Message Tees and Hidden Curriculum: Perceptions of Pre-service Teachers

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Abstract

The hidden curriculum in schools is frequently reflected in the clothing worn by students. Schools grapple with the implications of dress codes as they relate to the appropriateness of the items students wear and, in this study in particular, to the messages placed upon tee shirts. Legal precedent indicates that schools have the right to eliminate inappropriate clothing that impedes the educational mission of the school but, simultaneously, schools are obliged to respect appropriate free expression. This study sought to provide information useful to educators attempting to make this decision.

When speaking of the hidden curriculum, Peter McLaren stated: 'The best way to hide something is to put it right in front of somebody's eyes where they are not looking for it'. (Gair and Mullens, 2001, p.15.) Many pre-teens, teens, and young adults are wearing tee-shirts (in and out of the classroom setting) bearing a variety of messages communicating sexual innuendos, attitudinal statements, and stereotyping. Some of these messages are cleverly hidden within text and images and, if you don't look closely, you may not get the 'true message'. According to Darden (2008) 'Attire can provoke – like gang colors – and be provocative – like hip-hugging shorts. Making a fashion statement can also simultaneously communicate a statement of belief' (p. 36). In a school setting, this might be termed a 'hidden curriculum', a transmission (Jackson, 1968) of information distinct from that sanctioned by legal authority as the official curriculum.

Clothing Images in Social Contexts

According to Goffman (1951), 'Clothing images are significant in social contexts and may function as a sign (possessing a clear cut single meaning) or symbol (possessing multiple meanings or connotations)' (p.570). When clothing is viewed as a sign, it also is task oriented or instrumental and recognizable and it arouses behavioral expectations for both the wearer and the audience. Clothing signs are used to exercise authority, wield power, differentiate the sexes, and arouse sexual interest. While rules and regulations may govern signs, clothing symbols reflect ideas of what is socially valued, and those values may have multiple manifestations. Interpretation'is discovered only through '...a more intimate understanding of the person and his or her history' (Rubenstein, 2001, p. 3, as cited in Litterst and Bjorkland, 2001) Simmel (1957) remarked that fashion '...allows for personal modification, enabling the individual to pursue the competing desires for group identity and individual expression (Rubenstein, 2001, p.3). Simmel (1957) further states that:

> The self is also an audience, and clothing allows individuals to view themselves as social objects. By extricating the self from a setting or situation, the individual can scrutinize the image she or he presents in view of the social response that is desired. This separation and objectification, in turn, allows the individual to correct the image if necessary (Rubenstein, 2001, p.4).

In some public school settings, clothing considered lewd, promoting drug use, or that '...display(s) a variety of messages that conflict with the values the schools are trying to promote' (Lumsden & Miller, 2002, p. 2) can result in conflict. In such cases, schools are well within their rights to 'ban the clothing to avoid strife' (Darden, 2005, p. 37). Most educators are familiar with *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District* (1969), a case in which the U.S. Supreme Court held that school authorities cannot prohibit students' ideological expression unless the expression will lead to a substantial disruption of or interference with the educational process' (McCarthy, 2005, p. 49). It is important to note that several court cases have supported the action of schools against students who dressed inappropriately and thereby disrupted the educational process. According to McCarthy (2005) 'A federal court upheld an Idaho school in barring a tee-shirt that depicted three high school administrators drunk because students do not have a free expression right to portray administrators in a manner that undermines their authority' (p. 50). Likewise, the 6th Circuit Court also '...upheld a

school district's prohibitions on students wearing Marilyn Manson tee-shirts, finding the shirts counter to the school's efforts to denounce drugs and promote human dignity' (McCarthy, 2005). In a Poway (California) High School in 2004 a student wore a tee shirt that read, 'Be ashamed, our school embraced what God has condemned' on one side and 'Homosexuality is shameful – Romans 1:27' on the other. The student wore this shirt in response to the previous day's activity, a 'Day of Silence' organized by a homosexual alliance group to '...help encourage tolerance toward all students including those of gay and lesbian orientation' (Taylor, 2008, p.1). The student was punished and made to stay in the administrative offices all day although he was allowed to do his homework. A lawsuit resulted and the '...9th Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed a lower court's decision in the case that essentially upheld the school's prohibition of the shirt' (Taylor, 2008, p. 1). Although the school did not claim that the shirt caused a major disruption to other students, it did contend that the student's '...conduct was injurious to gay and lesbian students and interfered with their right to learn' (Taylor, 2008, p.1). Other cases have resulted in the student's favour such as Sypniewski v. Warren Hills Regional Board of Education (2002), in which the court upheld a student's right to wear a tee-shirt that contained the word 'redneck' (Taylor, 2006, p. 40).

