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## **BEHIND THE SEAMS: UNVEILING SOCIAL INJUSTICES IN A SCHOOL'S ENFORCEMENT OF PRESCRIBED DRESS RULES**

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### **Abstract**

*Research on school drop-out rates in democratic South Africa cites school uniforms among the predominant causes of high school children, from impoverished contexts, dropping out of school. In light of this finding, this paper offers a critical examination of a school's uniform rules against South Africa's National Schools Uniform policy. Research data presented and discussed in this paper is drawn from a small scale case study, conducted in a working class South African school. Hermeneutics provided the analytical lens through which data were analysed. Critical theory offered a theoretical framework for data interpretation. The findings unearth social injustices which have become embedded in the schools dress code, when the national uniform policies were translated into school rules by a school's leadership. The findings cannot be generalized to other schools. However, they do provide some insight into how children from impoverished backgrounds may be unfairly labelled, unjustly treated and possibly drop out of school, on account of the biased way in which a schools dress code expectations are decided on and enforced by a school's leadership.*

## Keywords

School Uniforms, Democratic Policies, Working-class schools, Subjective Dress Codes, Insensitive Dress Rules.

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## 1. Background

During apartheid, a school uniform was the compulsory dress code for all South African public-school children (HBC-SU, 2005). For boys, the basic uniform comprised a grey trouser and white shirt, a tie, black or grey socks. Primary school boys wore grey shorts, instead of pants. For girls in both high schools and primary schools, the basic uniform comprised either a pinafore dress or a skirt and plain shirt. Additionally, black or brown school shoes and school jerseys or blazers were prescribed for all schoolchildren. The colors of ties, jerseys, optional blazers, school shoes, school socks, dresses and school shirts were prescribed by management of the individual schools. Hence, in terms of color and chosen designs, the dress codes varied slightly between schools. By 1994, under the democratic dispensation, it no longer became compulsory for South African public schools to adopt a school uniform policy (Department of Education, 2006). Public School Governing Bodies (SGBs), however, chose to retain a standardized code of dressing. School uniforms were positively regarded among them as an important method of upholding an organizational school culture. School uniforms were thus considered among them to be effective promoters of safety and discipline, decreaseers of violence and increaseers of concentration in schools (Alston, 2006; Brunnsma, 2004; Brunnsma, 2005; Brunnsma and Rockquemore, 1998). Dress codes and rules were therefore officially prescribed by SGBs for public-school children. However, at the time, the retention of school uniforms seemed not to attract the same positivity among South African public-school children (Alston, 2006; Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016). Interestingly though, their grievances rested not in the retention of a standardized dress code *per se*. Rather, it was the way in which dress rules were crafted, prescribed and regulated that was disputed (Alston, 2006; Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016). Prescribed dress codes and rules were therefore perceived among them as an ill-fitting remnant of an oppressive apartheid educational system - a system which long after the collapse of apartheid continued to oppress children in democratic schools (Alston, 2006; Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016). The retention, promotion and policing of historical Eurocentric dress

norms in South African public schools, was consequently rejected among many children, for ingeniously continuing to undermine schoolchildren's unique social and self-identities (Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016). In early response to these brewing socio-political tensions, in 1998 the National Department of Education legislated a uniform schedule. The schedule is aptly entitled *The Guidelines for the Consideration of Governing Bodies in Adopting a Code of Conduct for Learners* (Department of Education, 1998). It outlines the national guidelines relating to the crafting dress codes and dress rules, for South African public-school children by SGBs. Most importantly, it sketches out the importance of school managers in aligning school-based Codes of Conduct for schoolchildren with Constitutional Rights for South African citizens – in particular, section 29 of the Constitution of South Africa. There, it is stated that everyone has the right of access to basic education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible. It is further recognized in the uniform schedule that, in South Africa, all South African citizens are afforded a legal right to Freedom of Expression (Department of Education, 1998). This fundamental right is elaborated under the Bill of Rights (1996, Chapter 2, Section 16) whereby it is explained that the right to Freedom of Expression includes, amongst others, 'the freedom of artistic creativity'. Extending these rights to schoolchildren, the uniform schedule (Department of Education, 1998) emphasizes that the right to Freedom of Expression in schools must be understood to include expression through dress, hairstyles and jewelry (Department of Education, 1998). This is unquestionably evident in that document where it is unambiguously stated that:

*Freedom of expression is more than freedom of speech. Freedom of expression includes the right to seek, hear, read and wear. Freedom of expression is extended to forms of outward expression as seen in clothing selection and hairstyles* (Department of Education, 1998, p.5).

