Australian Primary School Principals', Teachers', and Parents' Attitudes and Barriers to Changing School Uniform Policies From Traditional Uniforms to Sports Uniforms

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Background: To determine Australian primary school principals', teachers', and parents' attitudes to changing school uniform policies to allow students to wear sports uniforms every day and to assess associations between participant characteristics and their attitudes. A secondary aim was to identify principals' and teachers' perceived barriers to uniform changes. **Methods:** Cross-sectional surveys of principals, teachers, and parents of children in grades 2 to 3 (age 7–10 y) from 62 Australian primary schools (Oct 2017–Mar 2018) were undertaken. Mixed logistic regression analyses assessed the associations between participant characteristics and attitudes toward uniform changes. **Results:** In total, 73% of the principals (38/52) who responded reported that their school only allowed children to wear a sports uniform on sports days. Overall, 38% of the principals (18/47), 63% of the teachers (334/579), and 78% of the parents (965/1231) reported they would support a policy that allowed children to wear daily sports uniforms. The most commonly reported barrier was the perception that sports uniforms were not appropriate for formal occasions. **Conclusions:** Although the majority of the principals were not supportive of a change to a daily sports uniform, the majority of the teachers and parents were. Strategies to improve principal support may be required if broader adoption of physical activity–supporting uniforms is to be achieved.

Keywords: guidelines and recommendation, health promotion, education, movement

Children's participation in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day supports healthy growth and development and the prevention of future chronic disease, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.¹ Schools have been a popular setting for the implementation of interventions to promote physical activity to children, as they reach almost all students on an ongoing basis.^{2,3} Furthermore, schools provide multiple opportunities to contribute to children's physical activity requirements through physical education, sport, and recess and lunch breaks. The US' Institute of Medicine recommends that children accumulate at least 30 minutes of MVPA during school hours⁴; this recommendation has been widely adopted across a number of countries, including Australia, through mandatory policies that stipulate the minimum requirements of structured physical activity each day or each week.^{5–7} However, data from studies across a number of jurisdictions, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia reveal that children are falling well short of these guidelines.^{8–12} Furthermore, research also suggests that physical activity levels during school hours are lower among girls compared with boys.¹³

It has been hypothesized that one of the reasons children, particularly girls, may not be active at school is due to the impracticability of their school uniforms.¹⁴ Within Australia, most schools require children to wear traditional uniforms, that

is, leather shoes with shirts and pants for boys, and a dress, tunic, or skirt, and a shirt with leather shoes and socks or stockings for girls. A 2012 qualitative study of 54 primary school children from 6 schools in South Australia found that girls reported their uniform significantly limited their ability to be active at recess and lunch breaks, as current uniforms “*held them back from running*” and restricted them from playing specific sports, such as basketball.¹⁴ Similarly a 2015 qualitative study undertaken in 4 South Australian secondary schools found that girls' uniforms could either be the strong barrier (if not an activity-promoting uniform) or a facilitator (if an activity-promoting uniform) to lunchtime physical activities in both high and low socioeconomic status (SES) schools.¹⁵ Furthermore, a cross-sectional study conducted by the research team in 2018, of 832 students from 12 New South Wales (NSW) Catholic primary schools, found that 62% of students would prefer to wear their sports uniform every day and 62% reported that they believed they would be more active if they could do so.¹⁶

In July 2018, the NSW Department of Education amended their uniform policy and mandated that all government schools provide girls with the option to wear shorts and pants.¹⁷ How schools implemented the policy is not stipulated; however, the policy directs schools to consult with their parent community as part of the change. Determining school staff's (in particular, principals) and parents' willingness and barriers to amending uniform policies can help identify strategies to support schools that may be experiencing implementation challenges.¹⁸ In this context, the aim of this study was to assess Australian primary school principals', teachers', and parents' attitudes to changing school uniform policies from wearing traditional uniforms to those that allow students to wear sports uniforms every day and to assess the associations between participant characteristics and attitudes toward uniform changes. A secondary aim was to identify the

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perceived barriers faced by principals and teachers in making changes to their local school uniform policies.

