

5-2013

# Perceptions of High School Students of the Impact of a School Uniform Policy

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PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
OF THE IMPACT OF A SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY

PERCEPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
OF THE IMPACT OF A SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

High schools are tirelessly pondering ideas of enhancing the learning environment by increasing academic engagement and safety. This phenomenology study was designed to report and analyze the perceptions of selected students about their academic engagement and safety while attending one high school. Data for this study were obtained through interviews that were conducted on two levels: focus group and individual interviews. The results indicate that uniforms by themselves have little to do with a student's academic engagement. Students believe that their teachers play a big part in the way that they participate in educational tasks. They also believe that engaging in academics has great consequences such as becoming a member of certain school organizations, graduating from school, and furthering their education. This study suggests that simply requiring students to wear uniforms will not cause them to become more academically engaged nor will it make schools safer. However, when a mandatory uniform policy is in place, the learning environment is enhanced because fewer instances of teasing and fighting over jealousy will occur.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my true loves, Blair and Paige.

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## **Chapter One Introduction**

The argument over school dress codes and school uniform policies continues to echo in the meeting rooms, administrative offices, and classrooms of public schools throughout the country. Historically, uniforms have been limited to private and parochial schools (Hughes, 1996; Samuels, 2003). While Catholic schools report high achievement and few behavioral problems, their success cannot be generalized to public schools. The success seen in Catholic schools may be caused by other factors such as high standards, close communities, family support, academic efforts made by the student, and highly motivated environments: factors that are rare in public schools (Samuels, 2003). Nevertheless, within the last two decades, public schools have decided to implement uniform policies as a means of obtaining the academic and behavioral success seen in private schools. To date, twenty-one states in the United States and the District of Columbia give local public districts the authority to mandate school uniform policies (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

District board of directors may form a parent/student advisory committee to determine whether a district wide student dress code should be enacted. After such a committee decides that a dress code policy should be adopted, the board may place the issue on the ballot of "any school election." However, "[n]othing in this section shall be construed as requiring the board of directors of a local school district to adopt a uniform dress code or to hold an election on the issue (p.1).

Those who have mandated such policies have done so in an effort to enhance the learning environment (Padgett, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). The learning environment is influenced by the attitudes of the students, teachers, and staff members and it is created through the interaction of human relationships, physical setting, and psychological atmosphere (CUBE, 2006). The enhancement of this environment includes increasing academic engagement while decreasing disciplinary problems. Students engaged in academics work hard

and perform at high levels of academic achievement (Voelkl, 1995). In doing so, they are unlikely to cause disciplinary problems. Disciplinary problems such as violence, gang affiliation, and acts of bullying create an unsafe learning environment and pose a threat to the learning environment (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler & Feinberg, 2005; Vanover, 1993).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While there are studies analyzing the effects that the school uniform policy may or may not have on elementary aged students (Van Mater, 2005; Swain, 2002), none explain how the policy affects the perceptions of high school students. Currently no study exists that analyzes the effects that the school uniform policy has on academic engagement, safety, and behavior of high school students. Studies conducted in elementary settings cannot be generalized to high school settings. Elementary students are developmentally different from high school students (McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Snowman & Bieler, 2000). This is evident with the analysis of one study which suggests that after the implementation of a uniform policy, elementary school students demonstrated higher academic gains when compared to middle school students. Elementary school students also showed fewer disciplinary problems than middle school students (Pate, 1999).

In order to investigate the effects that the school uniform policy has on academic performance and discipline, it is necessary to understand the history of the dress code in public schools and the advantages and disadvantages of implementing a school uniform policy.

**history of the uniform policy.** The history of the uniform policy in public schools dates back to 1987 when Cherry Hill Elementary, an inner-city school in Baltimore, became the first public school to adopt uniforms. In 1994, the Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) became the first public school district to require all students in grades Kindergarten through

eighth to wear uniforms (Anderson, 2002; Brunsmas & Rockquemore, 1998; Lopez, 2003; Stanley, 1996; Wilson, 1999). Within the first year of the implementation of the policy, the LBUSD began a study to measure its effectiveness (Stanley, 1996; Wilson, 1999). The study consisted of surveys given to elementary and middle school teachers, staff, and students who were present on the day of the survey. Although the primary focus of the study was the middle school setting, the researcher also surveyed high school students and parents. Other data from this study were obtained by counting reported class disruptions, reported playground acts of violence, suspensions, and reported violations of the dress code. Research findings indicate that elementary school suspensions declined by 25% from 3,183 in the 1993-94 school year to 2,278 in the 1994-95 school year. Middle school suspensions were reduced by 36% from 2,813 in the 1993-94 school year to 1,814 in the following year.

Survey responses indicated that school administrators believed that school uniforms had a positive effect on student behavior. From this survey, the researchers found that since the implementation of the policy school administrators noticed fewer class disruptions (81.5%), improved student behavior (95.4%), increased student cooperation (78.4%), improved student attitude (90.7%), fewer playground fights (73.9%), fewer suspensions (57%), fewer dress code violations (83%), an increase in cooperation among students (53.8%), and a small increase in student courtesy (47.7%) (Stanley, 1996).

Despite the positive perceptions of adults, students responding to the survey had different feelings concerning the uniform policy. Middle school students indicated that uniforms did not reduce fights (80.9%), did not make them feel safer at school, and did not make them feel part of a school (68.7%). Elementary students agreed that uniforms did not reduce fights (77%), while half of them believed that they felt safer wearing uniforms. However, when asked if the uniform

made them feel part of a school, 61% agreed. While high school students were not required to wear uniforms, 62.5% of those surveyed did not believe that wearing uniforms would help them be a part of the school family (Stanley, 1996).

After two years of the implementation of the uniform policy in the LBUSD, President William (Bill) Clinton presented the topic of dress codes and uniform policies in his 1996 state of the union address (Anderson, 2002; Dussel, 2005). In his speech, Clinton presented the topic by stressing how uniforms would help promote security in schools and would be safe attire for children. He supported this notion by recalling an event that happened days earlier when a teenager had been killed for a pair of Nike shoes (Dussel, 2005). Shortly after his address, President Clinton tasked the United States Department of Education to develop and publish a *Manual on School Uniforms*. After the publication of the manual, the U.S. Department of Education mailed a manual to all 16,000 school districts in the nation (Anderson, 2002). This publication provides a guide to which schools may adhere in order to ensure the development of appropriate dress codes (what must not be worn) and uniform policies (what must be worn) (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

**advantages of the uniform policy.** An increase in violent threats among school youths over clothing and accessories prompted the idea of mandatory school uniform policies (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Proponents of the uniform policy believe that if everyone in a school dresses alike, or at least dresses similarly, there will be a decrease in behavioral problems, an increase in learning and academic achievement, and an improvement in the school climate (Bodine, 2003; Elder, 1999; Padgett, 1998). They also believe that uniforms could help reduce violence and increase the possibility of a safe learning environment (NAESP, 2001; Wilson, 1999).

In response to this increase of violence in U.S. schools, many parents, teachers, and school officials view school uniforms as one positive and creative way of reducing disciplinary problems while increasing school safety (U.S. Department of Education, 1996; VanMater, 2005). There is an array of desired outcomes that may come from the implementation of a uniform policy: 1) decreasing violence and theft among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers; 2) helping prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school; 3) instilling students with discipline; and 4) helping school officials recognize intruders who come to the school (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

One survey revealed that more than 70 percent of the 5,500 principals surveyed as attendees of the 1996 National Association of Secondary School Principals' Annual Conference believed that requiring students to wear uniforms to school would reduce violent incidents and discipline problems. Moreover, more than 80 percent of Long Beach Press-Telegram readers supported school uniforms and their ability to reduce violence (NAESP, 2001).

A May 2000 survey, conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), revealed that more than two-thirds of the principals (67%) at schools with uniform policies saw improvements in their students' concentration on schoolwork (NAESP, 2001).

**disadvantages of the uniform policy.** Although some people believe that the uniform policy promotes academic excellence while decreasing disciplinary problems, others feel differently. The most prevalent arguments for school uniforms are that uniforms prevent gang-related activities, enable students to focus on schooling, reduce violent behavior, and increase student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Opponents of the policy say that uniforms do not reduce gang activity, do not reduce violence, and have little to do with academic

achievement (Brunsma, 2002; Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998; Wilkins, 1999). In fact, many believe that dress codes and uniform policies are shallow solutions to deeper problems (Anderson, 2002). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) conducted a series of focus group and discussions with high school students to identify what students believed to be solutions to the problem of school violence. School uniforms were not among the solutions students mentioned. Students' suggestions did include schools seriously confronting and discussing issues of racial and cultural conflict; providing programs that would protect students safety to and from school; securing school entrances; providing more extracurricular activities and clubs; establishing open forums to provide opportunities for self-expressions; and teaching conflict resolution skills (NAESP, 2001).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the uniform policy on public high schools. Specifically, this study examined students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while at one high school.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their academic engagement?
2. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their safety while at school?

### **Scope of the Study**

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the uniform policy as it relates to the perceptions held by the students of their academic engagement and safety in one public high school (grades 10-12). To provide an understanding of this social phenomenon, semi-structured

individual interviews as well as focus group interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth responses from students who were attending the school district during the time of the study. The district's annual discipline report was also requested for an archival overview.

### **Significance of Study**

High schools are tirelessly pondering ideas of enhancing the learning environment by increasing academic engagement and safety. It has been suggested that the adoption of a uniform policy may aid in this nationwide goal. The LBUSD credits uniforms for numerous behavioral and academic changes. Brunsmma and Rockquemore (1998) challenge this claim by noting that since other reform efforts (i.e. reassessment of content standards and alternative pedagogical strategies) took place at the same time as the implementation of the uniform policy, uniforms cannot be considered the sole factor in causing a variety of positive educational outcomes. Therefore, this study examined high school students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while attending a school where a uniform policy is in place.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to the perceptions of students in one high school located in the Delta region of Arkansas. The participants in this study were limited to twelve students enrolled during the 2009-2010 school year. The results of this study do not represent a random sample and are not generalizable to other elementary, middle, or high schools. Other schools are in different locations, are of different sizes, and have different demographics.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. Academic engagement: on task behaviors that signal a serious psychological investment in class work.
2. Achievement: something accomplished by superior ability, special effort, or great

courage.

3. Bullying: acts of intentionally causing harm to others through verbal harassment, physical assault, or other methods of coercion.
4. Discipline problem: students not following the student conduct code and disrupting the teacher's instruction of the class.
5. Flooding: wearing pants at or above the ankles.
6. Gangs: group of adolescents who associate closely and who engage in a range of social and antisocial behaviors.
7. Jone: Tease
8. Mandatory school uniform: students wear a particular color and style of clothing that was chosen by students, parents, faculty, and staff members and approved by the school board of a particular district.
9. Policy: a plan of action; a way of management.
10. School climate: the learning environment created through the interactions of human relationships, physical setting, and psychological atmosphere.
11. Uniforms: distinctive garments worn by members of a group.

## **Summary**

The debate concerning the effectiveness of the school uniform policy is ongoing. Literature on the use of school uniforms is comprised largely of opinions and hearsay (Brunsma, 2002). Despite the lack of empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the uniform policy, schools throughout the country are adopting uniform policies as part of school reform. Schools that have implemented the policy do so as a means of improving the learning environment (Padgett, 1998). These improvements include creating a safe learning environment that supports academic

achievement. A study of the uniform policy may provide a better insight into the policy's effectiveness. This study examined the effectiveness of the uniform policy as it relates to academic engagement and safety in public high schools.

In order to effectively examine this issue it is imperative to have a clear understanding of the effects that the uniform policy may or may not have on academic engagement and/or safety. The findings of this study enable districts, administrators, parents, and teachers to determine if the efforts used to implement such a policy will produce desired benefits (i.e. increased academic engagement and school safety). If it is found that the implementation of a school uniform policy promotes positive academic and safety changes, then schools considering such reforms will have evidence of its effectiveness. On the other hand, if it is found that the policy does not promote positive changes, schools may decide to focus their attention on alternative reforms that may produce these desirable outcomes.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

The following categories will be examined for the literature review in this chapter: school environment, effective schools, academics and school uniforms, and safety in public schools. A summary of the literature review concludes the chapter.