Furthermore, in a study relating to Freedom of Expression through dress codes, Alston (2006) posits that:

*...school dress is no longer just about the schools. Issues of religion and culture, the right to dignity and equality of value as an individual all make demands to be*

*respected. To declare that such issues are trivial, is to trivialize the individual person concerned (p.84).*

Hence, the vastness of the meaning of *expression*, and the intersections and overlaps of this right with other constitutional rights, becomes apparent when one considers *expression* in terms of “expressions of what and how and at what cost“. In the context of the Constitution of South Africa (1996) and the *Guidelines for the Consideration of the Governing Bodies in Adopting a Code of Conduct for Learners (1998)*, the *what* and *how* of Freedom of Expression could therefore be understood as freedom to express creativity, individuality, self-identity, religious affiliation, cultural identity and sexual identity in schools through clothing, hairstyles and jewelry (Alston, 2006). It can therefore be argued that exercising ones Constitutional right to Freedom of Expression cannot be narrowly understood in terms of verbal expression. In the same vein, neither is the right to access basic education as simply as showing up for school every day (Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, 2012; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010a; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010b).

By 2006, well over a decade into democracy, the “costs of expression” became evident. It was apparent that the *Guidelines for the Consideration of the Governing Bodies in Adopting a Code of Conduct for Learners* failed to douse the brewing tensions, in many schools, over the retention of historically inherited apartheid uniform policies. This resurgence became most apparent when far too many children, who were either being punished or being sent home from school, on account of not dressing according to teacher-exceptions, were reported on in the local media. Research relating to this phenomenon revealed that a major bone of contention for many “transgressive” children was not purely that school uniforms suppressed their individual and social identities. Rather, the escalating costs of school clothing was highlighted as a major fact that constrained many children from strictly adhering to what their school dress rules prescribed (ACCESS, 2007; Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, 2012; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010a; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010b). At the one end, uniforms are mass produced and one would expect that they would be cheaper than civilian clothing. Therefore, retaining uniforms in working class schools, in particular, should be an ideal way of addressing the financial frustrations of poor households, in purchasing school clothing (Department of Education, 2006; ACCESS, 2007). The research relating to this, however, revealed the contrary. A

major finding was that, in South Africa, when national school policies were translated into school uniform rules, the rising costs of this mass produced clothing was a notable factor causing many “inappropriately dressed” children from impoverished contexts to either be unjustly punished or turned away from the school gates by scrutinizing teachers (ACCESS, 2007; Andersen, Case and Lam, 2001; Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, 2012; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010a; Strassburg, Meny-Gibert and Russell, 2010b). In many cases, these perceived transgressors opted to drop out from school altogether (Alston, 2006; Alston, van Staden and Pretorius, 2006; Department of Education, 2006). Responding to these findings, the Department of Education again emphasized the importance of respecting constitutional rights in the crafting of school dress rules. This was outlined in a document entitled *National Guidelines for School Uniforms in democratic South African public schools* (Department of Education, 2006). School-leaders were again cautioned against school uniforms becoming a costly factor that will restrict children’s access to schools - particularly children from working class backgrounds. To this end, these guidelines state emphatically that prescribed school dress codes must not “impede access to education in any manner...” (Department of Education, 2006, p.4). It is thus against this backdrop: (i) the 2006 National Guidelines on School Uniforms for South African public schools, (ii) Sections 16 and 29 of the Bill of Rights as entrenched in the 1996 Constitution of South Africa, (iii) the brewing tensions over apartheid inherited dress norms in South African democratic schools, (iv) the financial costs associated with these dress standards, and (v) in recognition of the impact of school dress rules on children’s access to basic education sites, that the discussion in this paper is situated. Accordingly, this paper offers a cross scrutiny of a school’s Dress Code and Uniform Rules against key national democratic policy documents. An analysis of these documents in light of interview data will illustrate that it is not the retention of school uniforms *per se* that counter-acts South Africa’s democratic educational ideals for schools to be accessible places of unity, safety, discipline, cleanliness, diversity, individuality and gender equality, for all children. Rather, this national agenda is compromised by the subjective and insensitive *ways in which* school uniform dress codes are crafted and enforced.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The overarching objectives guiding this paper are to determine how a school's implementation and enforcement of bias dress norms, through a standardized dress code:

- Simultaneously may impede learner's legal access to formal education, and infringe on their constitutionally afforded right of Freedom of Expression, in schooling contexts.
- Might counteract the national educational ideals for school uniforms to be used in democratic public schools 'positively and creatively', and in a way that curbs dropout rates (ACCESS, 2007), 'reduces discipline problems and increases schools safety' (Department of Education, 2006, p.4).

