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DISSERTATION

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS
ON THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS
IN AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL**

Submitted by

JoLynn Britt

School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2001

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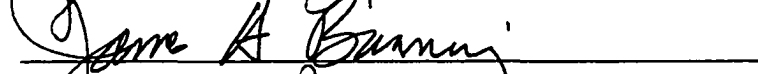
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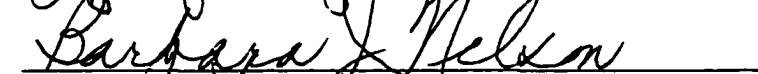
WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE DISSERTATION PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY JOLYNN BRITT ENTITLED TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS ON THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.


Committee on Graduate Work









Advisor 

Director

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS ON THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS IN AN ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL

This study was based upon the qualitative method of inquiry, using a phenomenological approach. The purpose of this study was to discover teachers' perceptions about the impact of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior in a public alternative school, and to discover themes related to teachers' experiences with school uniforms in this unique setting.

The sample for this study consisted of eight teachers, both male and female, from a public alternative school in the western region of the United States. The school used in the study was an expulsion school with approximately 40 students per year, both male and female, in grades seven through twelve. The data for this study were gathered through face-to-face interviews with the

participants using the following grand tour question: "Describe your experiences with school uniforms in this setting." Interviews were taped for the purpose of transcription, and both inductive and deductive coding were used to discover statements and themes.

As teachers described their experiences with school uniforms, the following topics emerged: gangs and gang-related activity, student attitude, school safety, competition and socioeconomic status, and individuality. There was division among the participants on several issues regarding the effects of school uniforms on students and the learning environment, and participants gave specific reasons for their beliefs. The positive effects of uniforms included improvement in student attitudes, student bonding, reduction of gang-related activities, increase in school safety, reduction in competition through clothing, diffusion of the effects of socioeconomic differences, improvement in overall school climate, and reduction of bad behavior. The negative effects of uniforms included initial belligerence among students resulting from the mandate to wear uniforms, and the restriction of expression in individuality. Some participants felt that uniforms helped to improve academic achievement, while some were unsure, and others felt that uniforms had no impact on academics.

The four overall themes that emerged from the data analysis were Rigidity and Conformity, Learning Life Lessons, Student Bonding, and Contradictions Among Teachers. Recommendations were given as to how the data from this

study could be helpful to the educational community in considering, evaluating and implementing school uniform policies.

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new world of research to me. I never thought I would write a qualitative dissertation, since my mind and organizational obsessions are more suited to the quantitative approach. I believe that this dissertation has given me knowledge and skills beyond what I would have gained had I conducted my research differently. Qualitative writing has been a big stretch for me, and I think I've come a long way in making it to the end. Thanks for helping me get there.

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for many, but because of you, this experience was fun, rewarding, and definitely memorable. I never thought that the quiet, smart girl from Louisiana would become my new best friend! Through all the classes, professors, papers, projects, hurdles, deadlines and exams, we stuck together and helped each other through. It was so nice to have someone to share the burden of statistics with, and someone to talk to about the wonderful world of television. You are genuine, caring, and kind, and because of your values, determination and level-headedness, you will be successful in all that you do in life. I hope that our paths will cross again in the future and that someday, when we are seasoned professionals, we will not forget the road that got us there. I will always have someone with which to share my memories of my years at CSU. You became my only true friend here and I will never forget that. Now, it's time to celebrate. We made it!

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"Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

Jeremiah 17: 7-8

DEDICATION

To Russell: my life, my love, my best friend.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of public schools today are implementing school uniform policies (Holloman, LaPoint, Alleyne, Palmer & Sanders-Phillips, 1996; Martin, 1998; Paliokas & Rist, 1996; White, 2000). Although school uniforms have been mandatory in private and parochial schools for centuries, they have only emerged as a popular policy within the public schools during the last decade (White, 2000). While there are no national data quantifying the number of public schools nationwide that have adopted school uniform policies, various surveys suggest that 11% of public elementary and middle school principals said their schools were considering adopting them (White, 2000). This is a notable contrast to the few public schools experimenting with uniforms a decade earlier.

Current research shows that many school officials see a need for regulations that prohibit disruptive and inappropriate forms of expression and attire (Uerling, 1997). Also, with increasing public awareness of school-related violence, school safety has become a priority among educational leaders, parents, students and the community (Burke, 1991; Gluckman, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Jones, 1997). Moreover, schools are implementing school uniform policies because of their beliefs that such policies increase the student sense of school membership, improve student self-image, and increase academic achievement

(Gluckman, 1996; Gregory, 1996; Martin, 1998; Mickens, 1994; Padgett, 1998; Shook, 1996). Although the aforementioned outcomes of uniform policies are notable and even desirable, the implementation of these policies can become a difficult process when legal issues are involved, more specifically the First Amendment rights of students and their parents to freedom of speech and expression (Paliokas et al., 1996).

Through a review of literature, three main areas of impact emerged in regard to school uniforms in public schools. These areas are school climate, academic achievement, and legal issues. The following paragraphs give a brief introduction to these areas.

School Climate

Educational leaders today are seeking ways to maintain an orderly school environment (Gluckman, 1996). This need to maintain an orderly school environment provides the basis for the implementation of school uniform policies. Some argue that implementing a uniform policy is a risk that can have adverse effects (Holloman, et al., 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Kane, 1991). Others believe that such policies can have a positive impact on schools and the educational climate (Gregory, 1996; Hughes, 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Jones, 1997; Martin, 1998; Murray, 1996; Padgett, 1998). As long as mandatory uniform policies continue to be implemented in our public schools, arguments on both sides of the issue will become stronger and people will continue to agree with different sides of the issue.

Current school climates are vastly different from those of previous decades (Holloman et al., 1996). Although the United States has adopted civil rights laws and has worked toward the reduction of racial and ethnic tensions within our communities, these tensions still exist and can be flagrant within schools (New York State Department of Education, 1972). School-related gang activity and gang violence are on the rise (Gluckman, 1996). With the recent wave of school shootings within the country, the awareness of school safety has peaked. Students, parents, administrators, teachers, and community members have great concern about the direction in which public schools are heading in relation to school climate and safety issues (Holloman et al., 1996; Padgett, 1998). Many believe that strict measures must be taken in order to curb these violent trends and protect youth (Holloman et al., 1996). The implementation of mandatory school uniform policies is identified as one way to improve school climate and reduce school-related violence (Gluckman, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Hughes, 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Jones, 1997; Martin, 1998; Murray, 1996; Sher, 1995;).

Although some believe that school climate is not affected by uniform policies (Soltner, 1997; Stevenson & Churn, 1991), current research shows that these policies can have a positive effect on school climate and have been successful in reducing the problems that lead to a poor school climate (Gluckman, 1996; Mickens, 1994; Padgett, 1998). Such problems include racial and ethnic dissension, purposeful distinction among students based on wealth and socioeconomic status, and peer competition (Holloman et al., 1996). In the area

of school uniforms, some believe that “it is better to take risks than to sit by and let a bad situation become worse” (Mickens, 1994, p.7). Although some see uniforms as a risk to schools, others see uniforms as a benefit.

Academic Achievement

Although there is much skepticism concerning the effects of school uniform policies on the academic performance of students (Paliokas et al., 1996; Sher, 1995; Stevenson & Chunn, 1991), there is research that suggests student academic performance has increased with the implementation of school uniform policies (Gregory, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Martin, 1998; Padgett, 1998). Some schools have implemented uniform policies solely as a strategy to re-focus student attention to learning (Stevenson & Chunn, 1991). For example, after implementing a school-wide, mandatory uniform policy, teachers and administrators in the Long Beach, California School district noticed a striking change in the academic performances of their students (Cohn, 1996). It was noted that students came to school with the mindset to learn and to work. School officials in Long Beach also noticed a reduction in tardies, absences, discipline referrals and suspensions which, in turn, helped to foster higher academic achievement.

Although some believe that the implementation of a uniform policy may have a positive effect on student achievement, others argue that there are many variables that affect student achievement, whether or not a strict code of dress is in place (Stevenson & Chunn, 1991). Such variables include curriculum,

instruction, assessment methods and instruments, parental involvement and support, and school climate. Others argue that since uniform policies ultimately impact school climate, it will be difficult to establish a direct correlation between what children wear to school and how they perform academically (Stevenson & Chunn, 1991). Since strong arguments exist on both sides of the issue, there is a need for further research in the area of school uniforms and their impact on student academic achievement (Jones, 1997; Martin, 1998; Paliokas & Rist, 1996).

Legal Issues

Probably the most controversial issue surrounding the implementation of school uniform policies is the law and the interpretations of the First Amendment. Students often want to wear clothing that expresses their constitutional rights, while some administrators are convinced that any type of dress or appearance slightly outside the norm is disruptive to the educational process (Kuhn, 1996). It is this kind of tension that sets the stage for many legal battles.

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that issues concerning student dress and appearance became prevalent in public schools (Uerling, 1997). Most of the early cases, some of which were taken to court, involved student hair length and grooming issues (Uerling, 1997). As time progressed, the problems changed from basic grooming issues to controversial clothing and messages printed on clothing. This trend caused many schools to implement strict dress and grooming codes, even mandatory uniform policies (Holloman, 1996; Gluckman,

1996). Larger numbers of students began complaining that their First Amendment rights were being violated, and increasing numbers of cases were being disputed within the courtroom. After years of policy-making and courtroom battles, the courts took on the general perspective that they would support dress and grooming code provisions that were necessary to maintain an educational environment free from substantial distractions and disruptions (Uerling, 1997). Courts, however, would not support regulations of student appearance that reflected little more than the personal preferences of school officials (Uerling, 1997). Within the courts' stand on this issue lie numerous exceptions. Since each case is unique, individual attention must be given to each circumstance in order for the ruling to be fair (Kuhn, 1996).

On the issue of mandatory school uniforms, a school district that chooses to implement such a policy must have substantial evidence to establish that its decision was made based on valid educational purposes (Kuhn, 1996; Paliokas et al., 1996). Although this evidence can be difficult to articulate, it is becoming more widely accepted as more and more schools move towards the implementation of these strict codes of dress. As stated previously, there is a need for a broader research base concerning uniform policies and their effects on the educational system. This research may be pertinent to the survival of uniform policies in the courtroom.

Problem Statement

The issue of implementing school uniforms in public schools is becoming a widely-debated topic (Gluckman, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Padgett, 1998). It was estimated that 25% of the nation's public elementary, middle, and junior high schools were expected to implement dress-related policies by 1998 (Isaacson, 1998). Ten states currently allow school districts to mandate school uniforms (Isaacson, 1998). Although there is an increasing amount of research related to this growing trend, both researchers and school officials agree that there is a lack of evidence proving a direct, positive relationship between school uniforms and academic achievement (Kuhn, 1996; Paliokas et al., 1996; Sher, 1995). Furthermore, no research has been conducted on the impact of school uniforms on at-risk students in a public alternative school.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to discover teachers' perceptions about the impact of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior in a public alternative school, and to discover themes related to teachers' experiences with school uniforms in this unique setting. Using a qualitative, phenomenological design, concepts and themes emerged that are critical to the evaluation of the school uniform experience within the alternative school setting.

Research Questions

There were four main research questions that guided this study:

1. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting academic achievement?
3. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting student behavior?
4. What concepts and themes emerge through teachers' descriptions of their perceptions of the impact of school uniforms on the overall learning experience of their students?

Definitions of Terms

There are certain terms to be defined in order for this study to be understood and replicated.

The term school uniform refers to a pre-selected set of attire that students are either encouraged or required to wear by the school. In such cases, students wear the uniforms during the school day while on the school premises.

The term school uniform policy generally has two meanings in the literature. One meaning is that the school has a policy that requires all students to wear uniforms to school. In these cases, the policies are usually referred to as a "mandatory uniform policy." The other meaning is that the school has a policy encouraging students to wear a designated uniform, but does not require it. In

these cases, the policies are usually referred to as a “uniform policy,” or an “optional uniform policy.”

The term dress code refers to any guidelines that a school may impose on students’ choices of attire. Usually, such guidelines include the restriction of baggy pants, halter tops, short skirts, bared midriffs, and so on. In most cases in the literature, the term dress code does not include the wearing of a uniform. If the wearing of uniform is discussed, it is usually referred to as a “mandatory uniform policy.” However, in a few cases, some authors and researchers have referred to a mandatory uniform policy as a “strict dress code.”

The term school climate refers to the overall atmosphere and description of the setting within a school, and includes the following: student attitude, school pride, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, socioeconomic differences, racial and ethnic tensions, gang influences, school safety, and student competition.

The term academic achievement refers to the amount of success students experience with their daily coursework, exams, and state-wide testing within the school.

The term learning experience is an encompassing term referring to those things that constitute, affect, and influence a student’s education. Such things are part of the school’s comprehensive educational program and include school setting, school climate, and academic achievement.

The term alternative school refers to any school that is either publicly or privately funded for the purpose of providing students with a specific type of education outside of the regular public school setting (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). The term can also indicate that the population of the school consists of students who have been expelled from regular schools for various reasons including violence and/or possession of drugs or weapons. In such a case, the school is sometimes called an "expulsion school." The term "alternative school" is also commonly used in reference to schools designed for youth with challenging behavior.

The term gang-bangers is a slang term referring to individuals who are known members of a gang, and engage in gang-related activities and behaviors. Although this term is not found in the literature, the participants of this study used this term frequently throughout their interviews.

The term baggies is a slang term referring to the large, oversized pants worn by gang members to symbolize their gang identities. Although baggies can be worn to make a style statement by students who are not in gangs, this type of pants is widely associated with gangs as a form of gang attire. Again, although this term is not found in the literature, the participants of this study used this term frequently throughout their interviews.

Delimitations

In order to achieve the purposes of this study, the population and setting of the study was limited to a small, public alternative school in an urban setting.

Since there were no other alternative schools with uniform policies in the state in which the study was conducted, no other schools were included in the study.

Limitations and Assumptions

The first major limitation of the study was the size of the population being studied. Since the population consisted of only eight teachers, the results were not able to be generalized to other teachers in the same field. This limitation should not be critical since most qualitative research is not conducted for the purpose of generalization.

The second major limitation of the study was the setting. Since only one alternative school with a mandatory uniform policy was available for the study, the school may not be representative of other schools. Furthermore, the region of the country where the school was located may not be similar to other regions of the country with similar school settings. Again, this should not be a problem since the goal of qualitative inquiry is not to produce generalizations from the data. Instead, the goal of qualitative inquiry is to study a topic in depth, gain understanding, and reveal the richness and uniqueness of the data.

The third major limitation of the study was that only two main sources of data collection were used: face to face interviews with the participants and my own personal journal of my research experience. Some might argue that the study could have been richer had there been more ways in which data were collected such as the gathering of school documents and archival records.

The fourth major limitation of the study was that some of the participants' experiences related to school uniforms in the alternative school setting were relatively short at the time this study began. The participants had only been teaching in a school with uniforms for a period of one to two years. It should be pointed out that perhaps their perceptions about school uniforms in this particular setting would have been different had they been teaching in this setting for a longer period of time.

The fifth major limitation of the study was that the student population within the alternative school during the period of this study consisted only of males. Although there had been female students at the school at one time, there were no females in attendance at the time the participants were interviewed. Therefore, the views presented by the participants reflected their experiences with school uniforms in relation to an all-male population. It is possible that the data may have been different had there been female students in attendance during the time of the participant interviews.

The main assumption of the study was that the eight participants who were interviewed answered the questions thoroughly and truthfully.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was in providing data regarding the implementation of school uniform policies in public alternative schools that would benefit teachers, students, and the educational community in their decision-making processes regarding the use of school uniforms. As more and

more public schools grapple with the issues of school safety and improving school climate, the growing trend of implementing school uniform policies becomes a topic for discussion. More research in the area of school uniforms and their perceived impact on the learning experience will not only be helpful to school officials and the community at large, but will also be a critical factor in choosing the best options for a successful learning experience for all students. More specifically, the teachers and students in alternative schools will benefit from in-depth research conducted in their unique setting.

Researcher's Perspective

My current perspective on school uniforms is not neutral although I have read literature on both sides of the issue and can identify with arguments presented by advocates on both sides. I have never attended a school in which uniforms were required, nor do I have any family members who have done so. Also, having been a public school teacher for five years, I have never taught in a school in which uniforms were either considered or required.

My interest to conduct research on school uniforms began during the first semester of my doctoral program when I conducted a policy analysis on the mandatory uniform policy at a local, public school. After much reading on the topic and a presentation of my policy analysis data to colleagues and professors, I was intrigued with the opposing opinions and discussions the topic evoked. I also was fascinated by the increasing number of public schools across the nation that were considering and implementing school uniforms. My heightened

interest led me to re-visit the school in which I did my policy analysis and I discussed the idea of continuing research on school uniforms with the school's principal. These events led me to my dissertation topic and this research study.

I have spent several years of my life as an educator and, in doing so, have developed my own attitudes about student attire and its effects on the learning experience. I have seen many cases in which inappropriate student attire has caused distractions in my classroom. I also have seen students become infatuated with name-brand and designer clothing, believing that such attire will convey a message of popularity and high status. Although I am not a dedicated advocate of school uniforms and do not have a persistent desire to see them mandated in every school, I do understand the positive effects. I believe that uniforms have a place in education, although I do not feel they are necessary or even appropriate for every educational setting.

My position on school uniforms has shifted throughout the course of this study. When I began the research, I felt somewhat supportive of school uniforms, and although I had no experience with school uniforms, I based my beliefs on my teaching experiences in public schools. As I began to read the literature and analyze the numerous success stories of public schools that had implemented school uniforms, I began to feel more supportive of uniforms. Subsequently, my new beliefs were not swayed by the few studies and cases that I read in which uniforms were found to have no effect on schools. Then, as I began to interview teachers and collect and analyze the data for my own study, I

heard new perspectives on school uniforms that connected me to the issue in a new and personal way. I began to feel more neutral on the issue and started to understand more points on the other side of the debate. Although my thought process on uniforms throughout this study has not been entirely consistent, I believe it has been a very important process for me in trying to be honest with myself about where I stand on the issue. After all this, I honestly can say that I feel very clear about my stand on school uniforms. Although there is much evidence and success stories to support the use of school uniforms, I believe that the problems leading to the implementation of school uniforms are not solved by the uniforms. In other words, I believe that school uniforms can have numerous positive effects on students and schools, and that the implementation of school uniforms can be the right choice for many schools. On the other hand, I believe that uniforms are simply a “band-aid” for the symptoms resulting from the larger, deeper problems existing in students and schools today. Covering something up is not a solution. Uniforms may change what is on the outside of a person, but they do not change what is on the inside.

I feel that my open-minded approach to the literature and my understanding of my personal view on school uniforms have contributed to the depth and unbiased discussion concerning the data produced through this study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A broad base of literature was reviewed and synthesized to gain perspectives to aid this research. Data were collected based on pertinence and relevance to the issue of school uniforms in the public school setting. Data for this literature review were obtained through library data-bases and internet sites accessed through Colorado State University. Data bases used included ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts and Education Abstracts. Headings used for computer searches included the following: school uniforms, school climate, public school uniforms, school gangs, school violence, school safety, school uniform policies, school uniforms and legal issues, at-risk students, alternative schools and alternative education.

There are seven main sections of this review: Defining Dress and Identity, School Climate, Academic Achievement, Legal Issues, Alternative Schools, Guiding Theoretical Concepts, and Application of Theories.

Defining Dress and Identity

According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992), dress is defined as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (p. 29). The term “dress” also includes a long list of possible modifications of the body such as colored hair and skin, piercings, garments, and accessories. The

word “dress” has often been used interchangeably with other terms including clothing, ornament, adornment, and cosmetics. According to Roach-Higgins & Eicher (1992), the term dress is preferred over other terms because other terms do not identify all possible modifications and supplements to the body that are believed to be included in the term dress. Furthermore, the term dress can include two viewpoints, one based upon the total repertoire of body modifications and supplements that are influenced by a particular social group, and the second based upon particular displays of bodily modifications and supplements that are assembled by a specific individual for a particular time and place (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

The term identity is defined as “any aspect of the self about which individuals can communicate to others through symbolic means” (Davis, 1985, p. 23-24). According to Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992), many authors cite Erik Erickson’s 1946 paper as the document that sparked interest among social scientists in the term *identity* used with the interpretation of human behavior. Since that time, the term identity has been widely used as a technical term in the social science community. The characteristics of dress that communicate identities of individuals depend on both available materials and social structuring (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). This structuring includes belief systems that shape moral and aesthetic standards for dress. The term identity is also associated with impression management (Hunt & Miller, 1997). Impression management is the creation and management of one’s identity via interaction that is socially

constructed, interpreted, and communicated through words, deeds, and images (Hunt & Miller, 1997).

Well-known author and psychologist Erik Erikson presented several theories relating to adolescent development and identity that can be closely related to dress and appearance. Erikson (1963) believed that adolescence is “the age of the final establishment of a dominant positive ego identity” (p. 306). Therefore, it is crucial that the adolescent years be a positive and healthy period of growth and identity. Erikson (1982) also introduced “identity confusion” as being both a normal and necessary experience among adolescents. Identity confusion involves the search for one’s place in a social context. Furthermore, Erikson believed that the basic patterns of identity must emerge from the ways in which the social processes of the times identify young individuals. Since clothing and appearance are a significant part of youth identity, and since the clothing styles change with the times, it is clear from Erikson’s research that one way adolescents define both their identities and the identities of others is through clothing and appearance. Erikson also identifies “gang loyalty” as the result of an “ill-fated search for communality” (1982, p. 72) sought by individuals who are not accepted by others. Clearly then, clothing and appearance play a significant role in the discovery of adolescent identity.

School Climate

The desire to improve school climate is one of the motivating forces behind the implementation of school uniform policies (Murphy, 1997; Paliokas & Rist,

1996; Uerling, 1997). Many schools in which such policies have been implemented have reported positive effects on the climates of the schools (Gluckman, 1996; Jones, 1997; Mickens, 1994; Murphy, 1997; Murray, 1996; Padgett, 1998; Paliokas & Rist, 1996). For example, according to a study done in a public elementary school in Georgia, 41 teachers who were surveyed responded favorably to a uniform policy, stating that student attitudes and behavior improved following the implementation of the policy (Padgett, 1998). It also was noted that under the policy students became less concerned with their appearances and dress, and subsequently became more understanding of cultural, ethnic, and economic differences among their peers. The school district also reported that discipline referrals decreased following the implementation of the policy and found that students were less likely to engage in discriminatory behaviors within the school. Another study conducted by Murray (1996) in which 306 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students completed a school climate survey revealed that the students believed their school climate had improved following the implementation of a school uniform policy. The students expressed improvements in the following areas: teacher-student relationships, security, student behavioral values, guidance, parent and community school relations, and instructional management (Murray, 1996). A similar study by Murphy (1997) found that perceptions about school climate improved among parents, teachers and elementary students following the implementation of a

uniform policy. In addition, parents suggested that the uniforms helped to increase their children's sense of school pride.

The Ridley School District of suburban Philadelphia is another school that chose uniforms to improve school climate. In the Fall of 1999, the Ridley School District implemented a mandatory uniform policy for students in kindergarten through fifth grade (White, 2000). According to school officials, the policy was intended to foster a team learning environment and help teachers and administrators maintain order. Furthermore, officials hoped the uniforms would reduce disciplinary problems and improve school climate. Ridley schools were among the first in the state of Pennsylvania to take advantage of the 1998 state law allowing school districts to set their own codes of dress. The Ridley School District is one example of the many public schools considering and implementing school-wide uniform policies (White, 2000).