#### **School Environment**

Students cannot learn well and are not likely to behave well in negative school environments. Likewise teachers will not teach well in such environments. In negative school environments, students rarely experience success in school (CUBE, 2006). These environments do not promote student development and learning. Negative school environments not only lack mutually respectful relationships among students and staff, but they are not physically or psychologically safe environments (Johnson, 2009). Such environments place a great threat on both teaching and learning. "Where we learn", a nationwide survey developed by The National School Boards Association Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE, 2006) was administered to approximately 32,000 students to gather their perceptions of the school climate and its influence. Participants of this study were enrolled in 108 schools within 15 urban districts, across 13 states: 40 elementary schools, 26 middle schools, 28 high schools, and 14 K-8 schools. Findings from this study indicate improved student climate contributes to: higher academic achievement, higher morale among students and teachers, more reflective practice among teachers, fewer student dropouts, reduced violence, better community relations, and increased institutional pride. This suggests that teaching and learning reaches their maximum potential in a school environment that fosters a positive climate (CUBE, 2006).

## **Effective Schools**

Students in effective schools feel that they are valued participants working toward meaningful goals (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). They seem to respond more positively to schooling when they are treated as individuals. Interpersonal relationships between teachers and students can promote such an environment by increasing achievement while decreasing behavioral problems (CUBE, 2006; McEvoy & Welker, 2000). As cited by McEvoy and Welker (2000), research by William Glasser documented the transformation of an inner-city low achieving school where antisocial behavior was prevalent among its students. Positive changes in academic achievement and pro-social behavior were possible because of a systematic change in the rapport between students and teachers (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Ideally, this level of trust and respect is prominent in all grade levels. However as a student gets older, the level of trust and respect between them and their teacher decreases. Respondents of the "Where We Learn" survey were asked to respond to the statement, "At my school, teachers respect the students." More than 61 percent (61.6%) of the students agreed. However, students in grades 9-12 were twice as likely as those in grades 4-6 to disagree with the statement (25.9% and 10.7%, respectively). Approximately 21 percent of students in grades 7-8 disagreed with the statement (CUBE, 2006).

Results from this survey and research by Glasser may provide insights to findings from another study. Pate (1999) designed a study to examine the influence of a mandatory school uniform dress code on academic achievement and discipline. Participants for this study were 87,170 students in six middle schools and 80 elementary schools from two districts. One district was located in a primarily urban area of South Florida. The other district was located in a predominately rural area in central Florida. An analysis of standardized test scores and data on

disciplinary infractions revealed that while there were academic improvements in both school districts, these improvements were most evident in elementary schools. As for disciplinary infractions, some schools in both districts had fewer discipline infractions, while others had more after the adoption of the mandatory uniform policy. Specifically, middle school students did not have a significant decrease for discipline. This difference in achievement and discipline between elementary and middle school students may be directly related to the relationships between the teachers and the students (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). The elementary students may have had fewer disciplinary infractions than the middle school students because the elementary students had better relationships with their teachers than the middle school students had with their teachers. Therefore it is important to note the developmental changes among youth.

During early school years, parents and teachers set standards of conduct, and most children abide by these rules. These children eagerly strive to please their teacher. However, as children get older they tend to be more interested in the thoughts and views of their peers rather than their parents or teachers (Snowman & Bieler, 2000).

According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, the behavior of children ages 6-11 is dominated by intellectual curiosity and performance (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). This is a time where children must be encouraged to do well, allowed to finish tasks, and praised for trying. Quite differently, the behavior of adolescence age 12-18 is shaped by the roles and skills that will prepare them to eventually take a meaningful place in society. During this stage in life, adolescents struggle to establish a sense of stability in various aspects of their lives. Simply put, adolescents age 12-18 are concerned with the development of their identity (Snowman & Bieler, 2000).

Identity can be defined as "accepting one's body, having goals, and getting recognition

(Snowman & Bieler, 2000 p. 29)." Adolescent's use their style as a means of conveying their identity. This style may consist of their dress, hairstyles, interests, and social relationships which are strongly influenced by peers. Not only do teens view their style as an influential factor, they also see it [style] as a way of being accepted by their peers. If a teenager does not experience acceptance by "those who count" they may decide to establish a negative identity. This causes the youngster to engage in defiant or destructive behavior (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). Since behavior and achievement are directly related, students who behave badly will likely fail academically (Kaplan & Maehr, 1999; Snowman & Bieler, 2000).

Studies show that safe and disciplined schools enhance students' academic achievement and discipline (CUBE, 2006; Kaplan & Maehr, 1999). Safety and discipline are the crux of an effective school. How a student feels about the safety of their school influences their learning potential (CUBE, 2006). In effective schools, students display high expectations for achievement and they exhibit a sense of efficacy with respect to learning (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). As cited by McEvoy and Welker (2000), in 1996, Maguin and Loeber conducted a meta-analysis of studies on the relationship between academic performance and delinquency. Results from this study suggest that poor academic performance is related to the onset, frequency, persistence, and seriousness of delinquent offences in adolescents. Thus, higher academic performance is associated with resisting delinquent behaviors. The authors also suggest that interventions that improve academic performance co-occur with a reduction in the prevalence of delinquency.

Proponents of the school uniform policy believe that requiring students to wear uniforms enhances the learning environment by increasing academic achievement while minimizing behavioral problems. They assert that students will spend less time concentrating on trends and

fashion and more time engaging in academics. Students who are academically successful have little impetus to engage in disruptive behavior such as fighting, bullying, and gang activity (Van Acker & Wehby, 2000).

### **Academics and School Uniforms**

During adolescence, many psychiatric disorders either appear or become prominent. Depression is the most common of these emotional disorders. Such a disorder can be triggered by a perceived failure at school. Students who are depressed have difficulty in concentrating, solving academic problems, and developing positive self-concepts (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). This causes students to fail grades or even drop out of school (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

The attribution theory suggests that low-achieving students attribute failure to low ability (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). These students predict a life of failure rather than a life of success. William Glasser, author of *Control Theory in the Classroom* (1986) and *The Quality School* (1990), argues that for children to succeed at life in general, they must first experience success in school. If they do not, their self-worth will suffer. This results in the depression of their motivation to achieve on subsequent classroom tasks (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). Therefore, it is imperative for students to experience success as they learn.

Students will likely experience this success in a school with a positive climate. A positive school climate gives students the security and encouragement they need to achieve academically (CUBE, 2006). Hardre, Crowson, Bebacker, and White (2007) conducted a study in 18 rural public high schools located in the southwestern United States to investigate predictive relationships among student characteristics that influence motivation for learning and achievement. Nine hundred students in grades 9-12 completed questionnaires that measured motivation-related perceptions (of their classroom climate, of their ability, and of the

instrumentality of learning tasks and activities), goals, and school-related effort and engagement. Results from this study suggest that school climate predicts academic engagement.

In another study, Voelkl (1995) determined a student's perception of school warmth contributes to his/her participation in class and/or academic achievement. Data for this study were derived from 13,121 eighth-grade students attending public schools that participated in the United States Department of Education's National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88). An analysis of the NELS:88 survey revealed that students' who have positive perceptions of school warmth may be more encouraged, like school better, and become more engaged. Once a student becomes more engaged in school, they will work harder and perform higher levels of academic achievement (Voelkl, 1995).

Similar results have been reported in older adolescents as well. A more recent study conducted by Pittman and Richmond (2007) explored the associations between a sense of school belonging and academic and psychological adjustment. In this study, questionnaires were given to 266 adolescents 18-19 years of age who were in the second semester of their freshman year at one regional state university. Researchers adopted the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) measure to ask participants about their current sense of belonging to the university and their past sense of belonging to their high school. The results of this study suggest that college students who reported a greater sense of belonging at the university and in their previous high schools were doing better academically, felt more competent scholastically, had higher self-worth, and denoted lower levels of externalizing problems such as aggressive behavior, anxiety, and depression. The authors also noted that students who have a better sense of belonging in high school may approach the transition to college with more confidence and higher expectations of doing well than those who did not experience a sense of belonging to their

high school.

Research suggests that school uniforms may promote a sense of belonging in the school climate (VanMater, 2005). Sixty-one percent of students in the LBUSD believed that uniforms made them feel part of a school (Stanley, 1996). When students wear less competitive clothing, peer pressure among students is minimized (VanMater, 2005). Students are able to spend less time worrying about what to wear or how they look and more time on academics (Daugherty, 2002; Stanley, 1996).

Padgett (1998) conducted a survey to determine whether or not teachers at a central Georgia elementary school believed that a strict dress code or a student uniform policy was needed to improve student behavior. He found a positive correlation between the uniform policy and academic performance. The results of his research indicate that teachers believe that students would behave better and work harder on academics if they are dressed professionally. Similar results were reported in the LBUSD school district. More than 78% of the administrators surveyed noticed an increase in work ethics. Similarly, 81.7% of parents surveyed believed that uniforms reminded children that they are going to school to learn (Stanley, 1996).

Further support for the notion that uniform policies have a positive effect on student achievement was found in Albuquerque Public schools. As a result of parent initiative, a uniform policy was implemented at John Adams and Truman Middle schools in Albuquerque Public Schools, Albuquerque, New Mexico in the fall of 1998. Within the first year of its implementation, Elder (1999) administered surveys to the students, parents, and staff members of both schools to gather perceptions of the impact of the policy. A majority of the parents surveyed believed that wearing school uniforms causes their child to have positive feelings about their school and it promotes a positive school climate (58.5%, 74.7% respectively). Moreover,

70.2% believe that school uniforms help their children focus on their education. Further insights concerning the impact of the policy were obtained by analyzing data on discipline referrals and number of students achieving honor roll status. When comparing the percent of students who earned honor status in both the first and second quarters of the 1997-1998 school year to those in the 1998-1999 school year, the percentage of students who made the honor roll increased at John Adams from 31.4% to 43.3%.

Although some people believe that the uniform policy promotes academic excellence, others believe that there is no positive relationship between the two (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 1998; Wilkins, 1999). In 1998, Brunsma and Rockquemore used the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988(NELS:88) to evaluate the effects of the uniform policy on 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The purpose of the study was to determine the effect that student uniforms may or may not have on behavioral problems, and academic achievement. The researchers used variables to control for differences in student characteristics, student socioeconomic status, school characteristics, and school sector. In this study, the authors failed to find a direct effect of uniforms on behavioral outcomes and/or academic achievement. When analyzing the relationship between the uniform policy and behavioral problems, Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998) could not find any sufficient evidence that supported the notion that school uniforms decrease behavioral problems. The authors added that academic preparedness, preschool attitudes, and peer norms are factors that aid in effectively lessening behavioral problems on average. They concluded by stating that, while uniforms act as a catalyst for change and provide a highly visible opportunity for additional programs; they have no direct effects on specific outcomes. The authors supported this notion by stating that the LBUSD's success cannot be solely contributed to the uniform policy, considering other reform efforts were implemented

during the same time. These reforms included a reassessment of content standards and alternative pedagogical strategies (Brunsmas & Rockquemore, 1998).

In a recent study, Sowell (2012) conducted a casual-comparative study to examine the relationship of school uniforms to attendance, academic achievement, and discipline referrals. This study was conducted in two high schools (one with a school uniform policy in place, the other without a school uniform policy in place) in rural Southwest Georgia county school systems.

An analysis of the Georgia High School Graduation test revealed that uniformed students scored slightly lower in math than non-uniformed students. When analyzing the English Language Arts (ELA), the scores of the schools were similar. Therefore, Sowell concluded that there was no support for the use of school uniforms to improve standardized ELA and math scores (Sowell, 2012).

### **Safety in Public Schools**

The first requirement of a good school is to provide a safe learning environment (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Problems such as violence, victimization, and similar behaviors create an unsafe learning environment and pose a threat to the school population (Luiselli et al., 2005; Vanover, 1993). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), during the 2005-06 school year, 86% of public schools reported that at least one violent incident, theft or other crime occurred at their school (NCES, 2007).

There will undoubtedly be educational consequences if students fear for their safety before, during, or after school. Neighborhoods and schools are frequently places of victimization for youth (Vanover, 1993). A survey conducted in 2000 by NCES found that principals reporting that their students lived in neighborhoods with high or mixed levels of crime

were more likely to report a violent or serious violent incident than those principals with students who lived in neighborhoods with low levels of crime (NCES, 2003).

Students who fear for their safety in school or on the way to school may become distracted from learning and may turn to truancy as a viable alternative to facing the daily threats of violence. Bowen & Bowen (1999) conducted a study to examine students' perceptions of their exposure to neighborhood and school danger and the effects of these exposures on their attendance, school behavior, and grades. In this study, 1,828 students from 39 middle schools and 54 high schools were administered the School Success Profile (SSP). This self-administered survey assesses student's perceptions of their family, school, peer, and neighborhood environments, and dimensions of individual adaptation such as physical health, psychological well-being and school functioning. Results from this study suggest that as a student's perception of danger increased, their grades suffered, their attendance dropped and they were less likely to avoid school behavior problems.

