

PERCEPTIONS OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION STUDENT TEACHERS REGARDING FORMAL DRESS CODE DURING TEACHING PRACTICE IN ESWATINI

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ABSTRACT

The debate on teachers' dress code has subsisted for decades among educators and is critical to the survival and enhancement of the education profession. While the debate on teacher professional dress continues, little research has been conducted regarding teacher dress code in Eswatini. The purpose of the study was to find out the perceptions held by Agricultural Education student teachers regarding the formal dress code. The study was a descriptive survey of all Agricultural Education student teachers who did teaching practice in 2016. A self-administered questionnaire validated by three lecturers from the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension, University of Eswatini was used for data collection. The inter-item reliability coefficient established using Cronbach's Alpha was 0.81. Findings revealed that formal dress code positively impacts on the professional identity of teachers. However, the findings revealed that formal dress code may not be suitable in hot weather conditions and during agriculture practicals. In conclusion, formal dress code instills professionalism on the teachers. The study recommended that head teachers should explain the dress code policy to teachers so they understand what is expected.

KEYWORDS: *Dress Code, Perceptions, Professional Attire, Student Teachers, Teaching Practice*

Article History

Received: 07 Jan 2019 | Revised: 28 Jan 2019 | Accepted: 31 Jan 2019

INTRODUCTION

The debate on teachers' dress code has subsisted for decades among educators, journalists, politicians, and the public at large (Joseph, 2017). Professional dress code is an ongoing topic of concern and is critical to the survival and enhancement of the education profession (Workman & Freeburg, 2008). Teachers' professional attire is potentially controversial in the schools, with the greatest effect on a school's climate and culture and the teachers' field of work (Lemos, 2007). In some strict professions dress codes (also known as professional attire) is called uniform (Heatherfield, 2016).

Dress code is an important part of professional life and whether going for an interview or a business meeting these days everyone is expected to appear in a formal dress (Target Study, 2013). Existing literature indicates that dress code is a significant form of non-verbal communication that affects the perceptions of others (Silberman, 2010). Individual's dress tells a subtle story and transmits social signals (Morris, 1977). It has the potential to affect student attitudes about teacher credibility, likeability, interpersonal attractiveness and dominance (Buckley, 1983; Lighthouse, Francis & Kocum, 2011).

Leathers (1992) appealed that individuals should consciously exercise control over selected communicative behaviors and cues (particularly non-verbal) for the purposes of making the desired impression.

Freeburg and Workman (2010) found that the impact of teacher professional dress (shirt and tie; dress pants/skirts/shoes) in United States schools affects not only the career identity of the teacher but also the teacher as a role model for students. Similarly, Aguilar (2005) reported that proper dress code presents the teacher as a role model for students, and is particularly important when establishing respect and authority. Teachers' appearance promotes a professional and positive image of the school in the community (Steinburg, 2003). Jones (2006) concurred that teachers' professionalism is based on appearance, voice, and what they say. Other researchers concur that generally speaking, students often perceive teacher professional attire more positively than casual wear (Kwon & Johnson-Hillery, 1998; Sebastian & Bristow, 2008). Rollman (1980) concluded that teachers who dressed in professional attire were perceived as more organized and knowledgeable, whereas informally dressed teachers were perceived as more friendly and flexible.

Some teachers and administrators believe that how teachers' professionalism can be impacted by their appearance should be included in the training of new teachers (Workman & Freeburg, 2008). Professional attire and accessories promote a working and learning environment that is free of unnecessary disruptions (Springer, 2009). Phillips and Smith (1992) observed that if educators are cognizant of the influence of the dress code on the teaching and learning process, they are more likely to make intelligent choices in developing a professional wardrobe. Conscious manipulation of student attitude through dress can lead to a more positive learning climate in the classroom (Phillips & Smith, 1992); school's culture and teachers' field of work (Lemos, 2007).

A teacher's dressing can add in making a subject more interesting, thereby increasing the process of assimilation (Tyessi, 2015). When a teacher dresses well, the students will love the teacher and will always want to draw close to him or her (Tyessi, 2015). Putting on formal clothes makes teachers feel powerful and that changes the basic way teachers see the world (Pinsker, 2015). Pinsker added that wearing clothing that is more formal usually makes people think more broadly and holistically rather than narrowly and about fine-grained details. In psychological parlance, wearing a suit encourages people to use abstract processing more readily than concrete processing (Pinsker, 2015).

