the means actually achieve the ends. School officials must remember that the presence of a dress code does not guarantee improved behavior (Workman & Studak, 2008). These researchers suggest that a dress code be designed as a tool to promote student learning rather than a disciplinary consequence.

Dress Codes and Religious Expression

Now more than ever before, schools face the challenge of creating dress codes in the wake of increasing religious diversity. As mentioned before, Kiracofe (2010) investigated the constitutionality of limiting a teacher's religious attire in the classroom. When constructing a guideline for classroom attire, the school must take into account the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. According to the Establishment Clause, laws cannot be passed that establish a religion. At the same time, the Free Exercise Clause asserts that no law can be passed that hinders an individual's free exercise of their religion. In addition, schools must also take into account their state's garb statutes. States like Oregon and Pennsylvania have passed strict statutes that prevent teachers from wearing anything that suggests their religious beliefs. While many court cases have arisen because of these types of

statutes, the court has predominantly sided with the school. The court and schools believe that the district's right to a religious statement of neutrality supersedes the rights of the teacher.

Religious expression is not only problematic for the teacher but also the student. As mentioned before, the *Chalifoux v. New Caney Independent School District* (1997) case resulted when two students were prohibited from wearing rosaries. This conflict is not limited to Christian students. Many Islamic students are faced with similar problems. The Director of London School of Islamics, Iftikhar Ahmad, addressed the challenges faced by Islamic students even in primarily Islamic schools. Ahmad (2005) shared an account of a Muslim girl who did not attend school for two years because she was forbidden to wear the Jilbab. According to the school, which was comprised of primarily Muslim girls, the Jilbab was a health and safety hazard. In addition, the school feared that by allowing girls to wear the Jilbab they would be encouraging a competition amongst their students to appear more Islamic. Ahmad argued that the Islamic faith and the resulting attire are rooted in the establishment of a sense of identity. Islam is not merely a religious belief system. By refusing to allow students to express their beliefs through their dress, schools are hindering their development of self-identity.

Carney & Sinclair (2006) expanded upon the case referenced by Ahmad (2005). They suggested that students do have freedom of religion; however, students do not have a right to express their beliefs in any way they see fit (Carney & Sinclair, 2006). While these two articles address a case in Great Britain, one can observe a similar way of thinking in the United States. As mentioned before, the court's ruling in the *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* case (1969) found that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." As in Great Britain, this court ruling does not

permit students to express their religious beliefs in any time or place in any manner that they wish.

Carney & Sinclair (2006) went on to address the power of a student's argument in opposition of certain religious restrictions when they voluntarily attended a school where they knew their religious beliefs would be compromised. They recognized that some students do not have a choice in where they attend school, but there are many options available to students. Carney & Sinclair suggest that if a student's religious beliefs are that important to the individual they should attend a school that allows for religious expression. If they cannot attend a school that permits religious expression, the student should already be aware of the restrictions in place at their school. In light of this knowledge, students have no grounds to reverse this decision since they were aware of the rules prior to entering the classroom.

Ultimately, Carney & Sinclair (2006) asserted that schools should either adopt an all or nothing approach. Meaning schools should either permit all religious attire as long as it does not pose a threat to the health and safety of students or all religious forms of expression should be banned. By adopting a more moderate position, they suggest that schools set themselves up for conflict. Oftentimes a moderate position, benefits the majority and harms the minority. This dangerous ideology can lead to the viewing of certain beliefs as more or less valid.

Student Perception

Based on the problems faced by school officials attempting to enforce school dress codes, one can hypothesize that many students take issue with this infringement upon their freedom of expression. As mentioned before, this theme of individuality was highlighted in research conducted by Kneia DaCosta (2006) who interviewed students in a Midwestern urban school

with a uniform policy. DaCosta found that 75% of students were opposed to the uniform policy. Her interviews allowed her to dig deeper and determine that 56% of students were in opposition because they felt the uniform was a restriction of their freedom. Clearly students had entered into high school with the preconceived notion that it was a place of freedom where they could express their independence. In the eyes of the students, this uniform policy shattered that dream of high school freedom and independence.

For young adults, expression through their clothing choices is an essential component in developing an identity (Swain, 2002). For these young students, clothing comes to present the image of themselves they wish the world to see. For instance, male students express their masculinity through their attire. The way in which they choose to express that masculinity directly defines their relationships with other male students. In this way, clothing choice is not limited to the individual. While the male student is forming his own personal identity through his clothing choices, he is doing so with the intention of constructing relationships. Swain found that many male students based their friendships upon how people dressed.