Exposure to and perceptions of danger in school and neighborhoods has a detrimental effect on the performance of adolescents (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Youth who feel safe, secure, and free from threats of violence perform better academically (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Therefore, it is imperative to recognize behavioral problems that may induce an unsafe learning environment.

**gangs.** Teens are concerned with their social status. School is a place that fosters this status by allowing students to develop friendships, cliques, and crowds. Students often form these relationships because they make them feel they are included and accepted by their peers (Vanover, 1993). Student inclusion is imperative to their well-being. Students who are academically and socially successful in school rarely engage in disruptive behavior (Van Acker

& Wehby, 2000). However, when a student fails to form strong social bonds, they increase their chances of delinquent behavior and subsequent gang involvement (Vanover, 1993).

A gang is considered to be a group of individuals who express their identification through private language, symbolic behavior and the wearing of "colors"(Vanover, 1993). Adolescents often join gangs because gang membership fulfills their need to belong to something by creating a unique bond between its members. This bond is so unique that the gang and its individual members commonly claim areas or turf in a neighborhood, which they will defend by any means possible (Struyk, 2006; Vanover, 1993). They also tend to assault others or create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation (Padgett, 1998; Vanover, 1993).

Failure in school is associated with gang involvement (Dishion, Nelson, & Yasui, 2005). Those who are members of gangs place great emphasis on enhancing their status through violence and criminal activities. To them, school has little relevance in their lives (Struyk, 2006). For example, Lopez (2006) conducted a 15 year longitudinal study to investigate the perceptions of gangs reported by a random sample of adolescents residing in southern California. Based on reading and math standardized test scores the 77 participants in the study were categorized as being above average, average, low, or very low achievers. Through a series of interviews the researcher determined that while all adolescents in the study reported having knowledge or exposure to gangs through friends, family, or acquaintances, the very low achieving students were most likely to report being gang members. Moreover, those who reported gang affiliations were more likely to drop out of school compared to students who were not involved in gangs.

The identifiable signs portrayed by gang members provoke distractions in the school over students' appearance (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). The prevalence of these distractions obstructs

the teaching and learning process and places a hindrance on the safety and academic success of students. Therefore, interventions focusing on social inclusion in addition to academic engagement may play a vital role in promoting a safe learning environment by reducing or eliminating gang activity in schools and neighborhoods.

One way of fostering social ties among students while minimizing disturbance brought on by students' appearance is to require all students to dress alike. Requiring students to wear less distracting and more business like clothing to school causes fewer students to develop feelings of alienation (Anderson, 2002). In addition, fewer disruptions due to disciplinary problems will occur and the learning environment will be positively enhanced (Sommers, 2001).

Sommers (2001) conducted a study to determine the relationship (if any) between a students' attire and behavior. This study was conducted in 19 schools: 5 high schools, 4 junior high/middle schools, and 10 elementary schools. Total enrollment of these schools was 8194 students including 3186 high school students, 1321 junior high/middle school students and 3687 elementary school students. In an effort to determine the effect that student dress has on student behavior, Sommers compared the number of reported discipline cases on days that students were: dressed up, dressed down, or dressed in regular clothing.

Results from this study revealed a direct relationship between student dress and student behavior. Students had a tendency to behave best on days that they were formally dressed. As the standard of dressing decreased, the number of reported disciplinary problems increased. For the entire study, 766 discipline cases were reported. Two hundred eleven of these cases were reported on dress up days, 233 were reported on regular dress days, while the remaining 322 were reported on dress down days. These results were evident when the cases were broken down by grade level as well. At the high school level there were 70 discipline reports on dress up

days, 82 on regular dress days, and 87 on dress down day. At the junior high/middle school level, there were 63 reports on dress up day, 64 on regular dress day, and 111 on dress down day. At the elementary level there were 78 disciplinary reports on dress up day, 87 on regular dress day and 124 on dress down day. This suggests that elementary and middle school students behave better and are more academically engaged when they dress formally.

At the high school level, there was not a significant decrease in disciplinary reports when the students were dressed formally. This may suggest that high school students are more mature and thereby behave better than younger students. Therefore, the way that high school students dress for school may not have an effect on their behavior at school.

Similar findings have been noted in schools with mandatory uniform policies as well. Samuels (2003) conducted a study in Birmingham City Schools (BCS) to examine the relationship among the school uniform policy and disciplinary referrals, attendance, SAT 8/9, normal curve equivalent scores, and students' perceptions based on grade level and gender on the implementation of the policy. She hypothesized that there would be no change in the number of disciplinary referrals resulting in suspension and expulsion among students enrolled in high school in the BCS relative to the three levels of offenses (minor, intermediate, and major) during the selected years. Samuels found that the number of disciplinary referrals resulting in suspensions and expulsions among high school students with regard to minor offenses steadily decreased by 691 (30%) referrals from 1997 to 1999. Regarding the number of intermediate offenses, the total number of disciplinary referrals decreased from 1997 to 1999 by 2,225 (40%) referrals. Samuels noted a decrease in the number of disciplinary referrals for major offenses as well. These referrals decreased by 455 (27%) from 1997 to 1999.

As previously mentioned, a study conducted by Elder (1999) evaluated the impact of the uniform policy within the first year of implementation by analyzing data on discipline referrals and number of students achieving honor roll status. When comparing the number of discipline referrals, Elder found a decrease in both schools. John Adams had 1,565 in the first semester of the 1997-1998 school year. This number decreased to 405 in the first semester of the 1998-1999 school year. Similarly, Truman's referrals decreased from 1,139 in the fall semester of 1997-1998 to 850 in 1998-1999. The author stated that although positive changes occurred since the implementation of the policy in the two schools, these changes cannot be attributable solely to the uniform policy. Other variables such as teacher attrition, instructional strategies, and school administration changed in both schools within the first year of the implementation of the policy.

The debate concerning the effectiveness of a uniform policy and its deterrence of gangs in schools is ongoing. Advocates for the uniform policy believe that uniforms promote a feeling of oneness among the student body and provide a means to stimulate student conformity to the school goals (VanMater, 2005). They also note that mandating a school uniform policy will enhance school safety by helping prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Such attire causes negative distractions in school.

Ann Bodine (2003b) conducted an ethnographic study to synthesize the range of dominant and contradictory views concerning the school uniform policy and its relationship to school safety. This study was conducted in 10 public schools (8 elementary schools, 2 middle schools) in a Milpitas, California school district. Bodine used a school district questionnaire that was administered to 4513 students, parents and teachers in the district. When asked if the uniform increases campus safety, 88% of parents agreed while 6% disagreed, 86% of the

teachers agreed while 6% disagreed, 43% of the students agreed while 33% disagreed. All others were neutral regarding this statement.

While some studies suggest that the uniform policy has a positive effect on student safety, others do not. Johnson (2010) conducted a multiple-methods study to explore the impact of school uniforms on safety in thirty-eight North Carolina high schools that adopted a school uniform policy during the 2004-2005 through 2008-2009 school years. In an effort to explore the possible relationship between school uniform policies and incidents of crime and violence and occurrences of suspensions and expulsions in North Carolina high schools, the researcher examined several annual reports that were distributed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

When comparing data from the number of suspensions that occurred in these schools before the implementation of a uniform policy to the number of suspensions that occurred after the implementation of the policy, thirty of the thirty-eight schools reported no change in their number of suspensions. Six schools reported a positive change after the implementation. Two schools reported a negative change in suspensions.

Further support for the notion that school uniforms are not directly related to school safety is provided in a previously mentioned study conducted by Sowell (2012). In this study, Sowell utilized a casual-comparative study to examine the relationship between school uniforms and disciplinary referrals. The researcher tried to determine if there was a significant difference between one uniformed and one non-uniformed school in discipline referrals for the 2010-2011 school year.

The study did not provide any evidence that uniforms reduce behavioral infractions. After a comparison of minor, intermediate, and major infractions, the uniformed school had slightly fewer minor infractions but more intermediate and major infractions.

Opponents to the policy believe that schools should not use the style and color of clothing as legitimate issues that affect the safety of students (Evans, 1996). They view the differentiation of gang members differently. They believe that it is difficult to prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia to school. Leaving certain buttons unbuttoned, turning pockets inside out, or turning a shirt collar up in a particular manner may signify gang affiliation (Struyk, 2006). Wilkins (1999) stated that it is unlikely that students will admit that an adornment signifies their gang membership. In return teachers will still be involved in constant battles to ban adornments seen as gang-affiliated.

**bullying.** Many students view socializing as an incentive for attending school (Bishop, 2004). Through socializing, teens are able to fulfill their desire to belong to a group. Students who experience social inclusion are likely to feel connected and valued by their peers, teachers, and school. Such feelings contribute to effective youth participation (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007) and achievement (Van Acker & Wehby, 2000).

While peer group affiliations have many positive effects on student's well-being, some may place adolescents at greater risk of being behavioral problems. Some groups thrive on disliking, rejecting, and avoiding others (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007). Such actions are harmful to the school environment because they allow interpersonal disrespect, acts of bullying (Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008), and academic failure (Snowman & Bieler, 2000).

Acts of bullying create an unsafe learning environment, undermine instruction, and pose a threat to the school population (Luiselli et al., 2005). Dan Olweus, an internationally known expert on bullying declares a student is a victim of bullying when he or she is repeatedly exposed to injury or discomfort on the part of one or more students (as cited in Green, 2007). These students are declared bullies because they use their authority, position, or size to undermine, frighten, or intimidate others (Lawrence, 2006). Half (50.2%) of all students who responded to the as "Where We Learn" survey agreed or strongly agreed that they have witnessed students being bullied at least once per month (CUBE, 2006). Moreover, a NCES survey revealed that during the 2005-2006 school year, 28% of students aged 12-18 reported having been bullied at school during the previous 6 months (NCES, 2007).

The severity of acts of bullying can be seen worldwide. Frisen, Jonsson, and Persson (2007) conducted a study in two Swedish high schools to determine adolescents' perceptions and experiences of bullying. Of the 119 adolescents aged 15-20 used in the study, 39 percent reported that they had been bullied at some time during their school years. Twenty percent stated that they had bullied others. Of those who had bullied others, 13 percent reported being both bullies and victims. When they were asked why they believed some adolescents bullied others, their responses were the bully: has psychological problems, has low self-esteem, wants to impress others, is jealous of the victim, lacks respect for others, is annoyed with the victim, has been bullied before, or is pressured by peers. When students are faced with these issues they will find it difficult to concentrate on academics (Snowman & Bieler, 2000), thus their grades may suffer (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Now the question is, "why do some students get bullied?" The most cited reason for children being bullied is the victim's appearance (Frisen et al., 2007; Lawrence & Adams, 2007;

San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). LaPoint, Alleyne, Mitchell, and Lee (2003) administered a survey to 213 middle school students to view their attitudes and experiences related to dress and behavior including uniforms. The survey was administered in a predominately black public middle school (which had implemented a uniform policy the previous year) in a United States northeastern city. The survey was administered to all students who were present on the day of the survey (62% of the student body). There were 100 females, and 113 males in grades 6 (28.4%), 7 (30%), and 8 (41%). When asked if students are judged by their dress and appearance 40 percent of the students responded yes, 11 percent responded no, 15 percent responded that they did not know while 34 percent responded “it depends”. When prompted to elaborate on “it depends” the following responses were given: out of style, ugly, dirty, reputation, name brands, situation, demeanor, and what others think. Such responses provide evidence on how observant students are of each other’s appearance. They seem to define themselves by how well they look and the type of clothing they wear (Swain, 2002).

A student's attire serves as a powerful signifier of their worth and it determines whether or not a student is socially accepted by their peers (Swain, 2002). Some students view bullying others as a viable means of obtaining acceptance from their peers. These students believe that they gain prestige from their peers by annoying, intimidating, and (in extreme situations) hurting weaker, or less popular students (Bishop, 2004).

