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School Uniforms: Cost, Gender and behavioural considerations

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1 Introduction

The school uniform is a long-contested topic in education circles. Supporters of traditional school wear state that it is democratic, fosters a sense of school community and improves student focus and discipline during lesson time. Conversely, some argue that it creates a financial burden for parents, limits self-expression and has to be policed by teachers, ultimately creating a disruption to learning. More recently, the gendered aspect of school uniforms has also become central to the debate, including that uniforms highlight differences between girls and boys and thus enhance stereotypes as well as the difficulties that uniforms can pose for non-binary, gender questioning or transitioning students. The Department of Education in Northern Ireland supports the use of school uniforms, stating that:

'The school uniform can play a valuable role by: setting an appropriate tone; instilling pride; supporting positive behaviour and discipline; encouraging identity with, and support for, the school ethos; ensuring pupils of all races and backgrounds feel

*welcome; protecting children from social pressures to dress in a particular way; and, nurturing cohesion and promoting good relations between different groups of pupils.*¹

The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of some of the arguments put forward regarding the advantages and disadvantages of school uniforms and any evidence to support those arguments.

2 The cost of school uniforms

School uniform costs have long been recognised as a source of financial and emotional stress for families living on a low-income across the UK. This has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.² Research indicates that ongoing lockdowns as a result of the pandemic have brought with them additional costs including those of utilities, home schooling and food at home. Families living in poverty will usually plan, budget and implement cautious and careful financial strategies in their efforts to get by, however, COVID-19 and lockdowns have simultaneously made many of these strategies impossible.³ Recent research carried out by the Nuffield Foundation entitled ‘COVID Realities’ described how school uniform costs are placing additional financial pressure on families at an already challenging time.⁴

The ‘poverty proofing’ potential of school uniforms

In 2014, the Children’s Commission on Poverty published a report on how poverty affects children’s experience of school. The report highlighted that school uniforms can play a vital part in ‘poverty-proofing’ classrooms from the demands of the latest trends.⁵ The Children’s Society, in their research into the cost of school uniforms across the UK, are also supportive of the view that school uniforms can help to reduce stigma for children living in poverty.⁶ Further research carried out in 2020 to understand attitudes of parents, teachers and children towards school uniforms found that 77% of students who live in homes where the main breadwinner is not working, believe wearing a uniform helps them to blend in with their classmates, suggesting that they feel school friends would be unable to distinguish their family’s financial status if everybody is wearing the same outfit.⁷

However, the Children’s Society have cited that the high costs of school uniforms across the UK, particularly where schools require parents to buy exclusive or branded items and use one supplier, are undermining the equalising potential of the school uniform. Instead,

¹ Department of Education (2011) Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy (revised 5 June 2018) <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

² Page, G, Power M and Patrick, R (2021) Uniform mistakes: The costs of going back to school. A Covid Realities Rapid-Response Report, April 2021 <https://media.covidrealities.org/CovidRealities-UniformMistakes.pdf>

³ Brewer, M and Patrick, R (2021) Pandemic Pressures Why families on a low income are spending more during Covid-19. Resolution Foundation Briefing <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/pandemic-pressures/>

⁴ As cited in footnote 2

⁵ Holloway, E, Mahony, S, Royston, S and Mueller, D (2017) At what cost? Exposing the impact of poverty on school life The Children Society Online Available at: https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/basw_21941-5_2.pdf

⁶ The Children’s Society (2020) The Wrong Blazer 2020: Time for action on school uniform costs <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/the-wrong-blazer-report-2020.pdf>

⁷ Trutex (2017) Attitudes to School Uniforms https://www.trutexbtru2u.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Uniform-Research-Report-29_6_17.pdf

expensive uniform requirements are currently placing an unnecessary burden on parents and children.⁸

Average cost of school uniforms

The Children's Society UK-wide 2020 survey found that parents spent on average £337 per year on school uniforms for each secondary school child and £315 on each primary school child. In contrast to actual spend, parents believed a more reasonable cost is closer to £105 for a secondary school uniform and £85 pounds per primary school uniform – actual costs are more than three times what parents think is reasonable.⁹

Coats, bags and school shoes were the most expensive items for both primary and secondary school. Blazers were notably expensive, with secondary school parents paying an average of £41 per child for blazers for their secondary school children.¹⁰

Many schools also require certain items to be branded or be bought from specific suppliers. The Children's Society research found that two thirds of parents with children in secondary schools had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier, while more than half of primary school parents had to buy two or more items from a specific supplier. Where parents had to buy two or more items from a specified supplier, the average cost of primary school uniform was around 50% more expensive.¹¹

Families can struggle to pay these high costs, which in turn has negative impacts on children. The survey showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of parents said that the cost of school uniforms had meant their child had worn ill-fitting, unclean or an incorrect uniform which in turn can lead to children being bullied, feeling left out or even being excluded from school.¹²

In 2017, the Commissioner for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (NICCY) published the results of a representative survey of 1006 parents in Northern Ireland which indicated that in the previous year, on average, they spent:

- £109.00 per child on school uniforms;
- £54.00 per child on PE clothing, footwear and equipment; and
- £52.00 per child on equipment for lessons.¹³

⁸The Children's Society (2020) The Wrong Blazer 2020:Time for action on school uniform costs <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/the-wrong-blazer-report-2020.pdf>

⁹ As cited directly above

¹⁰ As cited in footnote 8

¹¹ As cited in footnote 8

¹² As cited in footnote 8

¹³ Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People (2017) 'A 'free' education? The cost of education in Northern Ireland <https://www.niccy.org/media/2909/niccy-costs-of-education-key-findings-report-and-recommendations-18-oct-17.pdf>

The results of the survey also indicated that:

- Uniform costs and PE/equipment costs for older children were higher. For example parents spent £48 on Pre-school uniforms versus £85 for Primary school and £152 for Post primary;
- Uniforms for young people attending grammar schools were 25% more expensive than for those attending secondary schools; and
- For young people attending grammar schools, PE costs were 51% more expensive than for those attending secondary schools.

