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Images of Exclusion: A Phenomenological Examination of Teacher Dress Codes

Abstract

The article explores dress codes and social norms in the classroom.

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Images of Exclusion:
A Phenomenological Examination of Teacher Dress Codes
Alan Jeans

Ms. Sanders is new to Meadow Hills Elementary School. Having only graduated from university the previous April, she was shocked at how quickly she was able to find a position as a grade two teacher. Throughout her five-year Bachelor of Education degree she was often instilled with the importance of 'dressing for success'. Her practicum adviser had even given Ms. Sanders a helpful list of 'does and don'ts' for professional teacher dress. Based on this list, Ms. Sanders' mother took her shopping for professional teacher clothing as a graduation gift. As one of only two students from her graduating class to be teaching in a school this term, Ms. Sanders believes that her attitude of 'dressing for success' enabled her hiring. How may Ms. Sanders' assumptions regarding appearance influence the values she instills in her students? How may Ms. Sanders' 'dress for success' attitude impact her students? Which students may be included? Which students may be excluded?

IMAGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

When it comes to student-teacher attire, teacher-training programs often tout the mantra, 'Dress for Success!' (Tarleton State University, 2009; Brackett & Brackett, 2013; Pronini & Tomaszewski, 2013). Many teacher-training programs provide guidelines and rationale for 'dressing for success' (Tarleton State University, 2009; Brackett & Brackett, 2013; Pronini, Tomaszewski, & Cunningham, 2013). Men are often encouraged to wear dress pants, collared shirts, sport jackets, and shined shoes. Women are encouraged to wear dresses and hose, slacks, blouses (non see-through!), and appropriate shoes (3 inch heels are often recommended). With this 'dress for success' agenda comes major issues and implications, not the least of which is the query 'success according to whom?'

Judith Butler (1993) speaks of gender as a performative role within our society. Likewise, teacher dress codes provide a performative image of 'success,' grounded in a conservative, middle to upper class perspective. This performative image of success is a frozen symbol of social norms, projected upon the teacher's body via the dress code; however, the verb 'to teach' dictates the occurrence of action. The paradox of a frozen symbol needing to perform an action brings about tension within the role of the teacher, a tension that can't help but shape the activities of the classroom. How is classroom learning impacted by these images of success? Who is included and excluded by these images?

The perspective of 'teacher as upholder of traditional social values' is implicit within the social construct of the teacher role. In 2011, news broke of a male substitute teacher in Vancouver, Washington, who had worn women's capri pants in the classroom (Vogt, 2011). Although the school's personnel director stated that the school's clothing guidelines weren't gender-specific and the substitute teacher hadn't violated any codes of conduct (Vogt, 2011), the event did make news headlines and drew several complaints from parents. Likewise, an attempt to change the wording within the nondiscrimination policy for Orange County Public Schools drew fear from parents and public-groups that it would legitimize teacher cross-dressing in the classroom (ClickOrlando.com, 2012). These stories stand as illustrations of the societal pressure that constrict teacher dress codes into traditional gender norms. The notions of 'success' in these cases are based on the teacher's willingness to adhere to these traditional gender norms.

In the story above, Ms. Sanders' found herself able to quickly align her personal style with that of the teacher style. In the realm of role theory, this alignment is referred

to as ‘role embracement’ (Workman & Freeburg, 2010). Becoming a teacher was an integral part of Ms. Sanders’ personal identity, and she embraced the role. However, for some individuals, personal identity is not congruous with the socially-constructed image of ‘teacher’. These cases represent ‘role distancing’ (Workman & Freeburg, 2010). Dress codes in the classroom become problematized in the face of ‘role embracement’ versus ‘role distancing’.

As dress codes are encouraged, the ‘role distancing’ teacher, who does not adhere to or identify with the socially constructed images of ‘teacher’ set forth in the dress code, may be viewed as unprofessional and therefore unskilled (Workman & Freeburg, 2010) by colleagues. What impact can this ‘unprofessional’ label have on a teacher’s classroom? A common rationale for dress codes is that they help teachers maintain student respect (Santa Ana Unified School District, 1998; Tarleton State University, 2009; Abbasi, 2013; Brackett & Brackett, 2013; Pica, 2013; Pronini et al., 2013). But what has more impact on a teacher’s ability to maintain student respect: a given teacher’s non-adherence to a dress code or a colleague’s labeling of a teacher as ‘unprofessional’ as a result of non-adherence to the dress code?

When dress codes are set in place as images of success based on societal norms, students can be included or excluded based on gender, economics, sexual orientation, race, or role distancing. These same dress codes may also lead to excluding skilled and dedicated teachers based on their ability to match personal identity with the image of success proposed in such dress codes. Do teacher dress codes limit a student’s experience in/of the world? What are the impacts of this educational monoculture on a fertile student’s mind?