## **3. Critical Questions**

The fundamental research question guiding the discussion (and the research that informed this paper) is:

- What do critical conversations with schoolchildren reveal about the simultaneous role that school uniform rules play, in controlling children's access to basic education sites, while regulating their access to key constitutional rights?

## **4. Research Design and Methods**

The data reported on in this paper emerged from a broader qualitative case study which purposively and exclusively explored *children's* insights (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Fielding, 2004) and emotional geographies (Ahn, 2010; Andersen and Smith, 2001; Ansell, 2009; Davidson, Smith and Bondi, 2007; Holt, 2004; Holt and Holloway, 2006; Valentine and Holloway, 2000) relating to the wearing of their individual school uniforms and feelings about their outward presentations. The choice for exclusively probing the opinions of children was founded on the realization that children's voices are inadequately represented in research relating to official decision-making that directly impacts on children's self-identities and social identities in school spaces. The underlying research agenda documented in this paper therefore resonates with, and hence contributes to, the New Childhood Studies scholarship. That scholarship

specifically centers on Children's Emotional Geographies and privileges Children's Voices in the research. Purposive selection (Babbie and Mouton, 2009; Creswell, 2009; McMillan and Schumacher, 2006) of both the school and the participants was influenced by an awareness of widely publicized tensions existent in the identified school, between the children and teachers, relating to the prescribed dress code for learners and the enforcement of the dress rules by the teachers. The children's insights into these issues were explored through individual and collective critical conversations (Asghar, 2013). The critical conversations were video-taped and transcribed (Lindegger, 2010). Permission for their participation, as well as to be recorded, was sought from both the participants and their parents.

At the time of research, the child participants were considered in South Africa to be younger than the legal age of consent (Children's Act, 38 of 2005). Participation without parental consent was thus not allowed. However, where parental consent was given, children's willingness to participate in the study was foremost established. Their unique and collective responses were analyzed in light of the dress code and dress rules prescribed for them in their school's official Code of Conduct. Hermeneutics analysis (Niewenhuisen, 2010) guided the analysis of the data. To further ensure trustworthiness of data interpretation and representation in the study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009), the participants were afforded an opportunity to comment on the researcher's interpretation of the analyzed data for the purpose of identifying and clarifying any misrepresentations of their insights in the analyzed data. The responses of ten child participants are documented in this paper.

## **5. The Research Context**

The research reported on in this paper was conducted in a co-educational school, located in urban KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. During apartheid, under The Group Areas Act of 1950, the school was established for the "Colored" community in which the school is located. Although working class by broad national standards, the families who lived in the area in which the school was built were among the more financially viable "Colored" families living in KwaZulu-Natal at the time. Hence, by and large they subscribed to the "White" middle-class value system of the time. However, the dissolution of apartheid served to dissolve the racial and class lines that once restricted access into certain shared spaces. This shift in governance thus

saw an exodus of “Colored” schoolchildren out of this school to attend former-“White” schools in the surrounds. Simultaneously, there was an influx of “Black” children from the neighboring townships into this school. The minority of “Colored” children who enrolled at the school commuted from the apartheid-allocated areas for poorer “Coloreds”.

While the racial and economic composition of the learner body altered drastically, the racial and socio-economic demographics of the “Colored” teachers in the research site remained unchanged. So did the school’s historically inherited (apartheid) school-based policies. The existing school rules were harshly enforced without explanation and schoolchildren were expected to inarguably comply, if they wished to avoid the associated penalties for non-compliance (Porteus, Vally and Ruth, 2001). The research reported on in this paper focused on those “non-compliant” children who were seen among the teachers as being intentionally defiant, on account of deviating from the teacher interpretation of how children who attended this school should dress. Participants for this study were therefore identified from the school’s disciplinary records. Boys and girls were chosen to participate. Therefore, the fact that the data presented in this paper documents the views of girls, it is purely on account that the conversations relevant to this submission were extracted from discussions in which they participated.

