



Why we shun school uniform

Allow young people the freedom to be individuals, says the headmaster of Bedales School, **Keith Budge**

Various arguments are made on behalf of uniforms – wearing them is bound up with discipline and respect for authority, they provide a shared identity and soften differences, and they are part of preparing young people for adult life. However, none of this persuaded Bedales staff in the 1960s when uniform was phased out. Nor does it persuade me.

I am all in favour of schools choosing what works best for them. But the wearing of a uniform is not right for a school like ours, which celebrates individuality.

Not having a uniform is often confused with a kind of neglectful progressivism. The late Sir Chris Woodhead, former chief inspector of schools, commented in *The Sunday Times* in 2013 that “there are plenty of comprehensive schools without a uniform and with a relaxed, bohemian atmosphere where the kids learn nothing and hate school”. Unsurprisingly, I take issue with this. Our students learn plenty, develop a love of learning and enjoy coming to school.

The Bedales attitude towards dress reflects our approach to everything concerned with schooling: the education to be had here places students and their aspirations at its heart.

Does this mean that they can do whatever they want? Well, that rather depends on them.

Our school motto – “Work of each for weal [benefit] of all” – contains within it an important tension. On the one hand it stresses the importance of individuality, on the other the duty of each person to the wider



community. If there is no good reason to constrain students in their choices, then we don't.

But what of the potential for uniforms to foster a shared identity and iron out differences? I believe that there are far more powerful ways of doing this. At Bedales, we expect our students to contribute to the making of decisions on how the school is run and what happens in the classroom. We seek a shared identity that goes well beyond how we all look. And, anyway, what's wrong with having differences?

As for school being a preparation for adult life – I see the point, but would observe that you do not need five years' practice to wear a suit well. Rather, we are expected to dress in a way that respects our context and those around us.

We believe in giving young people the room to make mistakes and learn from them, and clothing seems to be a relatively risk-free area to experiment with choice. We begin to take an interest in what students wear only if we consider it offensive and to the detriment of others. What this might mean, however, is difficult to anticipate. Where there is conflict, we encourage people to have their say and seek accommodation.

Personally, I find the prospect of a dull curriculum and boring teaching far more offensive than any of the clothes worn by Bedales students.

Keith Budge is headmaster of Bedales School in Hampshire