



Review article

School Dress and Grooming Policies in Nigerian Schools: Implications for Student Inclusion, Engagement and Educational Experience

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ABSTRACT

In the Nigerian schools, the policies of school dress and grooming are often employed to ensure discipline, equality, safety and institutional identity. However, they need to be explored in terms of their impact for students' inclusion, participation and educational experience. The paper is a critical narrative literature review which was based on Nigerian and international studies, relevant laws and research in education. The literature is structured around four themes: school uniform and educational outcomes; gender, school uniform design and physical activity; grooming, identity and the legal context; and school belonging and disciplinary enforcement. The review shows that there is mixed evidence on the educational value of compulsory uniforms. Some studies show improvements in specific behavioural and organisational outcomes, others have concerns about belonging, comfort and participation. The analysis also points to the conflict between institutional norms and the individual needs of students, such as in relation to the appearance requirements and gender, religious practice and disciplinary control. Information on the lived realities of Nigerian secondary-school students with regard to these policies is still limited. The paper proposes that the purpose of the appearance requirement, practical effects and fairness of enforcement should be taken into account when evaluating the necessity of such requirements. It proposes frequent policy review, low cost and appropriate uniforms, appropriate discipline and increased student and parent participation.

1. Introduction

Dress and grooming policies have been a feature of schooling in Nigeria. Schools have dress codes, shoe requirements, hair requirements, and many have requirements for PE and other out-of-class activities in terms of jewellery, cosmetics and clothing. Often these needs are argued for on the grounds of discipline, cleanliness, equality, safety and institutional identity. While such goals are legitimate, the educational implications of appearance regulations warrant a more in-depth examination. In addition to a uniform look, schools should think about the impact these policies have on students' comfort, engagement, inclusion and teacher relationships.

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Schools may use uniforms to help maintain order, to help identify students and to help minimise the visible socioeconomic differences; these benefits are not always simple, though. The research findings in Nigeria on the implementation of a uniform school policy show that there are perceived benefits and challenges. Adeleke (2021) and Diyaolu et al. (2021) cite potential benefits with regard to equality and affordability, as well as concerns regarding school identity, student preferences, and identification of students who engage in misconduct. International studies are inconclusive though. Han (2010) and Gentile and Imberman (2012) link uniforms to improvements in specific behavioural or organisational outcomes, while Ansari et al. (2022) found no general improvements in behaviour or attendance for American elementary-school students and lower school belonging for those in uniform schools. The results indicate that the educational benefits of uniforms need to be evaluated with respect to their intended uses and not taken for granted.

Appearance rules also can be different for girls and boys, especially in physical education (PE) and sport. Studies suggest that uniform design may affect comfort and movement opportunities, however evidence on the effectiveness of uniform changes on physical activity is inconclusive (Norrish et al., 2012; Nathan et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2024). Broadly, Oluwasanu et al. (2021) highlight other institutional and sociocultural barriers to adolescents' physical activity in Nigeria, but their study does not include uniforms. These findings suggest grounds for considering whether school dress codes facilitate engagement in the context of the school setting.

Hair, jewellery, and other grooming needs bring up other issues of identity, dignity, and student–teacher relationships. While schools can have reasonable expectations, standards for hygiene, safety and organisation, how these are enforced can impact pupils' learning experiences. Regulations which lead to unnecessary embarrassment; unequal treatment and exclusion from lessons should therefore be carefully examined.

Although there is an increasing body of international literature, there is limited literature on the experiences of secondary school students in Nigeria with everyday dress and grooming rules. While the Nigerian studies cited above offer some evidence on uniform policies, the institutional dress culture and physical activity, there is limited evidence on how students experience compulsory hairstyles, gender-specific clothing, restrictions on accessories and disciplinary enforcement. This paper is aimed at tackling these issues by critically synthesizing literature from Nigeria and abroad. It looks at why appearance policies are used in education, their gender and participation implications, and how grooming policies are connected to school belonging and participation. The goal is to find principles that will help Nigerian schools uphold reasonable appearance standards without compromising the dignity, inclusion and learning opportunities of students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 School Uniforms and Educational Outcomes

School uniforms are usually linked with discipline, equality and institutional identity. They can help students be more identifiable, limit the competition for clothing and create common expectations for appearance. However, these benefits depend on the affordability, design and implementation of the uniform policy. It is the question of whether compulsory uniforms have the educational benefits that have been claimed.