Graham (2014) recommended that teachers should dress in a way that promotes respect and shows students that teachers are in authority in the classroom. Some benefits include improved employee morale, a lack of cost to the employer, increased worker productivity, more open communication between staff and managers, cost savings to employees because casual wear is less expensive and also improved work quality (Gutierrez & Freese, 1999). Teachers' dress code also prevents a workplace becoming a fashion showing-off zone (Target study, 2013). Some workers can come to school dressed in expensive clothes which may create competition of clothing and thereby making school not conducive for those teachers who cannot afford expensive clothing. Therefore, as a professional educator, it is critical to present yourself well, limit distractions for students, and follow all dress code policies (Alix, 2012).

Many educators object to teacher dress codes, not because they want to look unprofessional, but because they see this as yet another unnecessary and insulting attempt to limit their rights and demean the profession (Graham, 2014). Graham (2014) argues that teachers know how to avoid revealing clothing and ultracausal attire and those who make that mistake must be reprimanded by their school administrators. Morris, Gorham, Cohen, and Huffman (1996) found that teachers wearing casual clothing such as jeans, T-shirts, and flannel skirts had the most positive influence than teachers wearing formal clothing. Similarly, Lukavsky, Butler, and Harden (1995) found that the teachers dressed informally were

more approachable and flexible, but at the same time commanded the least amount of respect. Formal dress code like wearing a necktie was questionable in hot places or summer seasons (Gately, 1986). Teachers objected the wearing of the formal dress code as it is expensive because they are paid low salaries (Tyessi, 2015). Islamproven (2015) further revealed that the formal dress code can be uncomfortable.

At the workplace, policies need to be implemented to assist employees to dress formally (Grenny, 2009). The organizational leaders such as the head teachers, should lead by example and dress formally (Heatherfield, 2016). In fact, a head teacher is duty bound to inspire the people around to dress formally. Heatherfield (2016) even suggested that teachers must be sent home to dress formally properly if not. Teacher training institutions such as colleges and universities should establish programmes where students could be taught and understand the importance of professional dress code (Ngo & Smith, 2013).

Delisio (2006) stated that casual wear has become the standard workplace attire due to the influx of younger workers. Some teachers were wearing clothing that was too revealing yet there are specific clothing that teachers should not wear in the classroom such as an exposed midriff and/or visible underwear (Feller, 2005). Some teachers were dressing in short skirts and tight pants and blouses of any sort at the workplace (Krittrels, 2008). Furthermore, some teachers were identified having body tattoos and multiple piercings. These features of a teacher's dress style were distracting to students and lead to off-task behavior (Phillips & Smith, 1992).

In Eswatini, the 'Guide to school regulations and procedures' stipulates that teachers as public officers must dress appropriately and presentable (Ministry of Education, 1998). The student teachers are also guided by the guidelines and procedures during teaching practice (Department of Agricultural Education and Extension, 2016). Maziya (2012) in the Times of Swaziland, reported that one principal was alleged to have threatened to deal with teachers who came to school dressed casually: jeans, takkies, T-shirts and revealing clothes, and insisted on formal dress code at all times. Maziya (2012) further alluded that male teachers were told to always wear neckties and also female teachers were advised to wear clothes that would not expose their breasts or any part of the body as that distracts the attention of the pupils. While the debate on teacher professional dress continues, little research has been conducted regarding teacher dress code in Eswatini.

The purpose of the study was to identify the perceptions held by Agricultural Education student teachers regarding formal dress code in Eswatini. The objectives of the study were to:

- Describe the respondents by their demographic characteristics and background information.
- Identify the views held by Agricultural Education student teachers regarding formal dress code.
- Identify the challenges faced student teachers on wearing formal dress.
- Investigate strategies to assist student teachers dress formally.
- Compare views held by Agricultural Education student teachers towards formal dress code by sex.

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive survey using a census of Agricultural Education student teachers (N=50) doing teaching practice from May to July 2016. A closed-ended, self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. A six-point Likert-type scale was used to measure the objectives of the study. The scale had the following options: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= slightly disagree, 4= slightly agree, 5= agree and 6= strongly agree.

Instrument validity was ensured by three lecturers from the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension at the University of Eswatini. Thirty student teachers from Consumer Science Education at the University of Eswatini were used for pilot testing for inter-item reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to establish the reliability coefficient. The reliability coefficient was 0.81 which indicated that the reliability was acceptable. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (such as mean, standard deviation and percentages) and inferential statistics (such as t-test) in SPSS version 20. Ethical issues were addressed by getting permission from the respondents through a consent form and the participants were assured of confidentiality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic Characteristics and Background Characteristics

Table 1 depicts that most of the respondents were males (n= 30, 60.0%). Ninety percent of the respondents were single (n= 45). A majority of the student teachers were in the age range 21-25 years (n= 37, 74.0%). Finally, most of the respondents did teaching practice in rural areas (n=29, 58.0%).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics and Background Information