Student self-esteem is often linked to school climate in the literature. Shook (1996) conducted a study on sixth graders to determine if clothing affected self-esteem. After administering the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to the students, the researcher found that feelings of clothing deprivation in young adolescents were associated with low self-esteem and low levels of social participation. This data indicates that student dress has a large impact on self-esteem. Forney and Forney (1995) and Ryan (1966) also believed that appearance is directly related to self-image among adolescents. Richards (1998) noted that dress and appearance can be responsible for making a child feel either included

in or excluded from a group. Advocates for school uniforms argue that uniforms help improve self-esteem and sense of belonging through eliminating distinct differences in clothing among children when the children wear clothing of their choice (Gregory, 1996). Studies by Hughes (1996), Kim (1998) and Murphy (1997) show that parents and teachers support such beliefs about uniforms improving self-esteem among students. Furthermore, these studies reveal that parents feel the uniforms help to decrease the amount of money they spend on clothing for their children.

Competition among students regarding clothing is a significant issue within the uniform debate. Sher (1995) found that there was less competition in clothing among students when a uniform was the daily, required attire. According to O'Neal (1997), competition among adolescents for clothing can become a serious problem. In extreme cases, students have turned to theft and violence in order to attain certain clothing and its accompanying status symbols. One example of such violence is an incident that occurred at a school bus stop when a 14 year old high school student was assaulted and killed after refusing to hand over an item of his clothing to another student (O'Neal, 1997). Although such incidences of violence related to clothing are considered rare, they are occurring more frequently. In trying to understand why adolescents engage in risky behavior for the sake of acquiring certain items of clothing, O'Neal (1998) conducted research on the issue and found that clothing was linked to self-image and self-esteem among adolescents. Furthermore, since some teenagers turn to violence as a

means of obtaining material items, specifically clothing, advocates for school uniforms believe that such violence may be reduced when students will not be walking to and from school in their regular street clothes. However, since the uniforms are only worn on schooldays, such a policy would not account for any deviant behavior related to clothing theft occurring on days when children do not attend school.

Other research provides evidence that uniform policies have decreased gang membership, peer competition, ostracism, theft, and assault within public schools (Holloman, et al., 1996). Moreover, this research by Holloman and colleagues provided evidence that uniform policies stimulated student conformity to school goals. This conformity has led to improved student attention, reduced rivalry over clothing, and improved classroom climate. Holloman and colleagues (1996) also give evidence to support the increased social integration of students across social class and neighborhood lines as a result of students being required to wear uniforms to school.

Safety is becoming a growing concern among schools (Hethorn, 1996; Holloman, 1995; Trump, 1998). According to Burke (1991), students cannot learn if they do not feel safe. Safety is necessary both on the school grounds and within the classrooms. Since schools are becoming areas of increasingly serious and constant violence, measures must be taken to insure the safety of all students (Burke, 1991; Trump, 1998). Burke believes that the way students dress, especially if the dress is associated with gang affiliation, can cause tension among

students. This tension ultimately can lead to an unstable school climate. Some school officials look to uniforms as a solution to the tensions that can arise from inappropriate student attire (Gluckman, 1996). A study by Mickens (1994) conducted in a New York City high school provided evidence that the implementation of a mandatory uniform policy decreased ethnic tensions among students, resulting in less fighting and intimidation, and fewer suspensions. This outcome is supported through research done by Gluckman (1996) in which a decrease in school-related gang activity was reported following the implementation of a uniform policy. According to Gluckman's research (1996), gang symbols, signs, and colors that were traditionally expressed through clothing were later being controlled and diffused through strict uniform dress codes. Intimidation among students had decreased and socioeconomic status was more easily hidden, resulting in a safer school environment.

According to Roach-Higgins, Eicher & Johnson (1995), dress can be used as a language of protest as is often the case among adolescents. Some advocates for school uniforms believe that uniforms help address the issue of gang apparel being used as an outright protest to the order and governance of a school, therefore creating tension within the climate of a school. A study conducted by Sher (1995) found that records of student suspensions, average daily attendance, and corporal punishment of elementary students revealed that school climate improved and gang activity decreased following the implementation of a uniform policy. Jones (1997) supports these findings with research conducted

through ethnographic interviews of ten staff members from a large middle school in southern California. The data collected through the interviews revealed that school uniforms improved school safety and decreased suspensions. Furthermore, the data suggested that overall school climate was more calm after the uniform policy was in place.

The Long Beach School District in California with 93,000 students also reported improved school-wide safety as a result of school uniforms. After implementing a district-wide, mandatory, school uniform policy in all of its 57 elementary schools, all 15 middle schools, and one high school, the Long Beach School District reported a long list of positive results (Paliokas, Futrell, & Rist, 1996). Evidence from school records showed a 34 percent decrease in assault and battery cases among students, a 51 percent decline in physical fights, and a 32 percent decrease in suspensions. Although the uniform policy in Long Beach was mainly intended to curb gang problems, it accomplished even more than that (White, 2000). School officials in Long Beach reported an improvement in student behavior and academic achievement.

A study by Martin (1998) examined the effect of uniforms on three elementary schools through interviews with students, staff and parents, observations, and document reviews. Discipline records revealed that school safety in all three schools improved as a result of the uniform policies. A similar study by Hughes (1996) was conducted in two, large, urban middle schools in Texas. Both schools had a uniform policy in place. Data gathered through interaction with teachers,

parents and students revealed improvements in classroom behavior, respect for peers, and less disruptions in the classrooms during instructional time. In addition, school discipline records showed a decrease in discipline referrals following the implementation of the uniform policies.

Another aspect of school safety involves intruders. Advocates for uniforms point out that uniforms make it possible and easier to identify non-students wearing regular street clothes who may enter the campus during the school day (Lennon, et al., 1999). Such trespassers may pose a threat to the safety of a school.

Although much evidence supports the implementation of school uniform policies in terms of their impact on school climate, controversial debates exist among many as to the effects of these policies. A study conducted by Soltner (1997) in which data were collected through school documents and interviews of teachers, parents and administrators from an elementary school found that uniforms had no affect on school climate. In fact, no measurable outcomes were found at all after the uniform policy was implemented. Subsequently, the uniform policy was later rejected. A study by Hughes (1996) found that uniforms had no affect on student attendance. Furthermore, students were not supportive of the uniform policy and when surveyed, did not feel that the uniforms had any effect of school climate. Forney and Forney (1995) concluded that most students do not want their schools to regulate dress. Moreover, such opposition to dress codes can have a negative effect on student attitude. Sher

(1995) found no difference in student behavior among students in three elementary schools with mandatory uniform policies. Evidence for this conclusion was based upon records of student discipline and attendance both before and after the policies were implemented in the three schools. Research by Murray (1996) supports these findings through a study in which two middle schools, one with uniforms and one without, were compared in terms of student behavior. Discipline records revealed no significant differences in suspension rates between the two schools. In terms of uniforms affecting gang-related activity in schools, a study by Hethorn (1994) revealed that gang identity was not controlled by clothing. In other words, students were aware of which students belonged to which gang regardless of dress. This awareness was partly due to other critical visual features of gang identity such as verbal language, hand-signs, body language and tattoos.

In research conducted by Holloman and colleagues (1996), findings indicated that a number of students, parents, and school officials were not in favor of uniform policies, believing that such policies restricted student and parental rights to freedom of expression in appearance. Some believed that mandatory uniform policies limited youths' abilities to engage in the normal developmental tasks related to identity experimentation using clothing and/or bodily adornment (Hethorn, 1994; Holloman, et al., 1996). Still others viewed these policies as an intrusion of local and state policies into the private lives of students and their families (Holloman, et al., 1996). Others argued that uniforms would

not erase social class lines because policies do not apply to other items that can be used to convey status such as jewelry, backpacks, bicycles, and cars (Isaacson, 1998). Furthermore, uniform policies have been found to have no direct affect on student self-image (Kim, 1998). Moreover, Paliokas and Rist (1996) reported that little empirical data exists on the cause-effect relationship between uniforms and violence.

Academic Achievement

Much controversy exists as to whether or not school uniform policies have a direct positive effect on student academic achievement. Although some research indicates that such policies have a positive impact on student achievement (Holloman, et al., 1996), many argue that there is a lack of research in this area and that if research were to be conducted, it would be difficult to show a cause-effect relationship (Isaacson, 1998).

Holloman, et al. (1996) reported that wearing school uniforms had improved student attendance, grades, and respect for teachers as well as enhanced classroom climate. Similar results were found by Padgett (1998) who concluded that students under a uniform policy worked harder in school and took their grades more seriously (Padgett, 1998). Also, a study conducted in a public school in Chicago reported that parents believed their children's academic progress increased following the implementation of a mandatory uniform policy (Woods & Ogletree, 1992). Of the parents surveyed in this study, 93 percent believed that the policy assisted their children in learning that clothes do not

make a person. Sixty percent believed that their child focused more on learning, and 80 percent agreed that the wearing of uniforms promoted good conduct, leading to a better learning environment.

Findings from a study conducted by Isaacson (1998) showed that uniforms helped students establish a more serious tone for study, along with improving student attendance, leading to exposure to more instructional time. These factors have led to increased academic performance among students. Research conducted by the Virginia State Department of Education (1992) supported these claims concluding that uniform policies within public schools have improved student focus on schoolwork.

Gregory (1996) conducted a comparative study between two inner city middle schools, one with uniforms and one without. Data gathered through student achievement averages in mathematics and language arts revealed that the school with uniforms showed evidence of higher academic achievement among students than the school without uniforms. Research by Martin (1998) supported these findings through a study conducted in three elementary schools with uniform policies in which each school showed an increase in academic achievement following implementation of the uniform policies.

Those against uniform policies believe that the school is responsible for setting the tone for academic achievement, not the wearing of uniforms. In a study conducted by Stevenson and Chunn (1991), no evidence was found to support an increase in student academic achievement following the

implementation of a uniform dress code in a public school. Although no direct correlation between uniforms and achievement was found, there was evidence in the study to support a positive impact of the uniforms on school climate. A study by Sher (1995) found similar results. After comparing records of academic achievement among elementary students in three urban schools with uniforms, no evidence of improved academic performance was found following the implementation of the uniform policies. Soltner (1997) found no measurable outcomes at all following the implementation of a uniform policy in an elementary school. Based on these conflicting findings, more research is needed to explore the impact of school uniforms on academic performance of students.

Legal Issues

The most controversial and problematic aspect of the school uniform debate lies within the interpretation of the law. Increasing numbers of cases involving students and school-related dress issues are reaching the courts (Kuhn, 1996; Paliokas et al., 1996). Regulation of dress in schools has led to considerable debate (Lennon, Schultz & Johnson, 1999). Since more and more schools are implementing strict dress policies (Holloman et al., 1996), the courts have dealt with more cases involving student and parental rights in relation to the First Amendment. The leading questions that emerge include the following: Do public schools have the right to force students to wear uniforms? Do students have to comply with uniform policies? What role does the court play in interpreting the law and deciding upon a fair outcome to such disputes?

Many schools support students' individual civil liberties and rights but also feel that school officials have obligations to exercise reasonable controls (New York State Department of Education, 1972). The New York State Commissioner of Education (1972) stated that public schools must recognize the importance of granting students the rights that are mandated by the courts. Also, schools must engage in good practices that support regard for the dignity of human beings in order to promote harmonious school-student relationships. The Commissioner also believed that schools must "promote activities which will lead students to understand that there are serious responsibilities connected with individual freedoms" (p. 4). These freedoms according to Paliokas and colleagues (1996) include the belief that students do not shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse door. The Supreme Court states, however, that students' free speech rights are not absolute and that school officials have a "comprehensive authority, consistent with fundamental constitutional safeguards, to prescribe and control conduct in the schools" (p. 32). It is this clash between students' individual rights of free expression and the obligation of public school authorities to provide a safe and supportive learning environment that becomes the "crux of the debate over dress-code policy" (Paliokas, et al., 1996, p. 33).

Many of the court rulings relating to school uniform policies are heavily dependent upon a school's justification for the policy's implementation (Kuhn, 1996; Paliokas et al., 1996). Courts are more likely to support a school's dress-

code policy if the school can provide a detailed rationale as to why they are requiring students to comply with such a policy (Lennon, et al., 1999; Paliokas, et al., 1996). If a school implies that a uniform policy is being implemented simply to improve school discipline in general, without supporting that claim with documented problems the policy will specifically address, it is unlikely that the policy will be successfully defended in a trial. Dress codes in schools are considered valid if they promote student safety or prevent disruption and distraction within the learning environment (Lennon, et al., 1999). Furthermore, school dress codes may be overturned if they are vague and difficult for students to understand or if they are not specific.

In 1995, the Phoenix Elementary School District was taken to court after two parents sued the school for attempting to expel their children for refusing to wear the uniforms mandated by the school's new dress-code policy (Zirkel, 1998). The court ruled in favor of the school's decision, upholding the belief that the "dress code bore a reasonable relation to the pedagogical purpose of the school" (p. 550). The court had identified several reasonable justifications for the code, including its positive effect on the learning environment where distractions were reduced and campus safety was fostered. The court also noted that the policy did allow for student expression by means of jewelry, buttons, and petitions.

In 1994, Governor Wilson of California signed into law a bill drafted by Senator Wyman providing school districts with the power to require uniforms

(Holloman, 1995). The law was inspired by the desire to eliminate gang-related clothing in schools and improve school safety. This law set the precedent for the Long Beach School District to adopt its mandatory uniform policy, as well as encouraged many other school districts in the state to consider uniforms.

According to the "Forum Analysis" approach, a legal evaluation process, strict dress codes are permissible regulations on student expression (Simonson, 1998). Forum Analysis involves a three-step process. First, the court must decide whether the speech or expression is protected by the First Amendment. Second, the court must identify the nature of the forum, specifically deciding whether or not it is a matter of public or private concern. Third, the court must assess whether the justifications for exclusion from the forum is appropriate. The Forum Analysis approach has been used in several court cases involving dress code and uniform disputes and stands to be a guideline for evaluation of dress policies (Simonson, 1998).

Kuhn (1996) presented another perspective on the legal battles of uniform policies in which several factors were noted as having effects on the outcome of a court's decision. These factors included how the issue is characterized, the particular words used in the policy, the geographic area of the conflict, and the political and social climate of the country. The question of characterization involves determining whether or not the issue is rationally related to the school's purposes. In relation to the wording of a policy, a court will interpret the words exactly as they appear in the policy. The court is likely to uphold the policy if its

purpose is to maintain an orderly learning environment within the school. The geographic location of the conflict was important because it sets the precedent for determining the outcome of the case based on previous incidents of the same nature. The political and social climate of the country can play a large role in the rulings on dress code cases. The Supreme Court, for example, has been known to take on both conservative and liberal positions depending on the issue and events at large in the public. For example, following the streak of public school shootings across America in the mid-to-late 1990's, public awareness of school safety increased, therefore impacting the courts which led to a more non-tolerance tone within the legal system. The courts tend to adopt the feelings and concerns of the public when such issues are before them (Kuhn, 1996).

While some believe that uniform policies seek to control and censor important forms of personal expression among students (Kane, 1991), others believe that such policies are sometimes necessary to insure the safety of schools and the quality of education (Pugh, 1990). According to Holloman (1995), much of the uniform debate between advocates and opponents is based on anecdotal accounts rather than on research. Even so, the debate is far from over and advocates for both sides will continue to fight for their rights and beliefs, all for the sake of what is best for America's youth.

Alternative Schools

An alternative school is any school that is either publicly or privately funded for the purpose of providing students with a specific type of education outside of

the regular public school setting (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). It is estimated that there are 15,000 alternative schools throughout the United States (Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). A growing body of research and years of anecdotal evidence show that students who have been labeled failures, troublemakers or dropouts in traditional schools can thrive in smaller, more individualized, alternative settings (NREL, 1998). Paglin and Fager (1997) reported that all public schools and districts face the challenge of trying to educate students who for one reason or another do not thrive in the regular school environment. Such "at-risk" students are at risk of failing, which subsequently alerts schools, parents and communities to the need for placement in an alternative school. In addition, new studies are showing improvements in academic performance, self-esteem, and reductions in behavior problems and dropout rates among students in alternative schools (NREL, 1998). Studies conducted by the NREL showed that students were more likely to drop-out of school early if they had a history of poor academic performance or low attendance. Statistics paint a grim picture for such students since more than 80% of prison inmates are high school dropouts (NREL, 1998).

Alternative schooling has developed out of years of education reform in the United States beginning in 1960 and continuing to the present (Gregory, 1998). John Dewey's ideal of the progressive school, along with the 1980's federal report *A Nation at Risk* and the race to set national standards have all contributed to the development of the alternative school (Gregory, 1998). Furthermore, concerns

about the nation's rising number of high school dropouts have led educators and communities to consider an alternative plan for educating at-risk youth and keeping them off the streets (Gregory, 1998). An example of such a plan is the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program of Houston, Texas (Houston Independent School District, 1997). This program was developed to provide an education for students who were expelled from school or were adjudicated to attend an alternative school. In the Fall of 1997 there were 270 students in the program, with 48.0% of them being African American, 46.7% Hispanic, and 4.4% White. During the school's first semester, student attendance ranged from 87%-89% with 46.3% of the students completing the program and returning to their home schools after the first year. The school was deemed successful and the program continues to serve the needs of at-risk youth in Houston, preparing them for their futures. Part of the school's success was due to its five major goals: (a) provide educational services to students, (b) establish consistency, predictability and appropriateness of student placement following expulsion from regular schools or alternative education programs, (c) return students to regular school settings, (d) provide discipline necessary to modify students' behavior as they prepared to return to the regular school setting, and (e) provide educational options for juvenile courts (Houston Independent School District, 1997). Fitzsimmons (1998) stated that troubled students need rehabilitative services instead of haphazard punishment. Furthermore, Fitzsimmons (1998) pointed out that the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) requires educators to address the behavioral as well as the learning problems of students. This law would clearly support the creation of alternative schools intended to educate troubled youth and rehabilitate their behavior.

What lies ahead for alternative schools? Alternative schools will most likely continue to grow within the United States as the need to educate at-risk youth remains. Furthermore, there will be a growing number of alternative middle schools and perhaps even elementary schools (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Tobin and Sprague (1999) pointed out three main reasons why alternative education is now increasingly extended to younger students. First, in recent years it has become more common for young students to act out in ways that are dangerous. Second, research on the development of antisocial behavior programs supports the idea of serving troubled children at a young age in hopes of rehabilitating them in their early years. Third, the current trends of under-identification of students with emotional and behavioral disorders have resulted in an increased need for permanent alternative placements (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

In an effort to increase the benefits of alternative education, some alternative schools are reaching out to home-schoolers and many alternative schools already offer night school, summer school, and independent study programs (Paglin & Fager, 1997). According to Reglin (1998), research has shown "mentoring" to be a powerful alternative education and dropout prevention strategy for students at risk. In addition, mentoring programs that cooperate with alternative schools

appear to be growing across the United States and may help to serve the needs of at-risk youth (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). In 1998, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington D.C. published the well-known federal report entitled *A Nation Still At Risk* (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1988). The report was a compilation of information and ideas presented by some of the nation's most prominent education reformers, business leaders, and policymakers whose goal was to discuss the state of U.S. education and recommend reforms. Although the report noted that improvements in education have been made over the last decade, it stated that large numbers of students remain at risk and that America's educational system is failing far too many people. The alternative school provides educational opportunity for those students at risk of failing the system.

Benefits of alternative schools include: reduction in dropout rates, reduction in student truancy, redirection of disruptive and inattentive students from mainstream schools into more productive and successful learning environments, and re-engagement with learning and the community that occurs when students are placed in a more responsive and flexible environment (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Challenges to opening and maintaining alternative schools include: lack of stable funding, lack of charismatic and trained leaders, inappropriate placements of students who may not be well suited to the alternative setting, and political and economic changes that may cause opposition to the alternative school setting (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Flannery (1998) points out that evaluation is a critical

part of any program's survival. In terms of alternative schools, needs assessments must be conducted in order to help the school districts determine whether or not there is a need for an alternative school, what would change as a result of having the school, and what works best in terms of setting up the school and why. All of these aforementioned factors are important to the existence of the alternative school.

In order for alternative schools to be successful, certain characteristics should be in place. According to Paglin and Fager (1997) and Tobin and Sprague (1999), these characteristics include: a clear mission; a smaller enrollment than those of the mainstream schools; a low ratio of students to staff; clear rules enforced fairly and consistently; high standards for behavior, attendance, and performance; a hands-on curriculum; positive rather than punitive emphasis on behavior management; mentoring programs; and student voice in school operations. In the 1998 report entitled *A Nation Still at Risk*, the answer to solving America's educational dilemmas was not a simple one. The answer was however, summed up best in these words; "In the last decade of this American Century, we must not be content with anything less than the best for all our children" (Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 1998, p. 9).

Guiding Theoretical Concepts

This section outlines the guiding theoretical concepts that underlie the theories discussed in the next section. Such concepts are important for creating a theoretical base upon which the literature can be based and interpreted. In

addition, the theories discussed here also have provided a framework within which the results of the study were explained and interpreted.

A theory is defined as “a set of related or internally consistent propositions which explain, interpret, describe, and/or predict a phenomenon in a highly-simplified and generalized manner” (Damhorst, 1991, p. 192). In contrast, a model is defined as “a set of internally consistent propositions which map out the components of a system or process, and indicate relationships among the components” (Damhorst, 1991, p. 192). Although the terms “theory” and “model” have seemingly similar definitions, they serve different purposes. A theory comprises many hypotheses, while a model sets a perspective and determines what can be considered as the focus of a study for the person adopting the model (Damhorst, 1991).

There are four basic theoretical models that dominate the social psychology of clothing (Nagasawa, Hutton, & Kaiser, 1993). These models are the cognitive model, the behavioral model, the bio-volitional model, and the symbolic model. The following discussion about these four theoretical models is based upon the work of Nagasawa and colleagues (1993).

In the cognitive model, the focus is directed towards how people form impressions of themselves and others. Thus, clothing provides indications about what a person is like. According to Kaiser (1997), the cognitive model has four main assumptions. First, humans are motivated to explain appearances in terms of situations and people. Second, people often use clothing and appearance for

the purpose of simplifying and understanding social interactions. Third, people strive for consistency and continuity in the ways in which they perceive the appearance of others. Fourth, humans seek and use aesthetic stimulation within their environments.

In the behavioral model, the focus is mainly on overt, intentional actions related to clothing and appearance. There are four main beliefs associated with this model. First, humans are passive receivers of clothing and appearance cues. Second, the maintenance of one's appearance is regulated by the consequences of the appearance. Third, the management of one's appearance is a learned behavior. Fourth, intentional appearances and their consequences are emphasized more strongly than the awareness of one's mental processes. In other words, the consequences that result from one's choice of clothing and appearance are more important to the person than his/her own awareness of the mental states that cause them to choose such clothing or appearance.

In the bio-volitional model, the focus is based upon the relationship between physical characteristics and appearance. Factors related to this relationship include perception, personality traits, and the unconscious. Thus, innate human characteristics are emphasized over any social processes. There are five main assumptions of this model. First, humans are genetically predisposed by physical characteristics to possess certain traits, emotions, or views about themselves and others. Second, physical appearance influences attraction between people. Third, humans use clothes as adaptive tools to adjust to their

environments. Fourth, personality traits influence personal approaches to appearance. Finally, appearance management and perception are based upon unconscious drives.

In the symbolic model, the focus is on the relationship between social actions and social objects. Through social interaction, the meanings of clothing and appearance are defined. According to Kaiser (1997), there are five assumptions associated with this model. First, humans create their own identities by managing their appearances. Second, people use symbols that coincide with their actions. Third, people respond to others based upon their perceptions of the clothing and appearance of others. Fourth, meanings associated with appearance symbols are derived from social interactions with others. Finally, meanings assigned to clothing and appearance are manipulated and modified through people's interpretations.

These four theoretical models are important for examining the similarities and differences among perspectives used in the study of clothing (Nagasawa, et. al., 1993). For each of these models, the underlying assumptions are believed to be true. In general, research in the area of clothing and human behavior indicates that type of clothing is related to "impressions formed of others and subsequent behavioral reactions to that person" (Lennon & Davis, 1989, p. 41). It is clear that perceptions of oneself and others are a key factor to understanding the social psychology of dress and appearance.