In addition, Swain (2002) found that clothing choice had a direct impact on the students' sense of self-worth. These findings illustrate how important a role clothing serves in the life of the student. At the same time, it makes apparent issues that can arise in the classroom as a result of students asserting their self-identity. While the absence of a dress code or uniform policy allows students to freely express themselves and thereby establish a sense of identity, it does invite conflict amongst students. Not all students have the opportunity to dress in the same manner as their classmates. Swain's research shows that these students will most likely be viewed as outcasts creating tensions between the imagined insiders and outsiders. The resulting social hierarchy could distract from learning in the classroom. Therefore, while it is clear that

students may wish to express themselves in any way they see fit, perhaps that level of freedom does more to harm the student rather than help.

A student's attitude towards a dress code policy leads one to consider how a student interprets a teacher's attire. Morris, Gorham, Cohen & Huffman (1996) sought to answer this very inquiry. Student attitudes toward teacher clothing choices can inform school officials of the differences between the teacher and student's perception of what is appropriate in the classroom. As a result, this knowledge can aid school officials in designing dress code policies not only for their students but also for their teachers. These researchers found that a more formal attire was associated with a greater competence in the classroom; whereas, a more casual wardrobe indicated a sense of approachability. Interestingly, the more casually dressed teachers were rated more highly overall than the more professionally dressed.

This seemingly contradictory finding teaches the educator a lot about students' ideas regarding attire. Teachers and other working professionals, like doctors and lawyers, have a very clear idea of what it means to look professional in the workplace. Students long for this freedom of expression and yet even a doctor cannot freely express themselves in a hospital. They are expected to wear the appropriate attire. While a student may feel more comfortable around a casually dressed teacher, it is clear from this data that the more professionally dressed the individual the greater their perceived competence. In light of these findings, when enforcing dress codes school officials should emphasize the power of one's clothing choices beyond self-expression. When students enter the workforce they will most likely not have the freedom to wear whatever they wish. In addition, students should be made aware of the nonverbal messages their appearance conveys. A student that dresses well will send a different message from the student who wears his pants halfway down his thigh. Clothing sends a signal. Students must

realize that the signal they are attempting to convey may not be understood by the majority. Instead they may convey an entirely false message that hinders their formation of an identity.

Gender Discrimination

In recent years, dress codes have faced even greater resistance on the grounds that they unfairly discriminate against female students. Smith (2012) asserts that schools must eliminate gender stereotypes embedded in their dress code policies. She shared the story of Ceara Sturgis, a high school senior from Mississippi, who is homosexual. Instead of wearing the traditional female garment for yearbook photos, she opted to wear the tuxedo, worn by the males, because she felt more comfortable in that attire. The school decided to not include her picture in the yearbook and even excluded her name from the class roster. While Smith wholeheartedly agreed that school dress codes should promote student safety and a focused learning environment, she did find fault with the rigidity many schools demonstrated in their dress code enforcement.

Smith (2012) highlighted that historically Title IX was very effective in addressing gender discrimination in terms of dress code. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibited discrimination based on sex in any federally funded education program. Now the best support for students feeling that they have been discriminated based on gender in terms of dress is the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

While Smith (2012) shared several cases related to this topic, perhaps the most interesting case addressed in this article was *Doe v. Yunits* (2001). In this case, a student suffering from gender-identity disorder was decided to be allowed to dress as conformed with her chosen identity. The court suggested that her attire was crucial to her health since it was a direct symbol of her identity. Smith found the ruling of this court case to be problematic. She asserted that

while the student suffering from a mental disorder had the right to express themselves and to have a strong sense of identity, so did the female student who simply preferred to wear traditionally male attire.

Pinto (2016) expounded upon the ideas conveyed by Smith (2012) highlighting the tendencies of dress codes to unfairly target women. Pinto (2016) asserted that dress codes are in place to promote a sense of professionalism in the school. She also suggested that dress codes are deemed necessary because certain items of clothing possess the potential to disrupt learning. Rather than addressing the inappropriate response of the students to distracting clothing, all of the attention is focused on the item of clothing itself. Pinto shared one example of a female teacher who was informed that her tailored suit was inappropriate for the classroom. An outfit that would be considered professional on a man was considered to be seductive on a woman. This often recurring problem reveals the “proper” femininity that a female teacher should express. The fear of the teacher being perceived as a sexual object by male students and thereby resulting in their distraction and inability to learn has greatly defined dress codes for women in schools.

