
DRESSING DIVERSITY:
POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND THE CASE OF SCHOOL UNIFORMS

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In *The New York Times* parenting blog, *Motherlode*, Debra Monroe writes about “the dynamic that makes public school democratic—a place to confront the humanity of others,” because she is concerned with what schooling teaches children about diversity and difference.¹ This paper begins with a similar assumption and concern; I too think schools ought to be places where children learn to confront the humanity and difference of others, and I am concerned with how children are taught to do so. Through an analysis of school uniform policies and theories of social justice, I argue not that children consciously experience school uniforms as uniforming, but that school uniforms and their foregoing policies assume that confronting strangers—an imperative of living in a democratic polity—is something that requires seeing sameness instead of recognizing difference. Imbuing schooling with a directive that says schools ought to be places where children learn to confront the humanity of others requires that we ask questions about how educational policies teach children to deal with human difference. Broadly speaking, uniform policies undergird the assumption that a child’s capacity to confront difference is unimportant.²

To consider the ways in which school uniform policies unjustly teach children to disregard difference so that they can reasonably participate in public and school life, this paper engages in a rich conversation about social justice. Fundamentally, social justice is about recognizing grave injustices between individual persons and groups of people living in, or being prevented from living in, the world. The works of John Rawls, Iris Marion Young, and Nancy Fraser represent three common theoretical constructs for dealing with social justice. Rawls comes from a social contract position and constructs a floating theory of justice based on a Kantian self that ultimately addresses injustices by way of redistribution.³ Young aligns herself with critical theory, finds her critique in the messiness of the “real world,” and tackles injustice by

¹ Debra Monroe, “When Elite Parents Dominate Volunteers, Children Lose.” *Motherlode* (blog), New York Times (January 19, 2014), <http://nyti.ms/19EIwRF>.

² I am purposefully not differentiating between public and private schooling, because all schooling situated in a democratic context ought to teach children to confront the humanity of others. Moreover, children are a part of the larger “public” in a Deweyan sense.

³ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

advocating for a politics of difference.⁴ All the while, Fraser works out a bivalent conception of social justice that bridges the divide between the spheres of distribution and recognition.⁵ Rawls's *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* is the theoretical backdrop against which this paper employs Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* and Fraser's "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation" to speak to the ways in which diversity can and should be "undressed," and therefore, "addressed" by children in school.

To "address" diversity, the first section of this paper will focus on the language of school uniform policies. Policy makers tell us that school uniform policies are meant to: minimize disruptive behavior, remove socioeconomic tension, and maintain high academic standards.⁶ There is nothing unjust about wanting to reduce socioeconomic difference, nor valuing high academic standards. What is unjust is that these policies do not remove socioeconomic difference, nor cure disruptive behavior. School uniform policies dress difference; they do not address it. Accordingly, in an attempt to "undress" difference, and, perhaps, "redress" the injustice of school uniform policies, the second section of this paper argues that schools ought to be places where children are confronted with the humanity of others. The argument is that removing uniforms should not be a mere undressing that leaves children to deal with difference and humiliation on their own, but that we must redress the injustice by philosophically resituating schooling. Finally, the concluding section will sketch out what it might mean to philosophically resituate schools and to think of school life as a reflection of city life where, "the public is heterogeneous, plural, and playful, a place where people witness and appreciate the diverse cultural expressions that they do not share and do not fully understand."⁷ Schools in this vision are not apolitical sanctuaries where children develop into perfect rational subjects; rather, schools are messy, vibrant, lively, worlds where children both constitute and come to know the diverse world and public(s) that surround them.

DRESSING DIVERSITY: THE SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY

A policy bulletin from Los Angeles states: "The Los Angeles Unified School District believes that appropriate student dress contributes to a

⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation." Tanner Lecture Series, Stanford University (April 30–May 2, 1996), http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/f/Fraser98.pdf.

⁶ David L. Brunσμα, "School Uniforms in Public Schools," *National Association of Elementary School Principals* (January/February 2006), 50.