## **6. Data Presentation and Interpretation**

The data presented and discussed in this section will illustrate the central argument of this paper that: The subjective and insensitive ways in which school leaders implement and enforce a prescribed dress code (i) impedes on working class children’s access to education, (ii) infringes on their constitutionally afforded right to *Freedom of Expression*; and thus (iii) counteracts the ruling governments democratic educational ideals for school uniforms to be used positively and creatively and as an inexpensive means of reducing discipline problems and increasing schools safety (Department of Education, 2006) whilst addressing drop-out rates from school linked to prescribed dress codes. However, in stark contrast to this ideal, an analysis of data reported on in this submission highlights the role of prescribed uniforms and dress rules in research site as being: limiters of expressions of social identity, restrictors of expressions of self-identity, unjust ascribers of rule-transgressing identities and reinscribers of (an inferior) social class identity, when these rules are reconsidered from the perspectives of working class schoolchildren.



However in arriving at these findings, due to overlaps in the data, it became difficult to neatly align specific findings to specific items of clothing. Rather than the conversations centering on expressions, the focus instead was on specific items of clothing and the associated prescribed school rules. Therefore, it was from a deeper analysis of their transcribed conversations about their individual outward presentations in relation to their school's dress rules, national uniform policies and the Bill of Rights as entrenched in the Constitution of South Africa (1998), that the infringement of school rules on key constitutional rights became apparent.

### **6.1. Skirts**

In the research site, the limitations on certain groups of children to express their social and self-identities is imbedded in their conversations about concerning skirts. Regarding skirts, the official uniform rule states (verbatim): *Knee-length skirt to be worn*. In light of this rule, the following extracts from critical conversations with the participants about their skirts indicates the ways in which the above stated rule limits schoolchildren's constitutional rights to express their self- and social- identities in this schooling context.

Kim: I think the right length for your skirt should really be above the knees. Not extremely above the knees, but just a nice length...Well obviously if you fat, you can't wear a short skirt - unless you feeling comfortable...No but still you know what happens with the pleated skirts. Have you seen some of the fat girls? The pleats actually open. It opens. It's not a closed pleat. No but it's like you know if you looking nice you feel good about yourself.

Anele: As long as the skirt looks nice on you. It fits nice. I have no problem...I've got a pleated skirt. It's not nice. Did you see me on Monday? I couldn't wait for the school to come out 'cos I don't like pleated skirts it doesn't look nice on me. It's long. It's big. Miss I like my plain skirt. Nice and short. It's not very short, but...

Zama: I think that bigger size girls should wear the pleated skirts. Because then it doesn't shape you. Imagine you are big and you have this big behind and you coming to school, with a straight skirt.

This conversation considers the length of girls' skirts in relation to girls' unique body shapes and sizes. The participants' shared desire to look and feel "nice" in their school skirts emerges from their conversation. This common desire among them resonates with the findings of Willett's (2008) study in which dressing "nice" was aligned with feelings of comfort and such feelings were closely linked to levels of self-esteem and confidence and thus success - with feelings of discomfort inducing opposite feelings. As articulated in the extract, feelings of discomfort also induce negative feelings in a particular girl about being at school; and therefore an anxiety for the school day to end. However, when one further considers the participants desire to "look nice" and 'feel good" in light of their school's skirt rules, it becomes apparent that in the crafting of the dress rules relating to skirts, no consideration was given to girls' unique body shapes; nor to their self-images and personal feelings about their physical appearances in wearing the prescribed skirt (Willett, 2008). In this regard, the specification regarding length also does not take into account that children of this age are still in the process of physical growth. Therefore, should longer skirts be altered, children will soon outgrow them. They will later on need to purchase an additional skirt that will be of an acceptable length to the school leaders (ACCESS, 2007). Given that mass production of school skirts results in a particular size being manufactured at a standard length (ACCESS, 2007), the financial costs of not considering children's varied physical heights and growth spurts in applying this particular dress rule then become a factor. This particularly in view that the prices of uniforms increase with dress size (ACCESS, 2007) and when "knee-length skirts eventually become "above-knee length" skirts due to a girl's natural physical growth. It was noted during fieldwork that in dealing with this challenge, when among their peers during lunch breaks and outside of the school gates, many girls would roll their skirts up at the waistband. They would then cover the waistband with the overhanging hems of their school blouses. When in the presence of teachers, they would unroll their skirts and tuck their blouses in at the waistline. This simple rolling and unrolling of their skirts demonstrated how these girls are able to straddle between the mainstream demands of their school, regarding the length of skirts, and the marginal expectations among their peers with regard to what is an acceptable way in which a skirt should be worn. Furthermore, whilst the participants are divided in their views about what would suite "fat' girls, there is notable consensus among them that girls should be allowed to wear what they feel comfortable in. In this