It is the first parent-teacher event of the year, and the Fields' have been excited to meet their son's favorite teacher, Ms. Smart. This is Ms. Smart's third year of teaching social studies at Hidden Valley High School, and she is finally gaining confidence in her role, which is evident in her appearance. This year she is often stylishly dressed in the latest fashions of skirts, boots, and tight sweaters, which has gained her rave reviews from her fashion conscious colleagues and students. When the Fields' tell Ms. Smart that she is their son's favorite teacher, she is surprised. Bobby Fields never participates in class discussions, doesn't complete assigned homework, and seems completely uninterested in the topic of social studies. She is aware, however, that Bobby often compliments her clothing. She begins to wonder if her newfound style might have unforeseen impacts on her students? Is it necessary to forgo her fashionable attire for the sake of maintaining authoritative respect in the classroom?

EXCLUSION AT WHAT COST

The history of the teaching profession in the Western world has been conflated with female sexuality, although historically the focus was on suppression and control of female sexuality (Atkinson, 2008; Kahn, 2013). In the early days of the profession, female teachers were forbidden from wearing make-up and required to wear several petticoats, so as not to show the shape of their legs (Atkinson, 2008; Kahn, 2013). Teachers were also forbidden from marrying, which Becky Atkinson (2008) claims to be an exercise of control over the virginal model of a teacher. Female teachers were forbidden from the company of non-familial men, even being required to live with other

female teachers and administrators (Atkinson, 2008; Kahn, 2013). When the fear of lesbianism became apparent, women were permitted to marry; however, this decision opened the door for sexuality to enter the classroom (Atkinson, 2008).

In modern days, as in the past, dress codes are more problematic for female teachers than for male teachers. Modern dress codes still highlight control over female sexuality, with dress codes even stating that female teachers are meant to keep “traditionally private body parts covered at all times” (Freeburg, Workman, Arnett, & Robinson, 2011, p. 37). Atkinson (2008) isolates three different styles of female teacher dress (although she admits that more exists). The first style, the *apple-jumper* teacher, wears long skirts and jumpers and often adorns herself with trappings of the season (pumpkins earrings at Halloween, sweaters with reindeer and snowmen at Christmas, etc.) (Atkinson, 2008). The second style, the *teacher babe*, is signified by fashionable high boots, short skirts, and low cut sweaters (Atkinson, 2008). The third style, the *bland uniformer*, is signified by a modest style of pants and loosely fitted shirts that is “rather androgynous, and downplays feminine physical characteristics for the sake of comfort and coverage” (Atkinson, 2008, p. 100). Atkinson reports that female student teachers in her college prefer the *bland uniformer* style for its utilitarian appeal. This choice raises the question, what is being excluded when role models of positive female sexuality are removed from the classroom?

Ms. Smart’s newly acquired fashion sense places her firmly in the role of ‘teacher babe’. Whereas the *bland uniformer* allows for the singular vision of teacher as a professional in the school (i.e., public), the sexuality present in the *teacher babe* projects a duality of teacher as professional in school and woman out-of-school (i.e., public and

private) (Atkinson, 2008). But dress codes aren't meant to keep women from looking like women, they're meant to keep women from "looking like a certain *type* of woman" (Kahn, 2013, p. 62). The female teacher body as a sexualized body in the classroom gives rise to the fear of teacher-as-predator. Atkinson expresses this fear as the vision of teacher as mother and student as son, bringing with it an Oedipal vision of incest (Atkinson, 2008). Atkinson (2008) even reports on instances of female teachers referring to a female colleague as 'the teacher slut' due to her appearance, and her perceived behavior. How would the classroom differ with the presence of role models of positive female sexuality?

In her article "*Their image of me: A phenomenological study of professional dress choices of female professors*", Laura Abbasi (2013) interviewed several female professors to learn of their personal experiences with dress code. All professors pointed to the impact clothing had on their mental and emotional states in the classroom and one professor stated, "I generally like what I wear. If you don't, you don't feel confident. It reflects in your performance" (Abbasi, 2013, p. 11). Kahn (2013) supports this experiential account, claiming that dress code policies set "limits on [teacher] performance and can influence in negative ways the expectations they hold for students" (Kahn, 2013, p. 63). How will the pressures to adhere to unwritten social codes about sexuality in the classroom impact Ms. Smart's clothing choices? What impact will these choices have on her personal confidence? What impact will these choices have on her class?

Conclusion:

The role of teacher is a socially constructed one in which clothing and dress are viewed as outward expressions of a teacher's professional attitude. Teacher dress codes, set to uphold these socially constructed images of teaching, become particularly problematic in a hiring process. A role-embracing teacher, who adheres to the socially constructed norms of 'appropriate' teacher attire, may appear as a more attractive candidate than a role-distancing teacher who does not adhere to the socially constructed norms of 'appropriate' attire. In this way, a greater importance might be placed on the performative structures of teaching (i.e., appearance) as opposed to the efficacy of a teacher's practice.

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