

Café Connect Episode 16

Automated Voice [00:00:03] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

Rachel Elliott [00:00:11] Welcome to the latest Cafe Connect podcast, where we bring you the latest research from the University of Aberdeen. My name is Rachel Elliot, and I'm part of the Public Engagement with Research Unit. In this series we meet different researchers who talk about their work and its relevance in society. If you have any comments or questions, we'd love to hear from you. Please email peru@abdn.ac.uk. And we'll put your questions and comments to our researchers. So, I'm joined today by Dr Rachel Shanks, who's a senior lecturer of Education. Today's discussion is all about her research on school uniform policies and her work influence, and policymakers and education officials about how the significant cost on parents can be addressed. Thank you for joining me, Rachel.

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:01:08] Thank you.

Rachel Elliott [00:01:09] So, how was it that the research initially came about?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:01:13] Well, it all came about from one conversation with a fourth-year student at the University of Aberdeen, who mentioned to me how great it would be if undergraduates had a chance to take part in research that staff were conducting. And so, I thought about that and I spoke to people at AUSA, the University Student Association and they helped me to recruit some students in 2019, and I had 12 fantastic students, undergraduates who and one master's student who worked with me for a week. I taught them some qualitative data analysis software called InVivo on how to use that. And then they worked with me, and we collected the school uniform policies of all 357 publicly funded secondary schools in Scotland, and we analysed them together and then three of the students are still working with me. One of them published an article, and two of them were about to send off manuscripts to journals as well. So, but it all came from just that one conversation. It was actually in Pittodrie Football Stadium on a University Strategy Away Day, and it's just provided a great opportunity.

Rachel Elliott [00:02:30] So, why is it that the Scottish school uniform system is so in favour of school uniforms, both in the past and today?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:02:37] So, I think school uniform, there are good reasons to have it because when we have families with different financial circumstances, it can try to put everyone on an equal footing. And I think for that reason, a lot of people have been in favour of school uniform so that everyone looks the same and it hopefully would prevent bullying so that people aren't possibly making fun of what people are wearing. There isn't a stigma of people being in different types of clothes. So, that's one of the key reasons I think that the school uniform has stayed in place in Scotland. But a lot of the other reasons that are given for school uniform is that it will help with learning and aren't actually borne out by any research. So, it's something that's taken for granted because most people in the UK, who went to school in the UK will have worn a uniform, their parents will have worn a uniform and probably their grandparents would have worn some type of uniform as well. So, because there's only 14 secondary schools in Scotland funded by the Scottish Government that have no school uniform requirement. So, we just assume that we always have a school uniform, and it doesn't change. It's just taken for granted. It's not questioned because we don't see an alternative, whereas in other countries that don't have a school uniform, they have the opposite problem they can't imagine having and requiring young people to wear a school uniform every day.

Rachel Elliott [00:04:19] And you've been focusing research on school uniform policies. What have you found as part of that research?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:04:26] So, what I found was that most secondary schools, they split up what girls should wear and what boys should wear. And so, we have really gendered school uniform policies, and there's quite a movement that gathered more attention and in England, too, to say that we should really have an ungendered school uniform so that if there's a school uniform, it simply says these are the items to wear and then young people can choose which items they wear. So rather than saying girls have to wear skirts, it just would be, and anyone could wear skirts or trousers, or shorts. So quite often in the summer, especially in the south of England, there are boys that wear skirts to school because they're not allowed to wear shorts. That's not part of the school uniform, so their way of protesting at is to wear a skirt. Now in Scotland, for a long time, girls have been able to wear trousers to school. But quite often when the school uniform is laid out, where to buy the school uniform, so if there's an exclusive supplier, it's been found in England that girl's uniform is more expensive than boy's when you add up all the items. So, the more single suppliers or a small number of suppliers are used, then the more expensive the school uniform is. What I was surprised about in my research was just how many schools sort of required a school tie. I didn't realise that 90 percent of secondary schools in Scotland that are publicly funded have a school tie that is compulsory, and two thirds have a school blazer that's compulsory. And those are costs that first of all, maybe aren't necessary. But also, again, it's that rather traditional things to wear. So, when we think of now, obviously a lot of people are working from home, but even before the pandemic, what people want to work had become more casual. And yet if we think of a school uniform with trousers or skirt and a shorter blouse tie and a blazer, that's something that we think of us as being very much, you know, still 1950s-1960s, you know 20th century and it doesn't really reflect what people went to work today. Because quite often schools will say they have a school uniform to sort of reflect what people will be wearing at work afterwards.