instance, the prescribed uniform does not consider girls' self-images or their insights. The restricted designs of skirts and styles of dressing thus presents an injustice to "bigger sized" girls, in particular. The data presented above therefore illustrates how a restricted teacher-biased legislated dress rule can limit children's expressions of social- and self-identity while compromising schoolchildren's self-esteem in the process (Willett, 2008).

## **6.2. Tops**

The restrictions on the participants' constitutionally afforded rights to freely express their diverse social- and self-identities is again apparent in their conversations relating to the tops officially permissible in their school. The official rules relating to tops specifies (verbatim): *White blouses. Short or long sleeve. NB. If T-shirt is worn it must be plain white color and the sleeves shorter than the shirt (No fancy prints)*. The following extract documents the participants reasoning about the tops that they wore to school.

Zama: Kim and Debbie like to wear very bright tops under her school shirt. Even if it's white, there's a dark print on their T-shirts.

Kim: The teachers say T-shirts mustn't go past the sleeve or they say we look like a street kid. Untidy! When we roll our sweaters up at our sleeves, they tell us to take it off.

Debbie: All my white T-shirts were in the wash this morning.

Trish: I only have colorful clothes. My mother only bought me two white T-shirts.

Lisa: I'm just wearing what I like. Sometimes we want to swim after school. Okay well today my t-shirt is wet but some girls wear it to show they are rich. They wear expensive costumes.

Anele: I have a friend. She wears nothing. It's [wearing a bikini top] better than wearing nothing under your shirt.

The above extract is taken from a conversation relating to the wearing of tops with advertising logos, bright colored vests and patterned bikini-costume tops. The participants had worn such tops to school on the day that this conversation was held. These were concealed by the tracksuit jerseys and school jackets that they wore during the day. However, the colors and

patterns of those clothing items could be easily seen underneath their white school blouses when they removed their jackets and jerseys during the conversation. Drawing from their articulated reasons and reasoning behind their choices of undergarments, it becomes evident that the participant held individual reasons for allegedly contravening the school rule relating to tops. However, despite their perceived transgression, it also becomes apparent that they were not motivated by intentional defiance of the rule or against teacher authority (Brunsma, 2004; Brunsma, 2005). Their explanations therefore debunk a widely held view that contravening the school rule in the way that they did was intentionally meant as an overt intentional anti-establishment expression of defiance (Brusma, 2004; Brunsma; 2005). If for example, one considers their choices against the school rules then, it could then be argued that the rules relating to tops are vague about what girls are to wear. What is meant by “plain”? What is meant by “fancy”? In the absence of these explanations, the meanings of “plain” and “fancy” are at the discretions of the schoolchildren. Hence, it is not intentional transgression of the rules but instead their choices for wearing these items was informed by (i) the vagueness and ambiguities in the rules; (ii) the participants’ socio-economic circumstance and (iii) their desire to report to school, despite the challenge of a limited number of “acceptable” undergarments.

Regarding uniform rules as inscribers and reascribers of socio-economic status, the layering of class among the children of this research site becomes evident. Undergarments apparently are used by some schoolchildren in the research site as a marker to sets the boundaries between the levels of poverty among their peers. Implicit in their explanations regarding this is that the personal choices of costume tops that some girls wear beneath their blouses is an indicator of an inward desire, a fantasy, to affiliate with a social class above their own. As indicated, bikini tops are used to suggest after school hours and among their peers (at the public swimming pool, for example) that they are “not as poor” as the other children in their school. From the discussion, it is possible that wearing oversized T-shirts beneath their blouses (as one of the girls declared) is an attempt to conceal these intentions while they are on the school premises. Disturbingly though, what also becomes apparent is how a teacher publicly and humiliatingly (Porteus, Vally and Ruth, 2001) uses the school rules as a way chastising these girls: by exposing their desired intentions in the schooling context, through ordering a removal of their layers of clothing while reminding them of their inferior class positioning (Bettie, 2003).