Methods

Ethics

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from Hunter New England Local Health District (HNELHD) Human Research Ethics Committee (no 06/07/26/4.04), the Maitland-Newcastle Catholic Schools' Office (approved October 31, 2016), and State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP) (2017184).

Design and Setting

This cross-sectional study was undertaken with the principals, classroom teachers (K–6), and parents of grade 2 and 3 students (typically aged 7–9 y) from 62 government and Catholic primary schools located in the Hunter New England region of NSW. The Hunter New England region has a population of approximately 174,000 children aged between 0 and 14 years of age¹⁹ and has approximately 325 government and 67 Catholic primary schools.

Sample, Recruitment, and Data Collection Methods

A database of all Catholic and government primary schools (catering for children aged 5–12 y) located in the Hunter New England Local Health District, NSW, Australia, was generated from those listed on the Catholic schools office and Department of Education websites and served as the sampling frame. Schools were excluded from the sample if they were central schools (catering to children aged 5–18 y), special purpose schools (catering to students with special needs), or currently participating in a physical activity intervention. All eligible schools were then randomly approached until the required number of schools consented to participate. Following principal consent, all K–6 teachers were provided with information about the study and invited to participate. The principals and teachers completed a self-administered paper questionnaire between November 2017 and March 2018.

All principals, all teachers, and parents of grade 2 and 3 students at the consenting schools were invited to participate in the study. The parents of all students in grades 2 and 3 were eligible to participate and were provided with an information pack, which included a letter explaining the purpose of the study and the data collection procedures. Two weeks following the distribution of the information pack, the parents who had not returned a consent form were telephoned by a school administration officer, and consent was sought. If the parent agreed, a replacement consent form was provided to indicate verbal consent. Parents who provided consent were invited to complete a 10- to 12-minute computer-assisted telephone survey. The items included in the computer-assisted telephone survey were developed by the research team and piloted before use for clarity and comprehension. The data were collected between November 2017 and May 2018, which is prior to the release of the 2018 NSW uniform policy.

Measures

Participant and School Characteristics. The principals were asked their sex and length of time in their current role. The teachers were asked their sex, year of birth, years of teaching experience, and the current grade level they were teaching. The parents were

asked their sex, postcode, and the sex of their grade 2 and 3 child/children. The data regarding the total number of students enrolled and the postcode of the locality of the school were obtained from each of the schools' administration teams.

Schools' Current Uniform Policy Requirements. The principals were asked, "when are students permitted to wear their school sports uniform?" (any day of the week; only on sports days; school does not have a sports uniform; or not applicable, as the school only has a sports uniform). Note: On a typical sports day, students wear their sports uniform to school, rather than their traditional uniform, as they will participate in a sport or physical activity lesson at some stage throughout the day.

Principal and Teacher Attitudes to Changing School Uniform Policy. All principals and teachers were asked, "would you support your school moving to having a sports uniform only that children wear every day?" (yes/no).

Parent Attitudes to Changing the School Uniform Policy. The parents were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) the extent to which they agreed that (a) "it is appropriate for schools to provide students the option of wearing sports uniform every day?" (b) "it is important that school uniforms are supportive of physical activity?" and (c) "it would cost families less financially if students wore sports uniforms only?"

School Staff Barriers to Changing School Uniform Policy.