With regard to where uniforms were purchased, 4% of all children in the survey purchased school uniform from schools directly, 49% from particular suppliers, 22% from both schools and suppliers, with 25% free to use any supplier. Among children required to purchase school uniforms from schools or particular suppliers, 71% were required to purchase all or most items from these sources.¹⁴

Research by the Irish League of Credit Unions in 2020 found that for 54% of parents in Northern Ireland, the costs involved in preparing children for a return to school are a significant financial burden. Among the most burdensome costs to be covered in these contexts are purchasing school uniforms, particularly new school uniforms (e.g. at transition stage), with clothes for secondary school attendees particularly expensive.¹⁵

On average, parents reported spending £131 on primary school uniforms and £177 on post primary uniforms when preparing their children for the return to school.¹⁶

The research also identified that 32% of families in Northern Ireland go into debt at the beginning of the new school year because of the rising costs. Around three-quarters (72%) of parents paid for school supplies out of their monthly outcome, with 21% using a credit card and 13% drawing on savings. A small number of parents (2%) turned to a doorstep lender or payday loan company.¹⁷

Tackling the costs of school uniforms

A number of charitable initiatives in England and Scotland have been developed to reduce the costs associated with attending school including the cost of school uniforms. The initiative 'Poverty Proofing the School Day' is an audit for schools, developed by Children North East and the North East Child Poverty Commission.¹⁸ The purpose of the project is to help school and communities identify and overcome cost barriers that shape and limit children's opportunities at school and to assist schools in exploring the most effective way to spend pupil premium allocation. A further initiative in Scotland, developed by the Child

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People (2017) 'A 'free' education? The cost of education in Northern Ireland <https://www.niccy.org/media/2909/niccy-costs-of-education-key-findings-report-and-recommendations-18-oct-17.pdf>

¹⁵ Preston, A (2019) Families. Third of NI families plunged into debt by back to school costs. The Belfast Telegraph Website Online Available at: <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/third-of-ni-families-plunged-into-debt-by-back-to-school-costs-39411209.html>

¹⁶ As cited in footnote 15

¹⁷ As cited in footnote 15

¹⁸ Poverty Proofing the School Day Website <http://www.povertyproofing.co.uk/about/>

Poverty Action Group, 'The Cost of the School Day' has a similar remit.¹⁹ The project helps children, parents and school staff identify cost barriers and take action to remove them.

Good practice on the cost of school uniforms identified in these projects include:

- Removing the need for badged uniform;
- Improving the promotion of school clothing grants to parents and carers;
- Holding uniform recycling days;
- Sourcing and recommending cheaper suppliers to parents and carers; and
- Giving the 'benefit of the doubt' when children or young people arrive at school not wearing full uniform or suitable clothing. Schools involved in the projects have opted to explore this sensitively, rather than disciplining automatically.²⁰

Government policy on school uniform costs

In 2019, the Welsh Government became the first in the UK to introduce statutory guidance on the cost of school uniforms. The guidance issued by the Department for Education recognises that school uniform and other items that are required to be purchased in accordance with a school uniform policy can be a financial burden, particularly for low income and large families.

Consequently, the new guidance means that when state schools are introducing a new uniform, or considering changes in uniform requirements:

*'Governing bodies will give high priority to cost and affordability. No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply for admission or to attend a particular school.'*²¹

The guidance states that schools must consider a number of ways to reduce the cost of uniforms including:

- Stipulating basic items and colours but not styles so that items can be bought from multiple retail chains at reasonable prices and not just from one authorised supplier;
- Avoiding high cost items such as blazers and caps;
- Considering the necessity of Logos, particularly across multiple items of clothing. If a governing body determines that uniform items with logos are required, schools should limit logos to one item (reasonably priced and widely available);
- Avoiding variation in colours and style for different year groups;
- Consideration of the cost and availability of non-standard size; and

¹⁹ What's already happening around Scotland Child Poverty Action Group Website: <https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/cost-school-day/happening-around>

²⁰ As cited in footnote 16 and 17

²¹ Welsh Government (2019) Statutory guidance for school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies Education, Wales (2019, No. 21) <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/statutory-guidance-for-school-governing-bodies-on-school-uniform-and-appearance-policies.pdf>

- Having easily washable items.²²

Furthermore, where single supplier arrangements are in place for uniform items, governing bodies should review these arrangements regularly and be able to demonstrate that they have obtained the best value for money from suppliers for example through a tendering process.

Governing bodies will also need to engage parents, community members, pupils and the school council in developing school uniform and appearance policies and document the consultation process undertaken. Policies will also need to be reviewed on a periodic basis. Finally, the process for raising complaints regarding school uniform or appearance policies should be publicised, for example, on the school website or in targeted communication with parents on school uniform and appearance policies.²³

With regard to assistance with the cost of school uniforms, the Welsh Government provides up to £125 for students eligible for free school meals to buy uniforms and other equipment through the Pupil Development Grant.²⁴ Eligible year seven students are also entitled to apply for a grant of up to £200 pounds to help with the cost of starting secondary school.