This is most apparent in the explanation of how, in a twisted ironic way, a child is punished for failing to conceal her underwear in the “correct” way in that the oversized T-shirt concealing it should not be worn under a school blouse in the way that this particular girl has. It is possible that the oversize T-shirt resulted as a consequence of buying “school T-shirts” in a size which this child would eventually grow into (ACCESS, 2007). Her attempt to adjust her T-shirt also suggests a desire to dress in line with the school’s shirt rule. Until being told to remove her T-shirt, this child’s oversized T-shirt had offered her some modest sense of personal privacy in the classroom and expression of respect for her teacher by not flaunting her underwear but instead concealing it with her oversized T-shirt which she rolled up at the sleeves. However, the scrutinizing teacher’s response contravenes a broader national call for school leaders to be sensitive in enforcing uniform rules among schoolchildren from impoverished backgrounds (Department of Education, 2006). Instead, this teacher’s actions expresses blatant insensitivity to the girl’s circumstances resulting in her wearing an oversized T-shirt and thus is an overt rejection of the socio-economic circumstances of this particular child. The teacher’s description of this child as a “street kids” further infers that the teacher looks upon her as if she is dirty and unkempt. Thus apart from negating this child’s (possible) personal desires and aspirations among her peers to show that she is “rich“, the teacher on the other hand seemingly feels that the reality of this child’s social positioning must be exposed in this school. The child is thus reminded that her dress choices that she makes for school portray her as “a street kid” - regardless of how she intends of portray herself; while she is simultaneously constructed as a rule-transgressor by her teacher. This episode therefore illustrates how an insensitive teacher-biased enforcement of a vague and ambiguous school rule can lead to dress rules unjustly ascribing degrading social and personal identities to certain schoolchildren. Echoing the findings of ACCESS (2007), in this research contexts it would seem that in the research site, in spaces such as the one reported in the extract, “[n]o distinction is made between affording uniforms and refusal to wear uniforms” (p.8).

### **6.3. Adornments**

The limitations on certain groups of children to express their social and self-identities is again rooted in their conversations about the jewelry, hairstyles and accessories that

the participants wore to school in light of what their uniform rules prescribed. In the school's rules it is stated verbatim that: *Girls must wear only one pair of earrings (studs only). Hair braids tied up neatly and out of face. Nails must be short. No nail varnish.* The participants' insights regarding items of adornment is documented in this section. The following extract relates to nails.

Zama: I take forever to grow my nails and teachers shouldn't ask me to cut them. Some teachers are jealous 'cos you can grow your nails and they can't....What do nails have to do with schoolwork? I don't see why nails interfere with our schoolwork. I mean it's just there on your fingers, Miss, it's not doing anything. It doesn't matter, because I don't see anything wrong with it. If my nails are long they gonna be long and they gonna be clean. The shorter your nail is, the easier it is for the dirt to get in. So if your nails are long they not going to be dirty. If you really like your nails then hell no you don't want it to be dirty. So miss I don't see why it has to be a problem. I don't like nail polish. Only if it's a manicure, but I don't like to paint my nails because it stains the nail. I don't do it. The school rules don't say nothing about tippex on your nails and black marker pens.

Kim: But I think I see why they complain about nails. I mean you get those nails that are long and then you know you get those girls who come to school and it's just all black under their nails. Then there's the issue with nail polish!

Lisa: What's wrong with being dirty? It doesn't influence your school work. You won't fail a test because your nails are dirty.

Based on the shared perspective documented in this excerpt, it becomes evident that the participants reject rules relating to nails because they fail to see the correlation between the length of their nails and their academic ability. In an absence of an explanation, they dismiss this rule as one which lacks reasoning and thus exists nonsensically merely to be enforced as an expression of teacher-jealousy against girls who are able to grow their nails. Their further deliberation of the association of shorter nails with expressions of hygienic practice (and long nails indicating lack of hygiene) suggests that these girls too are concerned about issues of

cleanliness. The inference therefore is that even if the presentation of their nails deviated from what the rules prescribed, they would still attempt to keep their long nails manicured. Their deliberations are also illustrative of their competencies to deliberate about their rights and articulate the crafty ways that teacher restrict their freedom of self-expression; that is, through the “unjustifiable” and “nonsensical” ways in which certain rules such as the rules relating to nails are applied. This restriction is again illustrated in a further conversation regarding hair adornments. The participants’ insights relating to hair are presented below.