Aggressiveness is the foundation for acts of bullying. Those who are bullies: have seen aggressive behavior, have been treated aggressively, and/or have been rewarded for acting aggressively themselves (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). This aggressive behavior often begins in the form of gossip, insults, put downs, threats and rejection. If such acts are not tamed, they may escalate to kicking, pushing, shoving and fighting (Green, 2007). Instances of fighting and

victimizing produce a negative impact on the school environment. More than half of the respondents to the "Where We Learn" survey (51.4%) believe that there is a lot of fighting at their school (CUBE, 2006). In a previously mentioned study conducted by Bodine (2003), 35 parents and 14 students were interviewed to gain insights on their perceptions concerning the school uniform policy and student safety. One respondent, a Stanford graduate student, recalled being taunted as a 12-year-old because of his clothes,

I just kept telling my parents, I have to have them! I have to have them! Finally they bought me Nike shoes and Ocean Pacific shirts, and I didn't get into anymore fights after that. As long they kept buying me the right shoes and shirts I was o.k. Don't know what might have happened to me otherwise (p.55).

Acts of bullying decrease with age. Bullying often begins in elementary school. When children are bullied in early grade school, they often have difficulties adjusting to middle school, this is where bullying is most prevalent (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). Fortunately, by the time students enter high school acts of bullying begin to decline (Green, 2007; Frisen et al., 2007). In a recent study conducted by Jankauskiene et al. (2008), 1162 students in Kaunau secondary schools completed questionnaires established to determine their involvement in bullying. Among 6<sup>th</sup> graders 64.5% of students surveyed reported being involved in bullying. This number increased by 4% (69.5%) in 8<sup>th</sup> graders, while 46% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported being involved in bullying.

In extreme cases, instances of bullying have had a prolonged effect that proceeds into adulthood (Green, 2007). Chapell, Hasselman, Kitchin, & Lomon (2006) conducted a study to investigate the continuity of bullying and victimization from elementary school through high school and college. One hundred – nineteen undergraduates from a large eastern university completed a 32 item bullying self-report questionnaire. Fourteen (53.8%) of the 26 bullies in college, had also been bullies in high school and elementary school. Moreover 18 (72%) of the

25 students who were bullied in college were also bullied in high school and elementary school. Twelve of the respondents reported being both bullies and victims in college. Of these 12, five (41.6%) had been both bullies and victims in high school and elementary school.

Although the occurrence of bullying decreases with age, the seriousness of violent and aggressive acts which are characteristic of bully's increases with age. This is the case in a modified narrative portrait conducted by Vick Lake. Lake (2004) conducted a study to personalize the effects that a child's home and school environment has on the development of antisocial and violent behaviors. After recording events that happened in one male student's life from kindergarten through high school, Lake noticed an increase in his aggressiveness toward others. In his early school years, he displayed acts of annoyance; this progressed to bullying, then to fighting. By the time he reached high school, these aggressive acts had escalated to attacking others.

Instances of student attacks give precedence to the notion that being bullied is associated with many negative developmental outcomes such as loneliness, depression (Jankauskiene et al. 2008; Wigfield et al., 2005), and academic failure (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). Students who have been victimized feel afraid, powerless, incompetent, and ashamed (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). Because they view their school climate as intimidating and threatening of harm, some victims choose to withdraw from social interaction (Bishop, 2004). These victims seek avenues to avoid being harassed, insulted, teased, and ostracized by peers. Some avoid socializing with others by walking quickly from class to class. They also avoid participating in after school activities; instead they immediately go home at the end of the school day (Bishop, 2004). Others view truancy as an effective solution to acts of bullying (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). In 2005, 6 percent of students aged 12-18 avoided school activity or places in school because of fear of

attack or harm (NCES, 2007). This pattern of avoidance is detrimental to the learning environment because when a student withdraws from school he or she also withdraws from learning.

Despite the many attempts of victims to avoid a bully's eye, bullies are not always avoidable. In situations where victims are confronted by bullies they often respond to the confrontation by saying mean things back, hitting back, or telling the bully to stop. Still, others try to ignore them and simply walk away (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). A Longview High School student recalls an incident of serious physical harassment "we were all hanging out...and then a couple of freaks walked by and everybody started throwing things at them, like rocks and stuff. They just kept on walking. They just try to ignore it." (Bishop, 2004 p. 238).

While each victim employs different strategies when dealing with bullies, very few choose to tell an adult at the school (Frisen, 2007; Lawrence & Adams, 2006; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). In one study, the experiences of 211 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders with bullying were discussed (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). Most of the students in this study were not confident that adults could protect them from being bullied. Others believed that teachers do not seem to notice bullying behavior found in schools (Frisen; Naylor, 2006; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007) and they do not take it as seriously as they should (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). This passive acceptance of bullying in schools creates an unsafe environment that allows bullying to continue and eventually lead to more serious violence if not stopped (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2005).

A victim's reluctance to report a bully's action to adults may be the reason for their repeated exposure to injury or discomfort (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). Such exposure is detrimental to the learning environment because it makes students feel unsafe. Students who do

not feel safe will have a hard time focusing on academics. Therefore, students should be advised of other avenues that may control or eliminate bullying in school. Lawrence and Adams offer the following suggestions when conferring with shy and insecure students who often fall prey to bullies:

Encourage the victim to keep a record of what has happened, when it happened and who was present.

Persuade the victim to talk to any adult.

Offer to report the bully's actions on behalf of the victim.

Encourage the victim to be assertive when dealing with a bully.

Encourage the victim to raise the issue of bullying during student council meetings or during class.

Encourage the victim to tell as many people as possible (Lawrence & Adams, 2006 p. 70).

If these individual level interventions do not appear to be sufficient in ensuring safety in the school by controlling acts of bullying, a whole school intervention may be necessary. One such effort could be the implementation of a school uniform policy. Proponents of the uniform policy contend that uniforms can affect students' safety by decreasing instances of fighting over clothing. With everyone dressed in similar clothing, peer pressure is minimized (VanMater, 2005) and clothing is no longer a potential source of conflict (Daugherty, 2002; Strom et al., 2003). In fact, students may feel like they are on a team. In return, these feelings may decrease acts of bullying and other violence while increasing academic achievement (Anderson, 2002).

On the other hand, opponents of the policy make the assertion that children who wear cheap-looking or unfashionable clothes, who don't regularly change their clothes, and whose

clothes are dirty, torn, ill-fitting, or look like hand-me-downs will not escape the bully's eye. These are things that even uniforms cannot disguise. Also, seeing uniformity as the norm could make children less tolerant of diversity, resulting in even more bullying in the long run. This is the case of British uniformed schools where acts of bullying have historically taken place (Wilkins, 1999).

### **Summary**

There will undoubtedly be educational consequences if students worry all day about their safety while in school (Cook, 2005). Acts of bullying and the presence of gang affiliation affect a student's ability to learn and pollute the school climate that promotes learning and student achievement. Controlling or eliminating such acts not only allows victimized children to feel safer at school, but it allows schools to devote less time to handling disciplinary problems and more time to teaching and learning (Green, 2007 ).

Dress is generally viewed as a form of self-expression that reflects a student's values, background, culture, and personality (Essex, 2004). Many times students are victimized by bullies or gang members because of their attire. This victimization causes the victim to feel sad and devalued. Students who experience these feelings often have difficulty in concentrating on academics (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). Hence, some believe that these feelings of abandonment can be avoided if students are required to dress like other students (Anderson, 2002). This may promote a sense of belonging over the entire learning environment. Students who feel like they belong to their school perform better academically (Pittman & Richmond, 2007) and spend more time on academics (Daugherty, 2002; Stanley, 1996) when compared to students who do not experience a sense of belonging to their school.

Previous research has suggested that students who dress alike are better students (Sommers, 2001; Van Mater, 2005). Those in favor of the uniform policy believe that uniforms enhance the learning environment by increasing academic achievement while decreasing behavioral problems. They believe that students will concentrate more and work harder on their academics if they are not concerned with fashion and trends. They also believe that behavioral problems will decrease because a uniform ensures that all students look alike. When students are dressed alike, there will be a decline in actions such as teasing, bullying, fighting, and other forms of violence among students.

In contrast, opponents of the policy do not believe that academics and discipline depend on how a student is dressed. They view uniform policies as shallow solutions to deeper problems (Anderson, 2002).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter describes the research questions, the rationale for the research design, theoretical perspective, the researcher's role and experience, the research participants, data collection procedures, methods used to analyze the data, and the soundness of the data.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the uniform policy on public high schools. Specifically, this study examined students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while at one high school.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their academic engagement?
2. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their safety while at school?

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is particularly situated in the social and psychological sciences for developing hypotheses and theories. Its focus is to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the human participants in the study (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). A qualitative research approach allows for the development of theories that are grounded in data collected through a variety of empirical materials (interviews, personal experiences, case study) and verified through systematic analysis (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. For

qualitative researchers, the understanding of a phenomenon is derived by focusing on the total picture (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Such an understanding unfolds as the researcher builds a complex holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

Qualitative methodologies are often used in situations in which controlled experiments are not possible or not desirable (Maxwell, 1996). It is especially useful in investigating many problems in children's behavior (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Researchers who use this method are concerned with the underlying reasons for certain actions. Their goal is to gain insight into the context and to better understand the behavior (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Creswell, 1998). Therefore, qualitative inquiry, as a method of understanding and describing behaviors makes it extremely useful for trying to capture the essential elements of the experience of students who attend schools with a mandatory uniform policy.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Qualitative research is rooted in phenomenology (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Phenomenology has its origins in the thinking of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938). Husserl is popularly known as the founder of phenomenology and it is his extensive writing addressing phenomenological philosophy that has inspired phenomenological research (Creswell, 1998).

In phenomenology, the world of lived experiences is central. Such studies are designed to describe and interpret an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as perceived by the people who have participated in the experience (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Creswell, 1998). Phenomenology assumes that there are several ways of interpreting the same experience, and that the meaning of the experience to each person is what constitutes

reality. In order to ascertain these experiences, Creswell (1998) suggests that the researcher enter the field of perception of participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon. Accordingly, the researcher must also look for the meaning of the participant's experience. In this case, the phenomenon under study was the school uniform policy. Then, the question became, "If students wear a school uniform, does this mean that their academic engagement and/or safety will be affected in any way?"

### **Researcher's Role and Experience**

Moustakas (1994) developed modifications of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data. The researcher used these modifications for this study. The first step of this method entails a description of the researcher's experience with the phenomenon. Initial interest in the topic began when the researcher started teaching in a school district where a mandatory uniform policy was implemented.

Moustakas goes on to explain that the role of the researcher is to collect data that explains meaning that a phenomenon holds for each participant. Given my previous experience with the uniform policy, as a researcher, I had to yield all prejudgments and rely on the experience of the participants in order to construct an overall description of the meaning and the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Site Selection and Access to Participants**

This study was conducted in one high school from a school district which, at the time of this study, had implemented a uniform policy in grades kindergarten through 12 for 10 years. This high school has approximately 1,112 students in grades 10-12. According to the school district's annual report for the 2009-2010 school year, the school had the following ethnicity distribution: African American 96%, White 2%, other 1%. This school has 58% of its students

who are at or below the poverty level. This figure was determined by the percent of students who received free lunch.

Permission was granted from the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and the high school principal to conduct this study within the high school.

### **Research Participants**

It is essential that all participants in a phenomenological study experience the phenomenon being studied (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Maxwell, 1996). Therefore, purposeful sampling was the chosen sampling mode for this study. This particular sampling technique works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon. Phenomenological studies are used to examine a phenomenon and the meaning it holds for several individuals (Creswell, 1998). The phenomenon in this research study was the experience of students in one high school.

After approval of the research proposal from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (see the appendix) was obtained, identification of potential participants was made by the researcher. The participants in this study were students who were currently attending a high school where a school uniform policy is enforced. This allowed them to give their perceptions of the experience.

After permission was granted from the superintendent to conduct the study, the researcher met with the principal of the high school in order to identify teachers who may be useful in identifying students who met the study's requirements. High school students were used because while there are studies analyzing the effects that the school uniform policy may or may not have on elementary students; no study exists that analyzes the effects that the school uniform policy has on academic engagement and safety of high school students.

From this meeting three teachers were sought to assist in the identification of suitable student participants for the study. These teachers were selected as participants because of their years of experience and because they teach all high school grade levels (10-12). These criteria were chosen because the perceptions of these teachers may prove to be more insightful than their peers sense they are able to distinguish behaviors/characteristics of students in varying grades as well as over periods of time. Also, having been teaching in the district for 10 years or more allows these teachers to reflect on how the school/students were before the implementation of the school uniform policy.