Variables	F	%
Sex		
Male	30	60.0
Female	20	40.0
Marital status		
Single	45	90.0
Divorced	1	2.0
Engaged	1	2.0
Married	3	6.0
Age		
21-25	37	74.0
26-30	11	22.0
31-35	2	4.0
Location of school		
Urban	21	42.0
Rural	29	58.0

Views Held by Agricultural Education Student Teachers Regarding Formal Dress Code

Table 2 depicts that student teachers held the following views towards formal dress code: formal dress code impacts professional identity (M= 5.26, SD= 0.80); fashion contributes towards declining standards of formal dress code (M= 5.10, SD= 1.04); formal dress code improves teachers' image (M= 4.98, SD=0.87); teachers always look presentable without a necktie (M= 4.90, SD= 1.05); formal dress code improves teacher's self-esteem (M=4.80, SD= 1.09); teachers must clearly know what a formal dress is (M= 4.60, SD= 1.4); formal dress promotes a learning environment free of unnecessary disruptions (M= 4.60, SD= 1.03) and so on. The findings that formal dress code positively impacts the professional identity of teachers are consistent with what Workman and Freeburg (2008) stated. Workman and Freeburg stated that appearance impacts the professional identity of teachers. Formal dress code promotes a learning environment free of unnecessary disruptions (Springer, 2009). The findings also pointed out that teachers must clearly know what a formal dress code is, in order to know what to wear. Affirmatively, Heather field (2016) stated that employers must ensure that the employees know and understand the dress code. The findings also revealed that students respect teachers dressed formally. Aguilar (2005) reported that proper dress code presents the teacher as a role model for students, and is

particularly important when establishing respect and authority. Contrary, Ngo, and Smith (2013) stated that most youngsters or students have a negative attitude towards individuals dressed in more formal or business professional dress, rather they prefer casual to the smart casual dress code which was against what the respondents viewed that students respect teachers dressed formally. Fashion has also been regarded to contribute to the declining standards of formal dress code. Some teachers tend to use the workplace as fashion showing-off zone (Target study, 2013) consequently diverting from the professional dress code.

Table 2: Views Held by Agricultural Education Students Regarding Formal Dress Code

Item	M	SD
Formal dress code impacts the professional identity of teachers	5.26	0.80
Fashion contributes towards the declining standards of formal dress code	5.10	1.04
Formal dress code help improve teachers' image	4.98	0.87
Teachers always look presentable even without a necktie	4.92	1.05
Formal dress code improves teachers' self-esteem	4.80	1.09
Students respect teachers dressed formally	4.76	0.85
Formal dress promotes a learning environment free of unnecessary disruptions	4.64	1.03
Teachers must clearly know what a formal dress code is	4.62	1.40
Formal dress elevates teachers' authority in the class	4.50	0.79
Students react positively to teachers dressed formally	4.36	1.44
Teachers need a dress code to know what to wear	4.30	1.16
Jeans should be won to school	4.22	1.40
Teachers dressed formally are more favorable	3.86	1.69
Teachers' dress code should be dependent upon the type of subject taught	3.78	1.43
Formal dress code improves the productivity of teachers in schools	3.46	1.22
Students like subject teachers who always dress formally.	3.18	1.30
Formal dress code makes working place boring	2.94	1.39
Stipulating what teachers wear without understanding their duties is right	2.86	1.53
Male teachers must always wear a necktie	2.28	1.44
Overall	4.19	0.37

Challenges Student Teachers have with a Formal Dress Code

Table 3 presents the following challenges with formal dress code: formal dress code is not suitable during hot days (M= 5.08, SD= 1.03); weather conditions have an effect on the way teachers dress (M= 4.92, SD= 1.01); dry cleaning expenses of formal clothing (M=4.84, SD= 7.45); it is time-consuming to prepare formal wear before wearing it (M=4.76, SD= 1.04); cultural beliefs have an effect on the way teachers dress (M= 4.74, SD= 1.14); religious beliefs affect the way teachers dress (M= 4.70, SD= 1.31); formal dress code limits practicals to be done by teachers outside the classroom (M=4.52, SD= 1.30), teachers income contributes to the dressing of teachers (M= 4.50,SD= 1.33) and so on. The findings stipulated that formal dress code is not suitable during hot days. Similarly, Gately (1986) reported that teachers complained that in summer the temperatures are high and therefore teachers cannot be expected to wear jackets and necktie. Findings also revealed that formal clothing is expensive to buy and dry clean. Affirmatively, Tyessi (2015) also argued that formal dress code was expensive while Islamproven (2015) stated that formal dress code needed to be dry cleaned. Umutesi (2012) also argued that dress code will vary with cultural and religious beliefs.