⁷ Young, *Politics of Difference*, 241.

productive learning environment.”⁸ While a policy from Pitt County states: “The implementation of school uniforms will help minimize disruptive behavior, promote respect for oneself and others, build school/community spirit, and, more significantly, help to maintain high academic standards.”⁹ Most school uniform policies echo these sentiments. They appear to originate from a genuine desire for students to succeed academically, and/or a need to improve behavior and safety. Yet, the history of asking students to appear one way or another is a story of mingled concerns about academic achievement, juvenile delinquency, gender appropriateness, race relations, and gang affiliation.¹⁰ Ines Dussel historically situates these concerns within a broad trend toward institutional organization and control of people who pivot around the “axis of difference.”¹¹ According to Dussel, “such policies were tied to the disciplining of ‘unruly’, ‘savage’, ‘untamed’ bodies, that is, the bodies of those who were not able to perform self-regulation or self-government: women, Black, Indian, poor classes, immigrants, toddlers or infants.”¹² In Young’s language, the victims of cultural imperialism are frozen “into a being marked as other,” while the dominant group occupies a universal “unmarked” position.¹³ The impetus to uniform is at once entangled in a project to mark or dress difference and to extend the “universalized” position to the “other.”¹⁴ The policy trend toward institutional control vis-à-vis school uniform policies is enmeshed in the desire for definition and regulation of student’s personal bodies and is a means to regulate and define children’s relationships with one another.

School uniform policies are not merely concerned with what one wears, but are a part of how we organize schools and the students therein. These policies are an attempt to make schools safer and better, to regulate what happens, and who affiliates with whom. A District of Columbia uniform policy hints at these underlying tensions by taking measures to define what “uniform” means within the policy: “The term ‘uniform,’ for the purposes of a mandatory uniform policy, is defined as clothing of the same style and/or color and

⁸ Jim Morris, “Student Dress Codes/Uniforms,” Los Angeles Unified School District Policy Bulletin, BUL-2549.1 (December 2009), 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wendell Anderson, “School Dress Codes and Uniform Policies,” *Policy Report* (ERIC Clearinghouse on Education Management), no. 4 (2002), 4. Anderson briefly captures this history in the synopsis of his policy report.

¹¹ Ines Dussel, “When Appearances Are Not Deceptive: A Comparative History of School Uniforms in Argentina and the United States (Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries),” *Paedagogica Historica* 41, no. 1–2 (2005): 191.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Young, *Politics of Difference*, 123.

¹⁴ To this point, Dussel, notes that elite, private, “preppy” school dress was extended down, as it were, to public mass schooling and has become the school uniform we are familiar with today, e.g. khaki pants and Oxford shirts.

standard look, as agreed upon by the school community.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, a definition of “uniform” does little to draw attention away from the fact that the policy is asking all children to appear the same. The concluding advice from a US Department of Education policy report for drafting a uniform policy reads: “when they are justified by a school’s circumstances, wisely conceived in collaboration with the community, and coupled with appropriate interventions, dress codes and school uniforms may positively influence school climate, student behavior, and academic success. *However, it is critical to keep such policies in proper perspective and avoid overestimating or exaggerating their potential benefits.*”¹⁶ This hesitant endorsement of school uniform policies manages to advise caution about drawing specific cause-and-effect relationships between school uniforms and academic gains, and in the same instance, it glosses over the historical and philosophical significance of asking students to uniformly dress their difference. Standardizing how students appear may give the school an air of control over the schooling environment, but in doing so, these policies tell students that when and where appearances differ, danger lurks.

ADDRESSING DIVERSITY: SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE SCHOOL UNIFORM POLICY

Claims for social justice, more often than not, stem from one of two directions; summed up by references to distribution or recognition, social injustices are either rectified by redistributing wealth/social goods, or by recognizing and valuing difference. Redistributive claims generally follow the logic of John Rawls’ theory of justice and utilize some version of an “original position.” The policy logic, or reasoning behind, school uniform policies broadly appeals to logic derived from a distributional ethic, which finds its ideal articulation of the student in the rational, reasoning, and regulated self. The problem with this ideal articulation and the distributional ethic is best illustrated by evaluating the ways in which Rawls’ theory of social justice informs the rationale of school uniform policies.

Rawls’s theory of justice and the school uniform policy share a similar objective: thinly constructed reasoning parties. In *Justice as Fairness* Rawls develops the “original position” whereby parties can agree to the terms of society and justice without conceding “differences in life prospects.”¹⁷ That is to say, difference or diversity is an essential consideration in Rawls’ project. In an effort to deal with the mandates of diversity, the fact of pluralism, Rawls adopts and builds upon the Kantian deontological self to describe the sort of people contracting in the original position. Accordingly, the original position

¹⁵ “District of Columbia Public Schools: Notice of Final Rule Making,” (District of Columbia Register, vol. 56, no. 33, Chapter B24, Section B2408, August 2009), 3.

