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Professional Conversations on “What Not To Wear” and Other Essential Advice for  
Female Pre-service Teachers

By Shelly Hudson Bowden, Tracye Strichik, Carolyn Corliss, and Ronnie Griffon

One of the missions embraced by members of WILLA is to improve quality of teaching in English language arts by increasing awareness of status and images of women in the profession. For those of us mentoring groups of pre-service teachers who are predominately females, attempts to reach that goal are often thwarted by our students' limited understanding of the gap they must bridge to move from being who they are now to becoming professional educators. And as their instructors and supervisors for public school field placements and internships, we find it difficult to confront issues related to attire and demeanor that compromise the professional status of many young women preparing to be teachers. One of the authors of this article, for example, observed an intern doing a read-aloud in a child-sized chair with 22 kindergartners gathered around on the floor. The intern sported a skirt so short that both Shelly, the supervisor, and the children had more trouble paying attention to the story, effectiveness of its delivery, and instructional efforts and outcomes than to the color and style of the underwear she wore! Shelly was then confronted with the awkward task of discussing the image presented by this young woman in follow-up conversations for feedback and evaluation.

To head off situations such as the one encountered by Shelly with this intern, we examined the most common problems presented by female pre-service teachers and our successes and failures helping them become aware of the importance of the images they project at school and in the classroom. Based on our experiences, we realized that taking a tongue-in-cheek, humorous tact was more productive than a confrontational approach to

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dealing with these issues. To do so, we adopted a format popularized on late night television by David Letterman who features the top ten examples representing a topic or type of event, starting with number ten, which is most obvious and somewhat amusing, and ending with number one, which is last because it is less obvious but deemed most likely to make the audience laugh. Unlike Letterman's list, our Top Ten Professional Tips are all equally salient; however, we have concluded our list with the item determined by us to be the most important, number one, set of points for female students to consider as they embark on their roles as professionals. As university faculty and classroom teachers, we have had to address all the behaviors and concerns that appear in our list, and we offer the tips we share with female pre-service teachers to other educators as a springboard for conversations about professional images with the women they instruct and supervise.

We begin our conversations about professionalism with a statement based on advice from Rike and Sharp (2008) to students aspiring to be teachers. They recommend that pre-service teachers start preparations for the position by realizing all they say, do, and wear (and how they say, do, and wear it) will be reflected in others' (including college and classroom teachers and supervisors, children and their parents, administrators, and future employers) visions of their roles and competencies as teachers. We also explain that the list that follows is not exhaustive but is merely a starting point for continuing discussions about the impact of image on one's status as a professional educator.

### **Top Ten Professional Tips for Female Pre-service Teachers**

**10-Attendance.** If you do not show up for work, you have no opportunity to present a professional image and convince anyone that you can be an effective teacher! Get more

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than one alarm clock for insurance that you will wake up on time. Leave earlier than you should need to so you can be punctual and have time to get prepared for instruction even if you are caught in traffic or stopped and ticketed for exceeding the speed limit on the way to school. Avoid no shows of all kinds, for all reasons, and at all costs.

**9-Speech habits.** You may have been taken in by movies with females who use Valley Girl speech in which the word “like” is repeatedly inserted in conversations between and in sentences where “like” is not needed. As you practice your teaching, tape record and listen to yourself to hear and note quantities of repeated words such as “like,” “okay,” and “alright” that interfere with coherent and articulate communication.

**8-Professional attire.** You are required to follow dress code policies established by each of the public schools in which you are placed for field experiences or internships. However, advertising used to sell women’s fashions has generated terms to entice you to buy and wear particular brands and styles of clothing. Victoria’s Secret, for instance, offers “juicy” items designed and marketed to appeal to you as a consumer and to make you appealing to onlookers. Additionally, pajama pants may indeed be “oh so comfortable,” but the classroom is not an appropriate place to wear sleeping and lounging attire, which is the exception and not the rule in most schools. Many schools do allow casual clothing such as jeans and t-shirts for special days or events. If so, make sure shirts promote the school (Hillcrest Middle School for example) or school sanctioned organizations and activities and do not display graphics that may be offensive to children, parents, and co-workers. Good rules of thumb are to dress each day as if you are in the school for a job interview and to be cautious about dressing casually even if given permission.