In 2021, the UK Parliament enacted the Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021.²⁵ The statutory guidance, which is due to be introduced in Autumn 2021, will require schools in England to consider ways to keep uniform prices as low as possible when they are developing school uniform policies.²⁶ The cross-party support for the Bill recognised the costs parents face for school uniform, particularly for branded items, and the statutory guidance will ask schools to consider high street alternatives. It will also include measures on encouraging second-hand uniform sales, more competitive arrangements with school suppliers including tendering processes, and ensuring parents have access to clear information about uniform policies.²⁷ While the current guidance in place in England also encourages schools to consider costs when developing school uniform policies, it is non-statutory and campaigners have broadly welcomed the government's decision to introduce legislation on the issue.²⁸

Currently, there is no statutory requirement for the provision of grants to assist with the costs of school uniforms in England. A number of Local Authorities offer grants, however there is considerable variation in the level of support they offer, and the eligibility criteria that apply. Schools can also use the funding they get from the Department for Education's pupil

²² As cited in footnote 21

²³ As cited in footnote 21

²⁴ Shanks, R (2020) Affordability of secondary school uniform in Scotland School of Education, University of Aberdeen https://aura.abdn.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2164/15388/Shanks_ABDN_AffordabilityOfSecondary_VoR.pdf

²⁵ Education (Guidance about Costs of School Uniforms) Act 2021 Legislation.gov.uk Website: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/20/contents/enacted>

²⁶ New law to make school uniform costs affordable for all, press release Gov.UK Website Online Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-to-make-school-uniform-costs-affordable-for-all>

²⁷ As cited in Footnote 22

²⁸ <https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/04/30/were-making-school-uniforms-more-affordable-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>

premium - money allocated for children from poorer backgrounds, or who are or have been looked after under local authority care - to purchase school uniforms.²⁹

In Scotland, there is currently no legislation or national guidance that specifically covers the wearing of school uniforms or the appearance of pupils.³⁰ A national minimum school clothing grant of £100 was introduced in 2018 as a result of agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, prior to this it was up to individual local authorities to decide on how much to provide.³¹ Families apply for this grant in the same way as they apply for free school meals.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education issued non statutory guidance for schools on developing a school uniform policy in 2011 which was further updated in 2018. The guidance places a particular emphasis on encouraging schools to consider the costs of uniforms carefully including:

- The use of branded items,
- The cost of uniform upkeep (e.g. Dry Cleaning); and
- The ability to purchase 'off the peg' items from a number of suppliers.

The guidance also encourages schools to consult widely with students, parents and communities when developing the policy.³²

School uniform grants are also available from the Education Authority to families in receipt of Universal Credit or certain benefits - the eligibility criteria are similar to qualifying for free school meals (FSM). However, as uniforms are not a legislative requirement, but are a matter for individual schools to determine whether they are needed, the scheme is not intended to cover the full cost of a uniform. Rather, it is designed to assist those in need with the cost of purchase.³³ The current grants available are:

- £35.75 for a primary school pupil;
- £51 for a post-primary/special school pupil under 15 years old;
- £56 for a post-primary/special school pupil over 15 years old; and
- £22 for a post-primary/special school pupil physical education kit

A school pupil can usually only get one clothing allowance during the school year.³⁴

²⁹ Wearn, R & England, R (2019) School uniform: Can it be bought more cheaply? BBC News Website Online Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-49090913>

³⁰ Wearn, R & England, R (2019) School uniform: Can it be bought more cheaply? BBC News Website Online Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-49090913>

³¹ As cited in footnote 25

³² Department of Education (2011) Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy (revised 5 June 2018) Online Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

³³ As cited in footnote 27

³⁴ NI Direct Website School Uniform and Uniform Grants <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/school-uniform-and-uniform-grants>

Commentators have highlighted that these grants cover only a fraction of the cost of the typical school uniform.³⁵ Research by the Nuffield Foundation highlighted this issue:

*'The entire child benefit for September went towards the 2 uniforms. My daughter's secondary school uniform was over £300 and my son at primary school was £100 that included shoes and trainers. The grant for primary is £35. For secondary its £75. My daughter's blazer alone was £90. I'm still waiting to save for her trainers and family managed to buy her shoes' (Charlotte P, lone mother of two, Northern Ireland)*³⁶

Several community initiatives have been set up such as uniform swap shops to help with the cost of school uniforms but campaigners argue that families need more financial assistance to help with the cost of school uniforms and that statutory guidance would also push the costs of school uniforms down.³⁷

3 The gendered implications of school uniforms

Commentators have argued that there are many reasons to challenge segregated uniform policies in schools, not only comfort, choice and practicality but also because they can reinforce unfair gender expectations.³⁸ This is thought to be particularly true for female students where policies often stipulate a skirt or dress as their regulation uniform as well as for transgender children and gender non-conforming youth who can struggle with expressing their identity where uniform policies stipulate gender segregated uniforms.

Do traditional school uniforms disadvantage female students?

The arguments concerning the impact of traditional school uniforms on female students centre on the issues of health, learning, social norms and equality.