Dress Codes and Uniforms

There are many schools in the U.S. that now require their students to wear uniforms or at least adhere to a dress code. The main difference between dress codes and uniform policies is that '...dress codes state what must not be worn and uniform policies state what must be worn' (Anderson, 2002, p.5). According to Darden (2008) individuals in favor of school uniforms cite a variety of benefits including the elimination of the disparity of pricier clothing brands among all students, making the school appear to be a more serious instructional institution, inspiring a feeling of companionship and community, decreasing disciplinary infractions, and generally making students happier. Some research has been conducted to validate many of these claims (See Draa, 2005; Holloman, 1996; National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001; Stanley, 1996.) while others indicate that school uniforms have '...no direct effect on substance abuse, behavioral problems, or attendance' (Anderson, 2002, p. 11); see also, Brunsma and Rockquemore (1998); Volokh and Snell(1999) and Elder (1999).

In practice, there is often little difference between dress codes and uniform policies (McCarthy, 2005) although dress codes are often seen as less concrete and orderly (Anderson, 2002). There are, however, legal differences between dress codes and uniform policies: 'Dress codes that prohibit the wearing of clothing or symbols linked to gangs have been traditionally' upheld by the courts, whereas uniform policies are sometimes viewed as violations of students' rights' (Anderson, p. 5). Many schools are changing their policies as they move from uniforms to dress codes, often in response to community demands (White, 2000). Many community demands center around the notion that the dress code policies mainly affect female students. Since female fashions often change and sometimes to a radical degree, it is difficult for administrators to make the necessary changes in a timely fashion (Anderson, 2002). Because these fashion changes are so unpredictable and hence difficult to stay attuned with, it is much more difficult to maintain a dress code than a uniform policy. This presents a gender equity dilemma for administrators.

Purpose of the Study

Within the context of freedom of expression and school responsibility, the ubiquitous message tee shirt emerges as a frequent item of concern in schools, especially those with relatively liberal dress codes. How are educators to judge legitimate expression and individuality of 'fashionable' and 'acceptable' dress (and perhaps public opinion) in relation to the disruptions to the educational process that they must minimize? Of course all manner of dress can be considered but because of the popularity of tee shirt messages and their low cost they are a staple of student wardrobes and an item of clothing that is frequently the target of school dress codes. In looking at tee shirt messages, significant questions emerge for educators: What message tees are so vulgar or so shocking that they cause class disruption? On what basis does a teacher judge the message and what situational factors or background characteristics turn Goffman's (1951) 'symbols' into 'significant educational disruptions' as opposed to legitimate social expression – a tacit and appropriate part of every school's hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968). This study sought to address these issues.

Method

The research method was devised to: (1) collect information from pre-service teachers regarding the types of messages frequently seen on tee shirts, thereby establishing a population of shirts for this study; (2) to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions of the messages portrayed on a selection of tee-shirts to determine if messages can consistently be ranked into thematic categories; (3) to determine which themes are most offensive, and (4) to determine if the perceptions differ according to the characteristics of the wearer. In order to accomplish this, the study was conducted in four distinct phases. Data were collected from four different groups of undergraduate students in various aspects of teacher training at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. In all instances students were asked to review and comment upon coloured picture images placed on paper booklets. Stimuli were selected by the researchers from online commercial sources and all pictures of tee shirts contained provocative messages and/or pictures printed on them. These tee shirts were judged by the researchers to be objectionable and offensive and not appropriate for school dress.