Application of Theories

In this section, five theories related to the social psychology of dress and appearance are presented. It is important to note that these theories are complementary and not competitive. The theories are: Social Cognition Theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory, Dramaturgy, Role Theory, and Uniformity and Conformity. Following an explanation of the core concepts of each theory is a discussion in which the theory is related to the topic of school uniforms.

Social Cognition Theory

Social cognition theory is defined as how people make sense of themselves and other people (Damhorst, 1991). Another phenomenon that fits under this broad category is how people classify and stereotype others. Also included in this category is the understanding of why others behave the way they do. Self-perception plays a large role in social cognition theory (Damhorst, 1991).

Individuals perceive themselves and identify themselves based upon their relationships with others. Social cognition also is concerned with the ways in which people develop attitudes and expectations for relationships they have with others. In addition, social cognition involves the act of making sense out of any situation with social interaction. In other words, a focus is placed upon the ways in which individuals classify and shape social events through their expectations for interaction with others (Damhorst, 1991).

There are three main stages of social cognition (Lennon & Davis, 1989). These stages are pre-processing, processing, and post-processing. In pre-processing,

before an individual is exposed to any information, factors work to direct attention and/or bias to the interpretation of that information. In this stage, the ways in which an individual attaches meaning to new information impacts how social information is encoded. An example of pre-processing is stereotyping others based on how they dress.

In the processing stage, an individual will evaluate social information. Factors that come into play in this stage include the role of self, level of awareness, and memory. An individual's previous experiences and perception of self affect the ways in which social information is processed. An example of processing is relating and responding to others based on what you know about them as individuals and not based entirely on physical appearance.

In the third stage, post-processing, factors are introduced following the encoding of information. Such factors include attitude change, mood, and context. These factors can influence judgment, attitudes, and recall. Self-perceptions can affect later behavior by causing people to develop conclusions about themselves (Lennon & Davis, 1989). An example of post-processing is developing or changing an attitude about someone based on one's perceptions of that person.

In relating social cognition theory to school uniforms, it is clear that one of the possible effects of uniforms on individuals is the creation of perceptions related to the wearing of the uniforms. In other words, the wearing of uniforms may cause individuals to arrive at certain conclusions about themselves and

others based solely on appearances. Furthermore, since social cognition involves classification and stereotyping, individuals may classify students wearing uniforms as studious or well mannered, simply because of how they look and the connotations that may accompany the wearing of a uniform. This classification may then shape how people interact with students who wear uniforms. In addition, social cognition includes the developing of attitudes and expectations based upon relationships with others. It is possible that an individual might have higher expectations for performance or conduct from a student wearing a uniform than a student not wearing a uniform. In other words, appearance and dress may play a large role in the expectations of others and the conclusions that others draw based upon their perceptions.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Symbolic interaction theory is defined as “a perspective that sees humans actively defining their situations and acting according to their definitions” (Charon, 1985, p. 146). Kaiser (1997) defines symbolic interaction theory as “a perspective that pursues the study of social actions and social objects” (p. 39). Symbolic interaction theory involves the processes that individuals use to understand the world around them (Ogle & Damhorst, 1999). The main principle behind this theory is that individuals involve themselves in social interaction, and in doing so, make sense of themselves, others, and situations. According to Charon (1985), in symbolic interactionism humans attempt to define situations for others through interaction. An example of symbolic

interactionism is the belief that a person is unpopular because of the words and actions of others. For example, if a powerful student or group of students decide that another student does not fit into their group, then other students may agree that the targeted student is not popular, simply because of the decision made by the powerful students.

There are five basic assumptions underlying symbolic interaction theory (Kaiser, 1997). The first assumption is that humans create their own realities by managing their appearances (Kaiser, 1997). People present personal information to others through their clothing and appearance. The second assumption is that people use symbols to fit their lines of action (Kaiser, 1997). Lines of actions are intentional ways in which individuals behave. Symbols derive their meaning from social contexts and thus are maintained through those contexts. The third assumption is that people act towards others on the basis of the meanings that are held by appearance (Kaiser, 1997). In other words, people may use clues from the appearances of others to make sense of those people and attach meaning to their specific behaviors. The fourth assumption is that meanings associated with appearance symbols emerge from social interaction with others (Kaiser, 1997). Each person must learn and discover meaning on his/her own. In order to understand social interactions and meanings, people must take into account viewpoints held by different people in various situations. The fifth and final assumption of symbolic interaction theory is that meanings assigned to clothing and appearance are manipulated and modified through interpretive

processes (Kaiser, 1997). After individuals have arrived at a given meaning to specific clothing symbol, they are still likely to revise or re-interpret such meanings according to their own perceptions and awareness.

Symbolic interaction theory can be related to school uniforms. In looking at Kaiser's (1997) five basic assumptions, it is clear that schools, parents, and administrators who support school uniforms are trying to convey a message based on appearance. Meaning is being attached to a uniform and therefore, a uniform becomes a symbol that represents a specific meaning. This meaning that is attached to the uniform is done so through interaction, and the interactions can be shaped by the uniforms. For example, If uniforms reduce distractions in the classroom, then the uniform is shaping the interactions between teachers and students. These interactions may have been different if classroom distractions affected the relationships between students and teachers. In another example showing the relationship between the uniform and its attached meaning, some may feel that the uniform will help students achieve greater academic success. In this case, the uniform becomes a symbol of academic achievement and conveys a meaning of "sound academic performance." Possibly the uniform acts as a symbol to generate specific responses from others. For example, to some the uniform may be a symbol of school pride. Therefore, wearing a uniform may convey meaning to some that the individual wearing the uniform has school pride. Consider one of the most prevalent, early court cases that has impacted the issue of school uniforms in this country: the 1969 case of *Tinker vs. Des*

Moines in which controversy arose over a male high-school student wearing a black arm band to school in protest of the Vietnam War. To the student, the armband was a symbol of his political beliefs. To the school administrators, the armband was a symbol of blatant rebellion and disrespect for school rules. The case went to the Supreme Court and the student's First Amendment rights to freedom of expression were upheld. In this situation, there was conflict over the meaning of a symbol. Clearly, according to symbolic interaction theory, individuals feel a need to attach meaning to symbols and appearances. In the case of school uniforms, controversy exists over what messages a uniform may or may not imply to others.

Dramaturgy

Dramaturgy refers to the ways in which individuals wish to present themselves to others (Goffman, 1959). Dramaturgy is closely related to symbolic interaction theory and involves the fostering and maintaining of impressions. In other words, individuals may have ideas about what they want others to think about them. Thus, individuals act or dress in a certain way in order to project that image, hoping that others will buy into it. In some situations, individuals may be so caught up in the reality that they have created for themselves that the true reality does not exist in their minds (Goffman, 1959). In contrast, individuals may not even be convinced of their own identities and therefore, may not have an understanding of the ways in which others perceive them.

Thus, dramaturgy involves the creation of roles by individuals. Through such roles, individuals make sense of themselves and others (Goffman, 1959).

Dramaturgy, along with the creation of roles and impressions, involves appearance. Appearance may be understood as “those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of a performer’s social status” (Goffman, 1959, p. 25). It is customary for individuals to exert some control over the ways they present themselves to others (Goffman, 1965). Items of clothing, including the ways they are arranged, are dramaturgical devices (Mechling, 1987). According to Joseph and Alex (1972), an individual is categorized on the basis of external characteristics such as dress. Thus, recognition of appearance plays a large role in social placement (Joseph & Alex, 1972). In addition, an individual’s appearance conveys messages about the temporary state of the individual. For example, the ways in which one dresses can indicate whether they are planning to attend a formal affair or planning to take part in an athletic activity.

Appearance is usually accompanied by manner. Manner is referred to as “those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation” (Goffman, 1959, p. 25). People often expect to find a consistency between appearance and manner.

The principles of dramaturgy can be related to the wearing of school uniforms. As stated previously, dramaturgy involves the creation and maintenance of impressions. Advocates for school uniforms, for example, may feel that the wearing of a uniform gives the public the impression that the

students in the uniforms are orderly and serious about their education. Moreover, advocates for school uniforms may feel that the uniform gives the students the impression that school is an orderly, serious place. In either example, it seems clear that the impression created by the uniform is more important than the actual physical uniform itself.

Another aspect of dramaturgy is the expectation that appearance and manner should coincide. For example, advocates for school uniforms may believe that the wearing of a uniform manifests a certain manner in the students. Perhaps students in uniforms will behave in more respectable manners than students not wearing uniforms. Perhaps it is unlikely that students in neatly-dressed uniforms will behave in a manner consistent with juvenile hoodlums. The use of a uniform is intended to create a relationship between appearance and manner. Joseph and Alex (1972) believe that anyone who recognizes the uniform to any extent has expectations of how the uniform-wearers will fulfill their positions. In other words, a uniform brings forth expectations for the person wearing the uniform, and therefore sets a guideline for how others should interact with the person wearing the uniform. Furthermore, the uniform influences the wearer himself (Joseph & Alex, 1972). Again, one can see a close relationship between the concepts of dramaturgy and social interaction theory in that both share the underlying belief that appearance both guides and shapes people's expectations about behaviors and the interpretation of behaviors. Advocates for school

uniforms most likely believe that the uniform will have an effect on the student and will influence the student's behavior.

Role Theory

Role theory is based upon the belief that there are specific relationships between material goods and social behavior (Solomon, 1983). This belief supports the idea that products are incorporated into interpersonal relationships. In other words, products and material goods can play a specific role in the social interaction of an individual. According to Solomon (1983), consumers use product symbolism to define social reality and ensure that certain behaviors appropriate for that reality will continue. Thus, in order to shape their self-images, consumers often rely on the social information connected with a product.

Solomon (1983) defined a role as a set of related meanings that direct an individual's behavior in a social setting. Therefore, people's behavior is made up largely of role-playing, and role behavior is facilitated through the presence of material symbols that are associated with a particular role (Solomon, 1983). For example, according to Solomon (1983) the possession and display of products such as clothing, cosmetics, jewelry, and so on are believed to be indicators of an individual's characteristics and are used to predict behavior. Such products and displays of products take on specific roles in the social interactive processes of individuals.

Stone (1963) discussed the issue of understanding one's role and the role of others through the act of role-taking. In role-taking individuals place themselves

in the perspective of others through adopting the attitudes and actions of others. Through this process, an individual derives meaning and understanding for the perspectives and attitudes of others and therefore understands the social interactive roles of those people. Such a concept is related to symbolic interaction theory that was discussed earlier. Stone (1963) further stated that clothing can provide an outlet through which individuals encounter and experiment with various roles. In addition, clothing and experimentation with clothing can be an important part of an individual's development of his/her social interactive role.

Role theory can be readily related to the issue of school uniforms. For example, advocates for school uniforms feel that the uniform has a specific purpose in terms of its role in the educational setting. The uniform, which also is a material good, could be purchased and used for the purpose of defining the role of a student. For example, the uniform may be a symbol to some that the role of a student wearing the uniform includes expectations as to how the student should be groomed or behave. Also, perhaps the uniform defines a student's role as being an orderly, presentable, well-mannered person. Clearly the uniform makes a statement to students that the freedom of having personal choice in appearance or display of material goods may not be compatible with the purposes of education. If clothing can define a person's role in society, then surely a uniform can define a student's role in the educational setting.

In this review of literature, advocates against uniforms argue that the uniform may hinder adolescent experimentation with clothing and bodily adornment, which is not only an important part of adolescence but also an infringement on First Amendment rights (Holloman, et. al., 1996). Clearly, some believe that the freedom to choose one's own attire is an important part of role development. This issue is consistent with Stone's (1963) discussion concerning role-taking. Since clothing and display of clothing can be a tool through which role-taking is facilitated, it is understandable that individuals use clothing and their perceptions of clothing to make sense of other people. For example, people might avoid someone dressed in tattered, unclean attire because they consider that person to be dirty or even unsafe. In a situation where students wear school uniforms, there may be less role-taking or different kinds of role-taking related to clothing since all the students wear the same attire. Perhaps it is this idea that uniform advocates support. In other words, if the appearance of all students is the same, then perhaps there will be less need for students to be concerned with roles and identity for themselves and others, which may lead to a greater focus on the academic part of the school experience.

Uniformity and Conformity

The term uniformity refers to the process through which an individual is identified based on a certain type of appearance or behavior (Bickman, 1974). The term conformity refers to the change in an individual's behavior or attitude toward something advocated by a group as a result of either real or imagined

pressure from that group (Davis & Miller, 1983). The main underlying assumption is that a person's judgment is subject to social influence (Davis & Miller, 1983).

In the case of conformity, both informational and normative social influence processes affect a person's judgment in terms of clothing (Davis & Miller, 1983). Therefore, individuals may turn to others for information about dress and attire that is socially correct. Subsequently, individuals then conform to such standards based on the dress and behavior of the norm in hopes of being accepted into the group.

In the case of uniformity, individuals become subject to a pre-determined standard of appearance and must conform to that standard in order to be identified with a certain group (Bickman, 1974). Often that standard is one in which a uniform is required. According to Bickman (1974), the uniform has been used as a symbol of power throughout history. The appearance of a uniform can affect one's attitude, behavior, honesty, and perception of status (Bickman, 1974). The uniform can be a strong agent for social power.

In the case of school uniforms, uniformity and conformity are inevitable. It seems clear that this uniformity and conformity are what cause controversy in terms of students' First Amendment rights. Some students and parents feel that students have a right to express themselves in any way they choose. To some it may seem restrictive to require an individual to look the same as everyone else. Ironically, it seems apparent that this issue of uniformity and conformity is what

motivates some to advocate for school uniforms. Perhaps some believe that if all students look alike, then they will act alike. Subsequently, if all students act alike, there will be less reason for disturbances to arise resulting from individual differences among dress and appearance.

The idea of uniformity and conformity is supported by Bickman's (1974) findings that a uniform can affect one's attitude, behavior, honesty, and perception of status. Advocates for uniforms surely support such notions. Wouldn't it be desirable for students to have better attitudes and better behavior because of a uniform? On the other hand, some may feel that there are other measures that can be taken besides the implementation of uniforms that could achieve the same outcomes. Issues like these are what contribute to the ongoing debate over school uniforms.

Chapter Summary

The topic of school uniforms is becoming more widely discussed and debated among public schools and their communities (Gluckman, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Padgett, 1998). A growing body of research has shown evidence that school uniforms can improve school climate and student self-esteem, reduce violence and discipline problems, improve respect for teachers, and strengthen academic performance (Burke, 1991; Gluckman, 1996; Holloman et al., 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Kane, 1991; Padgett, 1998). Although such evidence supports the implementation of school uniform policies, controversy remains over whether or not uniforms are in conflict with the First Amendment rights of students and

their parents (Paliokas et al., 1996; Kuhn, 1996). Furthermore, some researchers believe that there is a lack of evidence showing a direct relationship between uniforms and academic achievement (Stevenson & Chunn, 1991). While some believe that uniforms are a solution to the many problems facing schools today, others believe that uniforms are risky and unnecessary (Holloman et al., 1996; Isaacson, 1998; Kane, 1991). It is clear that further research is needed on school uniforms and their impact on students and the learning environment.

Concerns about the nation's rising number of high school dropouts have led to the development of alternative schools (Gregory, 1998). Alternative schools are publicly or privately funded schools intended to provide students with a specific type of education outside of the regular school setting (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). A growing body of research shows that students labeled as failures and troublemakers can thrive in the smaller, more personal setting characteristic of the alternative school (Northwest Regional Educational Lab, 1998). Benefits of alternative schools include: reduction in dropout rates, redirection of disruptive and inattentive students from mainstream schools into more productive learning environments, and re-engagement with learning (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Challenges to alternative schools include: lack of stable funding, lack of qualified, charismatic leaders, inappropriate placement of students, and political and economic changes (Paglin & Fager, 1997). Alternative schools will most likely continue to grow within the United States as the need to educate at-risk youth remains.

The issue of school uniforms can be related to existing theories concerning the social and psychological aspects of dress and appearance. Many theories can be used to understand and explain how dress and appearance affect a person's identity and perceptions of self and others (Damhorst, 1991; Hunt & Miller, 1997; Kaiser, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). There is much discussion concerning how and why people stereotype and classify others based on dress and appearance. Through social interaction with others, people develop attitudes and expectations about themselves and others based upon physical, external qualities (Damhorst, 1991; Kaiser, 1997). Behavior related to such social interaction includes fostering and maintaining appearances, conformity, role-play, dramatic interpretation, and creating impressions (Davis & Miller, 1983; Goffman, 1959; Kaiser, 1997; Solomon, 1983). Understanding the social interaction of people related to dress and appearance is the foundation of the theoretical perspective and pertinent to understanding how school uniforms may affect the learning experience of students.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study was based upon the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry. The methods used for this study were believed to be both effective and appropriate for this type of design. This chapter is divided into seven sections: Research Approach and Rationale, Participants, Setting, Procedure for Data Collection, The Role of the Researcher, Validity and Reliability, and Data Analysis.

Research Approach and Rationale

This study was a qualitative study based upon the phenomenological approach. I chose the phenomenological approach because of my desire to understand, describe, and analyze the phenomenon of the school uniform experience. This study sought to gain understanding about the phenomenon of school uniforms within an alternative school setting, based upon teachers' perceptions of the school uniform experience. The focus of the phenomenological approach is to understand the essence of experiences about a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Since the setting for the study was small and unique, the qualitative approach was most appropriate. In addition, the data collection process for the study consisted of in-depth interviews with the

participants and periodical entries in my personal journal, which also are appropriate techniques for the qualitative approach.

Participants

The participants consisted of eight individuals who were teachers from the alternative school used as the setting for this study. Since the population of the school consisted of approximately 40 students per year, there were only five teachers on staff each year. Therefore, in order to increase the sample, former teachers of the school were asked to participate, and because the school was opened only one year prior to the beginning of this study, the experiences of the former teachers in this setting were very recent.

The sample included both male and female participants and participation was completely voluntarily. There was diversity in the backgrounds, degrees, and types of educational training among the participants. The participants were licensed to teach within the school district and had training and degrees in the following areas: secondary education, elementary education, science, mathematics, language arts, psychology, human and family ecology, special education, and severe and affective needs. Some of the participants had masters degrees in education, science, and severe and affective needs. Participants' years of experience in education ranged from three years to fifteen years.

Since there had been some change-over in staff since the school opened, some of the participants in this study taught at the school when it opened, and others had joined the staff after the first year. Most of the teachers had previously

taught in mainstream, public schools before coming to this alternative school. Also, for most of the participants, this was their first experience teaching in an expulsion school.

Setting

The setting for this study was a public, alternative school with approximately 40 students. The school was located in a town of approximately 100,000 people in the western region of the United States. The school opened in the winter of 1998 after the school district received funds from the state legislature. The student population varied on a regular basis due to the nature of the school. The students who attended the school were expelled from regular, mainstream, public schools for violence, possession of drugs, possession of firearms, truancy, severe behavior problems, disrespect for authority, and so on. The students at this school did not attend by choice. There is a lengthy section on the students' backgrounds in Chapter Four, which includes statements from the participants. Since the school was funded by the state, the law required that any student who was expelled from a regular school within the school district must attend this alternative school.

The students were taught a core curriculum of reading, writing, math, and science, and also received training in art and business. Each student had a case manager through social services and met with a counselor for group therapy on a weekly basis. There was a very low teacher-student ratio within the classrooms, and students were monitored closely by teachers, staff, and full-time security

personnel. The academic and behavioral programs within the school were very structured and allowed few opportunities for the students to misbehave and move off task, although these things did occur. If students were successful in the curriculum and therapy programs, they could be recommended to return to the regular, public school setting. Such a recommendation would be a collective effort made by teachers, school administrators, parents, case managers, and school therapists.

The decision to implement a mandatory uniform policy at the school was made by a group of administrators within the school district and included the principal from the alternative school. Initially, teachers did not have input into the decision to require uniforms, mainly because at the time of the decision not all of the teachers had been hired. The uniform consisted of dark pants and a plain white polo shirt. In cooler weather, the students were allowed to wear plain-colored gray or white sweatshirts over the polo shirts. There were certain restrictions on the pants regarding the size and amount of sag below the waist. The complete uniform policy is included in Appendix E and provides more information about the specific restrictions and guidelines pertaining to the uniform.

There were a few reasons why I chose not to interview the students for this study. These reasons are based upon research I have read, discussions with the teachers, and my own perceptions of the students I acquired throughout the time I spent with them in their school. First, similar studies conducted in schools with

uniforms have shown that although the research shows that uniforms have had a positive impact on the school in terms of school climate and academics, the students of such schools, when asked about their opinions, reported that they did not feel the uniforms helped their schools at all. I believe that this conflict occurs because students in general do not like school uniforms and therefore may not recognize the benefits of uniforms to themselves and their schools.

Second, the students at this alternative school were tough, hard-core kids. A high percentage of them were outspoken gang members and would much rather wear clothing symbolizing their gang affiliation as opposed to a uniform. In addition, these kids were used to putting on a very tough front in order to survive in their worlds and, although they may have felt safer within their school as a result of wearing the uniforms, it was unlikely that they would admit it. Third, the teachers at this school put a lot of time and effort into building trusting relationships with the students. These students were not used to having trustworthy relationships in their lives, and generally took a long time to open up to another adult. I felt that my periodical visits to the school were not adequate enough nor well suited towards building any sort of relationship with these kids. Although the students got used to my presence on the campus, I never spent one-on-one time with any of the students.

Finally, my true desire that guided this research was to understand teachers' perceptions about the school uniform experience. Having been a public school teacher myself, I felt that teachers' perceptions about school-related experiences

are sometimes more accurate than the perceptions of students, parents, and even administrators. In trying to understand the phenomenon of school uniforms in the alternative school setting, I felt that teachers would give me the most honest, insightful, and thorough information.

Procedure for Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants and through entries in my personal journal. I made periodical visits to the school over a period of approximately one year and six months. During my visits, I spoke with teachers, students, and administrators, and also spent time observing in the classrooms. My experiences from these visits, along with my experiences from the interview sessions, gave me the data for my personal journal. My time spent in the school did not simply consist of teacher interviews, which is why I have included my personal journal as data for this study.

Interviews with teachers who were teaching at the school during the study were conducted at the school in the teachers' classrooms, and took place both during teacher prep time and after school. Interviews with former teachers were conducted in both public settings and my home, wherever the participant felt most comfortable. Interview sessions lasted approximately two hours.

Participants were asked to describe their experiences with school uniforms in this particular setting. Also, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the effects of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior. A complete list of the questions used in the interviews is

included at the end of this chapter, and also in Appendix A. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. Each interview resulted in approximately ten to fifteen transcribed pages, double-spaced. The interview tapes were destroyed following transcription, and the transcribed notes were stored in a locked storage area until the study was completed.

Through journal writing, I recorded my perceptions and reactions to the school uniform experience within the school. I made entries in my journal during my visits to the school and during observations within the classrooms. I also made entries in my journal after my visits to the school and after teacher interview sessions, describing my thoughts and perceptions of my experiences from certain days spent at the school.

The Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to interact with the participants of the study in order to gain insight and understanding about the data I collected and the processes best suited for organizing, discussing, and interpreting the data. Although neutrality on the part of the researcher is difficult to achieve, my role was to try and remain neutral with the views and opinions expressed by the participants. I felt that neutrality was important for presenting the data in an appropriate and realistic manner, accurately depicting the information presented by the participants.

Validity and Reliability

Certain methods were used to establish validity and reliability for this study. Those methods included reflexivity, taped-recorded interview sessions, code/re-code strategies, and peer examination. These methods were derived from Miles and Huberman's (1994) text on qualitative data analysis and Creswell's (1998) text on qualitative inquiry and research design.