In her paper on school uniforms and gender, Happel argues that a school uniform (particularly one that demands skirt-wearing solely for females) are physical markers of sex and gender which serve to confirm 'traditional' gender identities.³⁹ They have, therefore, implications for how girls are treated, viewed, and how they are able to move. Skirts restrict movement in real ways; wearers must negotiate how they sit, how they play, and how quickly they move. Skirt-wearing, consciously and unconsciously, imposes considerations of modesty and immodesty, in ways that trousers do not.⁴⁰

³⁵ Advice NI supports local community school uniforms initiatives to ease the financial burden on families Advice NI Website <https://www.adviceni.net/blog/advice-ni-supports-local-community-school-uniforms-initiatives-ease-financial-burden-families>

³⁶ Buying school uniforms post-lockdown "unmanageable" for low income families Nuffield Foundation Website <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/buying-school-uniforms-post-lockdown-unmanageable-for-low-income-families>

³⁷ Advice NI supports local community school uniforms initiatives to ease the financial burden on families Advice NI Website <https://www.adviceni.net/blog/advice-ni-supports-local-community-school-uniforms-initiatives-ease-financial-burden-families> and Buying school uniforms post-lockdown "unmanageable" for low income families Nuffield Foundation Website <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/buying-school-uniforms-post-lockdown-unmanageable-for-low-income-families>

³⁸ Mergler, A and Cariss, S (2020) Girls School Uniform Choices. Girls Uniform Agenda. Online Available at: http://girlsuniformagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Why-Options_WEBSITE-1.pdf

³⁹ Alison Happel (2013) Ritualized girling: school uniforms and the compulsory performance of gender, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 22:1, 92-96,

⁴⁰ As cited directly above

Restricting Movement

The notion of skirts restricting movement has been frequently raised with regard to girl's participation in Physical Education in school. In Northern Ireland there is a significant association between gender and meeting physical activity (PA) guidelines at post-primary level. Post-primary males are more likely to meet daily PA guidelines than females (16% versus 10%) and female decline in undertaking PA is significantly more dramatic than that of their male peers during adolescence.⁴¹ The lower participation rates of girls in PA in school and more generally is reflected internationally. For example, a recent study in global trends on physical activity among adolescents found that across all regions, girls were less active than boys.⁴² In 2016, joint research by the Youth Sport Trust and Women in Sport found that whilst both boys and girls understood the significance of an active lifestyle, there was a big disconnect between girls' attitudes and actual behaviour.⁴³

Many factors can influence the declining participation of girls in PA as they get older including the pressure of academic school work, lack of encouragement from teachers and parents, and lack of choice with regard to options for PE.⁴⁴ Self-consciousness and the impracticality of some P.E. uniforms have also been cited as a barrier to participation in PA in school.

In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education guidance on school uniform policy states that the PE uniform can be perceived as a barrier to participation in PE by girls and that schools should be aware of this and sensitive to concerns pupils might have about body image –particularly during transition and teenage years. The guidance suggests that schools might consider the use of shorts or 'skorts' instead of gym skirts and PE pants.⁴⁵

An Australian study by Norrish, Farringdon, Bulsara and Hands in 2012 recorded the number of steps undertaken by primary school girls and boys over a one month period. For two weeks the students wore their formal uniform (dress for girls, shorts for boys), and for two weeks they wore their sports uniform (shorts for both genders). The results showed that only the girls' physical activity levels were affected by the type of uniform they wore, with girls doing significantly less exercise when wearing a dress than when wearing the shorts.⁴⁶ A further Australian study that explored children's perceptions of the factors that impact on their ability to engage in lunchtime play at school revealed that 10 to 13 year old girls stated that their uniform was a factor (boys did not mention uniform). When girls were asked why they

⁴¹ Connolly, S, Carlin, A, Johnston, A, Woods, C, Powell, C, Belton, S, O'Brien, W, Saunders, J, Duff, C, Farmer, O and Murphy, M (2020) Physical Activity, Sport and Physical Education in Northern Ireland School Children: A Cross-Sectional Study. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 17, 6849

⁴² Guthold, R Stevens, GA, Riley, M and Bull, FC(2019) Global trends in insufficient physical activity among adolescents: a pooled analysis of 298 population-based surveys with 1.6 million participants *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Mental Health* Volume 4, Issue 1, P23-35, January 01, 2020

⁴³ Survey shows large gender gap in attitudes to physical activity for teenagers Youth Sports Trust Website Nov 6th 2017 [online] Available at: <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/news/survey-shows-large-gender-gap-attitudes-physical-activity-teenagers>

⁴⁴ As cited directly above

⁴⁵ Department of Education (2011) Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy (revised 5 June 2018) Online Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

⁴⁶ Norrish, H., Farringdon, F., Bulsara, M., & Hands, B. (2012). The effect of school uniform on incidental physical activity among 10-year old children. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education*, 3(1), 51-63

chose certain activities over others, uniform was identified as a significant restriction to playing certain types of activities, such as basketball.⁴⁷

A similar, more recent study conducted in Australia in 2015 by Watson, Elliott, and Mehta, reported on focus group discussions with girls from two South Australian co-educational primary schools (aged 12 to 13 years). The children were asked what they thought was the most important facilitator and barrier to engaging in physical activity during their lunch times. A key theme that the girls identified as a barrier to their participation was the gendered school uniform. The researchers write that, “most girls acknowledged the restrictive nature of dresses and skirts when engaging in physical activity, stating that clothing more appropriate for physical activity would encourage participation. The girls also recognised the gendered nature of the school uniform, making it easier for boys to be active”⁴⁸

A recent report from Plan International on the state of girl’s rights in the UK which was based on a survey of 1,000 teenagers and young women aged 14 to 21 across the UK in June 2018, found school uniforms to be an area of concern and frustration for girls, particularly double standards on sports uniform rules⁴⁹:

“In our school, we had sports in the last two periods and we weren’t allowed to leave in our PE kit because it wasn’t ‘appropriate.’ The boys left all the time in their PE kit...” (Belfast participant).

Do uniforms re-enforce female stereotypes?

An analysis of school uniform policies in Scotland regarding gender found that there were generally more rules and prescriptive policies for girls. Many policies mentioned the length of girls’ skirts using language that centred on the idea of decency or modesty which suggests a placing of normative categories on girls and young women using school uniform policies.⁵⁰ The notion of maintaining modesty and female students having to behave in a way that protects from exposing themselves while wearing their school uniform is frequently discussed by academics.

