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Dress Code Policies Affecting Women's Education

Introduction

In most schools a dress code policy is in place to keep a professional setting and to stop any potential distractions. Most dress codes in place are to prevent thighs, shoulders, and midriff from being exposed. Although these policies are relevant to all students they mostly tend to affect girls more so than boys. If these codes are broken then the offender is usually humiliated, and sent home to change or made to wear clothes provided by the school. These enforcements regarding dress code can impact a girls education for the worse.

This is because dress codes in school systems are very biased against girls. According to Bates (as cited in Harbach, M. J., 2016), girls are often told that “provocative clothing will distract their male classmates or make the male teachers feel uncomfortable” (p. 1044). This phrase is told to girls all the time due to clothing such as leggings, tank tops, shorts, low cut shirts and anything that shows midriff. For example, a common rule in schools is that shorts, skirts or dresses have to be fingertip length or lower. This is not an accurate method, considering everyone has different lengths of appendages. Therefore, girls with short arms or longer legs showed more thigh than girls whose finger tip reaches a moderate length. Thus, causing a grey area in what the rule actually is.

The dress code policy is very different for boys. Boys can wear shorts and tank tops without ramifications. In schools, males tend to be invisible when it comes to dress code violations. Schools officials do not see boys as a distraction because they do not pose a threat of

being scandalous, like girls do. Dress codes never seem to affect boys because their bodies are not sexualized to the degree of women's.

This may be because women's bodies are oversexualized on media and in society. The idea that a girl cannot wear a tank top because her shoulders or collar bone being exposed is distracting to her male peers is a common belief in the school system. According to McMahon (as cited in Harbach, M. J., 2016), this affects girls because, "dress codes... have negative ramifications for women, sending a message that exposing the female body is bad" (p. 1044). Girls are under constant scrutiny in the school system and have to focus more on their appearance than their education. If the school officials find her to be out of dress code then she is made to feel degraded. Bates contributes that (as cited as cited in Harbach, M. J., 2016), most "female students are powerfully affected by these policies and many express a profound sense of injustice" (p.1043). In addition, Bates also says (as cited in Harbach, M. J., 2016), girls are often "told to cover up, suggesting that their bodies are inappropriate, dangerous, and subject to judgement" (p. 1055). This can impede a girls education because she has to be constantly aware of how she may be portrayed to her male counterparts.

Punishments and Education

A girl's education is not only being restrained by the fact that they are sexualized by their peers and teachers, they also have punishments that prevent their education. These can include being taken out of class, sent home or to go change into something the school gives you. These "consequences of being "dress coded" have a negative impact on student learning and participation" (Harbach, M. J. 2016). Murphy offers an example (as cited in Harbach, M. J.,

2016), that in some schools “girls are forced to wear “shame suits” after having been found in violation of school dress policy” these outfits typically are “red sweatpants and an oversized neon yellow shirt that says “Dress Code Violation”(p.1039-1040). Dockterman relates this to (as cited in Harbach, M. J., 2016), a form of “slut shaming” (p. 1040). Those words on that shirt, no matter how they are phrased, show indication that the girl was in clothes that were not modest. Boys rarely get these punishments because of dress code violations. If boys out of dress code are even acknowledged then they are only told to not wear that to school anymore. This is the opposite for girls. Girls have to suffer through a constant cycle of media and society promoting sexuality and then their peers and mentors discriminating against them for exemplifying it. It is very confusing to young girls just learning who they are to decipher what is acceptable to wear.

Freedom of Expression

Another issue dress codes bring up are they are potentially violating a person’s first Amendment right of freedom of expression. Girls are constantly being reprimanded for their clothing. This brings up controversy that “the choice of dress is [a] type of protected expression” (Wilson, A. M. 1998). Mahling argues (as cited in Wilson, A. M., 1998), that dress codes are also “an infringement upon the students’ liberty to control their own appearance” (p.150). It is known that “public school administrators may only regulate expression when there is evidence that the regulations are, as stated by Tinker (as cited in Wilson, A. M., 1998), “necessary to avoid material and substantial interference with schoolwork or discipline”” (Wilson, A. M. 1998). Many school officials argue that they should be allowed to keep students from wearing clothing that can be distracting; however, most things that girls wear are not distracting. Due to the fact that society oversexualizes women’s bodies, schools find it necessary to put regulations

on what girls wear. In the greater aspect, a girls shoulders and collarbones are not disruptive to a learning environment; however, taking a girl away from that learning environment is.

Researcher Propose Uniforms

Some researchers have investigated implementing a uniform policy in schools to avoid the problem of dress code violations. This way everyone is wearing the same thing and are mandated to wear it. By doing this girls would no longer suffer an impediment on their education. They would no longer have to worry about their appearance instead of their education. Wade and Stafford propose (as cited in Brookshire, A. N., 2016), that this trend has become popular in the school system because uniforms “serve as a social and economic equalizer, reducing competition over clothes and ... teaching children that there is more to a person than the clothes he or she wears” (p. 3). This in the girls favor because it eliminates any chance of ramifications or embarrassment. Beresford’s writing on School Effectiveness and School Improvement has proposed (as cited in Brookshire, A. N., 2016), that implementing uniforms “brings tangible benefits, including lower student victimization, ... increased student learning and positive attitudes towards school and that they contribute to fewer occurrences of behavior problems” (p. 8). This sounds like a great alternative; however, it still takes away the right of expression and still expresses the mind set that girls bodies are sexualized and need to be covered.

Conclusion

Some further research could be done regarding what can be in place in schools to keep gender equality, without stripping the right of freedom of expression. This way girls do not have to feel as if they bodies are a problem and keep them from getting an education. Girls face many

injustices when it comes to school dress codes. They have a lot more to worry about than boys. A school environment is supposed to promote gender equality. The schools “that are not gender-sensitive and that discriminate on the basis of sex or gender limit girls’ equal enjoyment of the right to education” (Submissions from UNESCO., Estonia., Russian Federation). What a girl wears should not be more important than her education and it is unfair of a school system to succumb to the idea that it is.

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