Research in Nigeria has shown that there are perceived benefits and practical challenges to the unified school uniform policy in Osun State. A descriptive survey of 100 respondents by Adeleke (2021) revealed that stakeholders saw the potential of the policy in reducing the visible socioeconomic disparities. But respondents also noted the loss of choice, problems in identifying pupils from individual schools and apparent increases in truancy. Likewise, Diyaolu et al. (2021) conducted questionnaires with 200 students, interviews with 10 supervisors or directors, and fabric analysis, and generally the students' perceptions about the unified uniform

were positive, especially in terms of identity and affordability. However, students liked certain parts of their previous school uniform and administrators felt that it was a problem to identify students who were engaged in misconduct. The findings of these studies give valuable insights into the stakeholders' experiences, although they do not prove that uniform unification directly led to a change in student behaviour.

The broader policy environment is also pertinent. According to Ige et al. (2021), the uniform unification was part of the educational reforms that were carried out in Osun State from 2011 to 2018. The scheme was designed to foster a sense of belonging and to encourage local production of garments and economic development. But, it is important to separate the educational impact of the policy from the goal of broader economic outcomes. The Osun State experience thus highlights the need to evaluate uniforms in the context of affordability, institutional identity, student acceptance and practical school management and not by the criterion of standardisation alone.

The results of international studies are also mixed. In the United States, Han (2010) reported on a relationship between wearing compulsory uniforms and a reduction in student problem behaviour in 421 urban schools, except for high schools. Gentile and Imberman (2012) also found that there was an increase in teacher retention in elementary schools and improved attendance among secondary-school students after the adoption of uniforms. But they did not see any significant gains in academic performance or disciplinary problems. However, in a study of 6,320 elementary school students in the United States, representative of the nation, Ansari et al. (2022) did not identify any overall positive effects on behaviour or attendance for students in uniform schools. Pupils in uniform schools had lower school belonging, although some pupils from low-income families had higher attendance. The results suggest that uniforms might provide specific organisational benefits, but this does not mean their impact is necessarily universal across all educational environments or that they have a universal impact on student behaviour or engagement.

2.2 Gender, Uniform Design and Physical Activity

Gender is crucial when considering appearance policies as girls and boys may feel differently about clothing requirements. Edwards and Marshall (2020) examined 122 public-school dress codes in the United States and concluded that the dress codes were more restrictive for girls, as is the expectation in traditional conceptions of what is acceptable for girls. A similar issue is raised in Nigeria as Dairo (2023) notes that the dress code at universities in Nigeria is beset with tension between tradition, morality and professional aspirations. While her study is not about secondary schools, it does provide some context for how institutional expectations of appearance can put specific burdens on female students.

Sportswear design adds additional factors. Howard (2024) conducted a mixed methods study with 404 adult women in the United Kingdom (UK) and eight follow up interviews to explore how women recalled school sport. The study revealed issues of body confidence, comfort and gendered expectations of clothing. The results were based on adult participants remembering their school experiences and so cannot be interpreted as observations of what is happening to school girls today. However, they do question the effect that clothing might have on the girls' physical education and sport experiences.

There is less clear evidence on the impact of uniforms on physical activity. Norrish et al. (2012) reported that primary school girls took more steps in the breaks when wearing sports uniforms than traditional uniforms in Australia. In a larger cluster randomised controlled trial of 42 Australian primary schools, however, Nathan et al. (2021) reported no significant differences in the main physical activity outcomes for girls after implementing

activity-enabling uniforms. Additional exploratory analyses revealed smaller gains such as a decrease in sedentary time for the entire student sample. Ryan et al. (2024) also examined population-level data from 135 countries and regions, and identified no overall link between uniform use and gender disparities in PA for all school ages, but noted that there were some indications of higher gender disparities in PA in primary school, where uniforms were more prevalent. Ryan et al.'s study used an ecological design and therefore cannot establish causation. All of these results indicate that clothing can have an effect on physical activity in some situations, but that uniform changes alone are not likely to lead to significant improvements.