In their paper on girls’ school uniform choices, Mergler and Carris highlight that in the younger years, students often take part in play based activity on the floor or sit on the floor cross-legged for circle time and reading activities. This is difficult to do in a dress, and requires girls to ensure they are ‘being modest’ and not exposing themselves. During a school day a number of other occasions arise for which the wearing of skirts is impractical, for example clearing up classrooms, helping to mount pictures and other work on walls, sitting on high stools in a science lab, as well as presenting in front of the class and being

⁴⁷ Stanley, R.M., Boshoff, K., & Dollman, J. (2012). Voices in the playground: a qualitative exploration of the barriers and facilitators of lunchtime play. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 15(1), 44-51

⁴⁸ Watson, A., Elliott, J., & Mehta, K. (2015). Perceived barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity during the school lunch break for girls aged 12 -13 years. *European Physical Education Review*, 21(2), 257-271

⁴⁹ Plan International (2020) The State Of Girls’ Rights In The UK 2019-2020 <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk>

⁵⁰ School Uniform Policy in Scottish schools: Control and Consent European Educational Research Association Website Online Available at: <https://blog.eera-ecer.de/school-uniform-policy-in-scottish-schools-control-and-consent/>

called up to write on the board.⁵¹ The authors highlight that females should be free to focus on their learning, without being required to regularly consider the issue of modesty and immodesty.

The report by Plan International further highlighted that girls can feel self-conscious in prescribed clothing:

'Girls have told us about concerns around feeling self-conscious when school shirts are see-through and certain designs of skirts which blow up in the wind.'

The report also cited that more than one in three girls received unwanted sexual attention such as being groped, stared at, catcalled and wolf-whistled while wearing school uniform.⁵²

School dress code controversies often garner widespread media attention both in the UK and internationally. Many of the controversies centre on children being sent home for not adhering to their school's uniform policy. While male students are also often sent home for issues like inappropriate haircuts and footwear⁵³, the controversies often centre on the length of girls uniform skirts. Recently, in a secondary school in Dorset, England, students protested when a video on sexual harassment and ways to stay safe stated that girls should consider the length of their skirts and this could be a factor in boys verbally harassing them:

*'When you are breaking school uniform and having your skirts far too short then that's going to tempt boys to say silly things isn't it?'*⁵⁴

The school has since apologised. In 2019, the Priory School in Lewes, England updated its uniform policy to include a rule which dictated that all students must wear trousers. The reason for the updated guidelines, in addition to catering for pupils who identify as transgender, was over "concerns" regarding the length of skirts worn at the academic institution.⁵⁵

"This uniform has been designed specifically in response to the many issues and suggestions raised by parents, students and school staff. Specifically, it addresses the current issues of inequality and decency."

Commentators have highlighted that through these school policies and terminology such as decency and modesty, there is an implication that women should be hyper cognisant about their physical identity and that it places the onus on girls to prevent inappropriate reactions from their male classmates.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Mergler, A and Cariss, S (2020) Girls School Uniform Choices. Girls Uniform Agenda. Online Available at: http://girlsuniformagenda.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Why-Options_WEBSITE-1.pdf

⁵² Plan International (2020) The State Of Girls' Rights In The UK 2019-2020 <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk>

⁵³ Commissioner criticises school on haircut punishment BBC News Website Retrieved 26th May 2021 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-39301894>

⁵⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/teacher-sexual-harassment-short-skirts-b1836997.html>

⁵⁵ Whitehead, J (2019) Parents set for school gate protest against gender neutral uniforms The Independent Website Retrieved 26th May 2021 <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gender-neutral-uniform-priory-school-lewes-dress-code-transgender-a9092866.html>

⁵⁶ Zhou, L (2015) The Sexism of School Dress Codes, The Atlantic, Online Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/school-dress-codes-are-problematic/410962/>

Recently in response to media reports of primary schools encouraging girls to wear shorts under their school uniforms and an increasing trend in secondary schools for girls to wear shorts under their skirts or summer dresses to prevent 'up-skirting', the chief inspector of schools in England, Amanda Spielman stated that:

"I think it's really important we don't slide into a national culture that's essentially victim-blaming. In a primary school, I would very much hope we can find solutions in addressing any cultural problems that could be making girls feel uncomfortable doing normal things that every child should be doing in the playground."⁵⁷

Impact of school uniform policies on transgender children and gender non-conforming youth

It is acknowledged that uniforms can be problematic for non-binary, gender questioning or transitioning students. Commentators have highlighted that school uniform policies that have separate rules for boys and girls can undermine students' rights to gender neutrality, fluidity and experimentation and potentially undermine the message of inclusivity and LGBTQ+ support for which many schools increasingly advocate.⁵⁸

Currently research on the experience of transgender and gender non-conforming youth (TGNC) with regard to school uniform policy in Northern Ireland is limited. A small study carried out by Queens University in 2017 suggests that single-sex arrangements and gender normative uniform and haircut policies in NI schools impose gender stereotypes on TGNC youth. This leaves those students with the 'option' of going to school every day 'in drag', as one interviewee put it, or breaking school rules, which in turn makes them vulnerable to informal (e.g. name calling) and formal (e.g. detention) sanctions. Interviewees who transgressed uniform and/or hair policies invariably experienced homophobic and transphobic abuse from pupils and teachers either frequently or on an almost daily basis.⁵⁹