Throughout the study, reflexivity occurred as I kept a personal journal of my reactions and thoughts about the participants and setting regarding the research. Reflexivity helped me to remember thoughts and ideas that I would otherwise have forgotten or dismissed. In addition, the participants' data were collected through recorded interviews as opposed to researcher notes. This process insured that the data was accurate. As the data were being collected, code/re-code strategies were used to check the data and insure consistency. Code/re-code involves coding the same data twice to see if the results are similar. Also, peer examination was a key factor for validity and reliability. A fellow graduate student in my department reviewed the data and discussed data analysis with me several times throughout the study. In addition, my doctoral advisor and committee members also reviewed the data and discussed data analysis procedures with me throughout the study. Multiple sources of data were used to increase the validity of the study: participant interviews, and my personal journal entries.

Data Analysis

As is suitable for phenomenological studies, the data analysis for this study occurred through the discovery of statements and themes derived from information received from the participants in regard to school uniforms. The goal was to identify the data in its pure form, uncontaminated by extraneous influences. The data was organized into meaningful clusters such as school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior. This grouping of data eliminated redundant and irrelevant material. After grouping the data, I looked for the participants' views related to school uniforms. Participants' views became the basis for the statements and themes that were then compared to my findings as recorded in my personal journal.

The data were analyzed through deductive and inductive coding in which I looked at the data line by line and in segments for the purpose of attaching codes to the data. Through deductive coding, the data were analyzed for statements and themes relating to the overall topics reviewed in the literature including school climate, academic achievement and student behavior. Through inductive coding, the data were analyzed for any new and emerging statements and themes.

Through structural synthesis (Patton, 1990), I looked at the data to find structural patterns that crossed over all of the participants' statements. These patterns became the basis for the overall themes that are discussed in Chapter Four.

Once the data was organized, I wrote a summary of the findings to discuss both implications and outcomes of the study (Moustakas, 1994), and related the findings to research discussed in the literature review. In addition, there is a discussion about ways in which the findings could be used for future research.

Participant Interview Questions

Grand Tour Question:

1. Describe your experiences with school uniforms in this setting.

Other Questions:

1. Do you have any personal experience with wearing school uniforms and, if so, what effect does this have on your current perceptions of school uniforms?
2. How do you perceive school uniforms effecting school climate within your school? Explain.
3. How do you perceive school uniforms effecting the academic achievement of students within your school? Explain.
4. How do you perceive school uniforms effecting student behavior within your school? Explain.
5. Do you believe that your school would be any different if the uniforms were not required? Explain.
6. Do you think students would choose to wear the uniforms if the uniforms were not mandatory but rather optional? Explain.
7. Do you feel that the alternative school is an appropriate setting for school uniforms? Explain.

8. What impact if any do you feel the uniforms have on the community?

Explain.

9. After having taught in an alternative school with mandatory uniforms, has your perception of school uniforms changed in any way? Explain.

10. If given the opportunity, what recommendations would you make for other alternative schools considering a uniform policy?

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study was based upon the qualitative method of inquiry, using a phenomenological approach. I chose this approach because of my desire to understand and explain the phenomenon of the school uniform experience as described by teachers. The purpose of this study was to discover teachers' perceptions about the impact of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior in a public alternative school, and to discover themes related to teachers' experiences with school uniforms in this unique setting. The significance of this study was in providing data regarding the implementation of school uniform policies in public alternative schools to help teachers, students, and the educational community in their decision-making processes regarding the use of school uniforms.

The data for this chapter were gathered through interviews with eight participants, and deductive and inductive coding were used to analyze the data. Through deductive coding, the data were examined for statements and themes relating to the main topics reviewed in the literature such as school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior. The statements and themes related to these topics became the basis for answering and discussing the first three research questions for the study. Through inductive coding, the data were

analyzed for statements and themes not necessarily related to the aforementioned topics. The statements and themes found through inductive coding became the basis for the discussion of the fourth research question of the study. In general, participants were asked to describe their experiences with school uniforms at this particular school. Within that grand tour question, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions about the impact of uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior.

There were four main research questions that guided this study:

1. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting academic achievement?
3. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting student behavior?
4. What concepts and themes emerge through teachers' descriptions of their perceptions of the impact of school uniforms on the overall learning experience of their students?

Each of these four research questions are answered and discussed in this chapter as they relate to the main topics presented. I think it is important to point out that some of the answers and discussions regarding these questions are interrelated, and these relationships among the data are discussed as well.

Data for this study were also gathered through the use of a personal journal that I kept throughout the duration of the study. I began the journal during my

first visit to the school and continued it until the completion of my study, a time period lasting approximately one year and six months. The journal included my thoughts, reactions, questions and descriptions of experiences regarding my numerous visits to the school, interactions with students and teachers, and observations within the classrooms. I have introduced and discussed the data from my journal throughout this chapter as it related to the main topics presented.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: Demographics of the Study, School Climate, Academic Achievement, Student Behavior, Participant Recommendations, Overall Themes, and Chapter Summary.

Demographics of the Study

The setting for this study was a small, public, alternative school, located in a town of approximately 100,000 people in the western region of the United States. The town was middle- to upper-class, and the population was predominantly white. The school was funded through a grant from the state legislature, and opened its doors in 1998. The school included both male and female adolescents in grades seven through twelve, and there were approximately 40 students per year. There was an average of five teachers per year, teaching the core subjects of reading, writing, math, and science. The school also had an art program, and a business and economics program in which students interacted with local businesses as a part of the curriculum. The school had one principal and an office staff of approximately five persons. Also, there were case-workers and

counselors who would routinely visit the school to conduct therapy sessions and evaluations on the students. There were two full-time security people on site to handle serious behavioral problems and possible volatile and threatening situations. The school site consisted of a main building that housed the offices for the staff and administration and three out-building structures that housed the classrooms.

The teachers at the school included both males and females who had a wide variety of training and previous teaching experiences. Teacher backgrounds and training included degrees in secondary education and special education, and also included training in programs for severely- and emotionally-disturbed children. Since there had been some change-over in staff since the school opened, some of the participants in this study taught at the school when it opened, and others joined the staff after the first year. All of the teachers who participated in the study recognized the unique needs and struggles of the students whom they taught, and each teacher felt a burden to reach out to and educate at-risk youth. Most of the teachers had previously taught in mainstream, public schools before coming to this alternative school. Also, for most of the participants, this was their first experience teaching in an expulsion school.

The school operated on a "points system" in which each student had a point sheet on which they could acquire points, given by teachers, for positive behaviors. Positive behaviors included participating in class, showing common courtesy to others, displaying a positive attitude, and the completing of

assignments. In contrast, students could lose points on their point sheet for displaying negative behaviors. Negative behaviors included foul language, belligerence, failure to come to school in uniform, mistreatment of others, fighting, and so on. When students acquired a set number of points, they achieved the "transition level" which meant that they had shown significant improvements in both academics and behavior and would soon be allowed to return to their mainstream schools. Some students reached the transition level in a few months, and others never reached transition, remaining in the school until the end of grade twelve.

In order to understand the data from this study, it is important to understand the background and characteristics of the students. Since the school was an expulsion school, the climate was very different from a regular, public school, and the students and their backgrounds were unique. Students came to the school and left in relation to their expulsions from and return to the mainstream public schools within the district. The student population consisted mainly of males, but there were a few females who had attended the school. At the time of this study, however, there were only males in attendance. Some of the students came from homes with split families. Most of the students had difficulties dealing with relationships and authority. Many students had been involved with crimes, some serious. Teachers, administrators, case-workers and therapists were aware of students' backgrounds, and this awareness contributed to the focus on relationship-building among students, faculty, and other school

personnel. Some of the students came from environments of poverty and abuse, while others came from affluent, upper-class families. At the time of this study, most of the students were minorities, and there was racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among the students. During interviews, participants made several statements about the students' backgrounds and characteristics that ultimately contributed to the circumstances that brought the students to this school. The following statements by participants describe these backgrounds and characteristics.

[The students are] a pretty diverse bunch of kids . . . some are bona fide gang members and have been involved in some violent situations . . . some have very low self-esteem. Many [students] are unbonded and struggle with a lot of different issues . . . Some have experienced a lot of harassment being a minority.

It is a mixed bag racially . . . There are Caucasian kids and Hispanic kids. If you compare the proportion of Hispanics in this school to the proportion district-wide, it's way high . . . you know the fact that we have a large group of Hispanic kids here makes it pretty comfortable for them. They don't have to feel like they are a serious minority in this setting.

The students here don't fit into the other population. They cause a lot of havoc and that's why they were expelled. [The students] have behavioral disorders.

When you heard some of the abuse that they went through and their family backgrounds and the rejection and the abandonment . . . it was really sad.

Several kids come out of trailer parks; other kids come from the suburbs. They are artistic . . . very smart. Some are very gifted . . . very athletic. We had a couple of kids who were so amazingly smart and yet wouldn't show it.

Some [students] work very hard at looking absolutely perfect and [stylish] or else they don't care at all to the point of self-mutilation . . . sticking safety pins through their skin with no hygiene at all. Some of them are really filthy, smelly, no hygiene whatsoever. It is pretty extreme both ways.

Most of these kids are extremely intelligent . . . [but they] used their smarts for not the greatest of purposes. That's how they got into this setting, but they aren't here because they are dumb or anything like that. They are very savvy.

These kids are here because their parents can't control them. If this school doesn't stay around, these kids are going to be back on the streets, and I don't think anybody wants that.

There is some brilliance. I've had some of the sharpest kids that I've ever worked with in my teaching career.

The choices that they make go beyond who they are outside of the school, and they do amazing things together that really surprise us like working together in the teams. [The students] work through their relationships . . . [and] friendships are formed.

It was common knowledge that many of the students belonged to gangs, becoming involved with gangs at a young age and exposed to gang-related activity and behaviors through older siblings and relatives. There were competitive, rival gangs within the school.

Some of the kids are northside and southside gangs, and that's a pretty divisive thing to put in the same classroom.

Students' unique backgrounds not only impacted the students themselves but also the school, the teachers, and the curriculum. The school setting was very structured and the students were highly monitored. Students were given few opportunities to find time to get into trouble. In addition, the teachers at this expulsion school knew that they were dealing with a special type of student with

special needs. Therefore, the teachers' approaches to learning and discipline were different here than they would have been if these teachers taught in a regular, public school. It is for this reason that the students' backgrounds played a role in understanding the phenomenon of the school uniform experience in this school.

In looking back through my personal journal, I can recall feeling a little bit nervous and intimidated around these students during my first few visits to the school. I was aware that this was an expulsion school and that some of these kids had committed some serious crimes. My nervousness eased as I spent more time at the school, and I really tried to look beyond the hard-core images these kids were trying to portray. I felt as though many of these students were bright and had potential for successful futures. Through my observations and conversations with students and staff members, I was able to confirm many of the aforementioned statements made by teachers regarding these students and their backgrounds.

School Climate

The first research question of this study was: How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting school climate? According to the data, teachers felt that school uniforms impacted school climate in several areas. There also was disagreement among the participants as to whether such an impact was positive or negative. In this section of the data analysis, teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of school uniforms on school climate are presented and discussed.

There were several sub-topics that emerged from the data relating to the main topic of school climate. These sub-topics included the following: gangs and gang-related activity, student attitude, school safety, competition and socioeconomic status, and individuality.

Gangs and Gang-Related Activity

In each interview, teachers discussed the effects of uniforms on gangs and gang-related activity within the school. While some of the teachers felt that the uniforms helped to diffuse the gang element, others felt that the uniforms did not and could not prevent gang-related behaviors and problems. Clearly there was disagreement among participants concerning this issue. Since most of the students in the school belonged to gangs, the gang issue was something the teachers had to deal with on a daily basis. To many of the students, gang affiliation was a key part of their identities.

Teachers who believed that the uniforms helped to diffuse the gang element said that students seemed to behave differently, appear less threatened, and avoid gang-related behaviors when they were in uniform as opposed to when they were in their regular street clothes. In general, the only times teachers observed students in their regular street clothes were during occasional field trips when the students were allowed to wear their regular clothing, or at the end of the day when the teachers would observe students walking home from school or hanging-out near the school grounds. As students would leave the campus at

the end of the day, teachers oftentimes would see them taking off their shirts and changing “back to their gang outfits.”

Some of the statements reflected the belief that the uniforms helped to diffuse the gang element within the school.

Sometimes I think they didn't feel like they had to be quite as bad-ass as they did when they had their regular clothing on.

I think that the kids all know which gangs kids are in, but not being able to promote it helps a lot.

When the kids were in uniforms, they behaved differently than they would if they were in their gang clothing . . . [The uniform] took away immediate hostility, just the visual perception of it.

After going through the gang training and all that kind of stuff, I was actually really glad that we were going to enforce [uniforms] because we do have a lot of students who are known gang members. I think if we didn't have the uniform, there wouldn't be a way that we could stop the gang influence.

We have rival gangs on this campus, and we don't want them touting that. The uniform helps to keep [gang tensions] completely out of the picture.

Letting [the students] wear their gang stuff would make it a more unsafe environment for them.

The gang problems are one of the big reasons why we enforce uniforms . . . [The uniform] helps to avoid gang relations at school.

The situations we do have with gang members are pretty volatile, I think. We had one student who was involved in a bombing. When he had his uniform on, he almost seemed to become more clean-cut.

[Uniforms] could have an impact on students. There are certainly gang-related activities going on.

We know that there [are] a lot of other issues surrounding us. The uniform is just one little piece of the puzzle when we're trying to reduce gang activity.

Some of the participants felt that the uniforms were successful in prohibiting students from wearing certain gang-related colors that could have been threatening to other students.

We took away their weapons of violence, too, by limiting what they could wear and limiting what they could intimidate other people with by eliminating gang stuff.

There are some students who are oblivious to [gang activity] going on within the school, and I think that is partially because we don't allow them to wear their gang colors.

If [the students] are not flaunting their gang colors . . . that's going to decrease both the verbal confrontations and possible physical assaults.

I think [the uniform] diffuses gang issues because [students] are not able to show their colors in their clothing.

I don't think that you really could keep the [gang] colors out of school if you didn't have the uniform.

Conversely, teachers also made statements reflecting their beliefs that the uniforms did not necessarily diffuse the gang element within the school. Some teachers expressed that the uniforms did not stop students from displaying gang behaviors, nor did they inhibit students from finding "secret ways" to show their gang affiliations "unbeknownst to the administrators and the teachers." Furthermore, the uniform did not hinder students from expressing their gang affiliation and gang signs verbally. Things as simple as a word or a hand-sign could spur a fight between members of rival gangs. Some students wore their

uniform pants one size too big, or wore webbed belts, both considered gang signs. Others wrote gang-related words or drew gang signs on their hands and arms, and some students had permanent, visible, gang-related tattoos. Haircut styles were another way students showed gang affiliation. Students were also very creative with finding ways to filter in their gang colors with the uniforms. For example, bandanas were one way to add gang colors to the uniform.

Although the students were not supposed to wear bandanas, some did and were then confronted about it and asked to remove them. Since shoes were not part of the uniform, students would wear their gang colors on their shoelaces. Once the staff became aware of this, certain shoelace colors were prohibited. It was very important for some of the students to express their gang affiliations, and they were determined not to let the uniforms control that expression. The following statements reflect the beliefs that the uniforms could not prohibit all forms of gang-related expressions.

[Students will] try to sneak in wearing a certain color of shoelaces to represent their gangs.

Students are real clear on who they are, and they aren't going to let go of that. They have a lot of pride and are real vocal about it.

Belts are a big accessory . . . the really long, webbed belts are gang-related. [Students] will wear gang-related insignias on their belt buckles . . . or will wear a single letter to represent their gangs. The letter S is associated with the south side gang. They wear the number 13 on their belt buckles, definitely gang-related . . . [and] their tattoos are strongly gang-related.

[The students] wear gang-related tattoos on their hands . . . that can be extremely offensive. We make them black out [tattoos] with a permanent marker.

Regardless of the uniform, [students] do know who is in which gang.

If [the students] were associated with another student through a gang or family, oftentimes the kid, the more dominant one, would have a couple of followers going with him right away . . . He would rise to the top and then the other kids would follow.

Although there was disagreement among the participants as to how successful the uniforms were in preventing gang-related expression and behavior, most of the participants agreed that the uniforms did, to some extent, help control gang-related expression through the use of clothing.

I recorded in my journal that I wasn't really aware of the divisions of gangs among the students within the school. I did not witness any gang-related fights or threats during my visits that I was aware of. Furthermore, I did not notice any shoelace colors other than black and white. I also never witnessed any students being kicked out of class, sent home, or reprimanded by an authority concerning any inappropriate clothing. According to the participants, students have been reprimanded for wearing inappropriate clothing. I did, however, notice tattoos on some of the students' hands and arms. These tattoos, according to some of the participants, were gang-related. Since I am not familiar with the hand-signs that gang members flash to one another, I was not aware of any "throwing of signs" by students.

Student Attitude

There was a definite division among the participants in terms of their perceptions about the effects of the uniforms on students' attitudes. While some

of the teachers felt that the uniforms improved students' attitudes, others disagreed. It was interesting to see how the participants were so divided on this issue and even more interesting to hear the reasons for their beliefs.

Almost all of the participants agreed that the students would often express their dislike of the school uniforms. Many of the teachers remarked that they were glad the school implemented the uniform policy prior to its opening so that the students would have to accept the fact that the policy was in place before they came to the school. Teachers felt that if the school had not opened with the uniform policy already in place, it would have been much harder to implement such a policy with these students after school had already started. The general feeling of the teachers was that the students' initial complaints about the uniforms during their first few weeks at school would dwindle over time as the students came to accept the uniforms as part of their environment and daily routine. The following statements reflect this general feeling among teachers.

I think overall [the uniform policy] was a really good decision on the part of the administration in the setting up of the program. At first it was such a big issue but soon it faded into the background.

Initially, the students weren't all that enthralled with the uniforms. They did not like what they had to wear on a daily basis.

[The uniform policy] brought a lot of frustration immediately into the kids . . . a lot of division, probably anger. Initially, [the students] were doing everything they could to use the uniforms as one more reason to rebel.

The kids were pretty belligerent against the uniforms. Their attitude at first was really adamant against it . . . you know they couldn't possible say, "Oh this is actually a little bit comfortable," but you could kind of sense that deep down for some of them it was.

Some of the statements reflected teachers' beliefs that the mandatory uniform policy contributed to negative attitudes among students. Some teachers perceived that the uniforms gave students more reasons to complain about the school and resist education. This resistance was noted by some as reducing a sense of school pride. In addition, some participants felt that the students viewed the uniforms as a punishment and did not understand how the uniforms were supposed to help them be successful in their new environment. The following statements reflect teachers' beliefs that the uniforms had a negative effect on students' attitudes.

I don't think that the kids have a lot of pride going to school here. It is a punishment and the atmosphere feels punitive. They think [the uniform policy] is a really stupid rule. [The uniforms] make kids uncomfortable because they don't normally dress that way.

I'm pretty sure that the kids see [the uniforms] as punishment. To them it's just another hardship to endure because they screwed up in a free system.

The students see [the uniforms] as a punishment. They were already expelled from school, so in my opinion that's punishment enough.

The kids say [the uniform] sucks, that all uniforms suck. They say they don't want to look like a preppie.

[The uniform] is not punishment, but it's obviously seen as punishment . . . but [wearing a uniform is] better than jail.

[The students'] comments, when they discuss what they don't like about the school, always include the uniforms. They really are unhappy with the uniforms and complain constantly.

Part of the students' academic responsibilities involved trips off-campus to local businesses. Some teachers said that the students sometimes felt embarrassed to be seen as a group in their uniforms in public and would ask if they could bring along a change of clothes for the outing. Some teachers said that the students felt like everyone in public was staring at them when they were all in uniform together. The students did not like to bring this kind of attention to themselves. The following statement reflects students' negative feelings about wearing the uniforms off-campus.

When we took students off-campus . . . of course they had to wear their uniforms, and this caused just incredible amounts of embarrassment. They felt like everyone was staring at them. They were humiliated . . . felt like the uniforms pointed them out as troublemakers. I felt that [the uniform] took away a little bit from the experience of the curriculum by not having [the students] feel professional when they were out there. It was just so rigid and strict.

In contrast, some statements reflected teachers' perceptions that the uniforms gave the students pride when they appeared in public. This pride, according to the participants, was due to the fact that the students identifiably belonged to a group, and also, deep down, many of the students knew they looked good and this made them feel better about themselves. Furthermore, teachers indicated that the students were often judged in public as "bad kids" due to their gang-like attire and that oftentimes people in public would avoid them or move in the opposite direction when they saw the students approaching them on the

sidewalks or streets. Because of this behavior by people in the public, some teachers felt like the uniforms gave the students a second chance to not be judged by their appearances. The following statements reflect teachers' perceptions that the uniforms had a positive impact on improving the public's impressions of the students and making the students feel good about themselves.

One of the rationales behind the uniforms was . . . the students going out into the community for regular community service projects. We didn't want them looking like your stereotypical "gang-bangers" or "saggers." They are very identifiable [in the uniform], but there's nothing that's negative about that. [The uniform] has given the public the impression that maybe there is some discipline here, and there are rules. I think it's good.

I know that every person tries not to judge people by what they are wearing, but I think that you can't really avoid that. I think that when the kids wear the uniforms in public, people may look at the kids for who they are as opposed to looking at them and assuming, "Well he's a gangster; he's bad; he's a little punk kid." It helps people in the community to give them a chance.

The same kid who is going into a store without that uniform on is . . . looking like someone who may have just ripped off that store. When they entered those same stores in their uniforms, [the students] straightened up, they talked better, they were not so conscious of the owners perceiving them as bad kids.

We went downtown one afternoon on a field trip, and [the students] were in their street clothes, sagging pants and big shirts, and I was amazed at the reaction they got from people. People would watch them very closely when we would go into a store; others would move out of the way when they saw [the students] approaching. This shows the kids that people are afraid of them, and that is exactly what they want.

[The students] know why they have to wear the uniform here. We talk about it, and I think it helps them also to realize that how you dress affects how people perceive you. Whether it should or not, it does.

The following statement reflects one teacher's perception that some of the students were proud of their bad reputations, and the uniforms gave them bragging rights that they were in an "expulsion school."

I think that the kids were actually kind of proud to be part of the school, even though some of them used it for a "bragging right" in which they could say, "We were expelled from school," which some of them thought was cool.

Teachers expressed that during the students' first few weeks at school, a recurring question from students was "Why don't the teachers have to wear the uniform?" The teachers usually responded by saying "I don't have to wear a uniform because I was not expelled from school." Others did not know how to respond, and some felt uncomfortable with the question. Eventually, the students would stop asking the teachers why they did not have to wear the uniform, and the uniform became an accepted routine for the students. The following statements reflect some of the situations involving students and teachers discussing the issue of wearing the uniforms.

Students would make a point of asking, "Well how come you don't have to wear [the uniform]?" You would have to explain the whole situation again. It was a way of separating faculty from students and wasn't really improving the climate of the school or the learning environment. I felt a little hypocritical on that, and it bothered me.

The kids would ask us why we didn't have to wear uniforms, and we would always say because we weren't the ones who got expelled.

Since sagging pants were considered a gang sign, students were expected to make sure their pants fit correctly and were not too big. Teachers were expected to monitor the sag on pants and some kept tape measures in their rooms in order

to measure the sag. This measuring of students' pants by some teachers was considered punitive and unnecessary by other teachers. One teacher referred to other staff members as "the pants police" and further indicated that the measuring of pants "frustrated teachers" and caused "confusion" among staff members as to who's responsibility it was to monitor the sag on pants. One participant stated that "the last thing I was concerned about with these students was what their pants looked like." The following statement reflects one teacher's perception about measuring the sag on students' pants.

Students were definitely pushing the boundaries of what they could get away with, and it ended up causing time taken away from teaching to measure the sag on their pants. [Some teachers] would take out tape measures in class. These students needed education and were there to get back into an academic mindset, and [measuring pants] was definitely not helping.