Oluwasanu et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study in Nigeria, interviewing principals and teachers from 12 schools in Oyo State, to identify the barriers to physical activity among adolescents, which included school-related, parental, sociocultural and religious factors. Wider institutional and cultural conditions are shown to influence participation, although the study did not explore uniforms. T. C. Adeyemo (2025) also offers a wider background to the challenges of women's involvement and leadership in sport in Nigeria, but not on the issue of school attire. These studies suggest that Nigerian schools should examine whether their sportswear requirements create additional, avoidable barriers to participation

2.3 Grooming, Identity and the Nigerian Legal Context

Hair and jewellery policies raise questions on identity and school rules. Schools can reasonably expect students to have hair that is clean, easy to manage, and limit accessories that could pose safety or security concerns. But not all limitations should be justified by these goals. Content analysis of dress codes in Texas public schools (Banks, 2023) revealed that bans on hairstyles linked to Blackness may perpetuate negative stereotypes and exclusion. Whilst the racial connotations are different in Nigeria, the study suggests that it is important to consider whether grooming policies are a response to real issues in education or a reflection of entrenched notions of what is acceptable in terms of appearance.

There are related questions for Nigerian educational institutions on the relationship between appearance, tradition and personal beliefs. Dairo (2023) shows the institutional expectations of morality and identity in the dress code for students in the university, while Araromi and Adeyemo (2021) explore compulsory dress code and religious freedom in the education of Nigeria. While neither of the studies directly examines the daily lives of Nigerian secondary-school students, both reveal that appearance regulations may have issues that go beyond neatness. If multiple hairstyles and/or accessories fall within reasonable standards of hygiene, safety and affordability, schools should ask themselves if the need for a single standard has a necessary educational purpose.

The Nigerian legal system offers another viewpoint. In the case of Lagos State Government v. Abdulkareem (2022), the Supreme Court ruled that the hijab is allowed to be worn with school uniforms by female Muslim students in public schools in Lagos State. The ruling was about constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom, not school appearance requirements in general. However, it shows that uniformity of institutions is not a sufficient reason for restricting protected rights. Likewise, the Child's Rights Act 2003 sections 1, 10, 11, 12 and 15, cover Children's best interests, non-discrimination, dignity, recreation and education. While the application of child-rights legislation will need to be explored in the light of each state's legal system, the principles of these provisions are relevant in considering the educational implications of appearance policies and their implementation.

2.4 School Belonging and Disciplinary Enforcement

The educational impact of appearance policies is not independent from the students' experience of school. Acceptance and respect are factors of school membership (Goodenow, 1993) and belonging is linked with students' motivation, behaviour and attitudes to school (Osterman, 2000). In a meta-analysis of 51 studies, Allen et al. (2018) also found that teacher support and positive personal characteristics were important factors in predicting belonging. Korpershoek et al. (2020) also reported associations between school belonging and academic, motivational, behavioural and social-emotional outcomes. While these studies do not directly address grooming regulations, they do provide a context for understanding the importance of students' relationships with teachers and their sense of acceptance when considering the policy.

It is important to note the difference between compliance and meaningful engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) recognise the behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects of student engagement, and Furrer and Skinner (2003) illustrate the significance of student relationships with teachers and peers. These views imply that the success of discipline is not necessarily defined by the short-term compliance. A student can meet a grooming requirement while simultaneously feeling that he or she is being treated unfairly, especially if the correction is to be done publicly or the student is to be excluded from lessons. However, there is need for more research to find out the prevalence of such experiences in the Nigerian schools and the impact it has on the students' engagement in learning.

D. D. Adeyemo's (2021) discussion of restorative justice provides a complementary conceptual perspective. This study is in the field of criminal justice, but the focus on responsibility, recognition of harm and repairing relationships is an interesting lens for looking at disciplinary responses, although it is not a study of education. When applied judiciously to school appearance policies, this view supports correction, which seeks to correct the violation but not to unhelpfully diminish the dignity of the student or the relationship between the student and school. Its contribution is conceptual rather than direct empirical evidence about school dress codes, but it highlights the importance of distinguishing the purpose of a school rule from the consequences of its enforcement.

2.5 Research Gap

There is evidence in the existing literature regarding school uniform, gender, physical activity, appearance rules and belonging. While Nigerian studies provide useful information about uniform policy, there is limited direct evidence about the experiences of adolescents in relation to wearing of uniforms, and the institutional culture and barriers to physical activity. Specifically, there is limited evidence regarding the lived experiences of Nigerian secondary-school students with compulsory hairstyles, jewellery bans, gender-specific school uniforms and appearance related discipline.