Research carried out in 2013 on the experiences of gender variant and transgender children living in Northern Ireland suggests that wearing a uniform that does not correspond to their gender identity can 'be a cause of stress, anxiety and discomfort for young transgender people who are highly sensitive and generally distressed by their gendered appearance.'⁶⁰ Research by the Department of Education found that of those pupils who identify as transgender, many also experience issues and difficulties around participation in sport and school activities, the wearing of school PE uniforms and the use of toilet facilities.⁶¹

⁵⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/15/ofsted-chief-warns-against-victim-blaming-in-modesty-shorts-row>

⁵⁸ McBride, R-S., & Schubotz, D. (2017). Living a fairy tale: the educational experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming youth in Northern Ireland. *Childcare in Practice*, 1-13

⁵⁹ McBride, R-S., & Schubotz, D. (2017). Living a fairy tale: the educational experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming youth in Northern Ireland. *Childcare in Practice*, 1-13

⁶⁰ Ruari-Santiago McBride (2013): Grasping the nettle: the experiences of gender variant children and transgender youth living in Northern Ireland, OFMDFM (the Executive Office)

⁶¹ Department of Education (2016): Post-Primary School Experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender (LGB&T). Bangor

It is suggested that this poor experience at school has a knock-on effect on transgender young people's mental health, attendance and ability to learn. Almost three quarters of transgender pupils' report that experiences at school have a negative or very negative impact on their emotional wellbeing and educational experiences including attainment (38.5%), attendance (41.5%) and career planning (35.9%).⁶²

In Northern Ireland, transgender people have protection against unlawful discrimination in the areas of employment, vocational training and the provision of goods, facilities and services (in certain limited areas), as well as in the disposal or management of premises. However, unlike Great Britain,⁶³ there is no legal protection from discrimination for transgender pupils in education. Guidance from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland outlines that although schools in Northern Ireland have a responsibility not to discriminate against pupils on the protected grounds of sex, sexual orientation, race or disability *'the law does not apply to age, religious belief and political opinion and gender reassignment in schools'*.⁶⁴

This means that aggrieved pupils do not have protection against discrimination on the grounds of gender reassignment in the field of education in schools or by qualifications bodies, although school staff are protected under sex discrimination law.⁶⁵ The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has recommended changes to equality law in Northern Ireland to strengthen protection for transgender children in schools.⁶⁶

Similarly, in 2021 the Expert Advisory Panel on Gender for the Department for Communities produced a report to inform the development of a Gender Equality Strategy. The report identified that there are gaps in protection from discrimination for gender minorities in schools, where there is no statutory duty on schools to provide support to trans children and young people, often forcing them back into the closet and leading to them experiencing discrimination from peers and staff. The report identifies this a specific gap in NI equality legislation.⁶⁷

In 2019 the EA released guidance on how to support transgender youth in educational settings. The guidance states that, despite the aforementioned gap in equality law protection, schools should ensure that transgender young people are not singled out for

⁶² As cited in footnote 61

⁶³ In Great Britain, the Equality Act 2010 provides legal protection from discrimination of pupils proposing, undergoing or who have completed a process of gender reassignment. In order to be protected under the Act, a pupil will not necessarily have to be undertaking a medical procedure to change their sex but must be taking steps to live in the opposite gender, or proposing to do so

⁶⁴ Education Authority (2019) Guidance for Schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People. Equality Unit: Belfast Online Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/Guidance%20for%20Schools%2C%20EOTAS%20Centres%20and%20Youth%20Service%20on%20supporting%20transgender%20young%20people.pdf>

⁶⁵ Education Authority (2019) Guidance for Schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People. Equality Unit: Belfast Online Available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-01/Guidance%20for%20Schools%2C%20EOTAS%20Centres%20and%20Youth%20Service%20on%20supporting%20transgender%20young%20people.pdf>

⁶⁶ The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2016) Gender law reform Summary Report: Policy Priorities and Recommendations Online: Available at: <https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Delivering%20Equality/GenderLawReform-SummaryReport.pdf>

⁶⁷ Gray, AM, Coyle, L, Powell, R, Harding, S (2020) Gender Equality Strategy Expert Advisory Panel Report. Department for Communities Online Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-social-inclusion-strategy-gender-expert-advisory-panel-report.pdf>

different and less favourable treatment from that given to other young people and that schools should also ensure that transgender young people do not suffer unfair or less favourable treatment because of a school's policies or practices, where possible. The guidance addresses the issue of school uniform stating that:

*Schools can either have a gender-neutral uniform policy or a sex specific uniform policy. In either case, it is recommended that schools adopt a flexible approach to meet the needs of a pupil who is transgender. Generally, if the school has a specific dress code for boys and girls, a transgender pupil should be allowed to wear the clothing that corresponds to their gender identity, regardless of their sex assigned at birth, unless there is a good reason not to.*⁶⁸

The guidance further state that as a matter of good practice, schools may wish to introduce a 'gender neutral uniform option' and that this type of policy can benefit all children, regardless of whether they are transgender or experiencing gender identity issues. Schools are also urged to consider clothing worn by transgender pupils when participating in swimming lessons (for example, allowing the pupils to wear skirted swimsuits, rash vests or shorts).⁶⁹

Introducing gender neutral school uniform policies

Gender neutral school uniform policies are increasingly being seen as a means to mitigate some of the issues with sex specific school uniforms including unhelpful gender stereotypes, limiting movement and participation in school activities and restricting some students' personal and gender expression at a formative time in their lives. However, the introduction of these policies has not been without controversy.