Some of the statements reflected beliefs that the uniforms helped to improve students' attitudes and that by wearing the uniform, the students learned to respect authority and follow rules whether they personally agreed with it or not. The following statements reflect such beliefs.

I think [the uniform] helps their attitudes. I don't think the students would admit that they like having [the uniform], but I think it's helping them.

I think it gets back to the basic principle that you need to follow some simple instructions if you are going to be successful in a lot of areas in life. [Students] know they have to wear a uniform even if they don't like it. [The students] kind of felt sorry for each other, for themselves together, so in a way, [the uniform] was a bonding thing. They had something in common too that they could complain about and it gave them a bit of cohesiveness among their peer groups. [The uniform] brought them

together and when they got to complaining about it, other issues usually came out too.

[The uniform] helps with the attitude because [students] begin to realize that they look good, and they feel better about themselves. I truly believe [the uniform] does help them.

Learning the basic steps of understanding a rule and abiding by a rule, despite your personal beliefs, is a valuable lesson. So I think [the uniform is] a tool to help students learn that lesson.

Teachers also expressed that although the attitudes of students in general could sometimes be related to the uniforms, there were other things going on in their lives that contributed to the shaping of their attitudes at school.

I never heard any students complain about the uniforms either to me, their peers, or the teachers. My first visit to the school took place approximately one year and seven months after the school opened, so by this time the students were probably used to the uniform policy and may have realized that their complaining did no good. On the other hand, there were new students arriving and other students leaving on occasion, so there may have been some complaining about the uniforms by incoming students that I was not aware of. According to some of the participants, the students complained about the uniforms on a regular basis.

School Safety

Some of the participants mentioned that the uniforms were helpful in promoting a safe environment within the school and said that they personally felt safer having the students wear uniforms. Due to the backgrounds of the

students and their gang affiliations, teachers believed that the uniforms kept out the gang element within the school, which subsequently made the school a safer place.

Although gang activity and school safety are interrelated, I have chosen to discuss the two topics separately since the participants had specific statements about the two issues that are not necessarily related. The safety of the school was not just dependent upon the containment of gang activity, but upon the containment of other hostile behaviors that may or may not be gang-related. Such behaviors that could be threats to school safety included bringing weapons to school and the possibility of assaults with weapons on teachers, staff members and peers. One participant commented that "it's not an unreasonable fear of a teacher that a student might bring a weapon to class." Furthermore, although many of the students were involved in gangs, some were not, and so school safety meant more than just the diffusion of the gang element.

Since it was common knowledge to teachers and staff members that students had been known to hide assault weapons in their baggy clothing, the uniforms removed the fear of the unknown. The following statements describe teachers' perceptions about the role of the uniforms in promoting school safety.

[The uniform] was a safety issue . . . It was a necessity for our school. We have to search [the students' clothing] every morning and the uniforms make that easier. Safety is a real valid issue for our school.

I think at our school the main reason why uniforms need to be here is because of the gang influences we have. We want our campus to be a safe campus, and I don't think it would be safe if we were allowing [students] to represent their gangs.

I feel safer with the uniforms. I was upset when I learned that a local policeman had been shot and killed because of a sawed-off shotgun that was hidden in a pair of baggies.

Without uniforms, our school would be a lot scarier. [Uniforms] help people feel safer here. The kids have been traumatized in lots of different ways whether on purpose or on accident, and we try to make it a safe school climate.

I feel like it's a safer environment with the uniform and a safe place for the students to be. I don't think that I would feel comfortable if I came in and the kids were all just wearing whatever [gang] colors they wanted.

I do feel safer if [the students] are in uniforms. Every morning [the students] are scanned for weapons . . . and when they come in, we check everything, their clothes, pockets, etc. The uniforms make that easier.

We have a lot of kids here who need to feel more safe, and I'm sure they couldn't put their finger on it, but [the uniform] makes it more safe.

Part of "no tolerance" means that we don't even allow them to mention the words of their gangs. I don't know if that helps, but I think it does make it a lot safer.

Other teachers said that the uniforms did not necessarily make them feel safer and that although the uniforms may have diffused the gang element to some degree, there may have been other ways to diffuse the gang element without implementing uniforms. Again, there was division among the participants concerning school uniforms and their effect on school safety.

I think there could probably be solutions to kids dressing more like a certain gang would. The school could set the standard for the kids just as easily if they didn't have uniform.

I think the learning environment, a good school climate, and a good hands-on curriculum can overcome any of [the safety concerns] by having the students so engaged in the learning that there's not time for any kind of ancillary stuff.

In general, the majority of teachers said the uniforms made them feel safer as well as made the students feel safer, even though many of the students would not admit to it. A few of the teachers believed that other methods, aside from uniforms, could be used to promote school safety.

I can recall that in some of my earlier journal entries I was a little uneasy about my presence in the school. Although I was never really worried about my safety, I was conscious of it all the time. As time went on, I did feel that the school was safe, and I believed that the teachers, administrators and security personnel did a thorough job in maintaining a safe climate.

Competition and Socioeconomic Status

All of the participants talked about the impact on the socioeconomic differences among students. In addition, participants described their perceptions about the effects of uniforms on competition with clothing and status among students. Participants had very different beliefs about these issues. Some felt that the uniforms helped to conceal and diffuse the effects of socioeconomic differences among the students, creating a more equalized and less intimidating atmosphere in which the students could learn. In addition, some believed that the uniforms helped to prevent tension and feelings of inadequacy among students due to pressure to compete with clothing. The following statements

describe the beliefs that the uniforms helped to diffuse the effects of socioeconomic differences among students.

The uniform helps with the socioeconomic differences, I think, in a positive way because everybody is wearing the same thing. Someone doesn't feel worse because they don't have the popular name-brand jeans. The uniform kind of does equalize things and there's not the competitiveness to look better than someone.

[The uniform] unified the kids together because they all had the same burden of wearing it. It really brought a good bond to them . . . gave them at least something in common that allowed them to look beyond and work together.

We do have a lot of kids from different socioeconomic groups, so I think [the uniform] helps in that they don't have to have a new, trendy outfit each day. I think the tension of socioeconomic differences is lessened by having them wear the uniforms.

The uniform brings a kind of comfort zone into the classroom, and people don't have to be ashamed of their poverty or have a feeling that they are not measuring up or not able to compete. These things become non-issues, and I think that's good. [The uniform] relieves some of them from having to hide from others just how destitute their situations might really be . . . and some of them are pretty destitute.

The competitiveness is gone, the hierarchy of who is [stylish] and who has more money. That kind of thing goes by the wayside. I think it is a relief for them not to have to keep up with their peers or feel competitive.

I think [the uniform] dissolves socioeconomic tensions. It brings everybody on the same level of the playing field.

We have more students on free and reduced lunch than not, so there's a lot of kids who are from a lower socioeconomic bracket. We have some students who I know just don't have any kind of wardrobe at all. I do think [the uniform] is a good equalizer for the students.

[The uniform] does cut down on the socioeconomic tensions.

[The uniform] helps [the students] feel like they don't have to impress other kids by what they wear because it's not really an option.

Some of the teachers' statements indicated that although there was socioeconomic diversity within the school, such diversity did not appear to cause problems among students.

After a while, I don't think they see each other as "he's poor and I'm rich." I don't see specific bias against kids for being poor or rich. I don't feel it, that there's this big battle going on over students based on [socioeconomic differences] in our school.

Some teachers felt that the uniforms did not conceal nor diffuse the effects of socioeconomic differences among students because the uniforms did not hide personal hygiene problems, and students did not handle the cleaning and maintaining of the uniforms in the same way. Also, since the uniform consisted of dark jeans and a plain white polo shirt, students were allowed to buy whatever brand of jeans and shirts they desired, as long as they met the criteria for the uniform. Some teachers felt that students revealed their socioeconomic status through buying name-brand clothing, while other students could not afford it. Some students had more pairs of clean pants and shirts than other students. And, since footwear was not part of the uniform, some students wore name-brand shoes while others wore torn and tattered shoes. The following statements reflect teachers' perceptions that the uniforms did not successfully conceal all aspects of the effects of socioeconomic differences among students.

Some kids will wear the same white shirt for five days and just look really down-trodden, and it will smell badly. And then another kid will iron his to perfection, and it will be pure white.

You can also tell a lot about the kids, even when they're wearing uniforms, by the sneakers they wear . . . shoes are a way to show what socioeconomic level they come from. Also, cheap jeans vs. name brand jeans reveal status. When you stand back and look at them all lined up, it may not make a difference, but once you get close enough or you're sitting behind someone in class, you're noticing what they are wearing.

Certain students seem to have less of an economic base to work from and will wear the same shirt or pants two or three days in a row. It causes ridicule from fellow students.

One kid in particular wore the same pair of pants almost every day. They were dirty, faded and getting ratty. It was just socioeconomic reality for him.

Some of the kids come to school with name-brand tennis shoes all the time. Some of the kids have cool watches, and they know where each other lives. They know if their peers live in a trailer park or a subdivision.

Unfortunately, socioeconomic reality shows up in whether or not your uniform is clean.

There is still economic disparity with the uniforms. Some students look better than others. They have nicer shirts, nicer jeans. Others have ratty shirts, ratty jeans. Some kids' shirts are dirty and smelly; they just look horrible. If students were allowed to wear what they wanted, there would still be disparity.

A lot of the kids still have hygiene problems, and even though they are in uniform, they can be really dirty . . . not kept . . . not clean . . . stained shirts and un-kempt hair. And I don't know if that's going to be avoided by providing uniforms.

The uniforms don't include shoes, so you can tell the class changes there. These kids are definitely aware that they are poor.

The topic of the effects of socioeconomic status among students was one about which the participants had very different opinions. Although some felt the uniforms helped to make the students look and feel equal to each other, others

felt that some aspects of the effects of socioeconomic status could not be diffused by uniforms.

During my visits to the school, I wrote in my journal about my observations of the students. As the participants indicated, I noticed, too, that there was diversity among the students related to socioeconomic status. Some of the students appeared to be neat and clean, wearing clean uniforms, while others appeared to be less clean and more sloppy, wearing uniforms that were dirty and faded. Although this difference in appearance wasn't extremely noticeable and would probably not seem so apparent at a first glance, it did become more apparent to me as I spent more time at the school. I think that this disparity is somewhat related to the severity of the poverty level of some of these students. Although some of the students are well off, some are extremely poor, and whether they were wearing uniforms or regular clothes, such poverty was difficult to hide. In general, the students all appeared to look alike due to their uniforms, but a closer and longer glance indicated that there were socioeconomic differences among the students that were not successfully concealed by the uniforms.

Individuality

Many of the participants discussed the impact of the uniform on the individuality of the students. Although some of the participants agreed that the uniform did not take away from individuality, others felt that it did.

Individuality was somewhat related to previous statements found under the

themes of gangs and socioeconomic status. I mentioned earlier that some of the participants felt that students could show gang affiliation through haircuts, tattoos, hand-signs and verbal remarks. Such things were also ways of expressing individuality. Furthermore, I mentioned that some of the participants expressed that the uniforms did not necessarily hide socioeconomic status. Shoes, name-brand clothing, and the condition of the clothing were also ways in which students could and did express individuality. In addition, under the topic of student backgrounds and characteristics, participants mentioned that some students were very artistic and intelligent and used these talents to express themselves. Also, participants spoke directly about the issue of student individuality in the midst of a mandatory uniform policy. The participants who believed the students were still able to express their individualities with uniforms addressed some of the ways students did so.

They still individualize [the uniform], and what they do with it is really interesting.

They still find some different type of pants and different type of shirts so they aren't quite as plain as it has to be. They get a little creative, but some of the students just don't have the resources to do that.

Even with the uniform, there are little ways to personalize it you know.

They still express themselves. The uniforms don't deter that, I don't feel. [The uniform] doesn't take away from the fact that [students] are unique. They are individuals and can still express themselves.

What's neat about the uniforms is that [students] can still be individual. They can wear their own belts . . . wear their hair how they want and so on.

If you walked into the classroom, you can get a pretty good idea about their individuality, even with the uniforms. They wear jewelry . . . have different hair. There are other ways to show individuality other than through clothing.

The students have piercings to show individuality. One kid had his eye lid pierced . . . some kids have their tongues pierced. They wear their hair how they want.

The uniform brings a kind of identity among the students that says, "We are all in this together."

Some of the statements reflected beliefs that the uniforms limited students' abilities to express individuality. Teachers expressed that some students seemed frustrated because they could not wear their own clothes and express their identities. In addition, some of the participants felt that the uniforms had a negative impact on students' feelings about themselves and their unique places in the social setting of the school.

It's such a bad thing for those kids because they can't express themselves through their clothing, and it's one more thing to shut them down. Wearing your own clothes is where you really show your uniqueness, and it's hard to do that with the uniform.

There's not a lot you can do with a uniform to make it not look like one, especially when you are walking with seven to eight other kids who are all wearing the same clothes. They still sought that individuality.

They can't wear the clothes they like to wear. They have to wear these [uniforms] every day. That is a problem, I think, for some students. They are very interested in image and how they look, and that's how they define themselves with their peers a lot of times. So [the uniform] is really taking away a lot of their individuality.

[The students] will try to come in to class with a small insignia on their shirt which has some kind of meaning to them or a have a sweatshirt with a little bit of writing on it. They have to put tape over those things.

[The students] like to wear their own clothes. They like to be identified through what they wear and it's the added persona of who they are, so they want to represent that.

[The students] were thrown into a situation where they lost their individuality to some extent. I saw a phenomenon...the uniforms made everyone look alike, and yet they were still totally different.

When [the students] accomplish enough points, they are able to wear their own clothes to school. That is an incentive for some students. They definitely have that as a goal.

One participant described a possible solution to the identity problem that uniforms can cause.

[Students] could get a little pride from being at school, getting a second chance if they had a little say in what the uniforms were. Maybe give them one day where they could wear what they want . . . give them some leeway.

Some of the participants mentioned that the students couldn't wait to rid themselves of the uniforms at the end of the school day.

[Students] can't wait to get out of school to rip off that shirt and get back to being who they are. Once they are able to escape the boundaries and bonds of those expectations based on clothing that they would normally wear, different things come out . . . they say different things . . . act differently towards each other.

At the end of the day, the kids can't wait to get their uniforms off. It is a huge show...they rip off their stuff and carry it in their hands. They have clothes on underneath.

To my surprise, some of the participants spoke about the individuality issue with the same sense of strong conviction they had about other issues such as gang activity and school safety. Although some might argue that stifling the individualities of students is minor compared to the threat of school safety, some

of the teachers felt that a student's ability to express individuality was very important to the success of the program and the success of an individual.

According to my observations of the students as reported in my journal, the students expressed individuality even though they had to wear uniforms. I noticed that the students wore both subtle and dramatic jewelry, colored and styled their hair in different ways, and expressed themselves through their actions and personalities. Although the students looked alike, they were very different, and I think such differences were noticeable.

Conclusion

Teachers had different perceptions as to how uniforms impacted school climate, and there were specific areas of school climate that teachers described as being impacted by uniforms. These areas were: gangs and gang-related activity, student attitude, student bonding, school safety, competition and socioeconomic status, and individuality.

Overall, there seems to have been a mixture of feelings among teachers about the effects of uniforms on school climate. Some of the teachers believed that school uniforms had a positive impact on issues like gang behavior, student attitude, school safety, and the effects of socioeconomic status, while other teachers believed the opposite. I found this to be very interesting, especially since teachers on both sides of the argument gave strong statements as to why they felt the way they did.

There were some statements made about the overall condition of the school climate that did not necessarily fit with a single topic. Teachers made general statements about uniforms regarding the overall positive, negative, and absence of effect on school climate. The following statements were made regarding teachers' perceptions about the overall positive effect of uniforms on school climate.

I think [the uniform] has a definite effect on school climate. It takes away some of the distractions. In the public schools, sometimes it's just impossible to get students to focus because there's all these different outfits running around that are really distracting. I mean if girls have to have clothes on, guys pay a little more attention to math. So with the uniform, that distraction element is gone.

[The uniform] does work for some students.

I am glad that we have enforced uniforms. I just feel like [clothing] is one less thing that we need to approach the students about, and now I can focus more on [students'] behaviors and their academics instead of talking more about what they are wearing.

I find the school climate is a lot nicer now. All the kids are on the same level; they all have the same uniform requirements. It's a nice climate. Sometimes the kids don't think so, but I think ultimately they abide by it.

I find myself tuning more into eye contact and really focusing on the things [students] say instead of focusing on the external statement that you can make with clothing.

The uniform gives even more freedom. [Clothing] is just one less thing to worry about.

[The uniform] certainly takes care of all those dress-code issues. It's much easier to deal with. As soon as you tell kids they can't wear "X," then they bring in "Y" and it means the same thing. Students will always find ways to skirt the system with a dress code.

I think [the uniform] really frees us up to try and move on to some really crucial issues of healing and drying out and oppositional defiant disorders . . . some therapeutic issues . . . and get to some academics.

I don't think that you can give complete credit to the uniform, but it definitely changes the fact that a shirt isn't offensive as soon as they walk through the door.

I don't think our school would be as effective without the uniform. I think the issues of economic disparity, gang affiliation, and the tendency to change one's behavior based on clothing are all less of a problem with the uniform.

The uniform is very minimal. We are a prep school in a sense that we're prepping [students] to get back to reality and believe that there is more to life than stealing cars, getting busted, and working the system. The uniform plays a role in curbing behavior, teaching new behavior, and preventing bad behavior.

Teachers also made statements regarding their perceptions about the overall negative effect the uniforms had on school climate.

[The atmosphere] does feel a little bit sterile. It lacks the colorfulness and the variance and the variety and the diversity.

Along with the economic situation where some students have to wear the same clothing over and over again, I think [the uniform] takes away from some of the learning in certain instances because it is such an issue for the kids.

I think that the uniforms are probably more of a concern for the staff than the kids. I don't think it makes much difference to the kids. It is just one more thing the adults are asking [the students] to do . . . and the students have enough to work on.

After gym, the uniforms have an unsanitary nature. There is no changing into shorts and T-shirts. We head back to the classroom and it just smells bad. I have a real problem with that. It isn't [the students'] faults.

Students are sent home if they come to school with inappropriate clothing, and to some of them this is a goal. They want to be sent home from school. They will violate the uniform policy on purpose.

There were also statements made about the perceived absence of affect the uniforms had on school climate.

I don't think that when [the students] are all in uniform it makes a difference as to how they relate to each other.

I tried to wear as plain clothes as possible . . . to relate to them. It's just clothing. I don't know that the uniforms really produce or eliminate tension that is between the students.

Although the majority of the participants felt that the uniforms had a positive overall effect on school climate, others felt that the uniforms had a negative effect on school climate, and some of the statements indicated that it didn't make much difference whether or not a uniform policy was in place.

Academic Achievement

The second research question of the study was: How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting academic achievement? Participants gave a variety of responses to this question and had very different views about this issue. Some of the participants felt that uniforms had a positive effect on academic achievement while others felt that uniforms had a negative effect. In addition, some of the participants felt that uniforms had no affect on academic achievement while others were unsure. When participants were asked to describe their perceptions about the impact of uniforms on academic achievement, many of them had to stop and think about what to say. I was surprised by this phenomenon.

However, I now understand that since the student population was an at-risk group, the main focus of teachers and staff regarding uniforms was directed at

safety and gang-related issues. I don't believe that academic achievement was the primary reason for implementing a uniform policy in this school. Therefore, teachers had simply not given the connection much thought. I believe that this was why some of the statements reflected uncertainty about this issue.

Almost all of the participants expressed beliefs about the impact of uniforms on academic achievement. Again, there were contrasting views among the teachers. Some teachers felt that the uniforms reduced distractions in the classroom and helped to promote a safer environment, which subsequently increased students' abilities to focus and learn. Other teachers perceived that the uniforms had no direct effect on academic achievement and expressed their beliefs that the clothing students wore was not related to how well they performed. In addition, some teachers indicated that they weren't really sure whether or not the uniforms had an effect on learning.

According to the literature, the issue of uniforms impacting academic achievement is a topic in need of further research. Interestingly, one participant who expressed the belief that the uniforms did not affect academics in this school, indicated that this might not be the case in every school with uniforms. This participant said, "A uniform that is part of a larger plan may enhance [students'] overall attitudes about being in school which could have an impact on learning." This response supports some of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two where some believe that the changes in school climate that occur as a result of a uniform policy often improve academic performance. In other words, if

students have better attitudes, feel safer, and experience less competition with clothing and status among their peers, they may pay more attention to academics and therefore perform better. A direct connection between uniforms and academic performance is very hard to prove, however, which is one reason why this area remains contestable among advocates on both sides of the issue. The following statements reflect teachers' beliefs that uniforms have a positive effect of on academic achievement.

I think [the uniform] helps the classroom climate for learning because there aren't as many distractions. Sometimes individual expression is destructive and divisive. [The students] do learn a lot and I am really proud of what they accomplish in spite of so many detrimental circumstances. Yes, the uniforms help [the students] to focus more on the academics.

In the classroom, [the uniform] definitely helps. It brings down distractions in the classroom as far as their clothing. That might help them focus a little bit more on class. They have more opportunity to focus and learn.

The uniforms free us up to have a pretty dynamic academic experience.

[The uniform] makes it so there aren't distractions. You don't have to look over your shoulder and see someone's offensive clothing.

Some of the teachers felt that the uniforms had either a very minimal impact or no impact whatsoever on academic achievement.

I don't think the uniform has an impact on academics. I don't see it here at all. I don't see the connection. I'm sure that the literature has made links somewhere between uniforms and academics, but I don't see it here.

State testing is so hard here, obviously, that I don't think [the uniform] affects achievement in that regard.

[The students] don't see [the uniform] as something that's going to help them do better on tests. Also, it's hard to get the students to buy into the fact that they are wearing a uniform for a particular, positive reason that's going to help. I'm not sure how [the uniform] could possibly affect academics.

Some of the teachers were unsure about the effects of school uniforms on academic achievement. They expressed that they hadn't thought about it before, weren't aware of it, or didn't expect it. I was glad to see that the participants spoke honestly about this issue and did not appear to be concerned about how this uncertainty would make them look. There were a number of statements made by participants that expressed this uncertainty.

I don't know that [the uniforms] do have an effect on learning. I don't know that because [the students] are wearing a shirt tucked in their pants that they do better. I know that psychology would tell you if you feel good about the way you look then you are going to do better. I don't know that I see [learning] as evidence, frankly, just because of the uniform.

When it comes to academics, there are so many other factors involved. I don't think that I could just say that, yeah, the uniforms are helping with the academics. I think the fact that [the uniform] makes it a safer place could influence the way they learn. I mean if they come to school and are worried about the opposing gangs or things like that, I don't think they would be learning as much.

I don't have any hard data on uniforms affecting academics . . . but it seems logical to me that when some of the other issues are removed, like feelings of inequality or the fear of being threatened by gangs or not having things as nice as the person sitting next to you. If those things are taken out of the picture, then the environment is going to feel safer, maybe a little more friendly, and I think in turn, that it's going to affect people's performance. Obviously people don't learn too well when they're threatened, embarrassed, or ashamed.

I'm not sure if [uniforms] really affect learning. Students struggle with some of the academic topics. It's not because of their aptitudes, it's because of their attention spans, it's because of their interest levels, maybe because of the teaching styles.

I actually don't know if the uniforms affect their grades. It would be a very ambiguous thing to measure.

Conclusion

It seemed as though the participants had some very different views about the impact of uniforms on academic achievement. Although some teachers felt that the uniforms helped to promote learning, others were unsure or felt that the uniforms could have hindered learning. In addition, some of the participants felt that the uniforms had no impact on learning whatsoever. Again, the participants gave very specific reasons for feeling the way they did on this issue.