Rachel Elliott [00:07:16] Why is it that school uniforms can be so costly?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:07:20] Well, I mean, partly it's not exclusive supplier. So, if you have only one company that you can go to or one shop to buy a uniform that tends to make it more expensive and then it can be just the number of items that people are asked to buy. So, it might be a particular colour of socks, it might be a particular colour of trousers. It's not always black or grey. Some schools might have blue trousers, which because there's less, they'll be more expensive and ties can be expensive. When you don't have just one tie for the whole of four, five, six years of secondary school. You might have to change tie for the senior phase, for S4 or S5, depending on the rules of that school. And some schools even have three ties so that when people get to S6, they have a third tie that their family would have to buy for them. And another reason is PE kits, so physical education kits, so those other costs that are sometimes forgotten that there's not just the everyday clothes that people wear to school. There's also that the kit can be expensive. Although many schools ban trainers in class, but then there's two pairs of shoes are needed the school, maybe black school shoes, but then a separate pair of trainers for PE. And then it might say that a particular t-shirt, it might even be the school t-shirt, has to be worn or things like that. So, all the items, you might not think of it as being expensive, but when the school clothing grant is £150 per pupil per year for a growing teenager that's not going to cover all the costs of the school uniform.

Rachel Elliott [00:09:11] What have other countries been doing on school uniforms? Do other countries have a similar view of school uniforms being necessary?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:09:20] Scotland and England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are all very similar, just that tradition that sort of came from England. And then in a sense, during the time of the British Empire, the school uniform was exported all across the world. And so, a lot of countries that still have a school uniform, it started, maybe 150 years ago with the British Empire, hundreds of years ago. And in other parts of the world and most of Europe in fact, there isn't that tradition of school uniform. There might be some private schools or religious schools that might have a school uniform. But if we look to Finland in education, we often look to Finland because it does so well in international comparisons there's and not a

single school in Finland that has a school uniform and it's not common at all in other Nordic countries. But I think sometimes it's a reflection of if there's a bigger income differential between people in a country then a school uniform is a way of trying to mask that income difference. Whereas in the Nordic countries, there are more equal societies. So, there isn't that need to have school uniform to try and hide those differences in income. So, in the rest of Europe, there's Malta and Cyprus, of course, two former colonies. So, there we have this sort of tradition from the British Empire. And Malta, actually, in 2019 did a survey of parents, teachers and pupils to ask them about school uniform, and they decided to introduce a tracksuit. So, each school would have its own tracksuit and the uniform would be the tracksuit. So, to make it easier to do physical activity before school, after school, during the school day. But actually, that was put on hold because of the pandemic. In other countries such as China, a lot of schools have a track suit in China and in South America, Latin America there's quite a tradition of school uniforms, but that comes from a different tradition of to do with hygiene. So, it started off with a smock, was worn over people's clothes at the beginning of the 20th century, and then that's really developed into a school uniform.

Rachel Elliott [00:11:43] Now that you've done all your research, what changes would you like to see in school uniform policies in the future?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:11:50] Well, in Scotland, I think it would be great if there was national guidance on school uniforms, at the minute and local authorities might say to schools what they would expect in a school uniform policy. But it's actually up to each school within the local authority policy to decide on its own school uniform. Whereas in the rest of the UK, there's a guidance for schools, and in Wales they have guidance to say it should be generic items and that's actually coming into force in England as well in 2022. So, I think having generic items, so that's less things with logos and things that can be bought anywhere, so not having exclusive suppliers, I think that helps to keep the costs down. But it's also good for the planet because it means that things can be used between different schools and also it just makes it less expensive. And so, what I think would be great is if we think of school uniform as being affordable, comfortable and sustainable. So, affordable so that nobody is being made poorer because of the requirements of a school uniform policy, which is the case at the minute because the school clothing grant probably doesn't cover all the costs for a whole school year. Comfortable and that might sound odd, but it's just there's research to show that girls would do more physical activity turn and from school and during the school day if their school uniform was more comfortable, if they were more likely to wear trousers rather than skirts. And also, uncomfortable as well so that there's no potential gender discrimination, there's no race or religious discrimination as well to make sure that everyone can feel comfortable wearing the school uniform. And then also sustainable, so, what I've mentioned already this could be a way of people understanding the circular economy. There's so many clothes going to landfill and so many greenhouse gases being used in the production and transport of clothing around the world, so that if we had items that were more hard wearing, that could would last longer, that could be used by two or three people before they're recycled, for me, that would be something that we could be aiming for in Scotland.