Lisa: In the morning when I came to school my hairband was tucked behind my jacket and there was only a small piece and everyone was saying why you don’t chop it off. Why don’t you chop it off? It’s got school colors. I just put it on ‘cos it’s blue and white and yellow Miss we got like yellow in our uniform.

Anele: I used to wear that when I had my afro I used to put it on...see sometimes you in class and one teacher...there's a particular teacher who keeps on nagging about your hairstyle. Every time you ask her a question, miss, she'll look at you in that way and you don't feel comfortable in that teacher’s class.

This conversation relating to hair bands and afros echoes wider conversations in South Africa over the teacher-intolerance in some schools, towards the natural textures and hairstyles of certain girls (mainly “Black”) who have coarse hair or hair-weaves (Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016). Even though these rules have been publicly challenged and debated and found to have no legitimacy in schools (Henderson, 2016; Ngoepe, 2016), Lisa and Anele’s accounts do however provide insight into the ways that these tensions play out away from public scrutiny. In this scenario, the teacher does not only articulate her thoughts about the girls’ hairstyles. It is also apparent that body language as well is used to marginalize girls by making them feel uncomfortable and intimidating them into silence, when they (girls with teacher-sanctioned hairstyles) attempt to actively participate in classroom learning. The girls explanation about choosing hair adornments “that got school colors in it” infers a mindful attempt not to disrespect the school culture. The intention rather is to infuse their personal styles creatively into their prescribed styles of dressing. It is however evident from their teacher apparent responses to these expressions that in this instance hair should not be used by girls to express any sign of creativity

and individuality.

The following extract is taken from a participant's explanation of a jewelry and make-up she wore to school.

Kim: Look at me nicely. If I take this eyeliner off, you know how sick I'd look? I was like looking at that in the mirror in the morning. I was like, what is happening to me. Before I used to have such nice skin and everything and I used to glow, now it's just like ...! That's why I do that... [Laugh] and you know what's funny, the only people that we really scared of like with the jewelry and all is Mr. J., Miss F and obviously and Miss M. So every time we see them we like [covered her nose] hold your nose and just run past them. It's fun. I dunno [don't know] why. If we take it out nothing will happen but I dunno why. I dunno why we don't take it out. It's just fun.

Once again, a girl's personal reasons for wearing eye make-up comes to light in this conversation. Yet again, it becomes apparent that her motivation behind wearing eyeliner was linked to self-image, in light of the status of her health. Sadly, a few days following this conversation, this participant lapsed into a diabetic coma and passed away. It then became painfully clear that this girl, knowing that she was unwell, was merely trying to improve her outward appearance by creatively adorning her eyes. She chose to do this in a way that did not visibly show her feelings of illness in her facial expression.

Furthermore, as with her over-sized T-shirt, her attempt to not be overtly defiant against the teacher authority and the school rules emerges from her description of how she concealed her nose-ring when she passed certain teachers. Whereas her wearing of make-up and jewelry are forbidden in the rules, from her explanation it becomes clear that her decision to hide her nose-ring instead of taking it out are motivated purely by personal reasons that are closely aligned with her self-image, in the context of her illness and personal concerns about her outward appearance. Even though her choices cannot be directly aligned with wider discourses relating to school children's religious rights to wear nose-rings and similar items at school (Alston, 2006), it does indicate the insensitivity in some schools to children who wish to wear items of adornment that reflect their social- and self-identities.

From the data presented and discussed in this submission, it becomes apparent how the



ways in which a school's prescribed uniforms rules are enforced can work to constrain children's Constitutional Right to Freedom of Expression in various ways whilst serving also a catalyst for inadvertent rule-transgressing behaviors.