I wrote in my journal that I noticed very few situations in which the students were off-task in the classroom. It appeared to me that most of the time the majority of the students was involved in the learning process. I saw students raise their hands and participate in discussions, and I watched them work quietly on individual assignments and silent reading. The issue of uniforms affecting academic achievement is difficult to observe, and although I witnessed students engaged in the learning process, I had no evidence in my journal as to whether or not the uniforms had an impact on student learning. Moreover, since I was not engaged in the actual teaching, I did not have access to any of the students' written work or test scores. My observations of students' achievement were limited to their verbal responses and participation in the classroom, which

did not provide enough evidence for me to make a connection between the uniforms and learning.

Student Behavior

The third research question of the study was: How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting student behavior? Again, participants gave a variety of responses to this question. Some of the teachers felt that the uniforms had a positive effect on student behavior while others felt that the uniforms had a negative effect on student behavior. In addition, some of the participants felt that the uniforms had no impact whatsoever on student behavior.

Some of the teachers talked about how the uniforms affected student behavior in the classroom and on the campus. Some teachers felt that the uniforms helped to control the behavior of students through reducing tensions that may have been escalated by inappropriate, offensive, or disruptive clothing. Some teachers felt that there would have been more fights and suspensions among students if the uniform policy were not in place. In contrast, other teachers believed that the uniforms did not have any significant effect on student behavior and felt that the students would not have behaved any differently in the school if they had worn their own clothing instead of uniforms. In addition, some teachers felt that the structured environment and well-planned, hands-on curriculum was responsible for good student behavior, not necessarily the uniforms.

Again, as was the case with the issue of academics, the theme of student behavior was closely related to school climate. Some of the literature implied

that if the school climate is safe and controlled, then not only will it affect academic performance but also student behavior. In other words, if students feel safe and respected and are therefore performing better, then they will most likely behave better. I think that these issues are hard to separate because they are so closely related, as the literature points out. Even so, I believe that student behavior is a valid issue from the data and many of the participants made specific comments about it.

I also think that this is a good place to reiterate the uniqueness of the backgrounds and characteristics of these students. The students were labeled “at-risk” and this expulsion school became their last chance for receiving any kind of public education. These students had behavior problems that were not easily remedied. Some of the behavior problems were severe and contributed to the expulsions of these students from mainstream, public schools. Because of students with severe behavior problems, some of the teachers felt that the uniforms did not affect student behavior one way or another. The teachers of these at-risk students had to deal with behavior issues on a regular basis, which is why many of them had much to say about uniforms affecting behavior. The following statements show support for the uniforms in improving student behavior.

The uniforms are a disciplinary issue. Because of [the students'] backgrounds, they need really strict boundaries. We see [uniforms] as preventative discipline and there aren't very many fights on campus. I do think [the uniforms] help to prevent fights.

Once the kids came to terms with the fact that they wore uniforms, they didn't see it as a battle they wanted to fight any longer. The belligerence didn't last too long. [The uniform] became commonplace and they were used to it . . . and it does diffuse a lot of situations. It really releases them from the pressures of competition through clothing. Uniforms level the playing field and release tensions.

I think there is a difference in the way they conduct themselves when they are in their uniforms. A lot of [students] tell me that in their previous schools they were in trouble all the time, never in class, or always in the principal's office. We are able to keep kids in class a lot more than that. I think their incident reports here are a lot less than at their previous schools.

I think [the uniform] has an effect on behavior. I know by not allowing them to represent their gang colors in school it definitely decreases agitation.

I think [the uniform] does help the discipline issue. It did bring with it some belligerence because they were so angry about having to wear the uniforms, but I think in a way they were angry anyhow, so now they had a scapegoat for their anger.

I'm sure that [the uniform] does play a role in lowering fights. I think it all goes back to the school being a safe place for kids, and I think it is safer. They feel better and so do I as the teacher.

The belligerence definitely mellowed over time and I think they've started to realize that what we are really trying to deal with is the inside person. The anger, fighting, and suspensions; I think the uniform helps those things.

According to some of the statements made by participants, it seemed that there may have been other reasons why student behavior was controlled within the school. The school was small and there were regular security personnel as well as parents present some of the time. Also, the curriculum was very structured and involved much hands-on learning. Perhaps the controlled environment and the curriculum were more responsible for student behavior

than the actual uniforms. The following statements reflect the possibility that perhaps the uniforms were not the solely responsible for controlling student behavior.

Our school has a lot more supervision than regular schools. We have parents here all the time. Disruptive behavior gets squelched pretty quickly. We have really good security people here.

We have very few behavioral issues in our classes, and I think part of that is due to the curriculum we are teaching. We had a class where we were doing hands-on curriculum with investing in which the students were actually making money, and to these students, making money is a definite motivator and definitely piques their interest. So we see very few behavioral issues.

In terms of fighting, [the students] can fight with themselves, and they can fight with us, and that's a sign of belligerence. But they know the rules and we tell them it's all black and white, and if they don't agree to it, they don't get to come here.

The uniform by itself might not have been responsible for improving things; it is the entire mentality of the school that includes the uniforms.

We have a different system and we do a lot more problem-solving for all kinds of things. We call [the students] on tons of more issues than they got called on at their previous schools.

[The teachers] are all very consistent and very structured. That is the best part of our program.

Our school is a little different in a lot of aspects. It's not the same as traditional, public education even though we are a public facility. We are more structured and more contained. We have smaller classes. These things, combined with a sense of unity, affect [the students] in a positive way.

I think that [teachers here] have a good sense of students and a good sense of dynamics in the classroom.

We teach really well. We do a lot of hands-on learning...very few lectures. We have such a small population that we can help them learn

how they like to learn. I definitely know that the kids excel here because the teachers who are here want to be here.

Although most of the students became accustomed to the uniforms, some did not change their behaviors as a result of the uniforms. Students still found ways to continue the behavior patterns they brought with them to the school. In addition, teachers commented that some of the students' behavior problems resulted from deeper emotional and psychological problems that perhaps could not be solved by a uniform.

There have been suspensions for pretty serious things like weapons, fighting, fires and drugs . . . a lot of drugs. We search their outfits but they can get right past that. They hide their drugs and their cigarettes in their crotches. We found a joint inside of a sock one day. They get pretty proficient at hiding stuff . . . so the uniform does no good as far as searching them.

We do have behavior problems. A teacher was assaulted with a pencil . . . students cursing at the teachers. I've seen a few student fights. One student was charged with a felony for assaulting another student.

[The students'] problems are a lot more emotional than behavioral. They have family issues . . . feelings . . . frustrations.

Even with the uniforms, [students] still have attitude problems and personality conflicts. They still want to fight and threaten each other.

Some of the statements reflected beliefs that the uniforms increased misbehavior among students by provoking belligerence and truancy.

I think the uniforms can have a negative effect on behavior if a student comes to school ready to go for a day and has to deal with having his pants measured or being sent home to change clothes. [The uniform] is another way to disengage the students and another way of taking time away from learning.

[Mandatory uniforms] coupled with the transition into such a structured, rigid environment probably added to belligerence originally, but I think that once the kids are acclimated to the environment, [the uniform] doesn't play a huge role in their belligerence.

A common response from the school is to send students home for different acts of misbehavior. Some students want to get kicked out and will wear certain clothing, other than the uniform, that they know will get them sent home. This causes students to miss school; they will lose points and get frustrated, so maybe that affects their attitudes and leads to further discipline issues. It is self-fulfilling . . . and when they're not in school, they're not learning.

Some of the statements reflected the beliefs that the uniforms had no significant impact on fighting and other behaviors that were characteristic of the students.

I don't think a uniform has an impact on the fights that go on here one way or another. So, I don't think that the uniforms play any more of a role in suspension than their behavior in the classroom towards another student or teacher.

I haven't seen a lot of fights. We've had a couple of fights that I know of on campus between two different gangs. [The students] were in their uniforms during the fighting, but they still know who is in which gangs, the uniforms don't hide that.

I don't think kids steal computers, set things on fire, break into places, steal cars, and do the things they do because of the clothes that they are wearing. It has nothing to do with the clothes they are wearing, and so the uniforms they wear here at school don't remove those things from them.

Conclusion

The participants had different views about if, and how uniforms affected student behavior within the school. While some teachers felt that the uniforms helped to promote good behavior, others felt there was no impact, and some felt

the uniforms promoted negative behavior. Again, the participants gave specific reasons why they felt the way they did concerning this issue.

I wrote about my observations of student behavior in my journal. On several occasions I witnessed students showing verbal hostility towards teachers and their peers. Most of these occurrences took place both before and after teachers took points away from students due to their behaviors. Negative behaviors that resulted in the reduction of points included yelling and complaining, insulting peers, continuing to not listen to instructions, and disrupting lessons. I frequently heard students use foul and inappropriate language. Although students lost points for using foul language, they used it anyway and, according to what the students told the teachers, many of them were accustomed to talking that way at home. In general, I noticed that the students were fairly well-behaved and used to the structured environment. I never witnessed any serious misbehavior problems either in the classrooms or on campus.

Participant Recommendations

During interviews, I asked participants whether or not they would recommend that other public alternative schools implement mandatory uniform policies. Based on their experiences with uniforms in the alternative educational setting, participants gave a variety of responses. Those who said that they would recommend that other public alternative schools implement mandatory uniform policies made the following statements.

I would encourage uniforms for other alternative schools . . . but expect whiplash, discouragement, disappointment at first. [The uniform] really alleviates so much more stress than it causes and removes opportunities for a lot of other things to come up. These kids aren't rational. If you don't enforce [uniforms], you are creating a lot more work for yourself by allowing possible explosive situations to arise.

If you're going to start a program like this one, you should enforce the uniforms right away. I think you should definitely have uniforms. [Uniforms] are effective with gang populations and with kids who are getting in trouble a lot.

I think that uniforms are good for this particular setting. It was a choice that those kids made to get here, so I think uniforms in this setting makes sense.

I would say yes, definitely, I think that uniforms are appropriate for this type of setting. These kids look good, and they feel good and that's what we tell them, and eventually they believe it.

Teachers who said they would not recommend that other public alternative schools implement mandatory uniform policies made the following statements.

I would say . . . it doesn't make a difference [whether or not a uniform policy is in place] with these kids because they have enough on their plates. The point of having alternative schools is to build kids up and give them an alternative environment that suits their needs. I don't believe a uniform is suiting their needs.

I would say focus on the learning, focus on the teaching, focus on the students . . . have policies and procedures in place that aren't quick fixes or the hot educational intervention of the day, which seems to be "uniforms" in certain circles. Don't use uniforms unless you have some serious data to back up the fact that [uniforms] are going to improve the school, improve academics, and help the kids get back to the mainstream schools.

I also asked the participants if they felt that uniforms were appropriate for all educational settings. Based on their experiences with uniforms, participants

gave a variety of responses. The following statement reflects the belief that it might be appropriate for all schools to enforce uniforms.

I love uniforms, and I think everyone should wear them. I don't care what school. Every school should have [uniforms]. I don't think that skirts and ties are a necessity, but I just think that public schools should all have a nice, clean uniform.

The following statements reflect the belief that there may be specific situations in which uniforms can be justified.

It really bothers me that some schools have no consistency when it comes to dress codes. Parents get upset. Kids get away with wearing inappropriate attire. Nothing gets done about it. So, in these cases, yes, let's go to uniforms. When there is no consistency, it is difficult to teach. I do think that uniforms can work in certain settings, depending on the student population and also depending on what the uniforms look like.

In inner-city situations where there are so many messages going on through clothing . . . hostile situations. I can see where [uniforms] would work in that kind of school system.

The following statements represent participants' feelings as to why it might not be a good idea for all schools to enforce uniforms.

I don't think anybody can ever say "always" or make a blanket statement about uniforms because [school] environments vary a lot. I don't think anybody can make a call for everybody because each school's climate has its own uniqueness.

I think there should be a lot more freedoms for a mainstream public high school or junior high because those kids haven't made decisions to lose that freedom. Coming up with your own identity at that age is important.

My experience with uniforms definitely hasn't made me a supporter of [uniforms]. [The uniforms] must be implemented properly and there must be a good rationale behind them.

I would not support having uniforms in a regular high school. I think [uniforms] are a tremendous infringement on individual freedom. How [kids] represent themselves is really important to them.

There are appropriate settings for uniforms . . . but not in every school. I'm thinking of more mainstream schools where you wear a uniform to signify unity . . . add confidence . . . create more credibility. To me, [the uniform] flies in the face of the American way. To speak frankly, I just find [uniforms] to be a serious limitation of someone's individuality.

I think that [uniforms] aren't really necessary because we need to prepare the kids for real life, and in real life, we're not always expected to wear uniforms. We are though, expected to dress appropriately for different jobs . . . so I think there should be guidelines on what the kids wear, but I don't know if I would go as far as to say that there should be uniforms in all schools.

I think that [deciding to implement uniforms] would have to be individually-based. You couldn't blanket it and think that it was going to fly and work well for every situation.

Participants also made some general, overall statements regarding their personal feelings about uniforms based upon their experiences. These statements expressed a variety of feelings and beliefs related to uniforms, and the participants spoke about such beliefs very introspectively. Some of the participants felt that they had no specific biases either against or in support of uniforms while others definitely expressed biases one way or the other. I believe that such feelings are closely related to not only the participants' personal life experiences with uniforms but also to their underlying belief systems about life in general. These belief systems are most likely a part of who the participants are as individuals and have probably been deeply rooted within them for most of

their lives. The following statements reflect these general feelings about uniforms.

I have done some reading about uniforms in inner-city schools and uniform policies being implemented. I've read about the whiplash, kickback from kids, kids hating [uniforms], having no freedom of expression . . . but I think [uniforms are] great. It's a way of leveling the playing field. It allows you to look past whatever a person's wearing.

I didn't really have any preconceived notions about uniforms prior to my teaching here. I am aware of the "at-risk" nature of this group of kids and I feel that [uniforms] are justified because this is a way to control the kids. This is an expulsion school, and this is the last chance for a lot of these kids.

My teaching philosophy is that students should be intrinsically motivated . . . and uniforms are an extrinsic motivation.

I think I can see both sides of the issue with uniforms. I think there are positive aspects and negative aspects. I don't think that I am too biased one way or the other.

Uniforms do a really good job of getting everyone to look the same, but it isn't the answer to bringing complete unity and vision to a group of people.

When it comes to uniforms, I think it's important to talk to students, give them a say in the process, and come up with a policy that keeps the environment safe and is fair to everybody . . . a policy that respects [students'] rights.

Truthfully, before I came here, I didn't give uniforms much thought, and I don't think my perceptions about uniforms have really changed now one way or another.

I think that it's kind of silly to think that if we dress everyone the same, then we're going to eliminate all the personal problems and issues. I don't know who would bring a uniform in and think it's going to eliminate all kinds of problems.

Personally, I think if you're going to restrict students' abilities to wear what they want, then maybe the school should be responsible for

providing the uniforms. Maybe even [the school should] provide cleaning for [the uniforms].

Kids need to learn that clothing, whether it's a uniform or not, isn't what's making them become a good person.

When I talk about uniforms, it's really hard for me not to identify with how I would feel if I had to wear [a uniform]. Part of that is because I love clothes too and I like variety. I would feel punished if I had to wear a uniform. I would just really hate it.

I just don't know what problems and issues that are so pressing would be somehow solved through a uniform. I think that there are a lot of ways to move around in an issue that seems like either you don't have uniforms or you do. People are always going to disagree.

Having to wear a uniform goes beyond the clothing. It means being able to understand that even though I don't agree with something, it may be required of me. [Uniforms] can teach a valuable lesson, especially in regard to the decisions that students are choosing to make in their lives.

I think [school uniforms] is a great issue to research. I think it needs to be resolved or figured out or at least talked about more in order to get a sense of what the best plan really is.

Conclusion

The participants seemed to be able to express themselves very clearly regarding their general beliefs about uniforms. I think it is important to point out again that some of the participants had previous educational experiences in which they wore uniforms themselves. Although the participants who wore uniforms expressed that such an experience did not necessarily have an effect on the way they viewed uniform policies now, I think it would be hard to separate that personal experience from their beliefs about their present experiences with uniforms. I think that most of our life experiences shape us into becoming the

people that we are today and more importantly, shape our belief systems. I do feel that in general there was consistency among the participants regarding their statements about school uniforms. This consistency is evident in their statements regarding both specific issues and general issues relating to school uniforms.

Overall Themes

The fourth and final research question of the study was: What concepts and themes emerge through teachers' descriptions of their perceptions of the impact of school uniforms on the overall learning experience of their students? In order to answer this research question, I looked back over the data and grouped and re-grouped ideas and concepts together. There were several questions that I asked myself, and also that my doctoral committee asked me, in terms of how I should look at the data and interpret it. I would like to spend a little time discussing some of the processes and questions that led me to develop the overall themes from the study.

An important question to consider was "what does the experience of uniforms include from the perspectives of the participants?" Several concepts emerged relating to this question. First, participants identified uniforms as playing a role in both social acceptance and belonging. The students had to figure out how to maintain their identities while wearing a uniform that made them look exactly like everyone else. As the data revealed, students still found ways to express their gang identities, even though they wore uniforms. Also, several participants mentioned that the uniforms brought cohesiveness among the students, since

they all shared the burden of wearing them. This concept became the basis for a major theme that is discussed later in this chapter. So, in terms of social acceptance, the uniform played a role in both defining the social roles of the students, and also creating a sense of belonging that allowed the students to interact as a cohesive group.

Second, participants identified the uniforms as both equalizers and safety inducers. The topic of peer competition and socioeconomic status was widely discussed by all participants and it was generally acknowledged that the uniforms helped to equalize the effects of the differences in socioeconomic status, although such differences were not completely eliminated. In terms of safety, some felt that the uniforms promoted safety through reducing tensions caused by the presence of gang-related apparel. These concepts are solely based on the actual physical appearance of the students. If the students all look the same, then perhaps the rich will not stand out from the poor. Likewise, if the students are all dressed alike, then the immediate visual perception of gang colors and clothing will not be a threat or intimidation to other students and teachers. In this sense, uniforms could also be seen as a fear reducer if such fear was associated with gangs and gang-activity. Uniforms as both equalizers and safety inducers was a significant discussion topic among many of the participants.

Third, participants identified uniforms as impacting student individuality. One way in which the uniforms affected individuality was through the impressions they created for both the students and teachers. You may recall the

section earlier in this chapter in which I discussed the impact of the uniforms on the experiences of the students when they appeared in public as a group. The students and teachers noticed that the public responded differently, based on whether or not the students were in uniform. Although the individual students were the same persons whether in uniform or not, the public both perceived and expected them to be different individuals based in their appearances. Also, some of the teachers felt that the students actually straightened-up their attitudes when in uniform, contrasted to the behaviors they would typically resume while in gang attire. It could be that perhaps the students themselves felt and acted differently based upon their attire. This concept is closely tied to the theories related to dress and appearance that are discussed more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Five.

Another concept related to individually that participants identified was limitations. Some participants felt that the uniforms restricted student expression of individuality. Others felt that the students were still able to express individuality while in uniform. The data revealed that the uniforms definitely impacted individuality, although the participants did not agree upon the extent to which the uniforms limited individuality.

Finally, the participants identified the uniforms as having both positive and negative influences on the students and the learning environment. There were numerous positive effects of the uniforms including reducing distractions, diffusing the effects of socioeconomic differences, bringing cohesiveness to the

students as a group, reducing gang problems, improving student attitudes, improving school safety, reducing peer competition, improving student behavior, and improving academic performance. Among the negative influences, the list included increasing belligerence, increasing negative attitudes, restricting individuality, having no impact in academics, causing embarrassment among the students both in school and in public, and creating a punitive, rigid environment. This concept of the pro's versus the con's and the disagreement among teachers as to the impact of uniforms on the learning environment is one of the major themes of the study discussed later in this chapter.

The concepts I have described here, and the processes and questions leading to them, have given me the foundation for the identification and discussion of the major themes of this study. Although there may have been seemingly endless ways to look at and evaluate data, I believe that the major themes I have identified encompass the most significant findings that were both consistent and reoccurring throughout the data. The four major themes regarding teachers' perceptions about the impact of school uniforms on the overall learning experience of students in the alternative school setting were Rigidity and Conformity, Learning Life Lessons, Student Bonding, and Contradictions Among Teachers.

Rigidity and Conformity

The first major theme was "Rigidity and Conformity." It was apparent to me that many of the participants' statements reflected beliefs that the atmosphere,

structure, and rules within the school seemed somewhat rigid and strict. The question was; "Was such rigidity and conformity good or bad for these students?" Some of the participants felt that a rigid climate was good while others felt that it was not.

Many of the participants made negative statements regarding the "rigidity" of issues relating to school climate as a result of the mandatory uniform policy. For example, one participant commented that the rules and atmosphere seemed "so rigid and strict" regarding the expectations placed on students involving both clothing and behavior. Another participant stated that the students didn't like the "boundaries and bonds" placed upon them regarding clothing. A few participants remarked that in their opinions, the school felt like a "prison" to some of the students and that wearing uniforms made the students feel like they were "in jail." The uniforms were regarded by some teachers as "a punishment" within an "atmosphere that felt punitive." In terms of "conformity," another participant commented that the climate felt "a little bit sterile" with regard to the students looking the same and wearing the same clothes. Also, conformity meant limitations on individuality, and some teachers felt that the uniforms "restricted students' freedom to express themselves through clothing." One teacher said that a mandatory uniform policy "flies in the face of the American way." These examples show teachers' beliefs that the uniforms caused the atmosphere and climate of the school to feel rigid and confined.

The theme of rigidity and conformity was an interesting phenomenon to me because some of the teachers did not feel as though the uniforms had such an effect on school climate. In contrast, some teachers felt that a strict, rigid environment was exactly what these students needed. For example, one teacher commented that “because of [the students’] backgrounds and characteristics, they need really strict boundaries.” Other teachers made statements regarding the need for “structure and consistency” within the school which involved “close monitoring of the students at all times” by teachers, staff, and “full-time security people.” Clearly, some of the participants felt that a rigid atmosphere was not only appropriate, but well-suited to these students since they “screwed up in a free system” and “lost their privileges by getting expelled.” There was a definite dichotomy regarding participants’ beliefs about the positive and negative effects of having a “rigid” educational climate.

Learning Life Lessons

The second major theme was “Learning Life Lessons.” Again, as with the theme of rigidity, there was disagreement involving the participants’ perceptions about which “life lessons” the students should be learning. In terms of appearance, some teachers made statements about the uniforms providing students with opportunities to learn that “clothes do not make people who they are” and that we need to “look beyond the outside and appropriate people for who they are and not what they have.” In contrast, some teachers said that the uniforms took away students’ privileges to choose their own styles of dress,

which didn't teach them anything about how to make appropriate choices concerning clothing. One teacher remarked that "in the real world, people don't pick out your clothes and when you get a job, everyone must learn to develop a healthy, professional standard of dress." Several teachers mentioned the field trips that students went on that were part of the business and economics class. One teacher stated that having the students wear uniforms in public showed them that citizens responded more positively to them as opposed to when they were wearing their "gang-banger clothing." This teacher and others felt that "right or wrong, it is a fact that appearance has a lot to do with how people respond to you" and that by wearing the uniforms in public, it "helps the community to give these kids a second chance." Other teachers, however, felt that not allowing the students to wear their own clothes on trips to local businesses taught the students that appearance counts more than character. Teachers disagreed as to whether or not it was a beneficial life lesson for students to choose their own clothing.

Another aspect of learning life lessons was evident in teachers' statements about student behavior. Some of the participants commented that the mandatory uniform policy taught students to "abide by certain rules, whether they personally agreed with them or not." One teacher commented that "you have to be able to follow simple rules if you are going to be successful in a lot of areas in life." Also, since most of these students had serious problems with respecting any kind of authority, it was believed that "having to wear a uniform"

taught the students “an important lesson in life” regarding the respect of rules and those in authority. In contrast, some teachers felt that the uniforms provoked bad attitudes among the students, therefore causing them to disrespect authority.

