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## **(Un) Dressing teachers**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores how gender is constructed in teacher dress codes representing over 500 schools in Texas. The historical context of teaching and a discussion of how ideology is inscribed on the body provide the framework of the study. The results reveal that teacher dress codes enforce traditional characteristics of gender under the guise of professional attire.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a view of how teacher dress codes enforce traditional characteristics of gender that are entangled by what schools describe as professional attire. I discuss how historical perceptions of gender have contributed to how teachers and teaching are viewed (Grumet 1988; Tyack 1974). The concern for professional dress as it pertains to teachers has roots in the feminization of teaching and the continued low occupational prestige large numbers of females brought to the profession. It also has roots with women moving from the private to the public sphere of the classroom during a time when the public woman was considered immoral and even dangerous (Matthews 1992). I then present theoretical implications of the dressed body, arguing that clothing is influential in how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. In conclusion, I share observations of teacher dress codes taken from 27 school districts.

### **The Feminization of Teaching**

Teaching continues to be a feminized profession. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2012), 75% of all teachers and 59% and 29% of all principals at the primary and secondary levels respectively, are women. This is an important consideration in the analysis of dress codes since the image of a teacher is often shaped by the image of a woman and women's entry into the teaching profession in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was predicated, among other factors, on their supposed natural qualities such as nurturing, mothering, superior morality, and purity. These qualities are reflected in how teachers are expected to dress even today. The feminization of teaching is also significant in that it greatly influenced how the occupational status of teaching was viewed. Boyle (2004) points out that teaching has never been held in high esteem and its low status

facilitated women's entry into the field. Rury (1989) also maintains that teaching has never been held with the same regard as other fields such as law and medicine and that women's continued participation has served to maintain its low status. This remains true today and evident in the dress code policies' insistence on teachers looking 'professional.'

Although more women increasingly hold some administrative positions such as principalships, the higher tiered positions such as superintendencies and school board memberships continue to be overwhelmingly male (NSBA, 2002; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young & Ellerson 2010). This is reminiscent of and parallels 19<sup>th</sup> century feminization with the increased bureaucracy of the educational system. Minimal preparation was required of teachers based on the understanding that their male administrators would guide them (Tyack 1974). Along the same lines, Grumet (1988) argues that schooling has perpetuated patriarchal notions of the gender order. She highlights the irony of the fact that females by their sheer number have been responsible for the transmission of patriarchal values, serving as agents of their own oppression.

Historically, women in teaching have represented a transition from the private to the public sphere (Matthews 1992). This move was assisted in part by the desperate need for teachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the population was exploding with an influx of immigrants, the industrialization of the country was in high gear and there was a major westward movement in the nation (Tyack 1974; Urban & Jennings 1996). Teachers were needed in high numbers and women's exit from the home into the classroom required adjustments. A 1915 poster of rules for teachers from Pulaski, New York is indicative of the type of regulations placed upon women teachers (Wyman 1997). Among other rules, keeping company with men was forbidden, teachers were to be home after dark unless attending a school function and they were not allowed to ride in an automobile or carriage with any man with the exception of a relative (specifically their fathers or brothers). Other dress code regulations included a ban on dressing in bright colors and hair dyeing. Teachers' dresses could not be shorter than two inches above the ankle and a minimum of two petticoats were to be worn at all times. In effect, teachers' personal and professional lives were under a microscope.

Matthews (1992) points out that historically the public woman has negative connotations, usually those associated with sexual impropriety. The dichotomous public/private woman has roots in the Judeo Christian categorization of the virgin/whore paradox. Western 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorianism reinforced this view of women as was evident in the era's cult of confining dress for women that included corsets and long fitted skirts. Teachers and sexuality have been closely monitored. This surveillance was apparent in the marriage bans (many of which were in place as late as World War II) and the so called lesbian threats that ensued from women remaining single (Blount 1996). Another concern was that the lack of men in the profession would lead to creating weak and soft boys. G. Stanley Hall (1904), leading educational psychologist of the time, thought that the "feminization of the school spirit, discipline, and personnel is bad for boys" and that "It is hard, too, for male principals of schools with only female teachers not to suffer some deterioration in the moral tone of their virility and to lose in the power to cope successfully with men." (620) In sum, the factors contributing to women's acceptance

into teaching were that they embody the ideal of the good woman and remain in their place.

