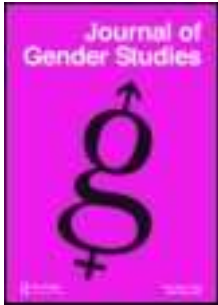


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Ritualized girling: school uniforms and the compulsory performance of gender

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School uniforms have been utilized by a number of schools in attempts to increase discipline and academic performance. This paper seeks to explore the relationships between gender, gender performance, and school uniforms through exploring writing on discipline, performance, and uniforms and then exploring some specific contemporary policy on school uniforms in the US.

Keywords: education; gender; school uniforms; girls; gender performance; critical theory

Introduction

In the USA under the ‘No Child Left Behind’ policy (of 2001) ‘failing schools’ are vulnerable to federal interventions (including teacher and administrator dismissal as well as the ultimate sanction of school closure). Issues of discipline and control are among those aspects of schooling that politicians, policy-makers, and the media have put under scrutiny and, according to Giroux (2008), many ‘at-risk’ schools have zero-tolerance policies seeking to eliminate ‘deviant’ behaviors.

Against this back-drop, some schools, most of which are located in low-income neighborhoods, have sought to improve discipline (and, thereby, academic performance) through dress-code policy or the adoption of school uniforms; the latter once being the identifying marker for private schools. This paper will explore notions of control and the performance of gender, to investigate the significance of skirt-wearing among middle and high school girls.¹

Relevant theory

Early critical theory sought social transformation and emancipation through critiquing certain material realities of human existence. Foucault (Rabinow 1984) and Marcuse (1989) examined the operation of oppressive forces and unveiled hierarchies and specific power relations. In his 1972 essay, ‘Traditional and critical theory’, Horkheimer argued that critical theory had been too far removed from the historically constituted social conditions that it commented on and sought to expose the constructed nature of supposed ‘facts’.

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In notable advancement of these early ideas, Butler's concept of gender performance (1988, 1990, 1991, 1993) points to the socially constructed nature of Western conceptualizations of gender and challenges the biological basis of sex and gender as 'given' and how these further the subordination of categories of gender. According to Allen (1998, p. 456), Butler's analysis of power offers crucial and under-used insights, and this paper employs these to investigate the reality of school uniforms for girls.

The idea that sex and gender can be re-conceptualized is of particular significance here. Butler ([1991] 1999) claims that we need to consider the socially constructed nature of 'binary' gender and sex categories (and the notion that they are necessarily ontologically related). As Gilbert observes, 'an account of gender must not merely assume that it is the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex' (2007, p. 130) since this cannot be understood as a cultural interpretation of a biological fact but rather as socially and historically situated. These *differences* must first be constituted as essentialized difference which enables categorization; it is only then that these categories are potentially oppressive. And if gender is not biologically determined then, Butler argues, it is performance that 'regularly conceals its genesis' (1988, p. 903). This well-known quote of Butler's brings together these ideas:

Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. (Butler 1988, p. 903)

The naturalization of sex and gender is 'a reiterative practice' (Butler 1993, p. 2) which, through repetition and imitation, is sanctioned socially (while others, that are not repeated and imitated, are not – see also Gilbert's discussion of smoking as gendered performance, 2007). These imitative acts underpin the apparent 'naturalness' of gender, but Butler stresses that these are imitation without an original (1991, p. 643).

Youdell (2005) conducted research into the performance of gender by girls in schools and examined how even girls' mundane practices contributed to conceptualizations of gender and how these were limiting and constricting; that girls were expected to perform gender and sexuality in specific ways and on a regular basis.

Most importantly, here, is the fact that society has so many regulatory regimes that dictate/encourage certain performance; this hyper-regulation points to the tenuous and unstable nature of the categories (Butler 1988) since, if these categories were innate, they would require no regulation to maintain them. The fact of their 'instability' suggests possible agency, resistance, and interruption.

School uniforms in North America

Until relatively recently in the US, private schools have been the primary space in which uniform was required; uniforms visually demarcated students attending such schools from those who did not. Uniforms have therefore contributed to class distinctions since they signify the economic resources and aspirations of the caregiver. In addition to enforcing the performance of class, the enforcement of skirt-wearing, not expected of male students, demands a particular type of gender performance.

According to Brunnsma and Rockquemore, the addition of uniform to the regulations of public schools² is viewed as a method for improving 'the overall school environment and student achievement' (1998, p. 53), though they review studies which suggest that there is no significant impact on these through the introduction of uniforms.

Critics of uniform policies in schools outline a number of reasons for their opposition, such as the curtailment of students' rights to freedom of expression (Meadmore and Symes 1997). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has voiced concerns about the cost implication of uniforms as well as the strict policies that govern the wearing of these (ACLU 1999). For example, in Wilson County, Tennessee, a school board approved a dress code that consequently affected 12,000 public schools. Students who failed to attend school in accordance with the dress code faced a warning, then suspension, going before a disciplinary board, and possible transfer to another (less desirable) school (ACLU 1999).