Rachel Elliott [00:14:16] And what have you been doing to influence policymakers? Do you think they and schools are willing to adopt their approach to school uniforms?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:14:24] So when I discovered that Scotland was the only part of the UK that didn't have any national guidance on school uniforms, I wrote up some of my research findings into a policy briefing, and I sent that by email to all the MSPs of the Education and Skills Committee ,to the Scottish Government and other stakeholders in education in Scotland. And then I met with MSPs from several different parties and the Scottish Government to explain my findings and recommendations about having national guidance, statutory guidance about schools, having regular reviews of their school uniform policies and also about involving pupils, so that young people have a say in what they're wearing to school every day. And I've been delighted by the response because three of the main political parties in Scotland then put recommendations,

commitments on school uniform policy in their manifesto in the 2021 election campaigns and then following on from that member of Parliament put in that question to Parliament. Another MSP then had a private member's debate in September 2021 about a school uniform and affordability, and the Scottish Government as part of their programme of government for this Parliament, they've committed to introducing statutory guidance on school uniforms.

So, I'm hoping within the next four years there will be statutory guidance, possibly similar to Wales asking schools to have generic items, not to have exclusive suppliers and to think about the cost and so that it isn't putting families in more difficult circumstances because of the cost of school uniforms.

Rachel Elliott [00:16:26] And what are the next steps for you on the issue? Are you doing further research?

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:16:30] Yes. So going back to your last question as well, actually, I'm really interested to know why there is resistance to changing school uniform. So, I am interested in looking at the school uniform from a human rights perspective in terms of children and young people. But I'm also interested in that resistance from some from teachers and people who might have to ask teachers or schools to make changes of, I guess, why people are so wedded to the notion of school uniform when there actually is no research to show that it makes a difference in terms of how young people do, you know, and works at the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland has done shows that it is beneficial to have a school uniform. And that's one of the Scottish Government's reasons for having a school uniform to prevent bullying and competition or the Child Poverty Action Group's talked about the stigma people can have if they can't afford clothes for school. But for me, I just I'm interested in why people aren't happy to maybe have the changes that we've seen during the pandemic. So, in economics, it's called a natural experiment where just because of the circumstances we were able to sort of see how things can be different. And during the pandemic a lot of schools relaxed their school uniform requirements, so if young people had physical education, they could go in a tracksuit that day. They could go in their PE kit and stay in their PE kit all day so that they didn't have to change because of COVID. Together with other colleagues in Scotland, we're hoping to write a book about school uniform, and we've included colleagues in Ireland and Zimbabwe as well. So we're looking at those colonial links with how school uniforms, if you like, was taken to other parts of the world during the time of the British Empire and also looking at school uniform today in Scotland in terms of do pupils get to participate in the decisions about what they wear; what are the gender differences are still apparent in school uniform policies and how can we make it more sustainable for the future.

Dr Rachel Shanks [00:19:01] And obviously, a lot of young people maybe wore their tracksuit on days that they didn't actually have PE, but they figured maybe their teachers wouldn't realise. And a lot of schools have realised that when shops were closed during the pandemic and young people still were growing, then parents couldn't go out and buy the next size up of the uniform. So, they relaxed the rules, and it was simply come to school and dress warmly because windows are open even in the winter. So, young people have to wear lots of extra layers. And again, some schools are still sending young people home when they're not wearing the school uniform, unfortunately. But I think that sort of relaxation of rules because of COVID might have made a bit of a difference with teachers and head teachers realising, well, actually, the young people are still working hard at school, they're still doing well, and maybe there isn't a link between wearing a school uniform and doing well at school. So, I think there might be a change in also what a lot of people are wearing because they're home working, in what people are wearing while the working has become much more casual. And again, there's an even bigger disconnect between young people going to school and a blazer and a tie in a shirt. and someone that's working from home in their tracksuit bottoms and slippers. So, I'm hopeful that people might see that we can change school uniform and the sky won't fall down.

Rachel Elliott [00:20:44] Well, thank you very much for joining me today, Rachel and thank you for such a thorough overview of your research. We are always interested in hearing views of our audience, so please email peru@abdn.ac.uk if you have any comments or questions. Thank you for listening and goodbye.

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