### **The Dressed Body**

Our bodies are both shaped by and reflective of dominant ideology. Postmodernist views of the body suggest that it is discursively constituted (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004; Foucault 1978). These views have been useful for reframing the body's association with social structures. Foucault maintains that social institutions such as prisons, schools, and clinics control and discipline the body, rendering it docile. Bartky (1990) points out that his argument lacks attention to those practices that engender the body and "To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed" (65). Butler (1993) also views the body as culturally shaped and argues that gender is an act, a performance of cultural signifiers. In this postmodern view, the body can be read. This is apparent in the changing nature of what type of body the media portray as desirable. For example, Bordo (2003) parallels the rise of anorexia nervosa and bulimia with the thinner standard for physical attractiveness. She points out that agoraphobia in the 1950s increased with the popular ideology that women remain in the home. Likewise, reading teachers' bodies can unveil pervasive ideas about teaching and gender that are not explicit in the formal curriculum.

Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) makes important contributions to the theoretical outlooks of the body. He rejects Cartesian dualisms and instead positions the body as a body subject, arguing that we *are* our bodies and our perceptions come through our corporeal place in the world. In other words, we come to know who we are and how we perceive the world through both our physical and historical placement of our bodies. Merleau-Ponty deviates from Foucault's view of the body as passive, one that is acted upon, a docile body (Entwhistle, 2001). Furthering Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological view, Entwhistle (2001), acknowledges how clothing "works on the body which in turn works on and mediates the experience of self." (p.44)

The clothed body and its parallel to dominant ideological practices represents a gendered site of compliance and resistance. Weitz (2003) suggests that bodies are important sites for power struggles because they are public and personal. Some scholars (i.e. Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin 2005; Entwhistle & Wilson 2001; Weitz 2003) argue that women (and by extension, men) as embodied beings perform, either through resistance or compliance, a gender commentary, a visual text in the form of feminine and masculine signifiers, such as hair-dos, dresses, earrings and other artifacts.

However, when bodies are clothed as deemed appropriate by certain institutions such as the military or schools, they embody layered text. Military uniforms were implemented for the purpose of identifying friend from foe as well as for utilitarian purposes (e.g. to carry weapons, food, etc.). At the same time, the uniforms embody the ideals of the military, one of which is uniformity. This can be related to the basic combat training experience, where enlistees are trained for nine weeks where the rules of combat and ideals of the army are mentally as well as physically embedded ([www.army.com](http://www.army.com)).

School uniforms have been implemented in hopes that the students will conform more easily to school standards (Bodine 2003; Yeung 2009). Proponents argue that school uniforms reduce violence, vandalism, increase academic achievement, promote a sense of community and allow for easy identification. Detractors claim it violates their freedom of expression. Whatever the correlation may be, uniforms send a clear message of required conformity and allegiance to the school.

Many restaurants, law enforcement and some areas of the medical field also require conformity in dress and behavior. These are fields where rigid standards involving anything from hygiene to ethical behavior must be met or be faced with severe consequences. Yet, some professions do not have formal dress codes. University professors, for example, are notorious for teaching in all sorts of apparel and any attempts to establish a dress code, are usually controversial. Bourdieu (1977) would perhaps argue that professors have a certain amount of cultural capital that allows them to dismiss dress codes. And yet, K-12 teachers are subject to restrictions, supporting the notion that while educated and many instances earning similar salaries, they are considered less prestigious than professors and subject to more control. If women's limited participation contributes to a profession's higher status then this is true at the university level where women account for less than 38% of full time instructional faculty overall, 38% of associate professors, and 23% of full professors (AAUP, 2006).

Teachers, as educators and as gendered beings, are perhaps the most visible and gazed upon individuals in the school. As such, they hold a powerful position in terms of gender role modeling. The gaze of students, administrators and colleagues influences how teachers wish to be perceived as women or men, and as professionals. Thus making dress codes an important consideration.

### **Texas Professional Dress**

In Texas, all schools must follow a basic 'rulebook' to which each district and/or school may add to it. Under the "Dress and Grooming" section of the Texas Education Code (TEC) for employees, it states, "The dress and grooming of District employees shall be clean, neat, in a manner appropriate for their assignments, and in accordance with any additional standards established by their supervisors and approved by the Superintendent." Many of the districts have district wide detailed employee dress codes (final approval coming from the superintendent and the school board) and those that do not leave the decision of what is appropriate and not appropriate in the hands of the principal. In addition to the "Dress and Grooming" section of TEC, gender is also an important consideration when making decisions about employee apparel. In fact, the Texas Supreme Court ruled that school districts have the right to establish student dress codes that are gender differentiated. For example, most schools allow girls to wear earrings and have long hair while boys are forbidden to do the same. This is sanctioned by state law and bears consideration in this study.

In collecting data, I limited my search to dress codes that were implemented district wide as opposed to individual school campuses. This allowed for broader representation and also by implication, the importance school districts have ascribed to dress codes by

having written documentation. I gathered a total of 27 documents via the Internet, students, teachers, and colleagues. The data, representing over 500 schools for the 2012-2013 school year were divided and tabulated into specific categories as they were mentioned in the dress code for a total of 49 categories.