Gender discrimination as it relates to dress codes is not an isolated issue. Girls across the United States have joined the movement #imnotadistracted (Harbach, 2016). Leggings were banned in an Illinois school because they were believed to be distracting male students. Similarly, a New Jersey school prohibited girls from wearing strapless dresses to prom because male students would be distracted. Many equality advocates fear that this kind of mentality reinforces sex stereotyping and sex discrimination. Some schools have even gone so far to require female students to wear a shame suit when they violate the dress code. This slut shaming greatly shapes a female student’s sense of identity. Unfortunately, a school dress code’s attempt

to promote modesty often leads to sexualization of female students. By inadvertently reinforcing the idea that female students are sexual objects, schools negatively impact female attitudes towards their sexuality. When told that they cannot wear leggings because male students will be distracted, females are perpetually exposed to the idea that they are merely sexual objects. In addition, it trains girls to believe that sexual harassment is unavoidable. As the saying goes, boys will be boys. This mentality also harms male students. They are raised being told that their views of women are normal and cannot be helped. The male student is not responsible when distracted by a female, rather all responsibility rests on the female student. The truth is, however, that no female causes sexual harassment. Regardless of what a female student wears she does not deserve to be harassed. This faulty thinking has given birth to the rape culture that proposes the victim was asking to be raped. While schools should promote modesty and professionalism in the classroom, they must recognize the harmful subliminal messages they are sending their students.

Uniforms

With the multitude of problems faced by dress codes, it has been suggested that the only solution is to create a uniform policy (Killen, 2000). Killen asserts that while dress codes and uniforms exist to promote improved behavior and academic performance, only a uniform policy can realize these goals. A uniform policy provides clear unmovable guidelines for what is appropriate in the classroom. Unlike a dress code, it does not leave room for interpretation.

The arguments in favor of uniform policies are strong and yet the data to support these claims is harder to find. At the same time, even if a school's data suggests that a uniform has achieved its desired goals the student attitude toward a uniform policy is consistently negative.

As mentioned before Kneia DaCosta (2006) found that 75% of students she interviewed were opposed to the uniform policy at their school. She found that 56% of students were in opposition because they felt the uniform was a restriction of their freedom.

A similar study was conducted by Sanchez, Yoxsimer, & Hill (2012). They conducted surveys to ascertain student attitudes towards the new uniform policy at their school. Only 1.7% of students indicated that they strongly liked the new policy; whereas, 36.4% disliked it and 44.4% strongly disliked the new policy. Students were also asked whether they liked wearing a uniform. 12.7% selected yes and 87.3% responded no. These researchers then asked for students' awareness of drugs, bullying, gang activity, violence, and teasing in the school. These are all problem areas that uniforms are said to minimize. 15% of students reported the presence of drugs, 20% identified bullying, 20% acknowledged gang activity, 26% reported violence, and 34% noted teasing in the school. Only 30 to 40% of students acknowledged the perceived benefits of uniforms. The majority did, however, suggest that the uniform requirement had led to a decrease in gang activity.

Considering the data collected from students, Sanchez et al. (2012) turned their attention to the school's disciplinary records. With the introduction of the uniform policy, school discipline referrals were reduced by 9.7%. Inappropriate behavior referrals saw a decrease by 33% and police reports for the school decreased by 63%. They also noted an evident decrease in gang-related reports, graffiti, property damage, threats, battery, and administrative assists. This data was collected in the first year of the uniform policy. These researchers hypothesized that the school would continue to see a decrease in negative behaviors as students became more accustomed to the uniform.

The results of this study, however, are not generalizable. This fact makes it much harder to make the argument that uniforms are truly effective in decreasing inappropriate behavior and improving academic performance. Even in light of these problems, however, uniforms are not plagued by the same vagueness that many school dress codes face.

Conclusion

This review of literature outlines the many arguments in favor of dress code policies and the many challenges these policies face. First, one should reflect upon the reasoning behind the dress code. School dress code policies are established in hopes of creating safe learning environments free of distractions. It has been argued that dress codes can aid in improving attention in the classroom and reduce rivalries based on physical appearance (Holloman et al., 1996). When wearing similar attire, students are less likely to feel like outsiders. In this way, dress codes benefit the classroom climate by allowing for social integration.

Schools in France have embraced this idea to the point that they assert that the student must shed their identity at the entrance of the school so that they may be exposed to various lifestyles and beliefs (Gereluk, 2006). While schools in France seek to create an identity as a community rather than as individuals, many in America are resistant to this idea. The concept of a student's individual sense of identity is a crucial component in the discussion surrounding dress codes. Students and parents argue that their sense of identity is essential to their development (Pinto, 2016). Individuals against dress codes argue in favor of freedom of expression (Killen, 2000).

The topic of dress codes in relation to religious expression has become increasingly controversial. Religious expression poses a huge threat to the existence of school dress codes

leading to many court cases. In most cases, however, the court and schools have found that the district's right to a religious statement of neutrality supersedes the rights of the teacher and student (Kiracofe, 2010). Unfortunately, these controversies will only continue to escalate as religious diversity continues to expand. Ahmad (2005) shared the story of a young Islamic student who did not attend school for two years because her religious attire was forbidden. Ahmad argued that the Islamic faith and the resulting attire are rooted in the establishment of a sense of identity. Islam is not merely a religious belief system. This student gave up her education for two years in favor of staying true to her religious beliefs. By refusing to allow students to express their beliefs through their dress, schools are hindering their development of self-identity.