Throughout the study students were offered an incentive for participating. By signing a card (kept separate from the data sheets), students' names were entered into a lucky draw at the completion of each phase of the study. The winner was given a certificate redeemable for $50.00 at the University Bookstore. In all cases, and in all phases of the study, students willingly participated. Additionally, all students were under the protection of the Universities Institutional Review Board which protects human subjects engaged in research, and all responses were kept anonymous. Each phase of the study had a specific purpose. Phase One was developed to verify that the images were in fact widely available and that many of the participants had seen the images for sale online, in stores, or as apparel worn in public places. Phase Two was developed to determine if the participants could classify the nature of the content on the tee shirt image or statement. Phase three was included to determine which of the images were deemed most objectionable and offensive. The final phase of the study sought to determine specific personal responses to tee shirt messages that had (in phases one to three) been verified as familiar, classified as belonging to one of four homogeneous categories and, finally, been determined as objectionable and offensive.

Phase One Method

Subjects and Procedure

In Phase One, four groups of undergraduate student responded to 52 stimuli. The stimuli were images of tee shirts and were about 2 inches by 2 inches with four images per page.[1] All students in this phase of the study were enrolled in an introduction to education course. Fifty-nine students from four classes participated. Forty of the 59 students (68%) were female; 13 (22%) were freshmen, while 15 (25%), 13 (22%), and 12 (20%) were sophomores, juniors and seniors respectively. Four (7%) students marked 'other' indicating a post baccalaureate status. Forty five (76%) of the 59 students were aged 24 or younger.

Each student was asked to indicate for each image if they had seen the image (yes-no) and if so where they had seen the image (e.g. workplace, public location). Finally participants were asked to print other messages that they had seen.

Phase One Results

Forty six additional tee shirt slogans were provided by the participants, an outcome that indicated that they had seen the stimuli or similar slogans in many locations, especially on the street or in shopping malls. In all, more than 75% of the participants indicated that they had personally observed 35 of the 52 images presented in Phase One. On the basis of this evidence it was concluded that the 35 shirts were not novel and were, in fact, widely available and visible in public areas around the university and in the community in general. These 35 images subsequently became the stimuli for phase two of the study.

Phase Two Method

Subjects and Procedure

Seventy nine students enrolled in upper level education classes participated in the Second Phase of the study. These students did not participate in Phase one of the study [2] but participated in a similar procedure (examination of the remaining original images in paper format) and were offered the same incentive for participation. As before, all responses were anonymous and all participants were protected by the IRB. Of the participants, 60 (76%) were female and 19 (24%) were male; the mean age was 26.79 (SD=7.82). Fifty nine (75%) of the participants

were seniors, 15 (19%) post baccalaureate and 3 (4%) did not indicate degree status. All were education majors preparing to become student teachers. In a procedure similar to phase one of the study, the students were asked to classify each of the 35 images as (A) 'a general attitudinal statement', (B) a statement 'expressing gender bias', (C) a statement expressing 'sexual innuendo', or (D) something different from A, B or C. No other description of the classifications was provided to the participants. Of the 35 images, six (17%) were classified as 'attitudinal statements' by at least 75% of the participants, six (17%) as a statement 'expressing gender bias' and 10 (29%) expressing 'sexual innuendo'.

Phase Two Results.

These results indicated that 22 (63%) of the images could be consistently rated as an expression having a single common theme. Most of the remaining images were judged to convey two or more meanings (e.g., sexual innuendo *and* gender bias). The 22 thematic images became the stimuli for phase three.
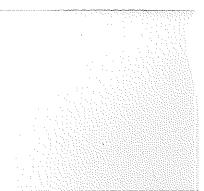
Phase Three Method

Subjects and Procedure

Eighty one individuals participated in Phase Three of the study. All were enrolled in the student teaching experience. Of the 81, 17 (21%) were males, 63 (78%) were females and one individual did not indicate gender. Sixty four participants were seniors (79%), 15 (19%) were post baccalaureate and two (2%) failed to indicate classification. The mean age of the participants was 27.53 with a SD=8.4.

The procedure in this phase of the study was similar to previous phases and the same protections and incentives were provided. In this phase however, participants were asked to examine only 15 of the remaining 22 images. The 15 images had been drawn randomly by the researchers with five being drawn from each thematic category (general attitudinal statement, gender bias, sexual innuendo). The fifteen images were randomly presented and participants were asked to rate each image as 'Not offensive' (score =1), 'Offensive' (score 2), or 'Very offensive' (score =3).

