



Dress for Success in the Classroom

by MARIE WALL

The Tuesday after Labour Day I saw an immediate change that could not be dismissed. It was at the gym, the mall and at work. I saw people in business suits, shirts and ties, blouses and skirts. Something was in the air; the season changed from casual to business. How we dress has a significant message that we portray to the world and the message on this day was, “back to business”.

Dress for success is the image businessmen and women want to convey with the people with whom they work. Dress for success is an image teachers must convey in the classroom and education field. The success you achieve and the clientele you impress may be different, yet the message is basically the same. How you present yourself makes a statement. In our wellness articles we often focus on how to take care of yourself outside the school in order to function best at work. The purpose of this article is to focus on you in the classroom and school, to reflect on how you present yourself and whether it accomplishes your desired effects. Your attire helps set the tone of your class and delineates the student/teacher relationship. This article will consider clothes and how they assist in effectively managing the classroom and the dynamics that arise there.

Dressing for success in teaching may come naturally to some, but others have to work at it. In the days when uniforms were the norm the delineation between student and teacher was visible. Just as expectations for student dress changed, consequently our expectations for teachers have changed as well. Sometimes it may be easier and more comfortable to dress casually, but it can also come with a cost. It may create a tendency for the learning environment to be too casual and thus more difficult to manage. Consider who your clientele are and the message you want them to get when you start your class. Is the message casual or work orientated? Is the message, “I am your friend” or “I am your teacher”? Is there a time or event that may challenge you to dress up more in order to manage the tone in the class?

For a male teacher, a shirt and tie with a pair of dress pants or Khakis have a very different feel than pants and a t-shirt. For female teachers there are a lot of choices, yet the example of business casual can be a good foundation. It presents an aura of authority with comfort. Whether a combination of skirt or dress pants and top, a jacket always dresses up and separates teachers from students. Casual business dress is acceptable in the business world because it has the balance of professionalism and approachability. Consider what you want to say and present it to the world. It is the teacher who needs to make the differentiation from the student. When children are uncertain about the expectations because the teacher has not made it clear, the difficulty arises when the line of familiarity has been crossed. If you expect the student to treat and respect you as the teacher, you have to make it clear in both obvious and non-obvious ways. This will help you in the long term.

New teachers are often faced with a quandary – they are taking on a new role with new expectations, becoming colleagues with people often older than themselves. Yet they may have more in common and be more comfortable with their students. Creating an air of authority early in your career helps to set a firm foundation. In time it can be softened, but do what is necessary to make it clear to all early on.

Substitute teaching and Jeans Day are two specific occasions to pay attention to your attire. When substituting you have to walk into the class prepared; the preparation is often more mental and less curriculum preparation because the lesson plan should already be available. You do not have time on your side so attitude and presentation are the immediate assets you call upon. Dressing professionally lets the students know that you take this seriously and take ownership of the class, that you are comfortable with your authority as the teacher. And if you are feeling uncertain, be prepared to emit an aura of confidence anyway, the comfort will come.

Jeans Day, usually on Friday, already has an air of casualness which can prevent challenges in the classroom. This could, in my opinion, make for a non-productive day and potentially increase behavior problems in the classroom. Depending on the tone you want to set in your class, you may decide to dress up rather than go casual. This sends the message that you are expecting to work and be productive – your students will get the message.

Being clear about the role you play in the classroom is necessary for you and your students. You are in authority; it is your responsibility to direct the class, promote the learning and to develop working relationships. For some teachers the shift from student and peer to teacher and authority is difficult. You may have a problem with being labeled an authority. If so, consider what is meant by this. First, you are an authority in your area of expertise. Others may challenge this at times, but being comfortable with what you know is a form of authority. Some believe it means to act in a way of being authoritarian – to rule as a dictator. Educational research has pointed away from the didactic style towards communities of learners. So your role as teacher is authoritative – a relational approach to learning with you orchestrating the learning environment. This shift challenges us because the line can be blurred and when this happens it can increase stress. The more clear and comfortable you are with being authoritative, the more comfortable the school environment becomes.

Dressing for success it is about making choices. Your decisions increase your effectiveness in managing your class, increase your personal confidence and portray the image you want your students to have of you. It is important for a teacher to know the image of an effective teacher and consider ways to bring it about. Your individual personality needs to come out. You have to be able to look at yourself, know yourself and your limits. Develop confidence in yourself and what you have to offer. Students will learn different things from different teachers, verbally and non-verbally. For some it's humor, for others it's work ethic, and still others, kindness and connections. What you have to offer is your gift to your students. How you present yourself is one area of your professional self. Consider how best to make yourself professional and approachable.

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