Following identification of subjects, the researcher met with the teachers to establish a friendly rapport and to solicit their help in identifying students that fit the criteria of the study. A description of the type of student sought was given to each teacher. The teachers were encouraged to find students with varied characteristics including race, gender, social economic status (based on participation in the free lunch program), academic status, and behavior. From the teacher's suggestions, 18 students were contacted by the investigator and invited to participate in the study. The researcher telephoned the parents of those students to ask for consent and to inform them that a consent form would be sent home with their child. Of the 18 students, 12 agreed to participate in the study. The identity of these individuals will remain confidential.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

To collect data, school district annual reports were requested for an archival overview. One hour interviews were conducted on two levels: focus group and individual interviews. This allowed cross-referencing between information gathered during each process. Both techniques were useful in obtaining in-depth responses from the students.

For phenomenology, investigation relies heavily on interviews (Creswell, 1998). A phenomenological interview is an informal interactive conversation comprised of open-ended comments and questions (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Such dialogue allows the researcher to enter and understand the world of the participants. Through semi-structured interviews, the investigator explored the subject's thoughts and feeling to elicit the essence of an individual experiences with the uniform policy.

Focus groups are beneficial in this type of study because they bring several different perspectives into contact (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). During focus groups the interviewer elicits the views of the group members while noting interactions within the group. The 12 students in the study were used in the focus group. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (2002) 10-12 people should be used in a focus group. This allows for the group to be small enough that everyone can take part in the discussion, but large enough to provide diversity in perspective.

Before the actual interview, the interview questions which were created based on key elements found during the review of literature on school uniforms were given to a field sample of six high school students (two 10<sup>th</sup> graders, two 11<sup>th</sup> graders, two 12<sup>th</sup> graders) from a different high school to check for clarity in the questions and age appropriateness. Their comments addressed their understanding of the questions and the wording of the questions. From their suggestions, the researcher modified two of the questions. Appendix B provides a copy of the interview protocol.

Next the researcher telephoned the parents of each student participant to ask for consent. A consent form was sent home with the child. The participants were called the day before the interview to confirm the appointment. In addition to the consent form, a cover letter explaining

the research topic was provided. The cover letter explained the research topic, expressed gratitude for cooperation, and emphasized that participation was voluntary and confidential.

In qualitative research, it is imperative that the researcher conducts the study in a natural and comfortable setting (Creswell, 1998). The interviews with the participants were conducted one on one in the school's picnic area.

Moustakas (1994) suggests that an interview begin with a social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere. Students were engaged in small talk. Then asked to sign a consent form and complete a demographic questionnaire that provided information of their ethnicity, age, grade level, and GPA.

Maxwell (1996) stated that the process of engaging the subjects is crucial and that the investigator must listen to them [participants] nonjudgmentally. Furthermore, Creswell (1998) posits that a good interviewer is a listener rather than a speaker. The possession of such characteristics aids in the establishment of trust and rapport and it is needed for the gathering of data. Semi structured open ended interview questions were asked during a one hour audio taped interview to elicit student's perceptions of the effects that the uniform policy may or may not have on academic engagement, gang activity and acts of bullying.

After all individual interviews were conducted; the 12 students participated in a focus group. During the focus group interview, semi structured questions (See Appendix C) were asked and recorded during a one hour session. The perceptions gained from this focus group were used to corroborate the data from the school district annual reports and the individual interviews as a method of triangulation. Then, the recordings from the focus group and individual interviews were transcribed to facilitate the identification of themes and issues.

## **Data Analysis Methods**

Data analysis entails systematically searching for meaning (Hatch, 2002). This process does not have a fixed linear approach. Instead the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles to make sense of data (Creswell, 1998). Before data analysis of this study began, the names of the participants were removed from the notes by the researcher. Participants were organized by the demographic information received during the interviews: grade level and race. This helped to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

Next, the data derived from the interviews along with the field notes were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This process, frequently used in phenomenological studies, consists of six procedural steps:

1. Files for data were created and organized
2. Text were read, notes were made, and initial codes were formed
3. A description of the meaning of the experience for researcher was developed
4. Find and list statements of meaning for individual. Group statements into meaningful units
5. Develop a textual description, a structural description, and an overall description of the uniform policy
6. Present narration of the essence of the uniform policy using tables or figures of statement and meaning units.

## **Soundness of the Data**

The integrity of qualitative research concerns the truthfulness and consistency of the inquiry's findings (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh; 2002). Consideration was given to construct credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirm ability.

1. Credibility or truth value involves accurately describing and interpreting the experiences of the research participants. Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh suggest using interpretive evidence as a way of ensuring credibility. The current study used member checks and low-inference descriptors to enhance interpretive adequacy.
2. Transferability involves applying or generalizing the findings on one study to other contexts, people, settings, or times. This study examined the perceptions of one group of people in one high school during one school year; therefore, the results are not generalizable to another school or group of students or group of educators.
3. Confirmability is concerned with the degree in which the researcher is free of bias in the procedures and the interpretation of results. Triangulation was used to enhance the confirmability of this study. The records were examined to verify comments made during interviews. Data collected from focus groups, individual interviews, and district reports served as a basis for triangulation.
4. Dependability refers to consistency. In other words, to what extent can variation be tracked or explained. One of the best ways to establish dependability is to use an audit trail. Triangulation was used to enhance the dependability of this study. The records were examined to verify comments made during interviews. Data collected from focus groups, individual interviews, and district reports served as a basis for triangulation.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Analysis of the Data**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the uniform policy on public high schools. Specifically, this study examined students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while attending a high school where a mandatory uniform policy is in place.

#### **Research Questions:**

1. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their academic engagement?
2. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their safety while at school?

In this chapter, the researcher analyzes data that were collected in this investigation into the lived experiences of high school students with regard to school uniforms. In this study, three sources of data were collected and examined: individual interviews, focus group interviews, and school district reports.

The first source of data included the collection of information through a series of personal interview questions. The second source of data was collected through a focus group interview. All interviews were facilitated in 2010 by the researcher between September 4 and September 18. Each participant responded to questions asked by the researcher. For consistency, a questionnaire provided a framework for the interview process. During the one hour interviews, each participant's responses were tape recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The third source of data was obtained through an analysis of the district annual discipline report. These categories provided the structure for the individual responses provided by the participants in this study.

The data for this study are reported in 4 parts.

Part one describes the distinguishing characteristics of students participating in the study and the school where the students attend.

Part two details findings from individual interview questions.

Part three details findings from focus group interview questions.

Part four presents the key findings to the 2 research questions guiding this study.

### **Part 1: Setting and Environment**

In this section of the data analysis, the researcher provides a description of the participants. The purpose of this section is to provide a context within which the data are reported. In addition to the student description, this section also seeks to provide a description of the school site where the study was conducted.

#### Participant's demographics

Due to the confidentiality requirements required by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Arkansas regarding interviewing adolescents, the name and specific demographic information of each of the participants is not given or described.

Each of the participants attended one high school and was in grades 10-12 during the 2009-2010 school year. All are African Americans. Six are male; six are female. The participants were in an array of student organizations including: The band, the football team, the basketball team, FBLA (Future Business Leaders of America), the National Honor Society, the Spanish club, the history club, Student council, and Skills USA (cosmetology club).

All students have attended the school district since kindergarten. The names chosen for the purpose of this study are: Annette, Michelle, Amy, Gwen, Elizabeth, Emma, Kenneth, Columbus, Blake, Rickey, Roderick, and David.

#### Setting and Environment

Willow Down High School is located in the Delta Region of Arkansas. The school enrollment is 1,112 students. At the time of the study, the school uniform policy had been implemented for 10 years.

In February 2000 the issue of a mandatory school uniform was presented to the school board. After research and an overwhelming vote by parents for school uniforms, the district decided to implement a mandatory uniform policy effective at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year. Desired outcomes from implementing such a policy included enhancing school safety, improving discipline, creating an orderly learning environment, and increasing academic performance.

Although the school uniform policy differs by school, uniform policies generally require the students to wear the same color and style of shirts and pants. Some schools may offer several colors and styles to choose from while others allow one or two choices.

Polo styled shirts are usually chosen. Depending on the school, students may be able to choose the color of shirts that they wear. Some policies may allow only white shirts whereas others may allow a choice of white, burgundy, hunter green, or navy blue.

The bottoms of the uniform policy may differ by gender. Boys may be required to wear pants and possibly shorts during the warmer months. Girls may be allowed a choice of pants, skirts, skorts, or shorts. The most common colors of bottoms include khaki, navy blue, and black. Again the variety will differ by individual schools.

Socks and shoes may also be a requirement included in the uniform policy. If they are included in a policy, socks may have to be a solid color such as black or white. Shoes may have to be a certain style and/or color such as black or white tennis shoes or loafers. (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Willow Down High School uniform policy (allowed wear)

	TOP	BOTTOMS	SHOES	Socks/tights	Outerwear (sweater)	Outer wear (coat)	Belt
<b>COLOR</b>	Gray, navy blue, burgundy, white, hunter green	Khaki, navy blue	Black, navy, gray, white	Black, brown, navy, white	Gray, navy, burgundy, white, hunter green	Any – no logo	Black, brown or Same as top or bottoms worn.
<b>STYLE</b>	Polo, oxford, turtle neck (long or short sleeve)	Shorts, Pants, skirts, jumpers	Any style except: flip-flops, beach walkers, mesh type			Any – no logo	

**Part 2 Findings: Student Responses from Individual Interview Questions**

The purpose of this section is to summarize the perceptions of the 12 students. The first three (3) questions of the interview deal with the students perceptions of their academic performance.

**question 1: What makes you pay attention during class?** Many of the students’ answers dealt with the teacher’s ability to make the class interesting. For example, Gwen stated, “How teachers put excitement into it and explaining it the way it should be. When everybody tries to pay attention and the teacher helps them stay focused.”

Kenneth stated, “The Teacher who is not boring or dull.”

Rickey said, “The Teacher that is interactive with the students and doesn’t just stand up and lecture or teach to the board. Teach the student and walk around class to make sure we understand what is going on.”

Roderick stated, “When the topic we are discussing is interesting.” What topics spark your interest? “Anything can be interesting but it depends on how the Teacher teaches it. Like if it is

just talking-talking about anything, it becomes boring. If it is like real-life situations, it becomes very interesting.”

Others gave credit to the teacher:

Michelle stated, “The teacher. When she teaches, I know I need to learn it so I pay attention and knowing I need to graduate, pass my tests and make good grades.”

Blake stated, “The Teacher. I want to pay attention so I can do the work.”

Annette said, “The Teacher who knows how to teach us. It depends on how she covers things, and teaches us or comes at me. It is important for the teacher to respect us.”

Columbus stated, “When a teacher is interacting with the students and making me want to pay more attention to the teacher so I can understand what she is saying. I like how teachers put excitement into it and explaining it the way it should be.”

Other comments included the student distractions and students’ study habits. Elizabeth said, “Sitting in front of the class or dead in the middle but not in the back.” Amy Commented, “When things are quiet in the class and people are not constantly calling my name, I can pay attention.” Emma mentioned study habits, “Studying the lesson makes you pay attention.”

**question 2: What keeps you from learning during class?** Many of the students in this study believed that their learning is hindered in a boring classroom and/or a classroom conducive to student distractions. Rickey explained that he expects his teacher to interact with him. Kenneth said that ‘dull teachers’ keep him from learning. Other students believed that being in class with their friends who wanted to talk caused a burden on their academic engagement. Amy stated, “..., people are always calling out my name and talking.” Elizabeth believed that her learning is hindered when she sits in the back of the class, when she is in a class with a lot of her friends or when she believes that she has a boring teacher.

Others commented on the disciplinary procedures, especially the uniform policy.

Michelle said, “Uniform violations, problem with shoes, hair too bright, too much stuff on, can’t carry backpacks, purse too big.” Blake proclaimed, “..., somebody always disrupts the class to make the teacher stop teaching.... Sometimes they [teachers] go around.... just take the dress code. If a student is out of dress code, it will take about 15 minutes for them to write him up which is taking time out of class for us to learn..., this happens almost every day.” Columbus said, “disruptive students, talking, bothering me a teacher who don’t interact with us. She might just come in and tell us to do our work. That’s it.”

**question 3: What makes you want to complete your assignments during class?**

Many students’ responses dealt with graduating and making good grades. Elizabeth stated, “So I can get a good grade and so I can learn something different.” Blake explained how he is determined to have good grades. Rickey calmly stated, “I just want to do well, self- motivation, knowing that if I do well it will help me.”