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**7-Exposure of body parts.** Your neck, arms, and legs below the knees are generally the only body parts except the head that are safe to bare when working in a school setting. “Bend and snap” is a phrase for movements in a scene from the movie “Legally Blonde,” in which a woman bends down and then quickly snaps back up after exposing her breasts. Low-cut tops worn in the classroom create opportunities for too much fall out while leaning over to assist or monitor the work of children. Be sure to wear blouses and dresses that allow you to avoid bending and snapping. In addition, bare midriffs and body parts between the midriff and knees are often problems due to shirts that are not long enough, pants with waistbands that are not high enough, and skirts that are too short. Select clothes cut to eliminate exposure of body parts that will be seen as inappropriate for viewing at school.

**6-Jewelry, piercings, and tattoos.** In a segment of “Sabrina, the Teenage Witch,” the star informed a young man that his array of jewelry studded piercings was over the top by saying, “You look like you fell head first into a tackle box!” Before teaching, it is prudent to remove eyebrow and nose rings. Tattoos are another adornment that you may not want to display when teaching. Many school policies allow only one piercing and piece of jewelry in each ear, and some prohibit tattoos in plain view. Failure to abide by policies such as these can result in being asked to leave the classroom.

**5-Foot safety.** Just because you can wear flip-flops and sandals to school does not mean that it is a good idea. Consider leaving both at home when reporting for work at school. As a teacher in kindergarten, Ronnie, who is also one of our authors, warned interns and practicum students that even the littlest of feet in small-sized tennis shoes can hurt and do serious damage to unshod toes on much bigger feet! Additionally, children’s safety as

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well as your own must be considered when you select footwear for school. Spiked heels, for example, can be dangerous to adults and children moving in close quarters around classrooms and along hallways. Find shoes that protect you and the youngsters with whom you work!

**4-Communication and confidentiality.** The majority of educators are female. And, when women get together, talk can turn to gossip (Tannen, 1991). As a teacher, talking with colleagues, supervisors, administrators, parents, and students is necessary, but talking about any of these individuals is inappropriate and potentially a breach of confidentiality. Do what you need to do in the teachers' lounge or workroom, then leave to avoid sharing information that need not be disclosed. Exercise caution and ask for advice and help when communicating concerns about anything you experience or observe at school.

**3- Social networks and students.** Networking sites are a great way to stay connected with friends and family, but students in your classroom and their parents also may participate in networks and access sites where you post. If so, these activities are potentially harmful to your professional image and your teaching career. Janel, for example, encountered problems with social networking during her internship. One of her sixth grade students asked her to "friend" him on-line. She accepted the invitation and began communicating with him electronically. When the child's parents found out about her interactions with their son on the social network, they complained to Janel's principal and requested that these communications be terminated. The principal asked Janel not only to "unfriend" the student but also to discontinue her internship at that school.

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**2- Social networks and pictures.** Some pictures may indeed be worth a thousand words, and you may not be able to afford the impact on your professional image that those words are worth. Many of our pre-service teachers post photos of themselves and others on their social network pages that include shots of them wearing non-professional clothing and engaging in activities such as drinking and engaging in behaviors that test the moral codes of others. The following is an example of a picture that may prove detrimental to the professional images of the pre-service teachers enjoying this party. Our example picture has faces that have been blurred to protect the identity of the subjects. Blurring may be something to consider if you place an image like this on your social network site, but that defeats the purpose for posting the picture.



If your pages and photos are not restricted and available only to friends you trust not to take offense at what they see, they can be accessed by any audience which may include students and their parents, teaching colleagues, and potential employers.

**1-Responsible action and self-evaluation.** The nine tips for female pre-service teachers listed above are all significant considerations when developing your professional image as an educator. However, the ability to take responsibility for your actions and engage in self-evaluation is the number one, most important factor that will shape your professional

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image and status as a teacher. Try the Goldilocks test: Is your professionalism and the image you project too little, too much, or just right? Yes, you do have rights in determining what constitutes the professional image you want to project, but you also need to own up to responsibility in your role as a woman and educator. Take a look around and self-evaluate the actions and images you present on all fronts. As you do, selectively and carefully mirror the behaviors and images not only of peers with whom you interact on the college campus but also of teachers you respect as competent, committed professionals and mentors in the schools. Responsible action based on continuous self-evaluation will help you become a teacher and mentor for children your classroom. According to Baldwin, “Children may not be very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them” (“Baldwin,” (N. d.), “BrainyQuote.com”).

As university faculty and classroom teachers, we offer the tips we share with female pre-service teachers to other educators as a springboard for conversations about professional images with the women they instruct and supervise.

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