It was stated earlier that many of the students often asked the teachers why they didn’t have to wear the uniform along with the students. Most of the teachers replied that they didn’t have to wear the uniform because they hadn’t gotten expelled from school. It seemed as though some of the teachers did not really know how to respond to this question and some felt uncomfortable. One teacher commented that when the students would ask this question, the teachers would go through the whole explanation about the students making poor choices which caused them to lose their freedoms until they could prove themselves responsible again. Referring to this general answer, this teacher said; “I felt a little hypocritical about it, and that bothered me.” In contrast, some of the teachers felt that such an answer was very truthful and appropriate. Whichever way you look at it, a meaning comes across that implies the students made mistakes, and now they are paying for those mistakes. In other words, they are now learning a lesson about the consequences to their behaviors.

I think that in general, the teachers truly cared about the well-being of the students. Many teachers felt that this program was the last chance for these kids and an opportunity to turn their lives around for the better. Although there was disagreement among the teachers as to which “life lessons” were being taught to

the students through the uniform policy, it was agreed upon that these students had many life lessons to learn.

Student Bonding

The third major theme was "Student Bonding." This was one of the most interesting themes that emerged during my data analysis, and involved the concept of students bonding with each other as a result of wearing uniforms. I had not read about this phenomenon anywhere in the literature prior to conducting my study, nor did I expect it.

You may recall that one participant actually called the uniforms "a bonding thing." Another said the uniforms "really brought a good bond to [the students]." It was also said that the uniforms gave the students "something in common to complain about" and became a shared burden that brought "cohesiveness among their peer groups." I think it is important to point out that there were seemingly mixed feelings among the participants as to whether or not the cause of this bonding phenomenon was positive. For example, one participant said the uniform "unified the kids because they all had the same burden of wearing it." These notions of a "shared burden" and having "something in common to complain about" came up a few times in participant interviews, and lead one to believe that the students bonded over a negative issue. In contrast, it was said that such a shared experience "allowed [the students] to look beyond and work together." Another participant touched on this concept in commenting that the uniform brought "identity among the

students" that says, "We are all in this together." These examples lead one to believe that the uniforms were a positive force in the bonding phenomenon. It seems clear that whether the cause of the bonding was positive or negative, it did indeed occur, and the climate of the school was improved because of it.

I thought it was interesting that some of the participants, whether or not they supported school uniforms, acknowledged on their own that the students created a bond amongst themselves as a result of their shared experiences with uniforms. It seemed as though the students, who came from very different backgrounds and situations, were initially able to unite on their feelings about the uniforms. This unity gave them a common ground to start from and allowed them to later open up to each other on other issues they were struggling with in their lives. For example, you may recall the statement by a participant who said that "[the uniform] brought them together, and when they got to complaining about it, other issues usually came out too." One participant recalled a day when the students were complaining about the uniforms in class, and the attention was shifted from the uniforms to the students themselves. The teacher said, "Now what are you really angry about? Are you sure the issue is the shirt and pants or is it that someone is telling you to wear the shirt and pants? Has there been someone in your family or a foster home or an institution who has tried to control you and maybe that's what you are really angry about?" Once the students opened up about the uniforms, they opened up about all sorts of other issues.

Most of the participants, in some way or another, touched upon the phenomenon of students bonding as a result of the uniform. Although some disagreed as to whether or not the cause of the bonding was positive or negative, they all agreed that bonding took place and that eventually, the bonding over the uniform led to bonding in other areas.

Contradictions Among Teachers

The fourth and final major theme was “Contradictions Among Teachers.” I have touched upon this phenomenon several times throughout this study and have identified several areas in which participants disagreed concerning the impact of uniforms on both the students and the learning environment. It was even more interesting how some of the disagreements were backed up by logical reasoning. How could this be? Can a uniform be a positive influence and a negative influence at the same time? I believe that it can.

First, let’s recall from the data the areas of controversy. One of the discussion topics was gangs and gang-related activity. Some participants felt that the uniforms were successful in diffusing the effects of gang-related clothing and minimizing fear and intimidation caused by the presence of gang apparel. Others, however, felt that the uniforms were not successful in this area because the students still found ways to express their gang identities. Some of the ways in which they did so were through shoe laces, haircuts, tattoos, and verbal/hand signs.

I think it is important to clarify this issue further. I do believe that the uniforms did diffuse the gang apparel issue, but obviously a uniform is not going to cover-up hair, tattoos, or verbal/hand signs. And, if shoes are not a part of the uniform, then they can become a tool for expression as well. It is clear from the data that no one felt that the uniforms increased gang problems; rather, the uniforms simply did not eliminate all forms of gang expression. Following this line of thinking, it would be correct to say that the uniforms did help to control the issue of expressions of gang affiliations through clothing, but did not eliminate it. The main point I am trying to make here is that one must acknowledge the limitations of a uniform. A uniform is not meant to cover one's hair or prohibit one from speaking or flashing hand-signs. A uniform is intended to provide restrictions on one's clothing. Improper expressions resulting from hair styles, verbal outbursts, or hand-signs were never meant to be controlled by a uniform. I think that in deciding whether or not uniforms are going to help control gang problems, one must look at the benefits in whole of the uniforms and not just the limitations. I also think that a person who is against uniforms will naturally think about the limitations of a uniform, while a person who is supportive of uniforms will naturally think about the benefits. Such patterns in thinking could account for some of the discrepancy among participants concerning this topic and many others.

Student attitude was another discussion topic that participants disagreed about. Some felt that the uniforms improved student attitude and others felt that

they provoked belligerence. All participants agreed that the students initially had a negative response to the uniform, even though they eventually got used to it and were able to accept it. I think this initial belligerence was largely due to the fact that these students all came from mainstream schools where they were used to wearing their own clothes. Also, for most of these students, this was probably their first time to wear a uniform in their entire educational experience. I believe that any student, whether or not they were sent to an expulsion school, might have had problems adjusting to a uniform. I do not think that the belligerence described by the participants was characteristic of only "at-risk" youth. You may recall from the literature review that several studies on uniforms have given evidence that the most accepted and successful uniform policies were ones that were implemented in the elementary years. This way, students became accustomed to the uniforms at a young age and were not thrown into such a situation during the fragile, adolescent years.

Another topic of controversy was competition and socioeconomic status. The statements made by participants concerning this issue were largely related to the statements made regarding the gang issue. Some participants felt that the uniforms helped to diffuse the effects of the differences in socioeconomic status, while others felt that they did not. Statements in support of uniforms revealed that the uniforms "leveled the playing field" between the rich and the poor, reduced competition among students in terms of clothing, and equalized the environment. Those who disagreed said that the effects of socioeconomic

differences were still apparent through personal hygiene, level of cleanliness of the uniform, and condition of the uniform. Again, we see here an issue of benefits vs. limitations. The real question is, "which outweighs the other?" Should we keep the uniforms because they reduce "some" of the effects of differences in socioeconomic status, or do we get rid of them because they fail to reduce all? I think this question identifies one of the problems that participants struggled with in terms of describing their beliefs about the impact of uniforms on students and the learning experience. I don't think that when evaluating uniforms we can use an "all or nothing" mentality. I think it is important to evaluate both the benefits and limitations, and then decide which does the greater amount of good for the students and their educations.

Another important area of controversy for participants was the impact of uniforms on academic achievement. Some participants believed the uniforms improved academics while others saw no impact at all. I think that this discrepancy was largely due to the individual teaching styles and classroom management styles of the teachers. I think that some of the teachers may have felt distracted, intimidated, and even uneasy about teaching students who were wearing gang apparel. In these cases, it would seem logical that since the teacher felt more at ease with the students in uniforms, then he/she would naturally assume that the students would feel that way also. In contrast, I think that some of the teachers were amazingly talented and could get their students' attention no matter what distractions may have occurred through clothing expression. In

these cases, the wearing of a uniform in that particular classroom wouldn't really matter. Again, I think the important point to be made here is that this school, like any other school, was a collective community of individual teachers who probably had some different outlooks on education, and there would not have been one single approach to running the school that would suit everyone. I have never seen a school in which every teacher was completely supportive of every decision made regarding the education of its students. I think such a school would be rare.

The final significant area of disagreement among participants was the impact of uniforms on student behavior. Some participants felt that the uniforms were successful in reducing and eliminating behavior problems that would have otherwise arisen due to the presence of gang-related apparel. Some participants felt that the uniforms gave the students strict boundaries, which the students needed. Also, some felt that the students conducted themselves more appropriately while in uniform, since their "bad kid" images were left behind with their "bad kid" clothing. In contrast, other participants felt that the strict boundaries of the uniform increased belligerence and bad behavior, giving the students just one more thing to rebel against. Also, some participants indicated that students would sometimes skip school just to get out of wearing the uniform. Skipping school resulted in point reductions, detention, and sometimes suspension.

I pointed out earlier that much of the initial belligerence due to uniforms eventually stopped when the students got used to them. Again, one must consider which consequence outweighs the other. Is it better to deal with uniforms, initial belligerence, and periodical detentions and suspensions, or is it better to deal with no uniforms, gang apparel, and periodical disruptions and fights related to gang activity? This question is a difficult one to answer, and there may not be an easy solution. I think that this issue is closely related to the previous issues in terms of teachers' individual classroom management styles. I think that teachers who have a good handle on classroom management and student discipline may not necessarily see the benefits from uniforms in this area. On the other hand, I think that teachers who are less structured and more relaxed with discipline issues may have more difficulty maintaining peace in the classroom if students were allowed to wear their gang colors and clothing into the classroom. Again, this is an issue of individuality and I think the school must decide whether or not the uniforms will provide more positive experiences for the students or more negative ones.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the data collected through interviews with eight participants concerning their perceptions about their experiences with school uniforms in an alternative public school. Another aspect of data analysis involved a personal journal that I kept throughout the duration of the study, a period lasting approximately one year and six months. This journal included my

thoughts, questions, reactions, and descriptions of experiences regarding my interactions with teachers, students and staff, during my visits to the school.

Data from my journal was presented as it related to the main topics discussed.

The main topics of discussion in the interviews were related to the impact of school uniforms on the learning environment in the following areas: school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior. Sub-topics that emerged relating to the main topic of school climate included: gangs and gang-related activity, student attitude, school safety, competition and socioeconomic status, and individuality.

There was division among the participants on several issues regarding the effects of school uniforms on students and the learning environment, and participants gave specific reasons for their beliefs. While some of the participants felt that the uniforms affected school climate and student behavior, there was disagreement as to whether such effects were positive or negative. In addition, although some of the participants felt that uniforms had a positive effect on academic achievement, some were unsure, and others felt that there was no effect at all.

Table 1 displays a summary of the participants' perceptions regarding school uniforms. The numbers represent the participants. The topical areas represented are school climate, academics, and behavior. These areas were the basis for the deductive coding strategies and were also major topics of discussion in Chapter Four. There are five categories under each of the three topics. The first category,

“negative,” represents statements made by the participant reflecting the belief that uniforms had a negative impact on that area. The second category, **“positive,”** represents statements made by the participant reflecting the belief that uniforms had a positive impact on that area. The third category, **“mixed positive and negative,”** represents statements made by the participant reflecting the belief that uniforms had both positive and negative effects on that area. The fourth category, **“neutral,”** represents statements made by the participant reflecting the belief that uniforms had no significant impact on that area. The fifth and final category, **“unsure,”** represents statements made by the participant indicating uncertainty as to whether or not uniforms had an impact on that area.

In the area of school climate, one participant felt that uniforms had only a positive impact on school climate; one participant felt that uniforms had only a negative impact on school climate; five participants felt that uniforms had both positive and negative impacts on school climate; no participants felt that there was no impact at all; and one participant felt unsure.

In the area academic achievement, two participants felt that uniforms had a positive impact on some areas of academics but were unsure as to the impact in other areas; one participant felt that uniforms had only a positive impact on academics; no participants felt that uniforms had only a negative impact on academics; one participant felt that uniforms had both positive and negative impacts on academics; two participants felt there was no impact at all; and two participants felt unsure.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Perceptions

	School Climate					Academic Achievement					Student Behavior				
	Pos.	Neg.	Mixed	Neutral	Unsure	Pos.	Neg.	Mixed	Neutral	Unsure	Pos.	Neg.	Mixed	Neutral	Unsure
Participants															
# 1			X			X				X				X	
# 2			X			X				X				X	
# 3		X								X				X	
# 4			X							X				X	
# 5	X									X					X
# 6					X			X						X	
# 7			X							X					X
# 8			X			X					X				

In the area of student behavior, one participant felt that uniforms had only a positive impact on behavior; no participants felt that uniforms had only a negative impact on behavior; five participants felt that uniforms had both positive and negative impacts on behavior; two participants felt that there was no impact at all; and no participants felt unsure.

It is clear from the chart that there was a relatively even disbursement of statements regarding participants' perceptions about school uniforms and their impact on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior. In other words, one participant alone was not responsible for either all of the negative or positive statements regarding uniforms and their impact on the learning experience. Rather, most of the participants made statements reflecting mixed positive and negative perceptions about the impact of uniforms on school climate and behavior. Also, there was a relatively even disbursement of statements regarding the impact of uniforms on academic achievement in that some participants made statements reflecting negative perceptions, some made statements reflecting positive perceptions, and some were unsure about the impact of uniforms on academics.

Participants also gave their recommendations as to whether or not similar alternative schools should implement mandatory uniform policies. On this issue, some of the participants said they would recommend that alternative schools mandate uniform policies, while others said they would not.

Through both inductive and deductive data analysis, and through processes leading to the identification of themes, four major themes emerged: Rigidity and Conformity, Learning Life Lessons, Student Bonding, and Contradictions Among Teachers. The discussion topics and overall themes were presented and discussed based upon statements made by participants.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was based upon the qualitative method of inquiry, using the phenomenological approach. The purpose of this study was to discover teachers' perceptions about the impact of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior in a public alternative school, and to discover themes related to teachers' experiences with school uniforms in this unique setting. The significance of this study was in providing data regarding the implementation of school uniform policies in public alternative schools to help teachers, students, and the educational community in their decision-making processes regarding the use of school uniforms.

There were four main research questions that guided this study:

1. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting school climate?
2. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting academic achievement?
3. How do teachers perceive school uniforms impacting student behavior?
4. What concepts and themes emerge through teachers' descriptions of their perceptions of the impact of school uniforms on the overall learning experience of their students?

According to the data gathered through interviews with the eight participants, teachers did feel that school uniforms had an impact on school climate. There was, however, disagreement as to whether or not such an impact was positive or negative. Some teachers felt that the uniforms improved students' attitudes, reduced gang-related activity, encouraged student bonding, increased school safety, reduced competition with clothing, and diffused the effects of socioeconomic differences among students. Others however, felt that the uniforms contributed to negative attitudes among students, restricted individuality, and did little to diffuse socioeconomic differences among students and stop gang activity. In terms of academic achievement, some teachers felt that the uniforms had a positive impact on academics, while some were unsure, and others did not see any impact at all. In terms of student behavior, some of the participants felt that the uniforms helped in reducing bad behavior, although some felt that the uniforms contributed to bad behavior. There were several sub-topics that emerged relating to the topic of school climate. Those sub-topics were: gangs and gang-related activity, student attitude, student bonding, school safety, competition and socioeconomic status, and individuality. Overall themes that emerged included the following: Rigidity and Conformity, Learning Life Lessons, Student Bonding, and Contradictions Among Teachers.

As I came to the completion of this study, I felt that there were certain issues that should be discussed in this final chapter. First, I thought it was important to take a look back at the data presented in Chapter Four and discuss its

relationship to the review of literature in Chapter Two. Also, I wanted to know whether or not teachers' experiences with school uniforms in the alternative public school were similar to others' experiences with uniforms in the mainstream public schools. I wanted to know if similar issues and concerns were at stake and, if not, what other issues and concerns faced the alternative school. Second, I felt it was important to discuss the significance of this study and offer suggestions as to how this study could be used to aid the educational community, specifically for educators and administrators working in the alternative school setting. Third, I felt it was important to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this study and offer recommendations to others who may conduct research in this area.

This chapter is divided into the following sections: Discussion of the Literature, Significance of the Study, and Recommendations.

Discussion of the Literature

A look back through Chapter Two reveals that there is much controversy over the implementation of school uniform policies in public schools. Although much research has been conducted on uniforms in public mainstream schools, to my knowledge, no research has been conducted on uniforms in public alternative schools. And, since public alternative schools are rapidly growing in number across the nation, I think it is important to research and discuss the effects of school uniforms on students and their educational experiences in these unique

settings. I would like to discuss how the study findings related to the literature review.

The first issue from the review of literature is school climate. As stated in Chapter Four, there was a division among the participants as to whether or not the uniforms had a positive effect on school climate. Some of the participants said that the uniforms did affect the overall school climate in positive ways by reducing gang-related violence and activity, a conclusion supported by Burke (1991) and Gluckman (1996). Also, participants said the uniforms helped to improve student attitudes, supported by Padgett (1998) and Holloman and colleagues (1996), and created an atmosphere in which student competition decreased as a result of all students wearing the uniforms. In addition, other positive effects reported by participants included increased school safety, a finding supported by Hethorn (1994), Holloman and colleagues (1995), Burke (1991), Jones (1997), Murphy (1997), and Trump (1998), and reduced competition among students to wear name-brand or trendy clothing, a finding supported by Holloman and colleagues (1996), Gluckman (1996), Sher (1995) and O'Neal (1997). Also, participants reported that the uniforms helped to diffuse the socioeconomic differences among the students, a finding supported by Padgett (1988), Richards (1998) and Gregory (1996). Finally, some participants felt that the uniforms improved student behavior, a finding supported by Mickens (1994), Padgett (1998), Murray (1996), Paliokas and colleagues (1996), Martin (1998) and Hughes (1996).

At the other end of the school climate issue, there were participants who felt that the uniforms had no effect on school climate in terms of student behavior, supported by Murray (1996), or on gang-related violence and activity, a conclusion supported by Hethorn (1996). And there were a few participants who felt that the uniforms may have had negative effects on school climate, a finding supported by Soltner (1997) and Sher (1995). Some felt that the uniforms increased bad behavior by provoking agitation and belligerence among students and created an atmosphere that felt punitive, a finding supported by Forney and Forney (1997). On the issue of individuality, some of the participants felt that the uniforms restricted students' freedom of expression, a concern noted by Holloman and colleagues (1996) and Hethorn (1994). Moreover, some of the participants felt that the uniforms did not conceal all aspects of socioeconomic status, a conclusion supported by Isaacson (1998).

The second issue from the review of literature is academic achievement. As explained in Chapter Four, this issue was somewhat difficult for the participants to talk about because many of them were unsure about the effects of uniforms on academics. This uncertainty was expressed frequently in the literature as a reason behind the need for further research in this area (Isaacson, 1998). A few of the participants felt that the uniforms improved academic achievement through reducing distractions in the classroom due to offensive, inappropriate, or gang-related clothing, a finding supported by Holloman and colleagues (1998 and 1996) and Woods and Ogletree (1992). Because of this reduction in distractions,

participants felt that the students were able to focus more on learning, a finding noted by Padgett (1998), Woods and Ogletree (1992), Martin (1998), Gregory (1998) and Isaacson (1998).

Teachers who felt that the uniforms had no effect on academics said that clothing doesn't make kids smarter and that these students would have performed just the same if they didn't wear uniforms. This belief is supported by research conducted by Stevenson and Chunn (1991), Soltner (1997) and Sher (1995).

The third issue from the review of literature is legal issues. Although this issue is currently at the heart of the uniform debate among public schools, it wasn't an issue for this school. Since none of the teachers, staff members, students or their families had taken any legal action against the school regarding the mandated uniform policy, none of the participants spoke about this issue, having experienced no controversies with uniforms and the law. Participants did, however, talk about the First Amendment rights of students to freedom of expression through clothing, an issue discussed by several researchers including Kuhn (1996), Lennon and colleagues (1999) and Paliokas and colleagues (1996). A few of the participants felt that the uniforms interfered with student expression and one participant said that such interference "flies in the face of the American way."

The fourth and final issue from the review of literature is the application of theories related to dress and appearance. As presented in Chapter Four, some of

the participants made statements about the uniforms creating expectations for students based on behavior and appearance. In describing the field trips that students took to local businesses, a few participants commented about how the uniforms affected the perceptions of people in the community regarding the students. One teacher commented that when the students were in uniforms, they looked cleaner, neater, and therefore received more respect from the public as opposed to when they wore their sagging pants or "gang-banger" clothing. Also, one teacher noted that when the students did appear in public as a group in their "gang-banger" clothing, which wasn't often, members of the community went to special efforts to "avoid them" and "walk in the other direction." Also, one teacher recalled that when these students entered a local business in their regular clothes, store workers would watch them closely and even follow them around the store, thinking that they might steal something. Another teacher who witnessed these same events said that it was appalling to see how poorly these students were treated by the public when they wore their gangster-like clothing. These actions by the public confirmed students beliefs that members in the community were afraid of them, a fear that one teacher said "was just what they wanted" people to exhibit. Ironically, when the same students entered those same local businesses wearing their uniforms, the store workers treated them entirely differently and with more respect. Thus, the students' clothing set the tone for how others responded to them and set the standard for how the students wanted to be perceived by others.

This phenomenon is supported by the theory of social cognition, defined as how people make sense of themselves and others (Damhorst, 1991; Lennon & Davis, 1989). In this case, both the wearing of uniforms and the not wearing of uniforms caused community members to arrive at certain conclusions about the students based solely on appearance. The students were perceived to be trouble-makers, untrustworthy, and even dangerous when they wore their “gang-banger” clothing, and were perceived as clean-cut, respectable kids when they appeared in their uniforms. Therefore, higher expectations were placed upon the students when they wore their uniforms while lower expectations were placed upon them when they wore their gang clothing.

The theory of symbolic interaction is also related such behaviors. In symbolic interaction theory, people can use symbols to convey meaning about themselves and others (Kaiser, 1997; Charon, 1985). Therefore, people may form opinions about others and act on those opinions on the basis of the meanings that are held by appearances. In doing so, people use clues from appearances that are represented by symbols. Such symbols can involve clothing and can be used to describe and interpret beliefs and behaviors. For example, to some of the community members, oversized, sagging pants or other gang-like attire could be perceived as a symbol that indicates “stay away from me, I’m dangerous.” On the other hand, a clean, white, uniform could be perceived as a symbol that indicates “I’m a neat-looking, well-behaved student, it’s ok to approach me.” Thus, clothing can become symbols to others, whether it is intended to be or not.

Dramaturgy is another theory that can be related to this study, referring to the ways in which individuals wish to present themselves to others (Goffman, 1959; Joesph & Alex, 1972). This concept is a key factor among gang members. The gang members at this school were not allowed to wear their gang clothing, sport their gang colors, flash their gang signs, or speak about their gangs. Such things play a role in the way gang members define who they are and express their gang identities. As you may recall from Chapter Four, some of the participants said that although such representations and behaviors were prohibited, students still found ways to express their gang affiliations; and regardless of the school's restrictions, the students "still know who is in which gang." Dramaturgy also involves the creation of roles. Clearly, each member of a gang plays a certain role in the gang, and although the gang is unified as a group, some members have different roles than others. One participant commented that sometimes the more dominant member would be the leader and the others would follow. This behavior caused some problems within the school, even though according to participants, some of the gang-related activity was diffused through both the uniforms and the strict monitoring of the students.