Other’s student responses were more concerned with the benefits of making good grades such as passing to the next level (grade or college). Michelle said, “Knowing the fact that I want to get out of school and go to college.” Emma emphatically stated, “I know what will happen if I don’t. I will fail. I won’t graduate. I am trying to do everything I can to get out.” Additionally, Columbus stated, “It is a great necessity for me to have or accomplish a high average. I know an “A” is where I need to be. I make A’s so if I don’t do nothing, I can fall back on plan B for a scholarship or academics.”

Some student's comments detailed the direct relationship between good grades and being eligible to play sports. Kenneth said, “Sports. If I don’t pay attention in class or keep up my gpa,

I can't play sports." Roderick stated, "Motivation, I just complete the assignment because I know I need the grade to continue to play football and go to college."

Also, some gave credit to the teacher. Gwen stated, "The way they teach us makes me want to do the work." David said, "The teacher motivates me by the way they talk to us and explain how to do it...., the teacher tells us we are doing good and coming around and showing us how to get it done...., the teacher's tone and attitude."

**Safety. The next set of questions dealt with safety while attending school.**

**question 4: What makes you feel safe at school?** Many students feel safe while at school because of adult supervision. David, Gwen, and Michelle stated that principals, teachers, security guards, and other staff members make them feel safe at school. Emma stated, "knowing that I have a higher authority that is trying to help keep people out who shouldn't be there, making people show ID's makes me feel a little safer." Rickey said, "Security officers and the police on campus is good. I also like having cameras around too. I feel that if something happens they should be able to find out what happened or catch the person who did certain things." Columbus said, "When teachers strictly enforce rules, not letting students just push them over.... having security guards around and [teachers and security guards] being concerned with what students are doing."

Most students in the study feel safe while they are at school because of the presence of teachers, security guards, school resource officers, and principals. However, Elizabeth had a few concerns about her safety, "..., security guards help but we don't do a check-check so anybody can have anything. They are strict about what kind of back-pack we can have but you can always put something in your back-pack and have it covered up."

**question 5: What do you believe is the cause of students fighting at school?** Some of the students in this study believed that fights in school occurred because of jealousy and/or because of relationships. Emma stated, "..., fighting over who got their girlfriend/boyfriend, she's got on the same thing I got." Annette said, "Most of the time, the fights are over a girl or a boy or just to be fighting to make themselves look good. Kenneth said, "..., jealous because someone looks better or dresses better. You shouldn't fight at school, but sometimes you have to do what you have to do."

Others students explained how some students do not need a reason to fight. Elizabeth said, "They just be fighting just to show off over something stupid. They might fight just because they don't like each other. No reason why. They just don't like each other. Rickey said, "I know that sometimes you can't avoid all situations, but I just don't see school as a place to fight. These kids are always giving our school a bad 'rep' (reputation). Some people come to school just to do that, eat and fight. They don't want to get an education."

One of the students in this study insinuated that the fights may have something to do with gangs and/or the wearing of certain colors. Blake answered this question by pointing out, "It's a respect thing! You know like wearing the wrong color."

**question 6: Why do you believe some students are bullied?** Students are bullied because of their appearance and/or because the bully is jealous of the victim. Elizabeth stated, "Bullies are jealous of them. They [bullies] jealous because they [victim] got something they don't have and they want it. Or if you don't look right you will get picked on too. If you don't have name brand clothes on, they look at you like you are poor. Just outside appearance." Roderick stated, "I'm not even sure why students are bullied. Some students bully just to be bullying. Most of the time it is because of the way they are dressed. Like if they have a shirt

buttoned all the way up, they might start bullying them because they think they are a nerd or geek. Michelle said, "Dress Code, some people can't afford this or can't afford all the school clothes. They parents make them wear the same clothes again and again, or they only got one color shirt, they can't get shoes because their shoes are old, or they can't afford them."

Some students believe that students are bullied because of their personality. David stated, "Because the bully thinks they won't stand up and hit them back so they will hit on people." Gwen said, "Because they are a quiet person, they don't do much or the bully thinks they are weak. The people who bully the kids get bullied before the person they are trying to bully, so I guess that's why they do it. They feel like they've been bullied so they're gonna bully someone else so make themselves feel better. Sometimes they bully for no particular reason." Emma also believed that people are bullied because of their personality and who they hang around at school. Annette stated, "Some people just want to pick on others because they are not like they are. They are not 'out there' like everyone else, they just keep to themselves. It's their personality, if they are outgoing, they might pick on someone who is quiet."

Two students believe that the person who does the bullying does so because they have been bullied before. They also believe that these student's actions have something to do with their home life. Blake said, "The bully was probably bullied at home and in earlier grades.

Rickey was more detailed in his response concerning a bully's home life.

Problems back home, never know what is happening at home without surveillance around so they take it to the school what they see at the house. The aggressor may see that person doing something to somebody else and call themselves trying to help by bullying them but really they're not helping. They are making the situation worse. You may not know the bully's background which makes them be an aggressive person.

**question 7: Why are students often joned (teased) at school?** Students in this study believe that students are teased at school because of their appearance and because of jealousy. Gwen stated, “Because of the way they look, smell, dress or act. They are being teased because they are in jealousy of other kids..., girl who wears something nice and everyone talking about how good she looks but the jealous person teases her...., males do the same thing as well.” Elizabeth said, "Everybody gets 'joned'. Just because how you look, wear your hair, what you driving, if you dumb or smart." Michelle stated, “The way they look, act, talk. If you are different, they will tease you cause you are not like them and jealousy.”

Some students believe that students are teased because of the way that they are dressed. Blake said, "Appearance, lack of money, the way they look. Annette exclaimed, “The things they wear. People laugh at others because they don’t show too much good about theyselves. Like they wear a shirt that is all stained up or pants that are flooding (worn above ankles), they just jone kids who don’t have on Jordan’s or name brand.” Rickey said, "They don't have the best name brands clothes, shoes or socks or things like that."

**question 8: Why do you think that students join gangs?** Most of the students in this study believed that students join gangs for acceptance. Annette and Amy believe that students join gangs to fit in with the crowd or to emulate others. Blake sadly commented by saying, “They want to feel like they are a part of something, they don’t have any family at home, they need love in the streets.” Elizabeth commented by saying, "Just to be involved in stuff. They don't think they are smart enough to join things at school or they don't have the grades or gpa to do different sports. Some join just because their friend joined." Michelle stated, "To feel accepted and to feel loved when they are not getting that. To feel like they are a part of something, to feel like they have friends." Rickey answered this question by saying, "They want

to feel accepted by somebody to have friends. At the house, they feel that the only thing they have to do constructive is to join a gang to feel accepted." Columbus added, "They feel it is a cool thing to do. Everybody else walking around with their so-called gang set. They have their hand shaking, so they want the good experience of being in a group or organization. So they join gangs just to fit in, I guess."

Other's believed that students join gangs for protection. Roderick noted, "To make themselves feel popular or to have a sense that there is gonna be somebody to back them up when they get into it with other people." Emma stated, "To fit in with other people so they won't get teased or bullied. They get with people who bully others."

Still some students believed that students choose to join gangs because of boredom. Gwen said, "Kid's in certain areas have nothing to do around the city and they are bored at home so they join gangs thinking that it is something fun to do, but it is not fun."

**School Uniforms: The next sets of questions are related to the students' views on school uniforms.**

**question 9: What do you do to make your appearance different from other students at your school?** The girls in this study altered their appearance by adding accessories to their clothing. Students alter their uniform by wearing jewelry, colored socks, belts, and glasses. Gwen said, "Wearing jewelry, different color shoes or belts." Elizabeth stated, "I make myself look appropriate to students or teachers. I just add more to it, everybody looks the same, I put on jewelry, colored socks, accessories, belts." Michelle stated, " I go against the grain. If everybody is wearing this color, I wear a different color... I customize my clothes to fit me the way that I feel with decorations, cut them or sew them to make me look different. I want to be

one of a kind." Emma and Annette mentioned that their style is unique and that they change it by wearing jewelry and glasses.

Most of the boys in this study commented on their ability to be neat. Students explained how they keep their hair looking nice and how they iron their clothes. Ricky boasted, "I don't sag. My uniforms are the best buy. That means I have tip-top best creases in my pants and shirts. I try to stand out because I may not wear exactly what I want to wear but I wear it and try to make it look the best it can on me." Columbus said, "I don't sag. I always have my shirt-tail in. I never come up there with the wrong kind of stuff that make the teachers or principal want to send me home." Blake said, "I'm always gonna look pretty good, my hair is always gonna be cut, my face is never looking rough, everything is always gonna be clean. I try to look the best that I can."

Other guys said that they add things to their uniforms. David said, "They try to make people wear uniforms so they won't stand out. So, I just put different stuff on my wrist or head so that I can stand out. I wear different colors on my shoes or socks or under my socks so that I will look different." Roderick said, "I try to make myself stand out or be unique. I might wear a certain type of belt within the standards or wear a watch or necklace or jewelry to jazz it up a bit. I change from the plain and ordinary."

**question 10: How do you show your school pride?** Students show their pride by wearing school colors/mascot. Emma stated, "I wear a lot of zebra prints, I support the football team a lot..., I'm always with the band." Roderick said, "I wear the school basic color (which is burgundy) most of the time." Elizabeth exclaimed, "I go and buy everything zebra print...shirts, ear rings, socks, shoes, all of that!" Blake said, "I put zebra on everything."

Some students show their pride by attending school activities and participating in student organizations. Kenneth explained how he shows his pride, "I participate in school activities like tail-gating." Gwen said, "I mainly show my pride on Fridays when we have our football games. I tell them they need to get 'crunk up' for the game tonight." David explained, "Playing sports show that you care about your school. Bringing alumni or peers to the games and stuff show your pride for your school too." Rickey said, "Being a part of the football team is important. I do not want to lose. I am very competitive against other schools. I want to win." Columbus proudly stated, "Friday on game day, I play on the football team...I wear a suit and tie when I attend pep rallies or any other school related event. During or after school, I show my pride." Michelle explained that she is involved in various things at school. She said, "I'm involved in school as much as I can. I go to the games and the parades. I show my school pride in a positive way."

**question 11: How important is it for someone to respect you? Why?** Student's comments dealt with giving respect in order to receive respect. Michelle's exclaimed, "You gotta earn respect! It just depends on who you are, if you are a bad person people don't want to be around you. You gotta earn respect so give respect to everybody." David stated, "I feel they respect me a lot. When you respect them [teachers] and show them that you are doing your homework..., you don't give them attitude but you go ahead and show a positive attitude, they will show one right back." Roderick commented, "I feel that the students really respect me because of the way I carry myself around the school. I am not disobedient to the teachers. I just do what they tell me to do and keep going."

At the end of the interview, students were asked if they had any additional comments that they wanted to add concerning the school uniform policy. Some students did not like the policy

at all. Kenneth declared, “I really hate it! They make you be the same. They talk about being yourself but you can’t be yourself when you wearing the same stuff everybody else wearing?”

Annette said

I don’t like wearing them because lots of kids get picked about it. That’s one thing I don’t like about it, I care about people’s feelings. Sometimes they are real strict about it, some kids can’t get everything that we supposed to have like all-white shoes, khaki and burgundy so they just send us home and give us in-school over something that is uncalled for. I just feel like we should not have to wear uniforms because if we wear our own clothes because a lot of parents who can’t afford regular clothes and school clothes.

Furthermore, Roderick explained

I really don’t think we should have a school uniform policy because it is not really, really important to what we wear. It is what we come to learn. That should be what is important. If people could just dress the way they feel comfortable, maybe they wouldn’t get picked on so much. Most of the people wear their shirts all the way up just because the teachers ask them to wear their shirts all the way up. They get teased because of that. If students were able to wear their clothes freely, maybe they wouldn’t be teased as much.

On the other hand, others believed that the uniform policy is a good idea. Blake said, “I think school uniforms are ok and alright. The situation is they say certain colors represent a gang or you will fit in with this group. They put us in uniforms so we’ll all look alike but when you get a job you might have to wear uniforms so they are just preparing us for life.” Columbus stated, “Basically, I have been wearing uniforms since I’ve been in school. I don’t have a problem with it. I don’t have to wake up wondering what am I going to wear. You are limited to what you have to wear but you have a small variety so you can still change it up a little bit so I don’t really have a problem with it. Amy said, “The uniforms are ok with me because if you let them wear what they want to wear, they will come to school looking any kinda way. They will

try to wear these little short skirts or booty shorts and they won't have respect for themselves. I think that every Friday we should be able to wear our own clothes to give us a break out of uniforms."