Focus groups previously undertaken by the research team with school staff identified 13 potential barriers to their adoption of school policies that enabled children to wear their sports uniform every day. The principals and teachers who did not support changes from traditional uniforms to students being able to wear a sports uniform daily (defined in "Analysis" section) were asked to nominate whether they perceived any of these 13 barriers as impediments to policy adoption by ticking any that applied.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SAS (version 9.3; SAS Institute, Cary, NC). The school postcode was used to classify the schools as "urban" (major cities) or "rural" (inner/outer regional/remote) using the Australian Statistical Geography Standard.²⁰ The NSW median disadvantage score, from the Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia, was used to dichotomize the school postcodes into "higher" and "lower" socioeconomic regions (using the Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia database).²¹ Schools were classified by size according to the Department of Education's classifications, that is, small (1–159), medium (160–450), or large (451 or over).²² Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of the schools, participants, schools' current uniform policy requirements, staff's and parents' attitudes to change, and staff barriers to change. Likert scales were dichotomized into agree (strongly agree and agree) and neutral or disagree (strongly disagree, disagree, and neutral) categories for analyses. The statistical tests were 2-tailed, with an alpha of .05. For principals, univariate logistic regression was undertaken to assess the association between the sex of the teacher and the school sector, and a supportive attitude toward a change in the sports uniform policy, enabling students to wear a sports uniform every day (yes/no). For the teachers and parents, logistic regression was applied, adjusting for clustering at the school level to assess the association between school and participant characteristics (refer to Table 1) and an

attitude supportive of a change in the sports uniform policy, enabling students to wear a sports uniform every day (yes/no for teachers and agree/neutral or disagree for parents).

Results

Participant and School Characteristics

Of the 76 eligible schools that were contactable, 62 schools consented to participate (81.6%) in the study. Overall, 52 (85.4%) principals completed the paper survey, and 579 of the 728 (74.2%) teachers completed the paper survey. Of the 1740 eligible parents of students from grades 2 and 3, 1231 (70.8%) completed the computer-assisted telephone survey. Table 1 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the participating schools, principals, teachers, and parents.

Participating Schools Current Uniform Policy Requirements

Of the 52 principals who completed the survey, 38 (73%) reported that their school policy required students to wear a traditional uniform every day except for sports day, when sports uniforms are worn all day. Seven (13.5%) principals reported that they only have a sports uniform; 5 (9.5%) have both a traditional and a sports uniform, with students able to choose which to wear on any day of the school week; and 2 (3.9%) stated that the school does not have a sports uniform.

Principal, Teacher, and Parent Attitudes Toward Changing the School Uniform

Of the participants completing the attitude items in the survey, 38.3% of the principals, 63.5% of the teachers, and 78.5% of the parents supported their school changing from traditional uniforms to daily sports uniforms (Table 2).

A total of 61% of the parents (61.3%) agreed it would cost them less if students wore a daily sports uniform. Furthermore, 69.9% agreed it is appropriate for schools to provide students the option of wearing the sports uniform every day, and 92% agreed it is important that school uniforms be supportive of physical activity.

Associations Between Participants' Characteristics and Their Attitudes Toward Changing the School Uniform

There were no significant associations between the government and Catholic school principals' or teachers' support for the policy change. However, the parents of a girl had 1.5 times the odds of supporting change in the uniform policy compared with the parents of a boy, and government school parents had 2.7 times the odds of supporting change in the uniform policy compared with Catholic school parents (Table 2).

Principal and Teacher Perceived Barriers to Changing From Traditional Uniforms to Sports Uniforms

Table 3 shows that, of those principals and teachers not supportive of changing from traditional uniforms to daily sports uniforms, the most frequently reported barrier was its perceived inappropriateness for formal occasions.