It is therefore necessary to further investigate students' perceptions of these requirements and any differences in girls' and boys' experiences and how enforcement impacts participation, belonging and instructional time. Comparisons between public, private and faith-based schools might also help to explain the influence of institutional traditions and family resources on students' experiences. The gaps could be filled to give a better foundation for creating appearance policies that would help to ensure reasonable school standards, inclusion and educational involvement. Table 1 summarises the key empirical studies discussed above, highlighting differences in geographical context, study population, research design and principal findings.

Table 1. Comparative overview of key empirical studies

Study	Country	Educational level or study population	Research design	Main finding
Adeleke (2021)	Nigeria	Osun State public-school uniform policy; community stakeholders of varied ages	Descriptive survey	Respondents identified perceived equality benefits alongside concerns about choice, school identification and truancy.
Diyaolu et al. (2021)	Nigeria	Osun State public-school pupils and education administrators	Questionnaires, interviews and fabric testing	Students reported benefits relating to identity and cost, while administrators expressed concerns about identifying students involved in misconduct.
Han (2010)	United States	Elementary, middle and high schools in urban areas	Observational analysis	Compulsory uniforms were associated with fewer reported problem behaviours, except at high-school level.
Gentile and Imberman (2012)	United States	Elementary and secondary schools	Longitudinal fixed-effects analysis	Uniform adoption was associated with improved secondary-school attendance and increased elementary-school teacher retention.
Ansari et al. (2022)	United States	Elementary-school pupils	Longitudinal data analysis	No general improvement in behaviour or attendance was identified; pupils in uniform schools reported lower school belonging.
Edwards and Marshall (2020)	United States	Elementary, middle and high-school dress-code policies in North Carolina	Critical policy and content analysis	Dress codes placed more extensive appearance restrictions on girls.
Howard (2024)	United Kingdom	Adult women recalling their school sport experiences; precise former school year groups varied or were not specified	Retrospective mixed-methods study	Participants reported past concerns about comfort, body confidence and gendered sportswear.
Norrish et al. (2012)	Australia	Primary-school children aged approximately 10 years	Repeated-measures crossover study	Girls recorded more steps during school breaks when wearing sports uniforms.
Nathan et al. (2021)	Australia	Primary-school pupils	Cluster randomised controlled trial	Activity-enabling uniforms did not significantly improve girls' principal physical activity outcomes.
Ryan et al. (2024)	135 countries and regions	Primary-school-age children and secondary-school-age adolescents	Ecological analysis of pooled population-level data	No overall association with gender inequalities in physical activity was found, although differences appeared in particular subgroups.
Oluwasanu et al. (2021)	Nigeria	Secondary schools in Oyo State; principals and teachers were the research participants	Qualitative interviews and focus groups	Identified institutional, parental and sociocultural barriers to physical activity; uniforms were not investigated.

Note: The distinction between educational levels and study population is provided. Some studies collected information from adults or administrators or analysed policy documents rather than obtaining data directly from school pupils. These differences should be considered when applying the findings to Nigerian secondary schools. This is relevant when considering their significance for secondary-school learners in Nigeria.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In the study, a critical narrative literature review was used to explore the implications of school dress and grooming policy for students' inclusion, engagement, participation and educational experience with a particular focus on Nigerian schools. A narrative review was deemed to be suitable as the topic spans a number of educational research fields, such as school uniform policies, gender, physical activity, student identity, school

belonging and disciplinary practices. They have been studied in a variety of research, and it is important to consider their results in conjunction and with an awareness of the differences in context and methodology.

Unlike a systematic review, the present study does not have a complete, predefined and reproducible search and screening record. Instead, it uses a selective, critical synthesis of relevant literature. It is meant to review the available evidence, determine the points of agreement and disagreement and explore the implications of these for educational practice in Nigeria. This is in line with the recognition of narrative reviews as valuable tools for the creation of general insights on research areas, especially when literature is heterogeneous (Snyder, 2019).

The research question that guided the review is: What is the evidence of the impact of school dress and grooming policies on the inclusion, engagement, participation and educational experience of pupils and what are the implications of the evidence for Nigerian educators?