Dress codes have also faced claims of gender discrimination (Pinto, 2016). Pinto asserted that dress codes are in place to promote a sense of professionalism in the school. She also suggested that dress codes are deemed necessary because certain items of clothing possess the potential to disrupt learning. Rather than addressing the inappropriate response of the students to distracting clothing, all the attention is focused on the item of clothing itself. Many movements have erupted across the country in response to this form of discrimination. Girls have taken to social media to proclaim #iamnotadistracted (Harbach, 2016).

The reasoning for dress codes makes sense. Schools should strive to foster distraction free learning environments. The problems facing dress codes, however, cannot be ignored. While dress codes are created with the best of intentions, schools must acknowledge the vast resistance coming from individuals longing for the freedom of expression, individuals wishing to faithfully convey their religious beliefs, and young girls wanting to be seen as more than a potential

distraction. This study is going to address these concerns from the perspective of the student in hopes of minimizing the obstacles preventing dress codes from achieving their goals.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Procedures

Based on the review of literature concerning the impact of dress codes on the quality of student life, research was conducted at Elizabethton High School to investigate the effect that dress codes have on the quality of student life. This research was designed as a qualitative study and relied heavily on archival data. This chapter contains five sections: population, sample, data collection instruments, procedure, and research questions.

Population

The research was conducted at a public high school in Northeast Tennessee. The school consisted of 840 students. 781 students were white (93%) and the African-American population consisted of 20 students (.02%). There were 426 male students (51%) and 414 female students (49%). The high school was comprised of 112 SpED students (13.3%).

Sample

The sample for this study was the high school's graduating class of 2016. All dress code violations that the class incurred throughout their four years of high school were considered. The graduating class consisted of 214 students (110 female, 104 male).

Data Collection Instruments

The first half of this study relied solely on archival data. The district's central office provided documents outlining the instances of dress code infractions. The records outlined the cause for offense as well as the action taken. The second half of the study sought an

understanding of student attitudes towards the dress code policy. Students completed Likert scale opinionnaires. The opinionnaire consisted of statements like a dress code policy promotes a distraction free learning environment, and dress codes unfairly target female students.

Participants responded on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Procedures

Before the study began, permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the selected public high school. This study was found to be exempt by the IRB and the high school in question simply required the approval of the superintendent. The study focused on the history of dress code violations in the graduating class of 2016, considering the four years of high school.

The district's central office supplied archival records outlining the dress code infractions of this class. Each violation was studied carefully to determine the most common causes for disciplinary action, the type of action taken, and the students that earned these violations. Data were obtained for all four years because the researcher wanted to determine if the frequency of violations remained constant or fluctuated over the course of high school.

After elucidating themes from the archival data provided, attention was given to student attitudes towards the dress code policy. A Likert scale questionnaire was designed for students who had provided informed consent. This closed form of questioning resulted in more easily analyzed data. The data obtained from the school district and opinionnaires were then analyzed together to elucidate common trends.

Research Questions

Research Question #1: What is the impact of school dress codes on quality of student life at a selected high school?

Research Questions #2: Do school dress code policies unfairly target certain groups within the school (e.g. based on race, gender, or religious affiliation)?

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that school dress codes had on the quality of life in a senior class at Elizabethton High School. In recent years, dress codes have become an increasingly contentious issue. While a great deal of research has considered the challenges facing dress code enforcement, little attention has been given to student attitudes and perceptions.

Collection of Data

Data for this qualitative study were collected through the analysis of archival data and the distribution of surveys to eight students who graduated in 2016 from Elizabethton High School. The class consisted of 214 students. The district's central office provided documents outlining the instances of dress code infractions. The records outlined the cause for offense as well as the action taken. Dress code violations were considered over the course of all four years of high school resulting in a total of ten violations. The second half of the study sought an understanding of student attitudes towards the dress code policy. Students completed Likert scale opinionnaires which consisted of statements like a dress code policy promotes a distraction free learning environment, and dress codes unfairly target female students (See Appendix A). Participants responded on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The data were then triangulated. The demographic profile of the students is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Students

Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	104	49.00
Female	110	51.00
Total	214	100.00

Research Questions

The study was guided by two research questions.

Research Question #1:

What is the impact of school dress codes on quality of student life at a selected high school?

Research Questions #2

Do school dress code policies unfairly target certain groups within the school (e.g. based on race, gender, or religious affiliation)?

To answer these research questions, data were collected from the selected school district and a Likert scale opinionnaire was completed by eight students from Elizabethton High School's graduating class of 2016. Data were then examined and analyzed.