Phase Three Results

Five images were deemed to be offensive or very offensive (mean scores/standard deviations of: 2.44/.07; 2.43/.07; 2.35/07; 2.22/.08; 2.11/.08). The result was somewhat surprising in that the five images rated highest in terms of offense were the five that were also deemed by participants in phase two as thematically concerned with sexual innuendo. None of the other themes were rated as offensive as those reflecting 'sexual innuendo'. The final phase of the study sought to gather more information regarding this outcome.

Phase Four Method

Subjects and Procedure

In the final phase of the study, 101 student teachers were asked to reflect upon the five most offensive tee shirt images. Of the 101 teachers, 64 (63.4%) were in the age range of 20-25 and 21 (20.8%) were in the age range 26-30. Only 16% indicated that they were above the age of 30. Twenty four percent indicated that they were male and 76% female; none indicated previous employment as a certified teacher. Fifty percent indicated that they planned to be elementary school teachers and nearly 44% middle or high school teachers. The remainder offered no preference or cited two choices (e.g., pre-school *and* elementary).

Phase Four Results

In this phase of the study the researchers asked specific questions regarding the images. When asked 'Would you buy this shirt for yourself?' 97% of the participants said 'no'. When asked 'Would you buy this shirt for a friend?' 91% again said 'no'. Participants were then asked if they felt that it would be easy to purchase this shirt. Eighty-four per cent indicated that it would.

Participants were next asked where they felt they would most likely see the shirt. By far the greatest response(59%) was 'the Mall', followed by 'on the street' (31%). Only 4% indicated that they were unlikely to see this shirt and the remaining low occurrences were at home or at school (1 and 2% respectively).

The overwhelming majority of participants felt males were more likely to wear the shirt(s) (95%) and that they were most likely to be worn by a teenager (50.5%) or a young adult (34.7%). Fourteen percent

felt that no age would predominate. A final question asked the participants to indicate how comfortable they would be with a partner (girlfriend/boyfriend or husband/wife) wearing this shirt in a public place. Sixty one percent indicated that they would feel very uncomfortable, nearly 28% uncomfortable, 7.9% said they would be generally comfortable and only 3% said they would be very comfortable.

In Phase Four of the study, participants were asked to respond in qualitative fashion to specific questions. The questions were:

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe why someone would be motivated to wear this shirt, what would they be?

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe your reaction after seeing someone *you did not know* wear this shirt, what would those words be?

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe your reaction after seeing someone *you knew well* wear this shirt, what would those words be?

The number and variety of responses to these questions were considerable and represented a wide range of perceptions, emotions and judgments. The discreet comments in each category were collapsed by the authors where it seemed apparent that the words utilized represented a common theme. The themes with high numbers of participant responses are provided in Table 1.

Although question one resulted in 28 'themes', 20 of the themes had three or fewer responses. A similar pattern was found with question two (36 themes, in which 21 had three or less responses) and question three (28 themes with 13 with three or less responses).

When asked why someone would be motivated to wear the shirt? responses ranged from specific goals (to gain attention, to start a conversation), to presenting specific attributes (to appear rebellious, vulgar), to revealing detrimental characteristics (immature, irresponsible, foolish). Of these, an attempt to be 'funny' gathered the most responses, followed by the concept of 'gaining attention and being popular' (11 remarks), 'being stylish' (9), 'exhibiting over-confidence' (9) and appearing 'crude and vulgar' (8).

Table 1

High Scoring Participant Responses to Qualitative Questions

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe why someone would be motivated to wear this shirt, what would the person's reasons be?

To be funny	14
To gain attention/popularity/outgoing/conversation starter	11
Stylish/fit in/status/trendy	9
Over confident/ outgoing/full of themselves/ cocky/ self- absorbed/ macho	9
To be vulgar/crude/pervert/jerk/ repulsive / disgusting / dirty /nasty/profanity/rude/Disrespectful	8

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe your reaction after seeing someone *you did not know* wear this shirt, what would those words be?