Still, there are some students who are neutral to the idea concerning uniform policies. For example David revealed that he has mixed feelings. "It can help you not stand out. Some people are not fortunate enough to have or buy nice clothes so everybody can just buy the clothes they tell us to wear. That way people is wearing the same thing and nobody is standing out for wearing fashionable clothes. Another thing is that you don't have to get up in the morning worrying about what kind of clothes you're gonna wear every day. You can just know that you gotta wear certain colors and clothes. You got people who don't want to wear the uniform because it's not really fashionable."

### **Part 3 Findings: Student's Responses from Focus Group Interview Questions**

The purpose of this section is to summarize the responses derived from the focus group interview with the students.

**question 1: Would students' jone each other if everyone was required to wear regular clothes?** "Would we? It would be worse! We do it in class, lunch, out of class, all the time." Another student comments, "Now I only jone if someone doesn't have on a t-shirt, if they are wrinkled, or if they do not have on name brand shoes. If we could wear whatever we wanted to wear... man, I would be 'on' [teasing] some people!" Another student stated, "Let's talk about the t-shirts! The shirt got to be right. [If] the shirt is all wrinkled and stuff. It just looks dumbfounded....Dumbfounded is when your clothes just look nasty. You look messed up or you ain't wearing your clothes right."

**question 2: How are people able to steal during school?** Students steal things, and then hide them in non-conspicuous places. One student commented on an event that happened during football practice, “During football practice, I left my shoes in the gym and someone stole them and put them in the trash can.” Others mentioned that their things are stolen by individuals who have access to their lockers. “Somebody stole my purse. I guess they were looking for some money, but I didn’t have any”. Another student sadly added, “People do the same thing every day, Steal.” One student recalled an instance where students were required to steal things for gang initiation.

**question 3: How are you able to determine if a student is a member of a gang?** According to the students in this study, gang members dress alike and they give ‘special’ handshakes. Kenneth noted, “Some folks wear their flags out all the time... A flag is a bandanna in their back pockets..... Some folks in a ‘clique’ wear the same clothes, not sagging or nothing but they just dressed alike.” Another male added by saying, “Hand-shakes. You will know a gangster by the way they talk and the way they shake hands.” Blake commented, “It’s all about a person’s rep (reputation). You know who real and who ain’t.”

**question 4: Can you recall a gang fight taking place at school?** Students recall one instance of a gang fight. This fight involved students from their school as well as drop-out students and adults. “...the Boston Crips vs. the Bloods! People were everywhere!” Another student commented, “They wore their bandannas across their faces but we still knew who they were... They were in all colors.” Another male student chimed in by exclaiming, “Some dummies were running to the fight like they were gona do something. Man, I got out of there! I wasn’t about to get whooped for nobody! Your heard me?”

**question 5: Do you recall any fights that did not have anything to do with gangs?**

Students conversed about fights that have occurred because of relationships. David exclaimed, “They are always fighting over boyfriend/girlfriend stuff!” Another student exclaimed, “People are just messy! They hear one thing and run and tell another person. Then it goes to another person. Before you know it, everybody is telling the same story in different ways! A whole bunch of he said/she said!”

They also mentioned that fights are started when someone attempts to steal something from someone. One of the male students stated, “One dude got his phone stolen and he got whooped.... Some people get their shoes stolen and get whipped for it.” Still other students mentioned that many fights do not have a cause. These students believed that students ‘fight just to be fighting’. One female student recalled, “I remember asking this girl why she had been fighting. She said that she didn’t know why ole girl didn’t like her. I was like, ‘What’?”

**question 6: Do you believe that the uniform policy decreases theft of clothing or shoes?** Students spoke about theft of uniform clothing. Students have their uniform shirts and pants stolen while they are at school. “People are gonna steal regardless.... Somebody stole my school shirt... that’s why I know they needed a uniform.” Another student added, “Like I keep on saying, these people will get you (steal) for your shoes!”

**question 7: Can you describe a situation where wearing a school uniform help officials recognize intruders?** Students did not believe that the school officials paid much attention to “outsiders.” Students believed that the security guards assume that people should be on campus rather than check to see if they should be on campus. One student gave an example, “My cousin comes on campus all of the time! He doesn’t stop by the office and get a pass... He

always wears jerseys.” Another student added, “Yeah, we got people running up on campus and not in a uniform... so it don’t really matter anyway.”

**question 8: How are students able to bring weapons to school?** Students are able to conceal weapons in their backpacks, purses or they leave them in their cars. One young lady mentioned, “It’s not hard for us to keep something in our purse. Sometimes it’s best to have something... a knife, blade or something. People want to fight you and you didn’t even know that you were enemies.” Another student chimed in and said, “Yeah, better safe than sorry.” Students also mentioned that they are able to take their backpacks from class to class, “We can carry our backpacks everywhere. They only search us if they are looking for something. Like if someone says that someone stole something. Or if someone says that they saw you with something like a knife or something.”

**question 9: Does it take you longer to get ready for school or to get ready to go hang with your buddies?** Some believed that it takes less time preparing for school. One student said, “I know exactly what I’m wearing to school so it takes me longer to get ready to hang out. We ain’t gotta look for school clothes cause we wear the same thing.” Another student jokingly added, “Yeah, khaki and navy or navy and khaki!”

Others believed that it takes more time preparing for school. “I don’t like looking plain. I try to add something different to my uniform. I might have to iron my clothes. I want my hair to look good. Then I have to find all of the right accessories.” Michelle noted that she tries to make sure that her shoes, purse, and belt match each other. Another student said, “Because I got to fix my shirt and make sure I look good.”

#### **Part 4 Findings: Research questions**

The purpose of this section is to summarize the perceptions of the twelve students in this study. The data reported are based solely on the perceptions of these students at the time of the interviews. There was no intent on the part of the researcher to interpret, explain, predict, or establish implications based on the facts as they were recorded at the time of the interviews.

Additionally reported are the themes that emerged from the data. These themes or patterns are identified within the context of the two research questions that guided the study. Actual statements of subjects that serve as examples of these dominant themes were presented in part 3 to bring greater meaning to the descriptive research findings.

**research question 1: How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their academic engagement?** Students' responses varied by grade level and gender. A few key elements emerged as follows:

1. Teacher Pedagogy
2. Disciplinary issues
3. Personal motivation
4. Peer pressure

*teacher pedagogy.* Many of the students in this study believe that their academic engagement and their teachers' pedagogy are correlated. Students believe that the way a teacher conducts class determines how well they engage in class. For instance, teachers who choose to lecture for the majority of their class time are considered boring or dull. In return, students may choose to day dream or talk to their friends during these classes.

Students are more compelled to focus on their academics when their teacher is interactive. Students believe that they focus on their academics more when their teacher walks

around the class and offers appropriate feedback. It is also beneficial for students to have a teacher that explains the lesson. If a teacher doesn't explain a lesson then the students become discouraged or may not learn or want to learn.

Another factor in academic engagement deals with the relevance of the material being covered and the level of enthusiasm that the teacher shows when presenting the material. Specifically, lessons that involve real-life situations are deemed interesting and exciting to students.

***disciplinary issues.*** The learning environment is interrupted because of disciplinary issues. While behavioral problems do pose a threat to the learning environment, the bigger distraction occurs when the teacher stops teaching in order to handle the necessary paper work that accompanies disciplinary issues. This is time wasted that could have been used to teach the students. The other issue arises after the teacher completes the disciplinary forms for the disciplinary issue. After a teacher's lesson has been interrupted, he/she may find it difficult to effectively continue the lesson. The teacher may lose track of what he/she was teaching the students. Thereby, students are subject to redundant or irrelevant information.

***personal motivation.*** Some students enjoy learning and being exposed to new information. They view good grades as a 'means to an end'. In fact, they believe that their individual personality, not their environment, enables them to complete all assignments regardless of the circumstances. These students take pride in studying lessons and paying attention during class. They know that studying and paying attention during class will produce the desired outcomes of passing tests, making good grades, playing sports, and participating in student organizations. The students, who engage in this behavior, realize that if they do not

engage in their academics then they may not be able to achieve many of their goals including graduating from high school.

*peer pressure.* Students believe that being in class with their friends who want to talk causes a burden on their academic engagement. They noted that they tend to talk more and interact with their peers when they are placed in classes with friends.

However, this need to talk to friends may be minimized by the classroom seating arrangement. Where a student sits during class may serve as a determinant of how much a student may choose to interact with their peers during class time. Students who sit in the front of the class often pay attention to the teacher rather than their peers during class. On the other hand, if students sit in the back of the classroom with their friends, they are able to engage in non-educational tasks such as talking and/or writing personal notes.

**Research question 2: How do students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their safety while at school?**

1. Jealousy
2. Personality
3. Peer acceptance

*jealousy.* Students in the study commented a great deal on the abundance of jealousy among peers. Jealousy is a key factor in students being teased and in students fighting during school. Students are often jealous of their peers because they want what their peers have. For example it has already been assured that students are able to determine who has on name brand clothing and who doesn't. The person who does not have name brand clothes may choose to be jealous of the person who does have on name brands. Students may also get jealous of someone because they

get complimented because of their clothing or style. In this situation, the jealous person doesn't like others getting attention.

*personality.* Many problems occur in the school setting because of a student's personality. Students who are shy, quiet and timid are likely to get 'picked' on. These students generally are considered as loners because they spend a great deal of their time alone or away from many students. The aggressor chooses to taunt quiet students because it is assumed that quiet students will not defend themselves. It is not uncommon for these shy students to have their electronics and/or in some instances clothing taken away from them.

*peer acceptance.* Students associate school safety with peer acceptance. Students in this study mentioned that many students do things to "fit in". One way of fitting in may be for a student to join a clique or a gang. Choosing to be associated with a particular group of students gives some students a sense of belonging. Students believe that the more friends that a student has the safer he/she will be at school.

Students also mentioned that their peers often join cliques and gangs as a viable way of avoiding confrontation from others. Certain confrontations are usually associated with unfavorable reactions from others such as teasing, taunting, or bullying. Students who fall prey to these reactions consider such acts as undesirable. They prefer more desirable feelings such as popularity, love and protection. These are feelings that some students believe are attainable through affiliations with cliques and /or gangs.

## **Part 5 Findings: Archival Data**

There is no centralized uniform policy for schools in the United States. The decision of adopting a uniform policy is made by states, local school districts, schools, and parents. While

the reason for the implementation of a uniform policy will vary by schools, the primary objectives of the policy are:

- Decreasing violence and theft among students over designer clothing or expensive sneakers;
- Helping prevent gang members from wearing gang colors and insignia at school;
- Instilling students with discipline;
- Helping parents and students resist peer pressure;
- Helping students concentrate on their school work; and
- Helping school officials recognize intruders who come to the school.

Keeping the objectives in mind, the U.S. Department of Education has offered the following guidelines to assist parents, teachers, and school leaders in determining whether to adopt a school uniform policy:

- get parents involved from the beginning;
- protect students religious and other rights to expression;
- determine whether to have a voluntary (letting the students decide when and under what circumstances they will wear the uniform) or mandatory school uniform policy;
- when a mandatory school uniform policy is adopted, determine whether to have an opt out provision (the opt out provision allows students to not wear the uniform; Students generally need parental consent to opt out of the school uniform requirement);
- Do not require students to wear a message (i.e. political campaign);
- Assist families that need financial help;
- Treat school uniforms as part of an overall safety program

The researcher collected the school uniform policy from the school.

**dress code policy:** The uniform committee of the Willow Down School District finds that the adoption of school uniforms can promote school safety, improve discipline, and enhance the learning environment. In addition, they agree with legislative findings that state that “clothes and footwear worn by students in the public schools often preoccupy and distract students from their major purpose for being in school, that of becoming educated...” Therefore, after an overwhelming vote by parents for school uniforms, the adoption of this uniform dress code will attempt to enhance school safety, improve discipline, and create an orderly learning environment. This uniform dress code will also attempt to reduce distractions and disruptions caused by clothing, minimize the economic disparities between students, and increase academic performance (Willow Down School District, 2000).

The researcher also collected school reports to gain insights into the number of students who were referred to the office because they were not in compliance of the mandatory uniform policy. An analysis of school reports revealed that during the 2009-2010 school year, 312 office referrals were given for uniform violations. It has already been established through this study that the process of writing a disciplinary form for any violation causes a great distraction in the classroom. This distraction places a strain on the learning environment because time that could be used for academic learning is used to fill out a disciplinary form.

## **Summary**

This chapter described the findings of the individual and focus group interviews conducted by the researcher for the purpose of revealing the perceptions of students in one high school of their academic engagement and safety while at school. Utilizing philosophical

analysis, four major thematic clusters emerged from this study: A classroom environment free of distraction; peer acceptance; appearance; and personality.