¹⁶ Anderson, “School Dress Codes,” 4, my emphasis.

¹⁷ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 6.3–6.4, 12.2.

imbues these intrinsically worthy subjects with neutrality and structural impartiality, both of which ensure that they are representative of any person from society. Placed behind the “veil of ignorance,” the parties are situated symmetrically and on this undifferentiated plane they do not claim a social class, racial or sexual orientation, a comprehensive conception of the good, or any other distinguishing factor.¹⁸ Rawls states, “the parties are artificial persons, merely inhabitants of our device of representation: they are characters who have a part in the play of our thought experiment.”¹⁹ In consequence the representatives in the original position are, admittedly, non-real characters with limited knowledge, or “complicated amnesia.”²⁰ Moreover, it is the “complicated amnesia,” or the “veil of ignorance” that gives the parties the ability to be impartial and, more importantly, rational.

It is true that Rawls works to construct a thin consensus in the public about society’s basic structures because he wants to leave open the ability to construct individually defined thick lives; however, the parties of the original position are abstracted to such an extent that a monological position ensues. Michael Sandel summarizes the problem aptly: “The notion that not persons but only a single subject is to be found behind the veil of ignorance would explain why no bargaining or discussion can take place there.”²¹ The “veil of ignorance” removes the parties’ “thickness” so that they can reason together. The problem is that a truly pluralistic or diverse society will not be the product when a single subject conceives the definitions of justice. What’s more, the agreement of like-minded parties does not necessitate actual participation—it merely requires appearance. Uniform policies are theoretically similar. They function as a “veil of ignorance” for children who are too poor, too brown, or too different from one another to be members of the same school. Uniform policies imply that children in uniform are freed from any context that might impose a restraint on reason. Under a “veil of ignorance” children are not asked to think about why their classmate is poor, or brown; they are required to show up. Rawls’ theory of justice constructs thin, uniform, rational people (students) who can operate in the political sphere (school) as a way to achieve some kind of overlapping consensus (standard academic achievement). I believe it is clear that these thinly constituted people are both objectionable and impractical; nonetheless, Young helps draw out the unwelcome side affects of favoring the impartial subject and proposes an alternative solution.

Young approaches justice from within the messy, situated context of the world. Her argument for a politics of difference highlights the fact that theories of distributive justice have monopolized the conversation about what justice entails in the era of modern political philosophy, such that “displacing

¹⁸ Ibid., 23.3, 25.3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.4.

²⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 105.

²¹ Ibid., 132.

the distributive paradigm” is part of accepting her theory of justice as recognition of difference.²² For Young the distributive paradigms pose a large-scale problem in the sense that the “ideal of impartiality or logic of identity” infiltrates every aspect of civic life. The logic of identity is problematic because of the intrinsic desire for unity. As such, “The logic of identity seeks to reduce the plurality of particular subjects, their bodily, perspectival experience, to a unity, by measuring them against the unvarying standard of universal reason.”²³ The reverence deferred to universal reason is part of the project of moral ethics, which defines impartiality as necessary for the capacity to reason. The Kantian deontological ideal is to find a point of view that everyone can agree to, or see from, irrespective of their particular difference. School uniform polices strive for the same ideal. The hope is that if kids are all wearing the same clothing, no one will notice another’s socioeconomic status, or speak from their particular position. The ideal of impartiality creates a dichotomy between the “universal and the particular, public and private, and reason and passion” to the extent that the civic public, the terrain of schooling, becomes the place of universal reason.²⁴ Much like the problem identified by Sandel’s reading of Rawls’ original position, universal reason requires agreement of abstracted parties, not dialogue with those who are differently situated. Furthermore, if the terrain of schooling is a place of universal reason it is no wonder that the “either-or thinking” of dichotomies reigns. Children are either uniformed or partial, uniformed or needy, uniformed or irrational.