Vulgar/disrespectful/promiscuous/trashy/dirty minded/perverted/slut/classless	12
Jerk/dork/loser/idiot/lame//uneducated/idiot/stupid/ fool/clueless	10
Strange/weird/crazy/silly	9

If you were asked to use *three words* to describe your reaction after seeing someone *you knew well* wear this shirt, what would those words be?

Disgust/offended/appalled/revolted/shocked/stunned/upset/ omgg/disbelief/insulted/nasty/dirty/uhhh!/amazed/vulgar/ perverted/gross/no!	11
Funny/laugh/joke/chuckle/ goofy/ smile	11
Surprised/wow! /yikes! /stunned/shocked/speechless Interested/where did you get it?	8
Disappointment/irritation	8

Responses to seeing 'someone you did not know' wearing the shirt focused mainly on 'vulgarity and disrespectful classless behavior' (11). This was followed by phrases that evoked condemnation (loser, idiot – 10) but also a sense of ignorance on the part of the wearer as to the effect of the shirt on the observer. Similarly, the final category ('strange,

weird' (9), seemed to suggest less a sense of disgust and more an appraisal of social inferiority on the part of the wearer.

Finally, participants were asked what three words best expressed their reaction at seeing someone they knew well wearing the tee shirt. 'Vulgarity' and 'disgust' were high on the list (11) supported by 'surprised' and 'stunned' (8). 'Funny' and 'joke' also featured in a significant number of cases (11) suggesting perhaps a link to the eight responses of 'disappointment' and 'irritation'.

Discussion

The researchers investigated the availability of tee shirts with what many people might judge to be *risqué* messages imprinted upon them, to determine if these messages could be isolated by theme, to determine which themes were most offensive and to investigate individual responses to the shirts in relation to who might wear them and what people who saw these shirts would think about them under different circumstances. The study utilized pre-service teachers at different levels of training as subjects. The results generally concluded that the shirts are widely available, that many images and inscriptions could be clustered by specific themes, and that one of these themes, sexual innuendo, was judged to be more offensive than the others. In the final phase of the study participants made it clear that certain groups (males) were more likely to wear the shirts and also more likely to wear them in some locations (e.g., shopping malls) rather than others.

The primary reasons for wearing the shirts were thought to be to gain attention in some fashion, to be funny or just to be vulgar. The range of conclusions reached about the wearers varied based on whether they were known or unknown to the observer. The most common response to an unknown person was 'vulgar', usually with 'disgust' implied or stated. The same applied to someone well known to the observer, but an equal number of incidences of 'funny' or 'goofy' and others indicating 'surprise' or 'shock' attenuated the conclusion. Simply put, one's knowledge of the wearer tends to change one's perception of the wearer's motives.

It can reasonably be concluded from this investigation that *risqué*, and even downright profane tee shirt messages surround teachers and youth and are widely available. The shirts also have specific themes amongst which the most provocative by far is sexual innuendo which also attracts the strongest condemnation from observers

Individuals are clearly morally judged by the observers of provocative messages on tee shirts. The judgments of the participants in the study were generally not kind, though they were tempered in cases where the observers knew the wearers. This may help explain why peers frequently disagree about the specifications of dress codes or other limits put upon clothing choices in schools. Seemingly, observers are more tolerant or at least less acrimonious, in judging messages on tee shirts worn by persons they know. This observation, as well as perhaps social maturity and familiarity with the messages from repeated exposure in public places, may help explain the often contrasting responses of students and school officials.

While this study was no more than a preliminary investigation, the results suggest that the tee shirt messages may not always provoke others as the wearer intends. One wonders whether the wearers of tee shirts understand this, or that they are more than likely to generate negative rather than positive responses from both their peers and the general population. As Goffman (1951) noted, tee shirt messages represent what is thought to be socially valued by the wearer. This prompts the question of how faulty perceptions (from an adult perspective) emerge. Do perceptions simply differ radically due to age differences or does the attention (or some other unknown motive) gained from wearing the shirt mask the wearer's real intentions? Further studies using younger adult viewers or peers who are in some way affiliated through the rituals of offensive tee shirt slogans are needed to explore this possibility.

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NOTES

1. Images are available from senior author.
2. The names of participants were not recorded so there is a possibility that an individual participated in more than one phase of the study, however, because the study was conducted with differing class levels across different semesters the likelihood of this happening was remote.