Table 3: Challenges Student Teachers have with a Formal Dress Code

Items	M	SD
Formal dress (jacket, necktie) code is not suitable during hot weather conditions	5.08	1.03
Weather conditions have an effect on the way teachers dress	4.92	1.01
Dry cleaning expenses of formal clothing	4.84	7.45
It is time-consuming to prepare formal wear before wearing it	4.76	1.04
Cultural beliefs have an effect on the way teachers dress	4.74	1.14
Religious beliefs have an effect on the way teachers	4.70	1.31
Formal dress limits practical activities to be done by teachers outside the classroom	4.52	1.30
Teachers' income contributes to the dressing of teachers	4.50	1.33
Students associate teachers dressed formally of high class	4.14	1.36
Communication between teachers dressed formally and students	3.78	1.28
Classrooms remain dirty which can stain clothes	3.38	1.44
Comfort from formal dress code	3.32	1.74
Overall	4.39	1.03

Strategies that Can be used to Help Teachers Dress Formally

Table 4 shows that the following things can be done to help teachers dress formally: head teachers should set an example in the dress code to be won ($M= 5.38$, $SD= 0.95$); head teachers should explain the dress code policy to teachers ($M= 5.28$, $SD= 0.78$); universities should establish programmes where pre-service teachers will be taught more about dress codes ($M= 5.26$, $SD= 0.85$); teachers must be educated or reminded on what formal dress code entails ($M= 5.24$, $SD= 0.94$); teachers must be given a clothing allowance to purchase formal dress ($M= 5.04$, $SD= 0.90$); and head teachers should ensure that teachers respect the dress code policy ($M= 4.92$, $SD= 0.72$). The findings indicate that head teachers should be exemplary by wearing formal dress. Heather field (2016) that head teachers as leaders should inspire the people around them – even in dress code. The findings also indicated that teachers must be given a clothing allowance to purchase formal clothing. Similarly, Islam proven (2015) argued that in some cases employers must consider the cost of the dress code when making salary offers. Findings also pointed at the need for universities to establish programmes for students to be taught more about dress codes. Ngo and Smith (2013) concluded that there is a necessity for universities to establish programmes where students will be taught and understand the importance of professional clothing.

Table 4: Things that can be done to Help Student Teachers Dress Formally

Items	M	SD
Head teachers should set an example in the dress code	5.38	0.95
Head teachers should explain the dress code policy to teachers so they understand what is expected	5.28	0.78
Universities should establish programmes where students will be taught more about dress codes	5.26	0.85
Teachers must be educated on what formal dress code is	5.24	0.94
Teachers must be given a clothing allowance to purchase formal dress	5.04	0.90
Head teachers should ensure teachers respect the dress code policy	4.92	0.72
Head teachers should talk to teachers who violate the dress code policy	4.54	1.01
A government should establish deals with specific clothing stores to provide discounts to teachers	4.38	1.12
Teachers must be sent home to dress properly	2.20	1.44
Teachers must be suspended without pay if they violet the dress code policy more than 3 times	1.56	1.16
Teachers who repeatedly violet the dress code policy must be fired	1.40	1.01
Overall	4.11	0.41

Comparison of Views by Gender Held by Agricultural Education Students Regarding Formal Dress Code

Table 5 shows that there is no significant difference between males and female on their views regarding formal dress code ($t = -1.13$, $p = 0.27$). This literally means there was no significant difference in the perception of agricultural education student teachers on dress code by sex.

Table 5: Comparison of Views Held by Agricultural Education Students Regarding Formal Dress Code by Sex

Sex	M	SD	t	p
Male	4.14	0.32	-1.13	0.27
Female	4.26	0.43		

$p \leq .05$.

CONCLUSIONS

The student teachers in Agricultural Education viewed formal dress code as an identity for professionalism; improve the image of the teacher, increases teacher's self-esteem and contribute to school or classroom climate. Fashion contributes to the declining standards of formal dress code. Informal dresses such as women pants and body parts revealing clothing disrupt the teaching and learning process. Another conclusion drawn was that formal dress code is not suitable in certain whether conditions such as hot days; and for certain task such as agriculture practicals. Teachers cannot afford formal dress with the currently merge remuneration they are getting. Religion and culture affect the wearing of formal dress in the schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Head teachers should emphasize the importance of dressing formally to teachers and the policy statement on dress code should be observed.
- Teacher training institutions such as colleges and the University of Eswatini should have a course(s) where they teach the aspect and importance of dress code to the pre-service agriculture teachers.
- In-service teachers should be educated or reminded regularly on what formal dress code entails, especially during the era where fashion is emerging so fast.
- Teachers must be given a clothing allowance to purchase formal dress as they complain that formal dress is expensive.
- A study should be conducted on the impact of teachers' dress code on students' academic performance.

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