Young pointedly explains that the “ideal of impartiality” is flat out impossible, because it requires expelling the aspects of difference that do not fit. In fact, “no one can adopt a view that is completely impersonal and dispassionate.”²⁵ Additionally, my sense of imbeddedness defines my “social location” to the degree that I cannot enter someone else’s location. Nevertheless, if it is possible to strip myself of my location, what then is the purpose of having a location?²⁶ Requiring the removal of particularity for uniformity, whether for moral cohesion or universal reason, is an affected wish. People do not have to be the same to get along; rather, it is possible for people to be both partial and have reasonable associations with each other. Young argues, “If one assumes instead that moral reason is dialogic, the product of discussion among differently situated subjects all of whom desire recognition and acknowledgement from the others, then there is no need for a universal point of view to pull people out of egoism.”²⁷ Thus, the ideal of impartiality is not a necessity, and should not be a desire since it is a fanciful fiction. Instead,

²² Young, *Politics of Difference*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

if we grant that differently situated people can and should have a voice to discuss what matters to them, we will see their differences shed new light on relevant issues and aspects of justice.

School uniform policies, like the “ideal of impartiality,” create unjust expectations of neutrality on behalf of students, and in removing the space for actual conversation, depoliticize difference. In contrast, the recognition of difference presumes that “blindness to difference disadvantages groups whose experience, culture, and socialized capacities differ from those of privileged groups”²⁸ and that “assimilation always implies coming to the game late.”²⁹ As reflected in school uniform policies, the ideal of impartiality, in its blindness to difference, disadvantages students who are asked to assimilate by removing the space for conversation about difference. Moreover, no child should feel like they are coming to the game late, especially in a learning environment. Recognition of difference should be an essential function of schooling to the extent that any language of assimilation finds no purchase. Writ large, Young’s solution may appear obvious at this point, but it is worth stating explicitly: “A democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged.”³⁰ The solution writ small in, say, a school system, should mimic the same sentiments. Requiring student to wear uniforms is not the problem: the problem is the reason for requiring uniforms.

A unique answer to Young’s demand to displace the distributive is Nancy Fraser’s mixing of the distributive paradigm with recognition. Fraser starts by noting that the distributive paradigm has a certain theoretical heft—at some point various groups or individuals have appealed to their common humanity, the original position, or impartial reason out of necessity, perceived or actual. With the weightiness of the distributive paradigm in mind, Fraser erects a “bivalent axis” of social justice she calls a “two pronged” approach. The bivalent axis of social justice is best thought of as a spectrum within which a pendulum can swing from distinctly distributional problems to those characterized as distinctly recognition-based, but where neither is ever the singular answer.³¹ The pendulum is always in motion. According to Fraser, “A bivalent conception treats distribution and recognition as distinct perspectives on, and dimensions of, justice, while at the same time encompassing both of them within a broader overarching framework.” This does not mean that either claim, distribution or recognition, is subsumed into the other.³² Instead, Fraser locates their shared normative core as a “parity of participation.”³³ As she explains, “According to this norm, justice requires social arrangements that

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

³¹ Fraser, “Age of Identity Politics,” 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

³³ *Ibid.*, 30.

permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers.³⁴ In other words, justice both of the distributional and recognition varieties, stems from the supposition that each member of society has equal dignity and ought to have the means to interact with one another in the public sphere.

Fraser's "parity of participation," relies on an understanding of the imbricated nature of culture and the economy. To say that justice spans a continuum from distribution to recognition is also to say that the economy and culture are institutions that make up our shared social world.³⁵ The conditions for this parity of participation require a form of legal equality, and preclude "forms and levels of material inequality, [and] cultural patterns that systematically depreciate some categories of people."³⁶ People within this framework are thickly defined and contextually situated. They have both objective being that requires some kind of material position, and an intersubjective status that mandates recognition. The objective condition is, thus, most often rectified by redistribution, whereas the intersubjective condition is nullified by recognition. Fraser takes a decidedly rooted stance in a turn toward the pragmatic and recommends that answers to the injustice fit the practical situation. The pragmatic approach is the tool by which we ought to deploy the bivalent pendulum, which is always seeking the normative ideal, parity of participation. In every case the remedy of an injustice should be tailored to the harm, and in all cases the goal is to create, maintain, and reimagine a space for equal participation of each person or group of people.

Fraser's pragmatic answer, and its normative assumption, is not radically divergent from Young's grounding in critical social theory whereby she defines a "politics of difference." Young's politics of difference, after all, takes that differently situated people can have a discussion that leads to moral reason and just social structures.³⁷ The distinction between Fraser's parity of participation and Young's politics of difference rests on how equality is imagined to function. For Fraser the norm "parity of participation" holds that each person's voice has equal weight or worth within political discourse. Conversely, Young notes that the groups who are "oppressed and disadvantaged" are those for whom mechanisms of recognition must be appropriated.³⁸ The distinction lies in the fact that Fraser's "parity of participation" necessarily strives toward structural equality, as opposed to merely "mitigating the influence of current biases," as Young puts it.³⁹ Thus, Fraser's bivalent conception is an excellent tool to help us think about the

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ As Fraser aptly characterizes the argument, the answer does not lie in statements like: "it's the culture stupid," nor its counterpart "it's the economy stupid," 39–41.

³⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷ Young, *Politics of Difference*, 106.

³⁸ Ibid., 192–225.

³⁹ Ibid., 198.

pointed experience of injustice, but Young's normative politics of difference is a fuller norm to reach toward.

CONCLUSION: REDRESSING DIVERSITY,
CITY LIFE AS SCHOOL LIFE

Employing Fraser's bivalent continuum, we can say that school uniform policies are attempts to organize children who may be experiencing both distributional and recognition related injustices, but because the policies appeal to a logic of identity and distributional ethic, school uniform policies operate at the expense of a politics of difference. Following Fraser, a pragmatic remedy for the injustice of uniforming children in school requires that we rearticulate the value of "bringing children together in a common space."⁴⁰ An assumption of this paper is that the value of schooling is manifest in more than narrowly defined achievement or the acceptance of socialized roles. Rather, because education is always answering a question about what it means to be human,⁴¹ the value of bringing children together in a common space is evidenced when they learn how to recognize and speak from places of personal difference. The "dynamic that makes public schools democratic" is the activity of engaging children and their humanity. Higgins and Knight Abowitz ask, "What might it mean to think of the classroom not as a room within an institution that is already public, but as a space in which teachers and learners make public?"⁴² It means that we must see children and their teachers, and the school at large, as a public making project. Democratic schooling demands that we see children as full of vigorous and playful humanity. It requires that we engage with children as partial, situated members of the public.

Young imagines an alternative form of social relations—public—where a politics of difference prevails as analogous to city life.⁴³ Young's imaginative view of city life highlights democratic modes of being and is one way to think about what it might mean to envision the school as forever "becoming" public. In Young's parlance, "By 'city life' I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact with spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness."⁴⁴ Each day an encounter with the city on the train, in the park, at a restaurant, or in a building requires that we find ways to live together. The persistent encounter with difference forces city dwellers to recognize that

⁴⁰ Chris Higgins and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "What Makes a Public School Public? A Framework for Evaluating the Civic Substance of Schooling," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 4 (2011), 369.

⁴¹ Gert J. J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006), 2.

⁴² Higgins and Knight Abowitz, "Public School," 379.

⁴³ Young, *Politics of Difference*, 226–27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

people are just differently situated, or socially located beings, with whom they can have a partial dialogue. Recognition of our relationally defined being is the foundation for meaningful conversation about justice and the bivalent structures, cultural and economic, which shape our shared world. Democracy is premised on the human ability to engage in dialogue, to plan consequences, and to generate publics. Moreover, democracy is a human endeavor that requires people to think about each other from the inside out, a dynamic Young sees in expressions of city life.⁴⁵

Extending Young and Fraser into the school, which is a vital and political part of city life, requires that we imbue children with the capacity to converse with and about difference. It is unjust and naïve to believe a student's capacity for confronting difference is any less than a typical member of a city. City living implies a form of social relations that requires "a being together of strangers," but it does so no more than school living ought to, if schools do have "the dynamic that makes them democratic."⁴⁶ Moreover, the school is an institution each child can belong to; it is a place where they ought to be given the opportunity to come together as a public of strangers to work out the problems of associated living. By appealing to a "veil of ignorance" or logic of impartiality school uniform policies unjustly teach children to rid themselves of emotion, race, and gender so that they can reason.⁴⁷ All this logic does is perpetuate the idea that you cannot reason while emotional, that race and reason cannot be articulated together, and that gender affects who is rational and when. In my evaluation, social justice requires that we facilitate "a politics of difference" and foster a "bivalent approach" toward the axes of injustice to support children in their growth. The "dynamic that makes school democratic" only works when children are trusted with difference, diversity, and strangeness—at least to the extent that we trust members of a city with the same.

⁴⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶ Young, *Politics of Difference*, 237; see also Monroe, "When Elite Parents Dominate."

⁴⁷ For more on ritualization and gender and school uniforms see: Allison Happel, "Ritualized Girl: School Uniforms and the Compulsory Performance of Gender," *Journal of Gender Studies* 22, no. 1(2013): 92–95.