3.2 Literature Search and Selection

Relevant publications were identified through targeted searches of scholarly sources, including journal websites, academic search facilities and institutional repositories. The searches used combinations of terms relating to school uniforms, school dress codes, grooming policies, gendered uniforms, girls' sportswear, physical activity, school belonging, student engagement and disciplinary practices. Searches focusing on Nigeria also included terms relating to school uniform policies in Osun State and barriers to physical activity in Nigerian schools. The reference lists of relevant publications were checked for additional studies.

The publications were chosen based on their relevance to the research question and preference was given to peer-reviewed studies. Nigerian research was given preference in order to set the local context and international research was included if it provided relevant comparative evidence. Relevant research on the construct of school belonging and engagement was also included. There was no restriction on publication year.

Publications that did not seem to be directly related to the research question were not included in the synthesis. Studies with university students or adults/school students outside Nigeria were only included if they offered relevant contextual or comparative evidence. These were not taken as direct evidence of Nigerian secondary-school students' experiences. The law and institutional context was determined by examining Nigerian legislation, judicial decisions and policy documents.

A complete search log was not available. Consequently, the exact databases searched, search dates and numbers of records identified, screened and excluded cannot be reliably reported. The study is therefore presented as a critical narrative literature review rather than a systematic review. A numerical screening flow diagram is not included because the underlying records are unavailable.

3.3 Evidence Evaluation and Thematic Synthesis

The literature selected was critically examined based on geographical setting, research design, population, principal findings and limitations of the studies. Special focus was placed on the validity of the methods and evidence used to support conclusions made in past research. The review also differentiated between empirical findings, participants' reported perceptions, and theoretical arguments and policy objectives.

The studies examining Osun State's unified uniform policy were treated primarily as evidence of stakeholder perceptions and policy implementation. International research examining the correlation between uniform, behaviour and physical activity was analysed based on population and research design. Measurements

of physical activity among Australian primary-school children and retrospective accounts from British adults were not treated as direct evidence of Nigerian secondary-school students' experiences.

The evidence was grouped into four themes: school uniform and educational outcomes; gender, uniform design and physical activity; grooming, identity and the Nigerian legal context; and school belonging and disciplinary enforcement. Results obtained in each theme were compared to determine where there was consensus, conflicting evidence and gaps that needed to be explored. A comparative table was drawn up to provide a summary of the geographical contexts, educational contexts, research designs and key findings from the key empirical studies.

The synthesis was aimed at contrasting the purposes of appearance policies and the evidence of their educational impact. This enabled the review to take into account both the evidence for compulsory uniforms and studies which raised questions about the broader benefits of compulsory uniforms. It also served as a foundation to consider how appearance policies and the enforcement of those policies impact students' participation, dignity and learning.

3.4 Methodological Limitations

Three limitations are important when interpreting this review. First, because of the selective narrative approach and the lack of a reproducible search and screening record, relevant publications might not have been noted. The review can therefore not claim to give a comprehensive evaluation of the literature available.

Secondly, there is a lack of research on students' experiences of dress and grooming policies in Nigeria itself. Some of the evidence is from international contexts or Nigerian studies with university students, adult sport participation and broader physical activity barriers. These findings are only applicable to a limited extent in Nigerian secondary schools due to differences in educational systems, cultural expectations, school organisation and student populations.

Lastly, the studies included vary in terms of methods and educational outcomes examined. No formal quantitative meta-analysis or standardised methodological quality scoring was done. As a result, the review does not conclude that specific dress or grooming requirements lead to specific behavioural, academic or psychological outcomes. Its results should be viewed as a critical combination of all the evidence that has been found and a foundation for further student-centred research in Nigerian schools.

4. Discussion

School dress and grooming policies are frequently introduced as simple tools to ensure discipline, equality and institutional identity. The evidence reviewed in this study, however, indicates that at times these goals can clash or that they can have unintended side effects at the time of implementation. This is a critical problem for Nigerian schools: how to uphold reasonable standards, and how to understand that the educational worth of a rule is more than the students' willingness to abide by it. The tension gives rise to three issues: the gap between policy intentions and educational outcomes, the difficulty of applying common standards to students with differing needs, and the nature and scope of the evidence available to inform policy decisions.