Results Derived from Archival Data

Five trends emerged when the archival data were analyzed. Trend 1 revealed that dress code violations increased over the course of the four years of high school. During freshman year, this class only earned one dress code violation. During the senior year, the class incurred five dress code violations. Trend 2 indicated that there were no multiple offenders over all four years.

Some students did incur multiple infractions over the course of one year, but none violated the dress code all four years. Trend 3 demonstrated the gender bias in dress code violations. In four years, only one male received a dress code violation for wearing a bandana in the classroom. He received In-School Suspension (ISS) for his violation. In contrast, the remaining nine infractions were incurred by female students. The four years were characterized by six dress code violations by girls. Trend 4 suggests that the dress code and resulting disciplinary action taken for violations were effective in limiting repeated offenses. In four years, there were only two repeated offenders both of which were girls. One girl earned three violations her junior year and one girl received two violations her senior year. Trend 5 suggests the seriousness of Elizabethton High School's dress code policy. Seven violations resulted in ISS. This consistent and firm response to dress code violations likely discouraged more students from disregarding the dress code.

It should be noted that many dress code violations at the high school could be resolved immediately and did not result in a formal complaint. For instance, if a student were wearing an inappropriate shirt they could be asked to wear a jacket over it and that would be the end of the conversation. This explains why there were so few dress code violations over a period of four years. It also helps to explain why most reported cases resulted in ISS. Table 2 illustrates the archival data provided by Elizabethton school district.

Table 2

Archival Data: History of Dress Code Violations

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
<i>No. of Violations</i>	1	N/A	4	5
<i>Sex of Offender</i>	F	N/A	1 F 1 M	4 F
<i>Repeated Violations</i>	N/A	N/A	3	2
<i>Action Taken</i>	ISS	N/A	ISS	2 ISS

Results Derived from Likert Scale Opinionnaire

The Likert scale opinionnaire consisted of twenty statements. Eight participants were asked to respond with either strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), or strongly agree (5). Analysis began with calculating the percentages for each response. The resulting values are illustrated in Table 3. The list of statements can be found in Appendix A.

In analyzing the percentage values for the opinionnaire, the following trends were elucidated. First, 87.5% of participants agreed that the school dress code eliminated gang related attire. This is of interest, since this is one of the primary arguments given for dress code implementation. Unfortunately, for those who suggest that a dress code policy promotes learning, the participants suggested that it in no way improves student learning (25% Strongly Disagree; 37.5% Disagree; 37.5% Neutral). Another common argument in favor of dress codes is that it promotes a safe learning environment. Once again, however, the students did not appear to agree with this statement (12.5% Strongly Disagree; 12.5% Disagree; 50% Neutral; 25% Agree). One statement that the participants could agree on, however, was that the school dress code unfairly targets female students (75% Agree; 25% Strongly Agree). They also agreed that the school dress code hinders their self-expression (62.5% Neutral; 12.5% Agree; 12.5% Strongly Agree) and yet

when asked if the dress code was unfair the participants suggested that it was fair (62.5% Disagree; 25% Neutral; 12.5% Agree).