Table 1 Characteristics of Participating Schools, Principals, Teachers, and Parents

Characteristics	n	%
Schools (N = 62)		
Size		
Small (1–159)	11	17.7
Medium (160–450)	44	70.9
Large (≥451)	7	11.3
Location		
Rural	26	41.9
Urban	36	58
Socioeconomic status		
Lower	39	62.9
Higher	23	37.1
School type		
Catholic	21	33.9
Government	41	66.1
Principals		
All	52	
Female	21	44.7
Years in current role, mean (SD)	4.14 (3.41)	
Sector		
Catholic	19	40.4
Government	28	59.6
Teachers		
All	579	
Female	492	84.9%
Mean age, mean (SD)	39.33 (11.43)	
Years of teaching experience, mean (SD)	13.74 (10.77)	
Sector		
Catholic	158	27.3
Government	368	63.6
Class taught		
Infants	292	50.8
Primary	300	52.2
Parents		
All	1231	
Parent of a girl in grade 2/3	883	50.8
Sector		
Catholic	602	34.6
Government	1138	65.4
Location		
Rural	590	33.9
Urban	1150	66.1
Socioeconomic status (of school locality)		
Higher	837	48.1
Lower	903	51.0

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine Australian primary school principal, teacher, and parent attitudes and barriers to adopting a school uniform policy that allows students to wear

Table 2 Principal, Teacher, and Parent Support for Moving From Traditional Uniforms to Sports Uniforms Every Day, by Selected Demographic Factors

Characteristics	Support changing to sports uniform, n (%)	Odds ratio (95% CI)	P value
Principals (n = 47) ^a	18 (38.3%)		
Sex			
Female	9 (42.8%)	0.71 (0.22–2.31)	.54
Male	9 (34.6%)	—	
Sector			
Catholic	6 (31.6%)	—	.44
Government	12 (42.9%)	1.63 (0.48–5.52)	
Teachers (n = 579) ^b	334 (63.5%)		
Sex			
Female (n = 445)	284 (63.8%)	—	
Male (n = 74)	47 (63.5%)	1.00 (0.58–1.72)	.99
Sector			
Catholic (n = 158)	88 (55.70%)	—	.07
Government (n = 368)	246 (66.85%)	1.67 (0.94–2.94)	
Grade-level taught			
Infants (n = 255)	166 (65.1%)	1.17 (0.8–1.71)	.41
Primary (n = 253)	156 (61.6%)	—	
Parents (n = 1231) ^b	965 (78.46%)		
Parent of a girl	503 (81.5%)	1.47 (1.10–1.97)	.008
Parent of a boy	462 (75.37%)	—	
Sector			
Catholic (n = 455)	314 (69%)	—	<.001
Government (n = 775)	651 (84%)	2.7 (1.7–4.3)	
Location			
Urban (n = 855)	674 (78.8%)	1.08 (0.59–1.96)	.78
Rural (n = 375)	291 (77.6%)	—	
SEIFA			
Low (n = 604)	468 (77.5%)	—	.07
High (n = 626)	497 (79.4%)	1.47 (0.94–2.8)	

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; SEIFA, Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia.

^aFive principals did not answer uniform attitude questions, 60 teachers did not answer uniform attitude questions. ^bPrincipals, teachers, and parents were asked if they would support their school moving away from having a traditional uniform and a sports uniform to only having a sports uniform that children wear every day.

a sports uniform as opposed to a traditional uniform every school day. The study found that, currently, 23% of the schools had policies that allow students to wear sports uniforms every day; and while 62% of the principals were not supportive of introducing

Table 3 Principals' and Teachers' Barriers to Changing From Traditional Uniforms to Sports Uniforms

Barriers	Teachers (not supportive of change) (N = 192) n (%)	Principals (not supportive of change) (N = 29) n (%)
Sports uniform inappropriate for formal occasions	125 (65%)	28 (96.5%)
Cost of changing the uniform	64 (33%)	27 (93%)
School status/tradition	77 (40%)	26 (90%)
Not a school priority	35 (18%)	19 (65.5%)
No rationale/evidence for making change	29 (15%)	14 (48%)
Students' behavior (eg, become unsettled)	16 (8%)	2 (7%)
Does not suit the climate (weather)	5 (2.5%)	1 (3.5%)
Lack of support from parents and community	n/a	23 (79%)
Lack of support from executive/organizational level	n/a	15 (52%)
Lack of support from teachers	n/a	13 (45%)
Lack of support from students	n/a	3 (10%)
Lack of support from school education department	n/a	3 (10%)
Do not foresee any barriers to moving toward a sports uniform that children wear everyday	n/a	1 (3.5%)

Abbreviation: n/a = Teachers were not asked these questions.

such a policy at their school, the majority of the teachers and parents were. The principals and teachers perceived that barriers to introducing daily sports uniform policies were related to the appropriateness of wearing such uniforms at formal occasions, the cost of doing so for parents, and its effect on undermining school status and tradition.

