

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

As with many academies, a couple of years ago my school decided to join the current trend and introduce a spangly new uniform. Now, there's no denying that a hall full of matching blazers, shirts and ties proudly brandishing a bright school crest is attractive. I myself find something appealing about the public school image; it brings a sense of British nostalgia to the classroom, and it certainly looks smart, which is what uniform is all about isn't it?

We hear so much about the sense of pride, identity, community and belonging that a good strong uniform brings to a school. It improves performance, we're told. It removes societal barriers and peer pressure – there's no competition about having the best clothes, the latest fashions or the right trainers; and poverty, inequality and bullying suddenly disappear, because everyone looks, feels and is treated the same!

Oh, except for Ellie, who has to wear ill-fitting hand me downs with greying shirts and faded blazer; she might only be 13, but she knows that with four older sisters her single mum is struggling to pay the bills, so she puts up with the comments about how she looks and has learnt not to ask for new uniform, let alone a smart phone like her friends have. And 15-year-old Ben, who's already self-conscious about being 6' with size 14 feet and constantly finds himself in trouble for flouting school uniform rules because he doesn't want to wear a blazer with sleeves halfway up his forearms.

Then there's Natasha – my hard working, straight A* student, who lacks confidence and is terribly image-conscious. If she were allowed to have a bit more control over her appearance at school perhaps she'd have less to feel anxious about. Likewise, her strong-willed classmate Elizabeth might be more inclined to respect and listen to her teachers if she weren't constantly battling over what she is and isn't allowed to wear, because for Elizabeth it's a matter of principle. Why shouldn't she be allowed to dye her hair if she wants to, and express her individuality by what

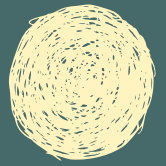
she wears? She objects to being told that to be a good member of the school community and show that she values her education she has to wear a specific coloured jumper and skirt. And as her teacher I'm inclined to agree with her.

The irony is that having a school uniform neither prevents nor remedies any of the issues that it claims to address – it just attempts to cover them up, literally. Telling people what to wear and placing emphasis on how they look does not lessen the anxiety about appearance; it merely changes it. How are young people expected to learn not to judge people by their differences if everyone is *made* to look the same and told, moreover, that being smart and presentable says something key about who they are?

Strict, formal uniform is becoming increasingly popular and with that comes increased cost. Families find themselves paying hundreds of pounds every couple of years to set their children up in the correct attire. Those like Ellie and Ben, whose parents just can't afford to buy new, don't suffer any less than they would if there were no uniform; in fact arguably they suffer more because not only is their poverty highlighted, they also can't choose what to wear and thus face being reprimanded by the school, as well as being bullied for their appearance.

Uniform is such an integral part of our education system that I doubt we could ever abandon it completely, but I firmly believe that taking it too far gets in the way of other more important aspects of school life, like teaching and learning. As a teacher I don't want to be wasting my time telling students to tuck their shirts in every 15 minutes, or to fasten their tie correctly, I just want to be allowed to teach. And believe it or not, the majority of students want to concentrate on learning; telling them how to dress down to the last minute detail is unproductive. Having a dress code to add to the community and look of the school is fine, but it should be just that, a simple dress code, not a strict, formal, authoritarian uniform.

Contrary to popular belief, strict uniform rules simply emphasise that some students are more equal than others, suggests this issue's frustrated pedagogue...



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