## **Findings**

### *Main Concerns*

Overall, schools seem concerned with women looking sexy, men looking like women and teachers looking too casual. This, however, was not explicitly stated, and most manuals rationalized the regulations with a statement that usually read, “In keeping with professional decorum...” The dress codes revealed an overwhelming focus on women’s bodies, both in number and type of regulations. Women wearing tight/revealing blouses (59%), sleeveless shirts (44%), and tight/short skirts (56%) were sources of concern.

Table I- <http://www.weebly.com/weebly/main.php>

Regulations directed towards women were much longer than those concerning men. Forty per cent of the 89 rules were directed towards women while only 22% were directed toward men. The remaining rules were gender neutral. Consider a local district’s dress code, which states,

Noisy, distracting jewelry/accessories that could cause a safety hazard may not be worn. In keeping with professional decorum, earrings may be worn by female employees only, and ears are the only exposed areas of the body on which pierced jewelry may be worn...Women are to wear dress or casual slacks or Capri pants of appropriate material with an appropriate blouse or coordinating jacket. Shorts and cargo style pants may not be worn. Women's skirts/dresses are to be no shorter than slightly above the knee, and slits, flaps, or openings in skirts/dresses may not be shorter than fingertip length. Leggings/tights may be worn only under a dress/skirt that adheres to the above guidelines. Seasonal/decorated shirts and blouses may be worn. Tank tops, backless apparel, midriffs, tops with straps less than 2” , sleeveless tops that are revealing (deep or low cut), or see through blouses are not acceptable. Spandex or garments that are too tight are not permitted. Men are to wear dress or casual slacks. Shirts with collars or sweaters or turtlenecks are to be worn. Socks must be worn with shoes. Shorts may not be worn. Male administrators must wear ties while on duty during regular school hours. Hair must be well groomed and not extend below the base of the neck. Men are permitted facial hair if neatly trimmed and moderate in style. All facial hair, however, must be fully

This is a typical example of how many of the school districts regulate attire, usually reserving a few lines for men and the rest directed towards women. Of the 27 documents, there was never a concern that men wear clothing that was too tight or see through or that their chosen ensemble be of a certain material or length. Another employee manual, actually recommends that women specifically wear dresses, skirts, suits or slacks while in the section directed towards men, it states that suits are optional. The blatant gender specificity of the regulations for the most part was unquestioned by teachers with whom I spoke.

The primary regulations regarding male teachers were that they not come to school with earrings (59%), messy facial hair (52%) and long hair (26%). This concern with stereotypical masculine signifiers suggests a preoccupation with men appearing as men in a feminized profession. In contrast, the regulations directed towards women do not seem to reveal a concern with women looking like women but rather a concern of women looking like a certain *type* of woman. Otherwise, women’s regulations would perhaps

prohibit stereotypical masculine signifiers such as short hair, earrings, suits and ties. It is evident that the type of woman who wears tight and revealing clothing, is not welcome in a school setting. Who is this woman and does her clothing diminish her teaching capacity? Table II- <http://www.weebly.com/weebly/main.php>

The number of guidelines directed towards both sexes totaled 85 (37%) out of 224. Primary concerns were jogging suits (56%), jeans (78%), flip flops (or 'house' shoes) (63%) and other items that seem casual or unbecoming to the job. According to one teacher from a local elementary school, her principal was so concerned about employee dress that 2 ½ hours of the first faculty meeting were devoted to educating the faculty on what was appropriate. This was complete with role-playing, lengthy discussion and additional literature on how to 'look professional'. In this sense, to *appear* professional is to *be* professional. This seems counterproductive considering the fact that teaching is a profession that involves a lot of body movement, particularly in the elementary grades where teachers deal with younger and smaller students. Jogging suits and jeans would seem like durable and comfortable attire for sitting on the floor reading to children, monitoring them on the playground or preparing manipulatives, such as clay, paint, or glue, which are used on a daily basis for younger children. Teaching is a visceral activity and the clothing that is acceptable seems to disguise the physical nature of the profession.

Table III- <http://www.weebly.com/weebly/main.php>

Table IV- <http://www.weebly.com/weebly/main.php>

#### *Hidden Guidelines*

While the focus of this essay is on the analysis of written dress codes, initial findings of an ongoing study of teacher perceptions of dress codes and voluntary comments made by teachers who provided me with faculty manuals revealed that district wide dress codes were selectively implemented at the discretion of the principals. For example, teachers often informed me of additional rules that were 'known' but not written. Some examples included encouraging women who wore open toed shoes to have painted toenails or to wear hosiery with certain clothing items. Others mentioned men coming to school with long hair or anything feminine such as a skirt would be sent home even though the faculty manual doesn't explicitly state that this is not allowed. Additionally, one teacher stated that while she constantly broke the dress code by wearing jeans, she was never reprimanded, and yet other teachers in the same school who did the same were chastised. How teachers were approached when deviating from the dress code rules appeared dependent on their age, status, sex, and appearance. Younger female teachers were often noticed for wearing clothing that was too tight or revealing. Teachers in hard to fill positions such as special education 'got away' with wearing prohibited items such as jeans.