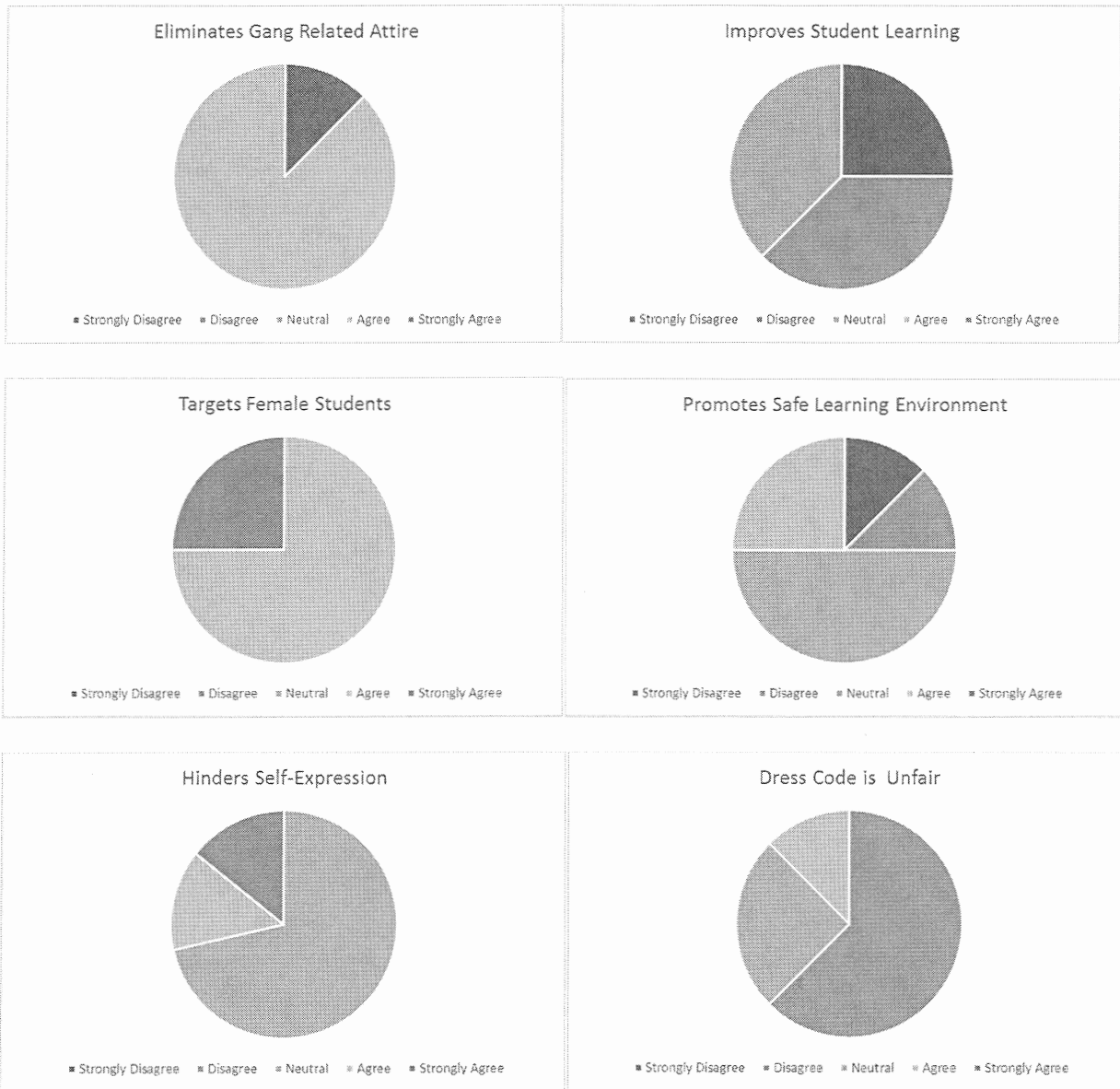
The students expressed that they understood why Elizabethton High School had asked them to adhere to a school dress code (25% Neutral; 50% Agree; 25% Strongly Agree). They also asserted that as students they had been familiar with the rules outlined in the dress code policy (12.5% Neutral; 75% Agree; 12.5% Strongly Agree). Their responses to these two statements suggest that the school did an excellent job of familiarizing students with the policy as well as making them aware of the benefits of such a policy. Unfortunately, the participants disagreed with the statement that teachers are consistent in the enforcement of the dress code policy (62.5% Strongly Disagree; 37.5% Neutral). This lack of consistency is one of the biggest obstacles to an effective dress code policy.

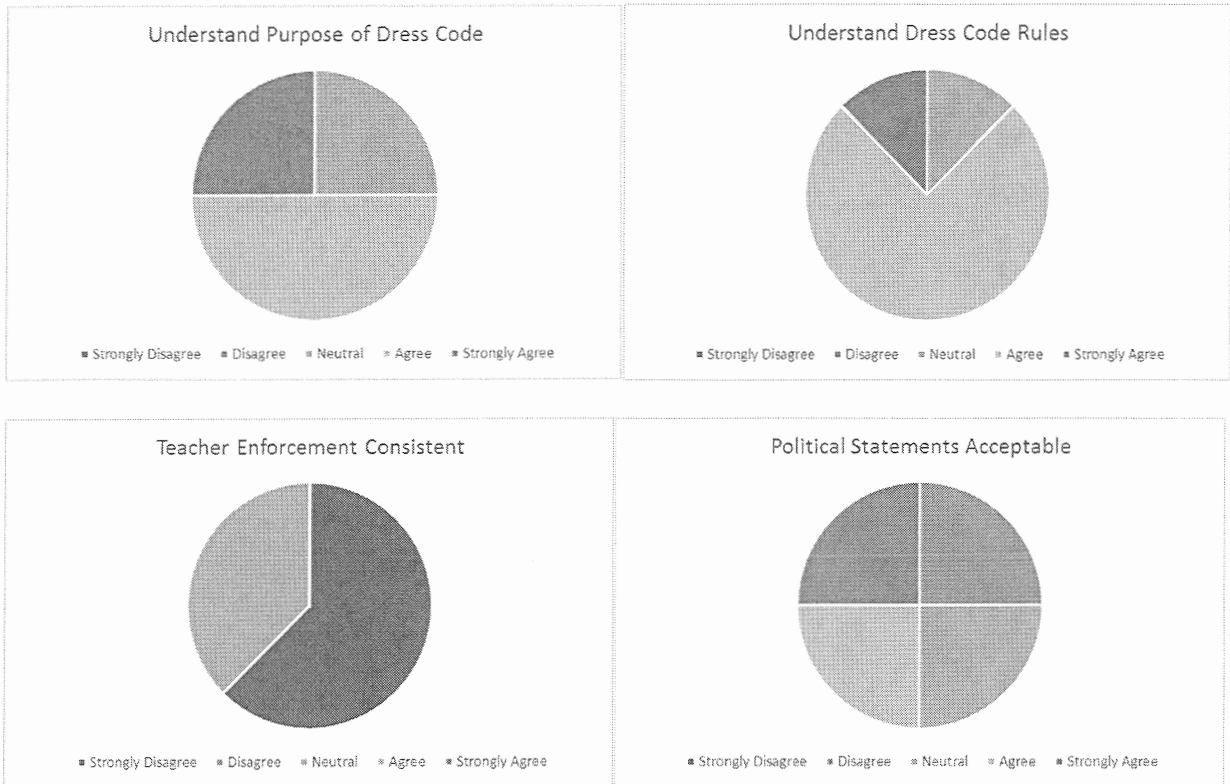
The statements concerning political attire and uniforms were much more divisive. The responses for political attire in the classroom ranged from disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree (25% Disagree; 25% Neutral; 25% Agree; 25% Strongly Agree). Likewise, students were divided on the topic of uniforms. Students agreed and disagreed with the statement that uniforms would benefit students (25% Strongly Disagree; 37.5% Disagree; 37.5% Agree).