Another theory of dress and appearance that is closely related to dramaturgy is role theory, which is based upon the belief that there are specific relationships between material goods and social behaviors (Soloman, 1983; Stone, 1963). You may recall in Chapter Four that a few of the participants talked about the students' desires to "rip off their uniforms" at the end of the day and "get back to

being who they were" by "changing back into their gang clothing." Also, one participant commented that by ridding themselves of the uniforms, the students "escaped the bonds and boundaries of the expectations placed upon them based on clothing." These statements indicated that apparently the uniforms made the students feel differently about themselves in terms of who they were and what they represented. Perhaps the students didn't feel like they were "bad kids" while they wore the uniforms, and instead, felt like they were supposed to behave differently. This idea is supported by one teacher who commented that "sometimes I think they didn't feel like they had to be quite as 'bad-ass' as they did when they had their regular clothing on." Clearly, some teachers perceived that the students behaved better when they wore uniforms as opposed to when they wore their regular clothes. This concept is seen in symbolic interaction theory in the sense that the uniform became a symbol of good behavior to both the students and the teachers. Some would argue that this concept is a motivating force behind the implementation of uniform policies. In other words, although the clothing itself may not be responsible for changing a person's behavior, the behavior changes as a result of teachers' and students' expectations of behaviors that are based on the clothing. This situation is a good example of the relationship between material goods, in this case a uniform, and social behavior.

According to the theory of uniformity and conformity, individuals are identified based on certain types of appearances or behaviors (Bickman, 1974;

Davis & Miller, 1983). Many of the participants talked about the effects on students of being identified as a member of an expulsion school. I mentioned earlier that this particular alternative school was the only expulsion school in the district and also the only school with uniforms. Therefore, when the students were seen in public as a group during their field trips and community service outings, most people knew that the students were from the district's expulsion school. This awareness embarrassed some of the students and gave others "bragging rights" about their notorious backgrounds. When referring to one of these regular outings, one teacher commented that "I think that the kids were actually kind of proud to be part of the school, even though some of them used it for a 'bragging right' in which they could say, 'We were expelled from school,' which some of them thought was cool." Another teacher had a different opinion about the situation saying that "when we took students off-campus . . . of course they had to wear their uniforms and this caused just incredible amounts of embarrassment. They felt like everyone was staring at them. They were humiliated . . . felt like the uniforms pointed them out as troublemakers." In both statements, it is clear that the uniforms not only had meaning standing alone but as a group as well. Seeing an entire group of students walk down the street or through a museum in matching uniforms has a much more dramatic effect than seeing just one student in a uniform. The students were aware of this "uniformity and conformity effect" and although some teachers felt that this situation embarrassed the students, others felt that it made the students feel

proud of themselves and their school, although some of this pride was based on their notoriety for negative reasons. In addition, the responses they received from community members were largely based on the appearance of the students as a group, whether or not they were in uniform.

I mentioned earlier that people would walk the other way and avoid the students when they appeared as a group in their gang clothing. In contrast, people behaved differently when they saw the group in their uniforms. In uniform, the students were easily identified as belonging to a certain school, and although some of the students may have felt that the uniforms pointed them out as “troublemakers,” the public may have had a completely different reaction. Apparently, the public perceived the students more as “trouble-makers” when they appeared as a group in their gang clothing. Although the students may have labeled themselves as troublemakers, the public was not aware of their backgrounds and characteristics simply through appearance.

In conclusion, it is clear that the five main theories of dress and appearance reviewed in Chapter Two have all been related to the findings of this study. I think it is important to note that the behavior and perceptions of the students at this alternative school, as described by their teachers, are largely consistent with existing theories regarding the social psychology of dress and appearance. I believe that this connection to a theoretical base helps to ensure the validity of the study. As was mentioned earlier, the five theories of dress and appearance

that were reviewed in this study are complimentary and not competitive, which was clear in how the theories were interrelated with the data.

Significance of the Study

As stated earlier, the significance of this study was in providing data regarding the implementation of school uniform policies in public alternative schools that would help teachers, students, and the educational community in making decisions regarding the use of school uniforms for their unique settings. People in the educational community who read this study need to understand that the data gathered was very specific to a certain setting. Therefore, as is the unique nature of qualitative research, the results from this study are not necessarily generalizable to all school settings. Even more important, since the setting used for this study was an alternative school, the results may not be generalizable to the mainstream school setting.

So then, how does one look at the findings of this study and benefit from them? I think there are two main issues to consider. The first issue for educators is to determine whether or not the findings of this study offer any new data compared to what currently exists in the literature on school uniforms. I mentioned in Chapter One that I was unable to locate any research on school uniforms conducted within the alternative school setting. This study may be one of very few studies that explored the use of uniforms in such a unique setting.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the theme of student bonding was not found anywhere in the literature prior to the completion of this study. I am not sure

why this is the case, but I can speculate on it. I believe that the issue of student bonding may be more prevalent among students labeled "at-risk" simply due to their unique backgrounds and lifestyles. I believe that these students have an above-average desire to bond to someone since their lifestyle choices have contributed to their expulsions from the mainstream schools in which they were "misfits." Also, according to teachers, most of these kids came from dysfunctional families in which normal, healthy family bonding is minimal or non-existent. Many of these kids feel unloved, unwanted, and unworthy. The idea of bonding to another adolescent with similar life experiences and similar feelings about themselves and others seems unavoidable. After all, these kids were put into this school because of a law mandating that they be educated. They are alike and share the same frustrations and inadequacies. They are no longer "misfits" and now have a chance to start over with a clean slate in an environment that was created just for them. I think that maybe they would have bonded anyway, whether or not they had to wear uniforms. I do not necessarily believe that students in mainstreams schools would not bond over uniforms, I just think that the "at-risk" student is desperate to bond with someone, and the unique setting of the alternative school lends itself easily to such an opportunity. Also, even though I believe that these kids would have bonded without the uniforms, I think that the shared experiences of wearing the uniforms may have brought them to that bonding point faster.

The second issue for educators to consider is to determine whether or not their school settings have similarities to the setting used in this study regarding student population, students' backgrounds, school size, class size, teacher-student ratio, and so on. Also, since the school used in this study was an expulsion school, the nature of how and why students are enrolled in an alternative school is important as well. Students did not attend this expulsion school by choice, which is not the case with all alternative schools. I think that if educators can find similarities between their schools and population, and the school and population from this study, then perhaps the data will be more helpful to them in making decisions regarding the use of school uniforms for their students.

I believe that since current research shows that the number of alternative schools across the nation are growing in number rapidly, knowledge about the use of school uniforms will be critical in aiding educators with the decision-making processes concerning the set-up, maintenance, and evaluation of such educational programs.

Recommendations

In this section, I would like to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this study, as well as discuss the implications for further research in the area of school uniforms. I would also like to present my personal recommendations regarding the use of school uniforms in the alternative school.

I believe that this study had certain strengths that contributed to both its reliability and validity. First, the study was well-grounded in the literature and had a strong theoretical base from which to interpret and discuss the findings. Second, the face-to-face interviews with the participants contributed to the genuineness and accuracy of the data, making it a personal, shared experience between myself and the participants. Also, the tape recordings of the interviews and transcriptions of the data helped to insure accuracy for the deductive and inductive coding strategies.

In addition, I spent a considerable length of the time visiting the school, observing in the classrooms, and getting to know the teachers, staff, and students. This time period of approximately one year and six months provided me with a good understanding of the school's purpose, setting, and academic program and also provided me with an opportunity to look at the data in a close and personal way.

Furthermore, I believe the journal that I kept throughout the duration of this study helped me to understand, describe, and interpret the data based upon my own personal thoughts and experiences. Throughout my data analysis, I was able to confirm statements made by participants as they were related to my own findings.

I think it is also important to discuss the weaknesses of this study in order to identify areas in which the study could have been improved. First, this study was confined to one setting and involved data collection from only eight

participants. Although such a situation is characteristic to a phenomenological study, some may find these qualities to be somewhat restrictive.

Second, as was discussed in the limitations of the study, the experiences of the participants relating to teaching in an alternative school with uniforms were relatively short prior to the start of this study. Since the school had only been open for approximately two years prior to the start of this study, the participants experiences within this setting were between one and two years in length. It is conceivable that the perceptions of the participants might have been different had they been teaching in this setting for a longer period of time.

Third, although data were gathered and interpreted through interviews with teachers and my personal journal, there were no other forms of data collected, such as school documents or archival records. Such information may have provided more in-depth information about the backgrounds of the students and the descriptions of the school and setting. But, since the school had opened just one year prior to the start of this study, there would not have been a large amount of data regarding school archives, and most of the information in the school records regarding student background would have been protected by law.

Finally, all of the coding involved only deductive and inductive methods, and there were no other methods used to explain and interpret the data.

In regards to implications for further research, there are a few recommendations that I would make to others who are interested in researching school uniforms in the alternative school setting. First, I would recommend that

the researcher spend a considerable amount of time, at least one year, in the setting used for the study. I believe that this time is important for the researcher to develop strong relationships with participants. Also, I think the data become much more personal and have more significance when the researcher knows the participants and the setting well. This relationship between the researcher and participants was also important for reducing miscommunications and errors in reporting and analyzing the data, resulting from a lack of closeness to both.

Second, I would recommend that the researcher have a strong theoretical base and a thorough review of literature in order to create a solid foundation upon which to build the study and interpret the findings.

Third, I would recommend face-to-face interviews as opposed to telephone interviews because I think it is helpful when the researcher can make eye contact with the participants, creating a more personable atmosphere and allowing the researcher and participant to build a relationship.

Fourth, I think it may be beneficial to look at different populations experiencing uniforms within the alternative school setting as well as different sources for the sample. Since the setting of this study was a school with adolescent males only, it may be beneficial to research uniforms in a setting including females. Also, interviewing students and parents instead of interviewing teachers only may expand the discussion.

Finally, I would recommend that the researcher remain open to the different ways in which the data can drive the study. It is important not to be confined by

personal beliefs and biases, and to be creative in how one looks at the data. I believe it is critical to report and interpret all data, regardless of whether or not the data conflicts with the mainstream literature, research questions, or the researcher's personal beliefs.

As is the nature of completing a dissertation, I am now considered an "expert" in the area of school uniforms in the alternative school, and this study would not seem complete without my personal recommendations regarding uniforms in this unique setting. As I stated in the "Researcher's Perspective" section of Chapter One, my thoughts and beliefs regarding school uniforms have shifted throughout this study. When I chose to research uniforms, I was interested in the topic but was not a strong advocate for uniforms. Then, having read the literature, I felt myself becoming more supportive of school uniforms. Once I started gathering and interpreting my data, I began to see the negative issues relating to uniforms and thus began to understand and evaluate the full effects of a uniform policy on the "at-risk" student.

I can now honestly say that I see both the good and the bad in uniforms and I don't believe that the two can be viewed independently. If an alternative school chooses to implement a uniform policy, its administrators and teachers must understand that the bad comes with the good, and such a discrepancy must be carefully weighed.

In general, here are my recommendations to alternative schools considering uniforms: First, administrators, teachers, and parents must have a clear

understanding of why they want uniforms. Is the issue safety? Is it school climate, academics, behavior management, or all of the above? Having a clear and sensible reason for the implementation of a uniform policy helps students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators to accept the uniforms and promote a positive attitude regarding their use. It isn't good enough to say that "we want uniforms because other alternative schools have them." Each school and its population are unique, and therefore have unique needs. If the uniforms will serve no specific purpose for the school, then they should not be implemented.

Second, if an alternative school chooses to implement a uniform policy, I believe that the uniforms should be mandatory. If given the choice, I don't feel that most students in an alternative school setting would wear the uniform, especially if the uniform inhibits their expressions of gang identities. Thus, if safety and gang-diffusion are two reasons for implementing the uniforms, the purpose is then discredited by students who choose not to wear the uniform.

Third, I believe that uniforms do decrease problems arising from gang-related clothing. Although this study revealed that students still found ways to express their gang identities even with uniforms, I believe that such expressions are limited and thus less drastic with a uniform. I think that it would be difficult to create a dress-code that eliminates all forms of gang-related expression without students finding loopholes in the guidelines. I do think that the uniform eliminates most of the major clothing-related issues and possibly more, depending on whether or not shoes are included in the uniform policy.

Fourth, I think that the style of the uniform can have a significant impact on the students. Uniforms that resemble prison-like attire such as those used in numerous juvenile facilities may seem like more of a punishment to the students. You may recall that some of the participants in this study said the students disliked the uniforms because they were “preppie” looking, and no “gang-banger” wants to look like a “preppie.” I think uniforms can be somewhat stylish while still prohibiting gang-related colors and fashions.

Fifth, I think that the decision to implement uniforms should be the result of a collective effort made by administrators, teachers, students, and parents. You may recall from Chapter Two that some of research says that the most successful uniform policies included input from teachers, students, and parents, not just a group of administrators. In many cases, top-down decisions are not as successful as collective ones. I also think that since uniforms have a significant impact on students and their parents, these groups should have a significant role in the processes leading to the implementation of uniform policies in their schools.

Finally, I think that the most critical issue accompanying the use of uniforms in any school is the need for routine evaluation of a uniform policy. Teachers and administrators need to evaluate whether or not the uniforms are having a positive impact on the students and their environment. If the uniforms are causing more harm than good, then the policy must be eliminated. In contrast, if the uniforms are proving to benefit students and the learning environment, then the uniforms should stay. I do not believe that educators can use an “all or

nothing” mentality with uniforms. In other words, the benefits of uniforms must be recognized along with the limitations. Uniforms are not meant to solve every problem related to school climate, academics, and student behavior. Uniforms are, however, meant to improve some aspects of the learning experience. The pro’s and con’s, and benefits and limitations of uniforms must be recognized and carefully evaluated.

A question that arises out of the evaluation process is; “How does the educational community choose between two rational ideas?” In other words, there are recognizable pro’s and con’s to the uniform debate, and so how does the educational community decide whether or not uniforms are the right choice for their schools? As I mentioned earlier, the most important issues to consider are the context of the school and reason behind implementation. Schools must be very clear on why they want uniforms and how uniforms will improve the overall learning experience of their students.

You may recall from Chapter Four that one of the participants mentioned that tape measures were sometimes used by teachers to measure the sag on students’ pants. This is an interesting point and worthy of some discussion. The underlying question is “Where do you draw the line?” Although the uniform policy in this school was very specific, there was room for latitude in certain areas such as shoes, belts, and other accessories to the uniform. Although the policy stated that the pants were not supposed to sag beyond two centimeters from the belly button, it seems inevitable that the monitoring of such a rule

would be not only questionable but also difficult to maintain. The questions here are; “How much latitude should be allowed, and how should the maintenance of such a rule be appropriately monitored?” I think that a certain amount of latitude in such policies should be expected as long as students abide by the general guidelines of the policy. I also think that rules that are extremely specific may well lead to tedious and sometimes inappropriate methods of maintenance. The way in which a uniform policy is written has a significant effect on the methods that will be used to uphold the policy.

I mentioned in Chapter One that although I see the benefits that uniforms can offer to the educational setting, I truly believe that they are simply a “band-aid” for the symptoms that arise from larger problems among today’s youth. Yes, uniforms can be positive, but they can also be negative. I think educators, students, and parents must find more lasting solutions to the problems leading to the increased implementation of uniform policies in all public schools, not just alternative schools.

I have gained a new respect for the qualitative paradigm and believe that this study was well-suited to this research approach. The phenomenon of the school uniform experience has been very interesting to study and explain. I feel as though this study has captured the essence and meaning behind teachers’ perceptions about their experiences with uniforms in a public alternative school. I think the themes that emerged through the data analysis helped to describe the

most critical issues, burdens, and concerns the participants faced regarding the existence of a mandatory uniform policy within their unique setting.

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APPENDIX A:

Participant Interview Questions

Participant Interview Questions

Grand Tour Question:

1. Describe your experiences with school uniforms in this setting.

Other Questions:

1. Do you have any personal experience with wearing school uniforms and, if so, what effect does this have on your current perceptions of school uniforms?
2. Do you believe that school uniforms have an effect on the overall school climate within your school? Explain.
3. Do you believe that school uniforms have an effect on the academic achievement of students within your school? Explain.
4. Do you believe that school uniforms have an effect on student behavior within your school? Explain.
5. Do you believe that your school would be any different if the uniforms were not required? Explain.
6. Do you think students would choose to wear the uniforms if the uniforms were not mandatory but rather optional? Explain.
7. Do you feel that the alternative school is an appropriate setting for school uniforms? Explain.
8. What impact if any do you feel the uniforms have on the community? Explain.

9. After having taught in an alternative school with mandatory uniforms, has your perception of school uniforms changed in any way? Explain.
10. If given the opportunity, what recommendations would you make for other alternative schools considering a uniform policy?

APPENDIX B:
Participant Consent Form

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Project

TITLE: Teachers' Perceptions About the Impact of School Uniforms on the Learning Experience of Students in an Alternative Public School

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Barbara Nelson, Ph.D.

CO-INVESTIGATOR: JoLynn Britt (doctoral student)

CONTACT NAME AND PHONE NUMBER FOR QUESTIONS:
JoLynn Britt (970) 377-8759

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH: To discover and analyze teachers' perceptions of the impact of school uniforms on the learning experience of at-risk students.

PROCEDURES/METHODS TO BE USED: You have been asked to participate in a research study. Data for this research will be gathered through face to face interviews approximately one to two hours in length. As a participant you will be asked a series of questions related to your experience with school uniforms in the alternative school setting. Your interview will be conducted in a setting suitable to both yourself and the researcher and will be taped on audio cassette for the purpose of transcription.

RISKS INHERENT IN THE PROCEDURES: There are no known risks at this time. However, it may be impossible to identify all potential risks in experimental procedures. The researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any potential risks.

BENEFITS: You may experience no direct benefits from this study. Information gained from this research may be used by various school districts throughout the country considering the implementation of school uniforms.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All gathered materials will be identified by case number so that no names will be associated with individual teacher's responses. Additionally, the names of the school and school district will not be identified in the study. Interview materials and audio cassettes will be stored in a locked area and will not be available to any persons other than the researchers. The audio tapes will be destroyed following successful completion of the dissertation final defense. A summary of research findings will be made available to each

Page 1 of 2 Subject's Initials _____ Date _____

participant and to the school district upon completion of the study. Although the names of the participants will not be revealed in the summary report, the research findings will reveal that the participants are teachers from a school with uniforms. Furthermore, since there is only one school with uniforms within the school district, it will be obvious which school was used in the study.

LIABILITY: The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of injury.

Questions about the subject's rights may be directed to Linda Kovar at Colorado State University (970) 491-0232.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this research project is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature indicates that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form.

Participant Name (printed)

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator or Co-Investigator Signature

Date

Page 2 of 2 Subject's Initials _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C:

Letters of Permission to Conduct Research



Research and Development Center for the Advancement of Student Learning

Colorado State University - Front Range Community College

1400 Remington Street, Fort Collins, CO 80524

TEL 970/491-3179 • FAX 970/491-3180 • www.colostate.edu/depts/r-dcenter

October 2, 2000

Ms. JoLynn Britt
6815 Antigua Drive 76
Fort Collins, CO 80525

Dear Ms. Britt:

_____ has approved your project, *School Uniforms in the Alternative School*. The purpose of the project is to determine the effect of school uniforms on school climate, academic achievement, and student behavior in an alternative school setting. Interviews of the teachers at _____ will provide the data for this project. Approval is based upon the following qualifications:

- (1) Participation of _____ teachers is voluntary and a research schedule will be jointly developed which is most convenient for them. Teachers will indicate their approval of participation by signing a consent form provided by you.
- (2) Confidentiality of teachers' names will be assured in any form of communication.
- (3) Written permission from _____ must be obtained prior to inclusion of the District and/or any of its school names in any published (e.g., journal) report.
- (4) Upon completion of the project, a copy of the relevant results/interpretation will be provided to _____ and to those who participate in the study.

Although participation of _____ teachers is voluntary, _____ has already expressed her support of the project.

If you have questions or need additional information, please give me a call at 491-3168.

Sincerely,

Ann Foster, Ed.D.
Director



To: Linda Kovar, Regulatory Coordinator for
The Human Research Committee
Colorado State University

From:

Date: October 4, 2000

Re: Doctoral student research project for JoLynn Britt,
Teachers' perceptions About the Impact of School Uniforms on the
Learning Experience of Students in an Alternative Public School.

Dear Linda Kovar,

I give permission to JoLynn Britt to conduct her study on school uniforms at

I am familiar with the scope of the research project and understand that the subjects will be participating in interviews with the researcher on a voluntary basis. I am also aware that the names and identities of the subjects will not be revealed in order to ensure anonymity. Furthermore, I understand that the subjects are adequately protected as human research subjects and that they acknowledge this through signing a consent form with the researcher. The involvement of _____ in this research project will entail the following: 1) providing a space to conduct interviews within the teachers' classrooms, and 2) providing subjects on a voluntary basis to participate in the study.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX D:
Human Subjects Approval

COPY



Office of Regulatory Compliance
Office of Vice President for Research
and Information Technology
Fort Collins, CO 805232046
(970) 491-1563
FAX: (970) 491-2293

MEMORANDUM

TO: Barbara Nelson, School of Education, 1588

FROM: Linda Kovar, Regulatory Administrator for the
Human Research Committee *LK*

SUBJECT: **PROJECT APPROVAL**
Title: Teachers' Perceptions about the Impact of School Uniforms on the Learning
Experience of Students in an Alternative Public School.
Protocol No.: 00-237H
Funding Agency: N/A
Funding Agency Deadline: N/A

DATE: October 24, 2000

I am pleased to inform you that the above-referenced project was approved by the Human Research Committee on October 24, 2000 for the period October 24, 2000 to October 24, 2001 with the condition that the attached consent form is signed by the subjects and each subject is given a copy of the form. It is the investigator's responsibility to obtain this consent form from all subjects. *NO changes may be made to this document without first obtaining the approval of the Committee. Approval is for 10 participants.*

A status report of this project will be required within a 12-month period from the date of approval. You will be sent a reminder approximately two months before the protocol expires. The Principal Investigator will report on the numbers of subjects who have participated this year and project-to-date, about problems encountered, and provide a verifying copy of the consent form or cover letter used. The necessary form (H-101) is available from the Regulatory Compliance web page (see below). Should the protocol not be renewed before expiration, all activities must cease until the protocol has been re-reviewed.

It is the responsibility of the investigator to immediately inform the Committee of any serious complications, unexpected risks, or injuries resulting from this research. It is also the investigator's responsibility to notify the Committee of any changes in experimental design, participant population, or consent procedures or documents. This can be done with a memo which completely describes the changes and their consequences (new consent form or cover letter, or altered survey instrument, for example). Students serving as Co-Principal Investigators may not alter projects without first obtaining PI approval. The PI is ultimately responsible for the conduct of the project.

This approval is issued under Colorado State University's OPRR Multiple Projects Assurance M-1153-01 issued August 1, 1996. If approval did not accompany a proposal when it was submitted to a sponsor, it is the researcher's responsibility to provide the sponsor with the approval notice.

Please direct any questions about the Committee's action on this project to me for routing to the Committee.

Additional information is available from the Regulatory Compliance web site at www.research.colostate.edu/regulatory/

Attachment

xc: JoLynn Britt w/attachment

APPENDIX E:

Uniform Policy of the Alternative School

The Mandatory Uniform Policy of The Alternative School

Students are required to wear a white polo shirt that is tucked into plain black pants or black denim pants that do not sag more than 2 cm. from the belly button.

Students may wear a plain white t-shirt, to be admitted to class but will be unable to move up the level system until they comply with the uniform policy.

Students on the Transition Level may wear their own shirts, but it may not advertise or promote gang involvement, violence, tobacco, or drug or alcohol usage. Shirts may not express racial, ethnic, or cultural hostilities.

Rags, colored shoelaces, colored socks, tags still fastened to clothing, and belts that hang from pants may not be worn at school.

Hats and coats will be checked into homeroom closets.

Plain white, gray or black sweatshirts are permissible on cold days to be worn over the white polo shirt.

Students will not be permitted to purchase or advance through the level system without complying with the uniform policy.

Clothing violations are an automatic level drop (there are no warnings).

Minor clothing violations will result in a point loss, while students with major clothing violations will receive their assignments for in-school suspension for the day.