Chapter 5 will focus on the major findings of the study, findings related to the literature review, and recommendations for further research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions**

The goal of this phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the high school students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while attending a school where a mandatory uniform policy is in place.

The previous chapter reported the researcher's findings over the course of the qualitative research study. An analysis of the data was completed and the key findings were presented in 5 parts: Part one, the setting and environment of the study; part 2, students responses derived from individual interview questions; part three, student's response derived from focus group interview questions; Part four, findings from research questions; and part five, findings from archival data.

In this chapter the researcher provides a review of the problem, the purpose of the study, the methodology, the major findings of the study, findings related to the literature review, and recommendations for further research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research study.

#### **Review of the Problem**

Within the last two decades, public schools have decided to implement uniform policies in an effort to enhance the learning environment. While a review of the literature provides studies that credit the uniform policy for numerous behavioral and academic changes, these studies were not conducted in high schools. They were conducted either in elementary or middle schools. Studies conducted in these settings cannot be generalized to high school settings. Twelve high school students' perceptions of their academic engagement and safety while attending one public high school provided data for this study.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the uniform policy on public high schools. Specifically this study examined student's perceptions on their academic engagement and safety while at one school.

## **Research Questions:**

1. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their academic engagement?
2. How do high school students who are required to wear a school uniform perceive their safety while at school?

## **Methodology**

This phenomenology study was designed to report and analyze the perceptions of selected students about their academic engagement and safety while attending one high school. Data for this study were obtained through interviews that were conducted on two levels: focus group and individual interviews. These interviews were guided by a questionnaire. The questionnaire that was used during the interviews is included in the appendix.

After permission was granted from the superintendent to conduct the study, the researcher met with the principal of the high school in order to identify teachers who may be useful in identifying students who met the study's requirements.

From this meeting three teachers were selected to assist with identifying student participants for this study. These teachers were chosen because of their years of experience and because they teach all high school grade levels (10-12).

A description of the type of students sought was given to each teacher. Each teacher was encouraged to find students with varied characteristics including race, gender, socioeconomic status, academic status, and behavior. Twelve students agreed to participate in this study.

The student interviews were then scheduled. After all 12 one on one interviews were complete, a focus group was scheduled with all 12 participants. During all interviews (individual and focus group) the researcher took notes. The interviewer also tape recorded and transcribed the taped interviews to facilitate the identification of themes and issues for use during the analysis process.

Additionally, the district's annual discipline report, the school suspension report, and the school uniform policy were requested for an archival review.

### **Findings Related to the Literature**

*academics.* School climate predicts academic engagement (Hardre, Crowson, Bebacker, & White (2007). Students commented on how the teacher's actions were a great indicator of how much they engaged in class. Students in this study continuously mentioned that they like for their teachers to entertain them. They expect the teacher to know his/her subject matter and be able to articulate their knowledge in a meaningful way. Students stated that anything can be interesting if the content is made relevant. Talking and lecturing are boring and may cause the students to daydream. But when teachers teach using real life situations they make learning interesting and this keeps students focused on academics.

Students also noted that their seating arrangement serves as a great indicator of their academic engagement. Students exclaimed that they would not be very engaged if they sat in the back of the classroom or if they sat next to their friends.

Classroom distractions pose a threat to classroom environment (Snowman & Bieler, 2000). When students talk to each other during class, this causes a distraction. This makes it hard for students to stay focused because they can't hear the teacher or because they place greater importance on the words of their classmates as opposed to their teacher.

Other classroom distractions occur when a teacher has to write a disciplinary referral. The process of writing office referrals does not promote active learning. Students become engaged in active learning when the teacher has the time to respect their student's ideas, model strategies for their student's learning and help their students make real life connections to the curriculum. These are tasks that the students in this study mentioned as viable solutions for an increase in their academic engagement.

Therefore, 312 disciplinary referrals equates to 312 interruptions in the learning environment. This means that the teacher loses a lot of time teaching and students in class lose a lot of learning time. Additionally, the student who receives the referral is greatly affected also. In fact, these students lose more time than anyone because they have to go to the office, speak with office personnel, and then go back to class. It is impossible for a student to academically engage in any lesson if the student is not in the class.

**gangs.** Adolescents often join gangs because gang membership fulfills their need to belong to something by creating a unique bond between its members (Struyk, 2006). All of the students in this study were involved in some sort of a school organization such as athletics, band, honor society, etc. While these students are not members of gangs they are able to recognize a gang (or who wants to be gang) member. They are recognizable because of the way that they wear their bandanas, the way that they shake hands, and the way that they talk.

Students also asserted that they rarely receive the opportunity to engage in meaningful conversations with gang members. This may be attributed to the lack of interest shared between the students in this study and gang members. For example, the students in this study were generally active in school events and school functions. The gang members were not. When asked if they recall seeing gang members at football games; they responded yes. But that whereas they (students in the study) were in the stands or on the field being actively involved in the game, the gangsters (or want to be gangsters) were near the concession area or outside of the stadium.

**bullying.** Student's appearance is the prevalent reason for them being bullied (Frisen et al, 2007; Laurence & Adams, 2006; San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). The most cited reason for children being bullied is the victim's appearance. Critics of the uniform policy contend that requiring students to wear a uniform will not eliminate bullying. They believe that bullies will notice cheap looking or unfashionable clothes, dirty clothing and/or torn ill-fitting clothing (Wilkins, 1999). According to the participants in this study, many students get picked on simply because of the way that they look. Simply put, students may get bullied because they do not look good enough. This may occur if the student has on regular clothing or a school uniform. For example, a student may get bullied because they have on wrinkled clothing. Students are also ridiculed if they wear flooding (too short) pants. Students can be so critical that they will see fault in the socks that others are wearing.

On the other hand a student may get bullied because they look too good. They may wear something that looks really nice and the aggressor becomes jealous. If a student has on name brand clothing or the latest fashions, a not so fortunate aggressor may choose to bully this student.

Those who are bullies have seen aggressive behavior and/or have been treated aggressively (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). Many of the participants believe that students, who are bullies, have either been bullied at home or that they were bullied in a previous grade.

It is also important to note that, acts of bullying decrease with age (Lawrence & Adams, 2006). While the students in this study were able to provide evidence of students being bullied at their school, all of them agreed that instances of bullying are rare. They noted that acts of bullying were more prevalent in their earlier years of school.

The students in this study would rather wear non uniformed clothing as opposed to the mandatory uniforms that they wear. These students do not believe that uniforms have a positive effect on their academic engagement and/or safety while at school. However, when asked if they would tease others if they did not wear uniforms, all of the students believe that certain acts would be worse without a uniform policy. They believe that there would be more competition over clothing. They also believe that students will tease each other more. These are actions that have a direct link to bullying and fighting.

When students are exposed to learning environments that foster bullying and fighting, learning becomes almost impossible. Exposure to these environments not only serves as a distraction for the student who is a victim to these actions, but these exposures hinder bystanders as well. Students who are not involved in these altercations at school are still affected when the teacher is unable to teach because he is busy settling disputes with other students.

### **Recommendations for School Administration**

Individuality is vital to adolescents. The students in this study took pride in explaining how they are not like others in as much they constantly seek ways to express their uniqueness. Although the students in this study have been wearing uniforms for the past 10 years, they still

find ways to break away from the uniformity. During the interviews and focus group session, it became very clear that the students know the rules and know exactly how far they can go before they can be reprimanded for uniform violations. For example, some students may wear different shades of a color shirt (i.e. light blue instead of the approved color, navy blue) to school. Others may choose to wear a gold belt instead of the approved brown belt. Furthermore, students mentioned that they may bring extra items to school and change into these items after first period, which is usually when uniform checks are conducted. The extremes that these adolescents go to in order to make themselves look different from the next student as well as the level of enthusiasm that they show when explaining how they alter their uniforms proves the extent in which individuality plays in their lives.

As far as determining the driving force behind students who do well in school, this has very little to do with whether or not students wear a school uniform. The students in this study for the most part had a reason for doing well in class whether it was making it to the next grade in school, graduating, participating in extracurricular activities, learning real life lessons that they consider relevant to their environment, or simply because doing well is part of their own beliefs.

Simply put, uniforms alone do not fix education for kids. As previously mentioned, they do; however, assist in minimizing teasing, which is one of many distractions in today's classrooms. Throughout this study, it was obvious that students have a plethora of knowledge concerning the operation of schools. They have a great deal of knowledge of what a teacher should and should not do. When asked about their academic engagement, it was adamantly clear that students will want to learn if they believe that the lesson is relevant and if the teacher is competent. These students know the importance of having an instructor that has thorough knowledge of the subject matter being taught. They also understand the importance of a rigorous,

differentiated instruction. These students know that teachers should not sit at their desk to teach. They expect for their teachers to be on their feet, not in their seats.

Like teachers, students also know what the administrators will and will not tolerate. Students know exactly how far to go before they receive certain consequences for their actions. They have discovered the proper times to do certain things if they do not want to get caught. If a student has the intellects to decipher the educational system in this manner, then surely their voice should be heard when determining what will and will not make them feel safe and become more academically engaged while at school.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

1. A study could be conducted in a comparable public high school to compare uniformed and non-uniformed schools. This will help determine if students who are required to wear uniforms are more or less academically engaged or safe than students who do not wear uniforms.
2. Studies could be conducted in high schools to investigate parent's perceptions of student safety and academic engagement while at school. This may assist in determining if other factors such as parental involvement have a greater influence on academic engagement and safety as oppose to school uniforms.
3. Studies could be conducted in high schools to investigate teacher's and administrator's perceptions of student safety and academic engagement while at school. This may assist the school system in providing effective and efficient alternatives to ensuring the safety of students. It may also assist in developing and/or adopting certain reforms that will increase academic engagement.

## Summary

Today's schools are constantly seeking solutions to poor academics and school safety. It has been suggested that school uniforms may be an answer to this problem. Research in this area has been conducted mainly in elementary and middle schools. However, many high school students are being required to wear uniforms as well. This study described perceptions of high school students from one high school. The results indicate that uniforms by themselves have little to do with a student's academic engagement. Students believe that their teachers play a big part in the way that they participate in educational tasks. They also believe that engaging in academics has great consequences such as becoming a member of certain school organizations, graduating from school, and furthering their education.

It can be noted that uniforms are an effective way to minimize teasing in schools. True, students are teased when they are dressed in uniformed attire; however, the students in this study proclaimed that they would tease others more if they were not required to wear uniforms. This may be the case because requiring students to wear uniforms limits the prevalence of designer clothing. Designer clothing has two things that make students jealous and envious of others: logo's and styles. When this is taken out of the school environment, students have fewer things to talk about; therefore, fewer fights, fewer acts of bullying and less taunting will occur.

This study suggests that simply requiring student to wear uniforms will not cause them to become more academically engaged nor will it make schools safer. However, when a mandatory uniform policy is in place, the learning environment is enhanced because fewer instances of joning and fighting over jealousy will occur.

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APPENDIX A  
RESEARCH PROPOSAL APPROVAL

MEMORANDUM

TO: Stacy Gregory  
Tom Smith

FROM: Ro Windwalker  
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 10-06-681

Protocol Title: *Perceptions of High School Students and Teachers of the Impact of a School Uniform Policy*

Review Type:  EXEMPT  EXPEDITED  FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 07/30/2010 Expiration Date: 07/22/2011

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Compliance website (<http://www.uark.edu/admin/rsspinfo/compliance/index.html>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 120 Ozark Hall, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What makes you pay attention during class?
2. What stops you from paying attention in class?
3. What makes you want to complete your assignments in class?
4. What makes you feel safe in school?
5. What do you believe is the cause of students fighting at school?
6. Why do you think some students get bullied?
7. Why do you think people get teased at school?
8. Why do you think students join gangs?
9. What do you do to make yourself look different from other students?
10. How do you show your school pride?
11. How important is it for someone to respect you? Why?

## APPENDIX C

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

1. Would students' jone each other if everyone was required to wear regular clothes?
2. How are people able to steal during school?
3. How are you able to determine if a student is a member of a gang?
4. Can you recall a gang fight taking place at school?
5. Do you recall any fights that did not have anything to do with gangs?
6. Do you believe that the uniform policy decreases theft of clothing or shoes?
7. Can you describe a situation where wearing a school uniform help officials recognize intruders?
8. How are students able to bring weapons to school?
9. Does it take you longer to get ready for school or to get ready to go hang with your buddies?