Finally, participants agreed that students should be allowed to wear what they want in the classroom. In conjunction with this idea, students agreed that the school dress code should not target individuals based on their religion. The overwhelming supportive response to this statement is interesting given the potentially contradictory responses given to earlier statements. Table 3 illustrates the findings of the Likert scale opinionnaire.

Table 3

Likert Scale Opinionnaire





Comprehensive Result Analysis

The findings obtained through archival data and the Likert scale opinionnaire must be analyzed together to gain a fuller understanding of this complex issue. When considering these trends as a cohesive data set, the complexity of this issue becomes apparent. This issue is not merely complex and divisive for parents and educators, but also for students. The trends observed in the archival data and Likert scale opinionnaire attest to this fact.

The first research question, concerned with the quality of life of students, has no easy answer. The archival data revealed a surprising lack of dress code violations over a period of four years with the class of 2016 only receiving ten dress code violations. Half of these violations resulted in ISS. If one were to merely consider the archival data, they would be tempted to suggest that dress codes have minimal impact on student life because so few instances occurred.

The responses to the Likert scale opinionnaire, however, reveal a much wider picture of the issue. While students gave a neutral response in regards to whether the dress code impeded their personal freedom, they did agree that it limited their self-expression. These responses seem contradictory. Either the participants did not understand the statements presented or their opinions are not fully formed. Similarly, the participants suggested that they understood the purpose of the school dress code and yet they did not feel that it promoted a safe environment that encouraged student learning. They did, however, admit that dress codes help to remove distractions from the classroom.

Through the survey, it also became apparent that participants were neutral to the fairness of the dress code, and yet they felt that the punishments necessitated by the dress code were unfair. This potential contradiction could be more a result of the inconsistency observed in teacher enforcement of the dress code than anything else. This lack of consistency could be the primary reason why students ultimately dislike the dress code policy even though they understand its merits.

Based on the archival data and Likert scale opinionnaire, one can suggest that a dress code policy does have an impact on the quality of student life. The extent of the impact, however, will be dependent upon the temperament of the student and their perception of the school's policy. While the lack of violations and responses from students indicate that the dress code policy serves a purpose, the students ultimately feel that they should be allowed to wear what they want. One can deduce that this desire springs from a need to express one's individuality.

The second research question considered the potential for school dress codes to target individuals based on race, religion, gender, etc. The archival data reveals that 90% of the dress code violations over a four-year period for one class were incurred by female students. This

statistic suggests that female students are more likely to receive dress code violations than male students. This finding was supported through the student responses in the Likert scale opinionnaire. The participants agreed that dress codes unfairly target female students. The data did not provide further instances of unfair treatment for particular individuals.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that school dress codes have on the quality of life in a senior class at Elizabethton High School. Archival data and Likert scale opinionnaires were analyzed. This chapter contains a summary of findings, conclusions, recommendations, and implications of the research.

Summary of Findings

Research Question #1: What is the impact of school dress codes on quality of student life at a selected high school?

When analyzing the archival data and Likert scale opinionnaires as one data set, the research suggests that school dress codes do have an impact on the quality of student life. While the surprising lack of dress code violations incurred over a period of four years, may lead one to assume that dress codes have little impact, the survey revealed the deep-seated impact of the school dress code. Students agreed with the research of Killen (2000) and Pinto (2016) which asserted that dress codes impede student self-expression. DaCosta (2006) revealed that the overwhelming majority of students at a selected school disapproved of the uniform policy. Similarly, the student participants indicated in the survey that students should be allowed to wear whatever they want.