The previously aforementioned case of the Priory School in Lewes, England introduced what it described as a gender neutral school uniform policy which obliged all students to wear trousers. Parents and children of the school argued that:

*"It's not a gender-neutral uniform, it's a male uniform. A gender-neutral uniform would allow boys to wear skirts and girls to wear skirts and both to wear trousers"*⁷⁰

Commentators have highlighted that only offering students a 'male uniform' without the option of wearing a skirt or alternative was felt to repress female-identifying students' self-expression and offer a 'male' standard for what is permissible.⁷¹

It could be argued that a 'trousers only' policy is not, in fact, gender-neutral and that a gender-neutral uniform would mean simply changing the wording in school rules so that the existing uniform of the school is available to all students, regardless of their gender identity.

⁶⁸As cited in footnote 55

⁶⁹ As cited in footnote 55

⁷⁰Cockburn, H (2019) Police called in as protesting pupils and parents locked out of school over new 'gender neutral' uniforms The Independent. Online Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/school-gender-neutral-uniform-protests-lewes-east-sussex-police-a9094636.html>

⁷¹ Griffiths, K (2019) Can school uniforms include everyone? Medium Website Online Available at: <https://medium.com/twinkl-educational-publishers/can-school-uniforms-include-everyone-5eceb1e8f5c2>

The option for children to choose between all of the options within the school uniform policy allows students to explore what they are comfortable in their self-identity.⁷²

In 2016 the Independent school Brighton College adopted such a policy by removing its traditional uniform rules and replacing them with a “trouser uniform” and a “skirt uniform” that can be worn by any pupil.⁷³

The issue of gender neutral uniform policies has also been raised in Northern Ireland. In 2019 a Belfast Grammar School announced that it was undertaking a review of its uniform policy with gender-neutral uniforms being explored as part of the review. In 2020, Derry and Strabane Council passed a motion with cross party support to encourage schools to introduce gender neutral school uniform policies.⁷⁴ In 2020 a single sex Grammar school in Derry introduced the option for girls to wear trousers or skirts following an initiative by the Student Council and after an overwhelming majority vote (87.4%) among students in favour of the move.⁷⁵

The Welsh Government was the first of the four regions in the UK to introduce statutory guidance on school uniforms which includes adopting a gender neutral policy. According to the policy, schools can no longer have separate uniform codes for boys and girls, so that trousers or shorts, for example, will be available for either to wear.⁷⁶ School will also need to consider whether flexibility is needed in relation to uniform to meet the needs of a pupil who is undergoing gender reassignment and highlights that failure to allow a pupil to wear uniform that reflects their gender identity may constitute discrimination on the basis of gender reassignment under the Equality Act (2010).⁷⁷

The Current guidance on uniform school policy in England which was published in 2013 states that in formulating its school uniform policy, a school should consider its obligations not to discriminate unlawfully. For example, it is not expected that the cost of girls’ uniform is significantly more expensive than boys or vice-versa as this may constitute unlawful sex discrimination which is covered under the Equality Act 2010.⁷⁸

Schools are also asked to bear in mind the concept of “indirect” discrimination. This involves the application of a requirement, which, although applied equally to everyone, puts certain people at a particular disadvantage because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, religion

⁷² As cited directly above

⁷³ Adams, R (2016) Brighton College alters uniform code to accommodate transgender pupils The Guardian Website Online Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/20/brighton-college-axes-uniform-dress-code-accommodate-transgender-pupils>

⁷⁴ <https://www.derryjournal.com/education/all-derry-strabane-schools-urged-end-outdated-tradition-mandatory-skirts-or-trousers-3024634>

⁷⁵ Derry girls will wear the trousers as St. Cecilia's students vote overwhelming for new uniform option <https://www.derryjournal.com/news/uk-news/derry-girls-will-wear-trousers-st-cecilias-students-vote-overwhelming-new-uniform-option-1741416>

⁷⁶ Welsh Government (2019) Statutory guidance for school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies Education, Wales (2019, No. 21) <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/statutory-guidance-for-school-governing-bodies-on-school-uniform-and-appearance-policies.pdf>

⁷⁷ As cited directly above

⁷⁸ Department for Education (2013) School uniform guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities Online Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514978/School_Uniform_Guidance.pdf

or belief or gender reassignment. The guidance states that such a requirement will need to be justified as a proportionate way of achieving a reasonable objective if it is to be lawful, and the policy will need to be flexible enough to allow for necessary exceptions.⁷⁹

Similarly in Northern Ireland, guidance on school uniforms, last updated in 2018, highlights a range of legislation that prohibits unlawful discrimination and protect the rights of individuals and that schools should bear in mind the concept of “indirect” discrimination when drawing up their school uniform policies.⁸⁰

4 School uniforms, student attainment and behaviour

It is theorised that uniforms could positively influence student attainment, performance and behaviour by:

- **Reducing peer pressure** in terms of clothing, particularly for girls;
- **Providing improvements in safety** by making it easier to identify unauthorised visitors, preventing the use of controversial clothing and reducing theft of expensive items;
- **Promoting a positive school Ethos** and instilling a **sense of pride** in school emblem and colours
- **Instilling respect for authority** among students which could improve behaviour and reduce disruptions; and
- **Reducing the time taken** to get ready for school, potentially allowing additional time for studying or sleeping.⁸¹

A number of attitudinal research studies have been commissioned by various school wear suppliers to understand attitudes of teachers, parents and children towards school uniforms across the UK. A recent 2020 survey carried out by Trutex in partnership with the Princess Diana Award found that teachers in particular, believe that a school uniform:

- Has a positive effect on student behaviour (89%);
- Reduces bullying in the classroom (89%) (*46% of children and 61% of parents agreed with this statement*);