## **7. Discussion**

It is mandatory for school leaders to show sensitivity to the socio-economic differences among school children in state schools. It is furthermore mandatory to recognize positive freedom of speech in making decisions relating to children (ACCESS, 2007; Department of Education, 2006). However, teacher-insensitivity - not just in the enforcement of the uniform rules but also towards the children's circumstances surrounding the ways that they dress - has come to the fore in all conversations documented in this submission. Drawing from those conversations, it is possible that the problem of insensitivity among school leaders may be rooted in the fact that decisions on school dress codes for children, and the rules relating to these, are deferred exclusively to their parents via the SGB. It is apparent that children's own socio-economic identities in this case are not taken into consideration when school dress codes and conduct rules are ratified. The composition of SGBs in this school therefore comes into question. One is caused to question whether the parents of children from extremely impoverished homes (Dieltiens and Meny-Gibert, 2012), who attend schools such as the one under scrutiny in this submission, have a voice on the SGB - specifically when it comes to deciding on issues such as mandatory school clothing for their children. Thus, outside of what national policies mandate (Department of Education, 1996; Department of Education, 2006; ACCESS, 2007), one is caused to question what are the underlying and undocumented criteria by which these parent representatives are chosen? What happens behind the scenes?

Additionally, the children's voices captured in this submission have illustrated that children themselves are capable of expressing and articulating their preferred styles of dressing. They are also capable of expressing their reasoning behind the clothing choices that they feel are most suited (individually and collectively) for them. In stark contrast however, they do not see their teachers as having the same reasoning about the rules that they so harshly enforce. This, for example, is most apparent in the conversation about a girl's oversized T-shirt and again in their discussions about their fingernails. However, it would appear that in this research site, children

are not given a platform to express their views. One could thus assume that the freedom of speech to express views on decisions relating to schoolchildren (Department of Education, 2006) is not extended to children such as the ones in the current study. In light of this, one then is caused to ponder further on the role that children play in peer-representation on the SGB. Apart from nationally prescribed procedures (Department of Education, 1996), one then is caused to question what are the underlying and undocumented ways that Learner Representation Councils are chosen and how do they represent their peers in SGB forums? What happens behind the scenes? Are they too silenced and intimidated by teacher's body-language and derogatory comments against them and their peers - such as in the case with the oversized T-shirt and hairstyles as articulated earlier in this submission?

Furthermore, national uniform guidelines specify that it is mandatory for learners to attend schools and participate in school activities even without uniforms (Department of Education, 2006). However, it emerges from the data in this paper that – even though not being sent home - children are publicly insulted and harshly humiliated on account of not dressing in a way that meets the teacher-interpretation of the schools dress rules. Given that success is aligned with comfort (Willett, 2008), one is then caused to question how can children from impoverished contexts succeed academically when much of their time focus and feeling of (dis)comfort in schools is centered around issues of the school uniform rule compliance and transgression? In the same vein, how can it be claimed that uniforms promote safety, discipline and decrease violence when children, such as the ones in the current study, are vulnerable to the punishment and emotional violence they receive from certain teachers, on account of what they wear to school?

However, in the absence of answers to the above and of some form of intervention that places the *best interests of the children* at the center of school-rule making, the girls in this study have demonstrated creative and ingenious ways which they themselves have found to stay in school, despite the challenges they face with uniform-policing and rule-enforcing teachers. This is evident in the rolling and unrolling of their skirts and T-shirts and blocking their nose-rings whilst walking past certain teachers. These actions imply an awareness among the participants of the personal agency that they have to exercise their rights to freedom of expression. However, their mindfulness of how to navigate between their school identities and their unique personal (social and self) identities in order to “survive” in this school is also apparent. This suggests their

awareness of the undocumented consequences of defying the status quo and thus of their collective and individual child-insights into what lies behind the “seams”.

## **8. Conclusion**

It is apparent from the study reported on in this paper that, if South Africa’s school drop-out rates are to be reduced among children from impoverished contexts, then there is a critical need to foremost address insensitive, negative and punitive behaviors in teacher-application of school uniform rules. This infers an evident need for relevant programs to be designed and implemented. Such programs should aim at addressing teachers-behaviors - specifically those of teachers whose dress code monitoring causes children’s access and engagement in schools to become unnerving. Correspondingly, this paper has also highlighted an apparent need for children’s accounts of their school uniform and dress rule experiences to also be considered in the designs of such programs. Engaging with schoolchildren on such issues will assist in unveiling children’s reasoning behind their perceived transgressive dressing. So doing will expose the real issues that lie “behind the seams”, when these issues are considered from a schoolchild’s perspective.

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