Dussel argues that school uniforms are part of the 'domestication of "unruly bodies"' (2005, p. 190) and points to their controversial past (as a means of controlling populations such as African-American slaves and immigrants), making explicit their oppressive character. Morris (2005) demonstrates how poorer, non-white students are forced to conform to dress policy to their detriment.

Lesko, one of the researchers who specifically address gendered issues in school uniforms, argues that dress code policies emphasizing modesty and restraint perpetuate the belief that girls' bodies and sexualities are in particular need of control and are dangerous when not restricted by the powerful Other in the Equation (1988).

Ritualized girling

Following Dussel (2005) and Morris (2005), I am interested in the exploration of uniform as it encourages certain performance, in particular where skirts form part of the uniform.

Quantz (1999) defines ritual as formalized, symbolic, performance. For this piece, the wearing of a skirt as part of a uniform is therefore categorized as ritualistic by virtue of its formality and what it is intended to symbolize. Uniform is also used to symbolize a school's cohesiveness, levels of discipline, respect for authority, and high achievement; a hierarchy of priorities that schools promote.

Butler uses the term 'girded' to account for how, from birth, certain subjectivities are created that uphold binary gender categories:

The doctor who receives the child and pronounces – 'It's a girl' – begins that long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girded: gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation. (Butler 1997, p. 49)

Following Butler, Charles uses the related term 'girling' to refer to the processes by which gender norms and expectations are upheld (2007, p. 137) and through which 'girls' are encouraged to embody certain features of femininity.

A uniform which demands skirt-wearing solely in those defined as female then persists the processes of ritualized girling, through which gendered performance is perpetuated and molded and, finally, 'naturalized'. While there is no one objective 'meaning' to a skirt (since there are cultures throughout history in which the 'skirt' is worn by a male), in this context, skirts differentiate the female from the male. They are the physical markers of sex and gender (and conflate the two) confirming 'traditional' gender identities. They have, therefore, implications for how girls are treated, viewed, and, most importantly here, for how they are able to move.

Skirts restrict movement in real ways; wearers must negotiate how they sit, how they play, and how quickly they move. Skirt-wearing, consciously and unconsciously, imposes considerations of modesty and immodesty, in ways that trousers do not. As Aapoia *et al.* explain:

young women must monitor and control what can and cannot be seen, and be responsible for the effects of the sexual meaning of their body parts in social relations ... restrict their movement so as to preserve 'modesty' ... in order to allow them to do everyday activities without the ascription of sexual meaning. (Aapoia *et al.*, 2005, pp. 140–1)

Although skirt-wearing is only one of the ways in which girls are expected to embody certain gender traits during their schooling, I argue that it is of grave significance given its potentially restrictive nature, which has not been adequately challenged hitherto. While I do not seek to deny girls their agentic, subjective experience of sexuality and desire, skirts implicitly sexualize girls in a way that they may have no control over since the possibility that body parts may be exposed is a regular hazard. Skirts allow for the exposure of underwear that covers buttocks and genitals; a possibility that has been commercialized and popularized in many ways through popular culture. Even where they do not reveal body parts, they can still be productive of the sexualization of young women. As Gilbert and Taylor (1991) observe, even body parts that are 'innocent' of normalized explicit sexualization can be, and are, drawn into the representation of female sexuality; as passive and objectified. The exposure of legs and thighs (whether willingly, or by virtue of a particular piece of clothing) carries sexual significance, and so girls are brought into this signification through the compulsory wearing of skirts. Girls are 'taught', early on, specific aspects of femininity (in particular here modesty and immodesty) through this particular garment.

Conclusion

Gilbert remarks that:

If gender is nothing other than the performative repetition of socially accepted and legitimated acts, we can break gender down into those acts and look at how they contribute to the feminization and genderisation of women. (Gilbert 2007, p. 131)

By scrutinizing the component of school uniforms which signifies the 'girl', it becomes clear that the repetitive and imitative acts of skirt-wearing contribute significantly to the regulation of girls and their gendered performance. This is important for those of us who seek to limit the impact of rigid gender roles and the expectations placed on these. The socialization of young girls is of utmost importance to feminism, concerned as it is with challenging the unjust and inequitable social relations that have evolved in Western society. Examination of the 'everyday' therefore is not trivial in this endeavor.

Future studies, therefore, might incorporate qualitative research which incorporates the voice of those who wear skirts; particularly where they are forced to do so. This will enable us to explore how girls negotiate and/or interrupt the restrictions and expectations placed upon them which are to their detriment. Research should also examine how resistance is currently enacted.

Notes

1. Within the United States, middle school includes grades 6 and 7, and high school includes grades 8–12. Most students attending these schools are 11–18 years old.
2. In the UK the term 'public school' is used interchangeably with 'private school' – outside of the UK the term 'public' tends to refer to 'state-funded' schools, as is the case here.

Notes on contributors

Alison Happel obtained her PhD in Educational Policy Studies from Georgia State University (Atlanta, USA) in 2011. Her research centers on the social foundations of education and

constructions of gender and sexuality within formal and informal education and schooling, GLBTQ issues within public schools, and feminist, queer, and post-structural theories as they relate to education.

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