One of the primary arguments in favor of a school dress code is that it promotes a safe learning environment (Lunenberg, 2011). While students agreed that dress codes do limit gang related attire, they did not feel that a dress code helps to create a safe learning environment. In contrast, they did assert that dress codes help to remove distractions from the classroom. These two seemingly contradictory statements further reveal the complexity of this issue.

Dress codes have faced major opposition in the name of religious expression. The constitutionality of limiting religious expression in the classroom has been examined (Kiracofe, 2010). Religious expression has become a balancing act between the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. Carney & Sinclair (2006) suggested that students do have the freedom of religion; however, students do not have the right to express their beliefs in any manner they deem appropriate. In response to a statement regarding religious expression in the classroom, the students proposed that students should be allowed to wear any religious attire that they wish.

Through the survey and archival data, it became apparent that students had a good understanding of the school dress code. Over the course of four years the class only received ten dress code violations. A few students received multiple infractions over the course of one school year, but there were no repeat offenders over multiple years. This suggests that the students were well versed in the school dress code policy and that the consequences of a dress code violation were effective in reducing future violations. In response to the survey, students claimed to have a clear understanding of the rules set forth by their school as well as the reasoning behind these rules. These responses are crucial to the success of a school dress code policy.

Finally, students were most divided on the topic of attire that sends a political message and the topic of uniforms. While the students all agreed that students should wear whatever they want, they were less prepared to support students who express overtly political messages through their attire. Once again, these seemingly contradictory statements reveal the complexity of this topic for not only educators but also students. In regards to uniforms, the students were divided on whether they felt that they were the best course of action in promoting a safe, distraction free

learning environment. These divisive results are consistent with the findings of Sanchez, Yoxsimer, & Hill (2012).

Research Questions #2: Do school dress code policies unfairly target certain groups within the school (e.g. based on race, gender, or religious affiliation)?

While this study did not produce any data that considered race or religious affiliation, it did produce some interesting results in regards to gender. The archival data revealed that over a four-year period 90% of the dress code violations were incurred by female students. Likewise, the survey revealed that students agree with the statement that dress codes unfairly target female students. These findings are consistent with the findings of Smith (2012) and Pinto (2016). These studies both emphasized the tendencies of dress codes to unfairly target women. Pinto (2016) suggested that this inequality is a result of schools attempting to eliminate a source of distraction, female appearance. She finds fault with this reasoning suggesting that attention should be equally given to the reaction to the distraction as well as the distraction itself.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that school dress codes have on the quality of life in a senior class at Elizabethton High School. More specifically, this study attempted to explore the impact of a school dress code on individuals based on race, gender, and religious affiliation. The results indicated that school dress codes do have an impact upon the students' quality of life. While most students were able to follow the dress code without difficulty, they simultaneously felt that it was an infringement of their personal freedoms. In addition, the school dress code had a much larger impact on female students.

Recommendations

1. Future research regarding student feelings towards dress codes should utilize a larger more diverse sample.
2. Future research should interview participants in addition to the Likert scale opinionnaire.
3. Future research should consider the opinions of current high school students.

Implications

1. Teachers should be consistent when addressing dress code violations.
2. School administrators should develop clear guidelines for the school dress code that all students and parents will be familiar with.
3. School dress code guidelines should be equally enforced for male and female students.

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Appendix A

Likert Scale Opinionnaire

Likert Scale Opinionnaire

On a scale of 1 to 5 rank the truth of the following statements with

1=strongly disagree 2=disagree 3=neutral 4=agree and 5=strongly agree.

1. The school dress code policy improves the classroom environment. _____
2. The school dress code policy eliminates gang-related attire. _____
3. The school dress code hinders my personal freedom. _____
4. The school dress code targets individuals based on religion. _____
5. The school dress code improves student learning. _____
6. The school dress code targets females more than males. _____
7. A strict dress code policy promotes a safe learning environment. _____
8. A strict dress code policy does not allow for self-expression. _____
9. The school dress code eliminates distractions from the classroom. _____
10. The school dress code policy is unfair. _____
11. I understand why my school has a dress code policy. _____
12. I am familiar with all the rules regarding dress code. _____
13. Teachers are consistent in their enforcement of the dress code. _____
14. The punishment for dress code violations is fair. _____
15. Students should be sent home when a dress code rule is violated. _____
16. Students should be humiliated when they violate the dress code. _____
17. Students should be allowed to wear religious attire to school. _____
18. Students should be allowed to make political statements with their attire. _____
19. Students would benefit from wearing uniforms. _____
20. Students should have the freedom to wear whatever they want. _____