⁷⁹ As cited directly above

⁸⁰ Department of Education (2011) Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy (revised 5 June 2018) Bangor Online Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>

⁸¹ Department of Education (2011) Circular 2011/04 - Guidance to schools on school uniform policy (revised 5 June 2018) Bangor Online Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201104-guidance-schools-school-uniform-policy-revised-5-june-2018>, The Benefits of School Specific Uniform, The Schoolwear Association Website <https://schoolwearassociation.co.uk/the-benefits-of-school-specific-uniform/>, Department for Education (2013) School uniform guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities Online Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514978/School_Uniform_Guidance.pdf and Gentile, E., Imberman, S.A. (2012) “Dressed for success? The effect of school uniforms on student achievement and behaviour” *Journal of Urban Economics* Vol. 71 pp. 1-17

- Helps students to 'fit in', as their standardised outfits make it harder to identify social classes or family backgrounds or who owns the latest 'must have' trainers (94%);
- Improved perceptions of a school (94%); and
- Contributes to a happy school community (83%).⁸²

Focus group research carried out by School Wear Association in 2017 with Year seven and Year nine students found that a clear dress code can help set boundaries for pupils. It also helps pupils to see school as a working environment and that a school uniform reduces many distractions associated with personal appearance.⁸³ This reflects earlier findings by the Association who commissioned survey research in 2007 with Oxford Brooks University and found that uniforms improved concentration and fostered a sense of pride, especially when worn outside of school.

These views are supported by guidance issued by the Department for Education in England on school uniforms which states that:

*'The Department strongly encourages schools to have a uniform as it can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone'*⁸⁴

However, overall there is a lack of robust research evidence on the impact of school uniform on student attainment, performance and behaviour.⁸⁵ The evidence rests mainly on attitudinal research mentioned above or correlational studies that have compared the performance of schools with uniforms to those without, or that have examined a school's trajectory of improvement after the introduction of school uniform. One of the problems in interpreting this evidence is that schools in challenging circumstances often choose a school uniform policy as part of a broader range of improvement measures and it can be difficult to isolate the role that uniforms have played. To date research in this area has been unable to establish a causal link.⁸⁶

There is some evidence that free school uniforms in areas with very high levels of deprivation in England can improve attendance, although this does not appear to apply universally across all areas of high deprivation.⁸⁷ Similarly, a large scale study in America found that wearing a uniform did have a positive impact on school attendance at post primary level

⁸²Trutex (2017) Attitudes to School Uniforms Online Available at: https://www.trutextru2u.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Uniform-Research-Report-29_6_17.pdf

⁸³ Burgess, D (2018) Schoolwear Association: Dressed for Success Online Available at: <https://cwb-online.co/schoolwear-association-dressed-for-success/>

⁸⁴ Department for Education (2013) School uniform guidance for governing bodies, school leaders, school staff and local authorities Online Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/514978/School_Uniform_Guidance.pdf

⁸⁵ Gentile, E., Imberman, S.A. (2012) "Dressed for success? The effect of school uniforms on student achievement and behaviour" *Journal of Urban Economics* Vol. 71 pp. 1-17 and Higgins, S., Kokotsaki, D., Coe, R. (2011) *Toolkit of Strategies to Improve Learning* Durham: The Sutton Trust

⁸⁶ Education Endowment Fund (2019) School Uniform Teaching and Learning Toolkit Online Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/school-uniform/#closeSignup> and Gentile, E., Imberman, S.A. (2012) "Dressed for success? The effect of school uniforms on student achievement and behaviour" *Journal of Urban Economics* Vol. 71 pp. 1-17

⁸⁷ Higgins, S., Kokotsaki, D., Coe, R. (2011) *Toolkit of Strategies to Improve Learning* Durham: The Sutton Trust

particularly among girls. However, the same study found no correlation between the introductions of school uniforms and improvements in student attainment or behaviour.

Current research does not present any conclusive evidence as to whether uniform has a positive or negative impact on students' behavioural and educational outcomes.

5 Summary

The purpose of this paper was to present an overview of some of the arguments put forward regarding the advantages and disadvantages of school uniforms and any evidence to support those arguments.

Purchasing school uniforms has been established as a financial burden for many parents which has been exacerbated further by the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent initiatives in the form of statutory guidance by the Welsh and UK government aims to reduce costs and lessen this burden on parents.

Stakeholders in Northern Ireland have called for more financial support for parents struggling to meet uniform costs. Currently guidance in Northern Ireland on school uniforms policy is non-statutory, putting it on a statutory footing similar to that in England and Wales could assist in stabilising costs.

The gendered aspect of the school uniforms have also become central to the debate including that they highlight differences between girls and boys and thus enhance stereotypes. Furthermore, the difficulties that uniforms can pose for non-binary, gender questioning or transitioning students are also being increasingly recognised. Gender neutral school uniform policies where children can choose between all of the options within the school uniform policy are thought to mitigate some of these gender issues and schools are increasingly implementing gender neutral policies.

In 2019 the EA released guidance on how to support transgender youth in educational settings including guidance in relation to school uniform policies. However, it has been recognised that there is a gap in Northern Ireland's equality legislation with regard to legal protections for transgender pupils in education. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has highlighted the need for this to be rectified to ensure transgendered pupils are protected from discrimination.

The paper also explored the role of the school uniform in supporting positive behaviour and student attainment. Attitudinal research indicates support, particularly among teachers, for the role that uniforms play in this regard, however overall there is a lack of robust research evidence which establishes a causal link. Consequently, there is no conclusive evidence as to whether uniform has a positive or negative impact on students' behavioural and educational outcomes and it is an area that would merit further research.