The majority of the schools did not permit students to wear daily sports uniforms. Such findings point to the considerable potential that the NSW Department of Education uniform policy may have on enabling students and, in particular, girls to feel more comfortable to participate in certain physical activities than they would if they were required to wear skirts or dresses.²³ While more recent data are required to identify any changes in uniform policies following the NSW Department of Education release of the mandatory policy in 2018, the findings of this study provide information relevant to the development of strategies to facilitate implementation among schools that may be experiencing challenges in doing so.

Principal support is essential for policy makers looking to implement policy changes in schools. However, only a minority (38%) of the principals were supportive of their school moving to a daily sports uniform policy. The primary barrier of the principals who were opposed to adopting sport uniforms only was the perceived appropriateness of sports uniforms for formal occasions and the impact on school status. Behavior change theories suggest that, in order to overcome these attitudinal barriers, education, persuasion, or modeling strategies may be effective.²⁴ Such strategies could leverage the large proportion of teachers (63.5%) and

parents (78.5%), in particular parents of girls, who were supportive of their school adopting such a policy, given research that suggests that the views of teaching staff and parents are influential in principal policy decisions.²⁵ Previous research has also demonstrated that students are supportive of such uniform policy changes.¹⁶ Utilizing student voices by including them in the decision-making process has also been found to be an effective strategy in organizational change in schools.²⁶

While broadly supportive, a number of barriers to the introduction of a daily sport uniform policy by teachers was identified. For example, the perceived appropriateness of sports uniforms for formal occasions was frequently cited as a barrier by school staff. As most schools in this study reported having 2 school uniforms (traditional and sports), the adoption of their sports uniforms for everyday use and traditional school uniforms for special school events or formal occasions may represent one means of overcoming this barrier. Interestingly, while the financial impact that uniform changes may have on families was also perceived to be a barrier by teachers, having a daily sports uniform policy was perceived by the majority of parents as likely to cost them less financially. Such findings suggest that, while schools should be mindful of the financial impact of any changes in school uniform policies and introduce any initiatives to mitigate this risk among families who are the most financially disadvantaged, this barrier may not represent as significant a barrier to change as perceived by school staff.

Strengths and Limitations

The study has a number of strengths, including the large and diverse sample, including representation of both government and Catholic schools and the multiple viewpoints of principals, teachers, and parents. These findings should also consider a number of limitations. The study was conducted in the Hunter New England area. The applicability of the study findings to other regions of Australia or internationally is unclear. The fact that only parents of students in grade 2 and 3 were surveyed may not be representative of the broader parent community. Furthermore, the use of a prespecified list of possible barriers may have missed other important factors that impact schools' implementation of uniform policies. Therefore, future studies may consider utilizing a determinants framework, such as the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research,²⁷ to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the multiple influences within and across the inner and outer context of the school setting in which implementation of such policies occur.²⁸ Notwithstanding these potential limitations, the study provides novel data in an important area of school-based physical activity promotion.

Conclusions

Physical activity-supportive school uniforms have been suggested as a potential means of improving student physical activity, particularly the activity levels of girls. This study showed that, although the majority of principals were not supportive of allowing students to wear daily sports uniform, the majority of teachers and parents were. The study provides important information for policy makers and practitioners responsible for the implementation of the state policy and physical activity promotion in schools.

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