Teachers who violated the dress code policy at worst were 'written up,' meaning a note went in their permanent file. This usually remained there without incident unless other issues with the teacher arose and this citation could be used as a support for dismissal if

necessary. Thus, how teachers are viewed in association with their apparel is dependent on a complex array of individual and institutional variables.

### **Discussion**

Teacher dress codes are a visual paradox of womanhood, manhood and professionalism. Teachers, learned individuals, allegedly respected for their academic learning are still told to look and by extension behave professionally. Professionalism is intimately bound to what it means to be a 'pure' woman and 'manly' man. The restrictions on tight and revealing clothing for women echo early 20<sup>th</sup> century discourse that hailed teaching as 'the true and noble profession' where women "possessed of missionary zeal and benevolence" were sought after to "instruct in morals and piety and to teach the domestic arts and virtues" (Beecher 1846, p. 13). Mothers and missionaries, models for the ideal teacher were expected to reflect their purity by modest dress. Likewise, the dress codes directed towards women encourage a desexualized femininity, on the one hand discouraging low cut blouses yet in some cases encouraging painted toenails. This is reminiscent of the virgin/whore duality that is reflective of the private/public sphere where mother is sacred, holy and private (read inside, guarded, protected, controlled) and the whore is public, reckless and profane. This underlying vein of desexualization is ironic because at the same time there is a demand for visual gender differentiation, which dichotomizes, and further marks perceived gender differences among men and women. Furthermore, those perceived differences, naturalized by discursive practices in education and made incarnate in teacher bodies and attire, perpetuate the notion that a 'good' teacher is a 'good' (i.e. virgin, pure, modest, etc.) woman. These antiquated and simplistic notions of women continue to be embedded in dress code regulations.

In contrast, male teachers' 'manliness' is policed by explicitly forbidding traditional feminine signifiers such as long hair or earrings. This widens the gulf between what is considered feminine and masculine and reinforces the existing power hierarchy between superintendents, school boards and school personnel. Additionally, the emphasis on traditional femininities and masculinities maintain the heteronormative ideology that schools continue to perpetuate through the absence of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) issues in the curriculum. To be professional is to support the structures in "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized." Teacher attire is processed through this "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990, p. 151) and any gender bending male garments are eliminated.

Gender appropriate appearance presumes certain behaviors. Several reports show that dress and appearance can mediate sexuality in the workplace (Skidmore 1999; Malos 2007) or promote professionalism by 'power dressing' in corporate arenas (Entwhistle 2000; Fisk 2006; Freeman 1993; Peluchette, Karl & Rust 2006). Merleau-Ponty (1962) suggests, "We perceive a world only provided that, before being facts of which we take cognizance, that world and that perception are thoughts of our own." (459) That is, we are in the midst of perception and *being in the world* prior to our actual reflection of that world. In this sense, the gendered meanings embedded in teacher attire can influence the way teachers move in the space of the school as well as color the daily pedagogical decisions they make.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to establish the types of dress codes, if any that should be implemented several issues bear consideration. Teacher dress codes, like other aspects of school culture, are infused with traditional gender ideologies that teachers wear and display. These ideologies reflect a gender hierarchy where women are subject to more regulations than are men and the types of regulations are also qualitatively different. The very act of reading these regulations and being told to cover their bodies, to be demure and modest, cannot be without consequence.

Schools, for example, are penalized for discrimination on the basis of sex (e.g. Title IX). This is why both girls and boys are allowed to take the same courses and participate in the same types of sports. Today, females have more coverage in textbooks and are seen in more leadership positions than before. However, can these small advances for gender equity actually bring together the gender divide while dress codes are actually nurturing the underlying perceived differences contributing to the separation? Given that we *are* our bodies and our bodies are always gendered, those ideals of gender equity such as those found in Title IX or with the inclusion of women and men in nontraditional roles may place second fiddle to what students pick up viscerally from teachers.

Ironically, this analysis of teacher attire reveals a preoccupation with gender and sexuality, and yet they are never explicitly mentioned. All of the regulations were couched in terms of being professional. Sex matters are repressed, and in this silent space they are given importance and power (Foucault, 1980).

Discursively constituted settings such as schools are imbued with values that shape teachers' subjectivities and by extension, those of their students. Teachers who do not conform to the gender frameworks embedded in dress codes run the risk of being seen as incompetent. When teachers are reminded on a daily basis that their professionalism hinges on their gender appropriate appearance it sets limits on their performance and can influence in negative ways the expectations they hold for students.

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