4.1 When the Intended Benefits of School Policies Conflict with Their Educational Consequences

A key issue that has arisen out of the review is that a school policy can have a short-term effect and have a negative impact at other points. The use of a common uniform, for instance, can create a common look and minimise the differences in student attire. The same policy can however cause financial pressure if families have to buy expensive clothes or replace usable clothes when the school decides to change the standards. Likewise, a

uniform that is worn by a number of schools can be used to create a common identity and can make it harder to identify pupils from different schools.

These tensions are especially pertinent in Nigeria, where appearance policies are frequently used for educational and cultural and organisational purposes at the same time. The problem comes when success in one regard is equated with the success of the policy in all aspects. A uniform can provide visual consistency but not necessarily increase student behaviour, attendance and participation. Likewise, the lack of an identifiable academic gain from uniforms does not imply that uniforms are of no organisational or social value. There are various types of evaluation for different objectives.

This distinction challenges the assumption that outward discipline is synonymous with educational discipline. School discipline is more than students following through. It involves cultivating responsibility, self-control, consideration for others and a desire to be a meaningful part of the learning process. Schools that focus too much on minor appearance infractions risk putting the focus on compliance rather than on these broader educational goals. Therefore, students should be evaluated based on their conduct and involvement and not just on how they look. Similarly, a student who is in violation of a grooming requirement should not be presumed to be a non-committer to learning.

The broader message is that schools should differentiate between the symbolic and practical aspects of appearance policies. A uniform can represent unity and discipline, and the effectiveness of the policy will depend on its cost, appropriateness for the students' daily activities and the ability of the school to manage it. These functions are connected but cannot be substituted.

This distinction can also be used as a starting point for the review of existing practices. While tradition may be a good thing for school identity, the longevity of a rule does not make it a good rule for ongoing education. Likewise, a new policy should not be implemented just because it would be more uniform or easier to administer. Existing and emerging needs must be evaluated in the context of the functions they serve and impacts they can have.

It is important, therefore, that an educationally justified appearance policy is evaluated in light of a number of considerations and not just one measure of success. These include its intended purpose, affordability, practical suitability, effects on participation and the consequences of its enforcement. By thinking about all these together, schools will be able to sustain traditions that are still valuable to them and to pinpoint needs that may no longer be fulfilled by these traditions.

4.2 Balancing Institutional Standards with Students' Different Needs

A second problem is the distinction between applying the same rule to all students and providing opportunities for students to participate in education in a fair way. While the intent of uniform policies is to create common standards, the requirements of a uniform are not necessarily the same for all students. Their needs might vary based on age, physical development, gender, family situation and personal or religious practices. It is thus possible to apply a policy uniformly and at the same time impose different burdens in practice.

This does not mean that schools should abandon common standards or permit unrestricted personal choice. What is more important is whether there may be any difference between students which can be accommodated without compromising the intent of a specific requirement. If there is more than one way to be safe and identified appropriately, insisting on one may cause unnecessary problems.

Physical education is a good illustration of this issue. Students should be able to engage in activities that involve movement, flexibility and physical confidence. But, the appropriateness of a specific clothing may vary from person to person. A school that allows students to wear alternative approved sportswear can retain the colours and institutional identity of the school and still allow students to wear clothing that suits their needs. This flexibility does not detract from uniformity; it is a matter of distinguishing the uniform from what is reasonably uniform.

However, the review does not prove that the more clothes that are allowed, the more participation will increase. Facilities, supervision, opportunities, cultural expectations and individual interests also have an impact on the students' engagement in physical activity. The message is that while schools may need to change their dress code, they must first determine the specific obstacles that exist within their unique context.

Grooming rules are no exception. Sometimes, requirements for cleanliness, cost or safety can be met by multiple acceptable hairstyles or accessories. In such situations, reasonable alternatives do not have to be detrimental to the school's authority. The challenge is identifying which are essential and which are preferences which can be addressed in other ways.

This puts a significant burden on the school leadership. Too much rigidity can lead to unnecessary conflict, while too much flexibility can lead to inconsistent treatment. Schools should therefore have clear guidelines which identify those requirements and those areas within which reasonable discretion is allowed. Decisions to be made in the light of the purpose of the rule, and the circumstances of the student and any relevant legal requirements, and not the personal preferences of individual teachers.

The way these decisions are communicated is important as well. Clear explanations and consistent procedures help students understand what is expected of them. This does not necessarily mean that every requirement will be met, but it does create a more transparent platform on which to discuss disagreements.

The general education problem is that equality does not necessarily mean uniformity. Schools can have shared expectations and acknowledge situations that warrant alternative arrangements. It is their responsibility to make sure that such decisions are reasonable, consistent and relate to legitimate educational purposes.

4.3 Research Evidence to Policy Decisions in Nigerian Schools

The overall evidence suggests a difference that is significant for Nigerian education: what is justified for the introduction of an appearance requirement is not necessarily justified for all aspects of its implementation. A policy may have a legitimate purpose, but schools need to ask whether the specific rule is necessary, if other options exist to address the same purpose, and whether the punishment is proportionate to the offense.

This distinction can serve as a starting point to assessing school appearance policies without assuming that more or less regulation is always better. Both of these are not suitable in all circumstances. Where there are safety concerns in activities, a school may reasonably require specific clothing during activities involving safety risks while allowing greater choice where clothing differences have little educational significance. The important consideration is whether the degree of restriction corresponds to the purpose being served.

An important distinction to consider is between the organisational outcomes and the educational experiences of students. While appearance policies can help make school administration easier, administrative convenience does not prove that appearance policies increase participation or engagement. Likewise, a policy that students don't like at first glance might have a valid educational or safety rationale. Assessing these policies thus calls for the consideration of various perspectives. The same requirement may be felt differently by school

administrators, teachers, students and parents, and their perspectives should be taken into consideration when deciding on its continued relevance and implementation.

For school in Nigeria, this means a way of making decisions about policy that involves a balance of clear institutional expectations and appropriate professional judgement. School leaders continue to be responsible for setting standards and teachers need adequate direction in applying them equitably. There should be opportunities for students and parents to discuss practical issues, especially if compliance is difficult, due to financial issues, physical discomfort or significant personal issues. Consultation does not necessarily mean that all rules are agreed, but it can help schools to differentiate between rules that can be avoided and rules that are legitimate issues of concern.

The contribution of this review lies in bringing these considerations into a common approach to educational decision-making. Nigerian schools should not separate the purpose of the uniform from the individual circumstances and disciplinary consequences, but rather look at the relationship between the purpose, individual circumstances and disciplinary consequences. This would enable appearance standards to be a part of school organisation without being an unhelpful barrier for students' learning.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are the outcomes of the discussion in terms of practical measures for Nigerian schools. They cover policy design and development, implementation, monitoring, and future research, and are sufficiently flexible to allow for variations in school resources and institutional circumstances.

5.1 Introduce a Formal Policy Review Process

School administrators should create a formal procedure for the review of dress and grooming policies, including at least once per academic year and when there are significant concerns. The review could be done by a small committee made up of school leaders, teachers and parent and student representatives.

The committee should review each major requirement, and ask what the purpose of the requirement is and if it is still necessary. Requirements that lead to recurrent complaints, financial problems or disciplinary conflicts should be given special consideration.

The rationale for inclusion, modification or exclusion of each requirement should be documented in writing. The new policy should make it clear which requirements are mandatory and which are acceptable alternatives/exceptions. Schools should inform students, parents and staff of the results of the review prior to making any changes.

5.2 Set Clear Affordability and Uniform Design Standards

School administrators should evaluate the cost, longevity and availability of the prescribed uniforms before implementing or altering the design. This evaluation should take into account the cost to the family, the appropriateness of the fabric to the Nigerian climate and the ease with which damaged or outgrown clothing can be replaced.

Schools should permit parents to buy clothes from various approved uniform suppliers where practicable, as long as the clothes comply with the design and quality standards. Uniform changes should be made with adequate notice and a transition period for worn uniforms might be considered.

Where common uniform designs are used, schools should also provide appropriate ways of distinguishing students, such as a distinctive badge or other acceptable feature. These measures would provide for practical identification issues without necessarily giving up standardisation.

5.3 Develop Inclusive Physical Education Clothing Requirements

The PE teacher(s) should be actively involved in the selection and review of sportswear. They should evaluate them in terms of how appropriate the clothes are for the activities they do, such as for movement, comfort, safety and ease of care.

Schools should seek students' confidential views on the challenges of wearing school-supplied sportswear. Alternative approved designs may be implemented where appropriate and feasible, but without changing the school colours or identification.

Changes should be considered in the context of a broader strategy to increase physical activity, such as provision of appropriate facilities, equipment, supervision and extra-curricular sporting opportunities. Schools might track participation data and student input both before and after implementing an alternative dress policy, and be aware that changes in participation may be due to other factors.

5.4 Implementing Clear and Proportionate Discipline Practices

School administrators should develop written procedures specifying how teachers should respond to appearance violations. The procedures should make a distinction between minor non-compliance, immediate safety concerns, repeated or deliberate breaches of reasonable requirements.

In general, minor violations should be handled by gentle reminders, an opportunity to make a correction, and/or communication with parents if needed. Immediate safety concerns should be addressed prior to the student engaging in the activity in question.

Public humiliation and inappropriate exclusion from lessons should not be a common reaction to dress code infractions. Clarify the procedures for dealing with disagreements related to cultural or religious practices, including relevant legal requirements, at school.

Staff should be guided on the consistent application of these procedures and referral of disputed matters to designated senior staff. There should be a straightforward complaints and review system for students and parents.

5.5 Monitor implementation and involve students and parents

Schools should keep an eye on the practical results of their appearance policies and not determine effectiveness just by the number of students abiding by the policy.

Administrators are expected to keep appropriate records of any repeated infractions, complaints, challenged decisions, and instructional time lost due to sanctions for appearance. These records should be periodically reviewed to determine if requirements or enforcement practices need to be adjusted.

Student councils, anonymous questionnaires and structured parent consultations may yield further data on affordability, comfort, transparency of rules and fairness of rule enforcement. Feedback must be taken into account in the context of disciplinary records and not as the only basis for policy decisions.

Monitoring should be done to detect potential issues early and to make things more consistent, and to see if policy adjustments have resolved issues that led to the policy.

5.6 Build a better Nigerian evidence base

In the future, it is important that more emphasis be placed on the first-hand experiences of Nigerian secondary-school students and not primarily on the perceptions of adults and/or the experiences of other countries.

Comparative research on public, private and faith-based schools might consider the differences in how appearance demands are experienced in different schools, and how institutional traditions, family resources,

gender and age contribute to this. Special focus should be directed towards compulsory hairstyles, restrictions on jewellery, sportswear options and disciplinary implications.

Questionnaires could be used in conjunction with interviews or focus groups to elicit patterns and give students the opportunity to describe their experiences. If possible, school discipline records should also be reviewed to determine the incidence of appearance-related sanctions leading to missed lessons. This research would help Nigerian schools and education authorities to make more informed decisions on appearance policies and be aware of the varying contexts in which schools operate.

6. Conclusion

School dress and grooming policies continue to be an essential aspect of Nigerian education, with discipline, safety, equality and institutional identity as some of the reasons for their importance. But as shown in this paper, these goals should not be equated to proven gains in learning outcomes. Some research has been conducted to determine specific organisational and behavioural advantages of mandatory uniforms, but results vary by level of education and research context.

This is a critical narrative review that collates evidence on school uniforms, gender, physical activity, grooming, school belonging and disciplinary enforcement to explore the broader educational implications of appearance requirements. The analysis demonstrates the need for policy intentions to be taken into account along with practical consequences, especially when common standards impose different burdens on students. It also reminds that while disciplining a student is a reasonable exercise of authority, enforcement practices may be unnecessary and may have an impact on the dignity of a student.

The main lesson for Nigerian schools is that dress codes must be based on well-defined educational goals, must be uniform, and must be reevaluated if they become problematic. Schools need not overlook students' varied circumstances in order to maintain institutional standards, nor is it necessary to compromise discipline or school identity in order to accommodate reasonable alternatives.

However, studies of the lived experience of secondary school students in Nigeria with respect to everyday dress and grooming codes are still scarce. Additional student-centred research is needed to determine the effects of these policies in various school settings and if specific requirements or disciplinary practices impact participation, belonging, and instructional time.

Finally, an effective appearance policy should be a part of the broader goals of education. It is therefore recommended that Nigerian schools work towards achieving reasonable standards and at the same time ensure that their design and implementation promotes the inclusion, dignity, participation and opportunities to learn of students.

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