

Do Dress Codes Affect Our Learning?

by Olivia Amiri, age 16

Casual is the new brand at school. We have all seen the army of UGGs, the sweatpants that make you question whether they can even be called sweats at all. My unconventional campus is based in an alley and its students address the teachers by their first names. But has abandoning all formality gotten to an unprecedented point? Our laid-back customs include having snacks with our teachers and being able to meet with them almost anytime about grades or problems we might be having. In the school handbook, the dress code isn't even something that has specific guidelines, but rather more of a suggestion to use one's judgment and to wear clothes that don't go against the school philosophy: "No formal dress code, with the exception of PE classes and athletic teams.... The school does not condone styles of dress that interfere with safety or denigrate the school's value." These unique characteristics of my school are usually seen as assets of singularity, but when present in excess, does "casual culture" begin to negatively affect academic performance?

The absence of a dress code was meant to liberate students and all for their self-expression and creativity to be of importance, but unfortunately during COVID, being at home while in class gave way to a casual leniency. This laid-back sense regarding one's appearance and decorum is partly a byproduct of online learning. "LM, a senior at my school, recalled how Zoom was freeing in the sense that "I could basically wear whatever I wanted to—people were zooming from their couch and would be in pajamas eating a snack during the lesson." She noticed that when students came back on campus following the lockdown, their casual habits and pajama pants remained. People left online school at home, but they haven't logged off of their Zoom wardrobe. But this relaxed atmosphere pervaded more than just the fashion at my school.

Classroom expectations at my school are also notably relaxed; it is normal for casual, direct conversations between teachers and students. A school friend remarked on how she has observed this specific dynamic, "People are so chill with their teachers—they talk to them as friends more than authority figures sometimes..." In elementary school, I had to address our teachers using "Mr." and "Mrs." When I transferred to my current school, I adjusted to the change of using their first name, which took some time to get used to. I specifically remember everyone joking around with my math teacher, and that wasn't something I had experienced before. I don't feel that the more strict and traditionally polite dynamic necessarily produces the most productive learning. My school now makes it easier to express confusion and ask for

clarification. This approachability is a trademark of my school's way of thinking: it is "informal," but it allows students to feel comfortable communicating with their teachers.

My French teacher was born in France and has taught at my school for more than 17 years. She often references the differences between high school and college processes in France, where high school students take a cumulative exam called "baccalaureate," which determines if a student has successfully completed the qualifications of secondary school. She thought about the difficulties she experienced when she started teaching at my school. "When I first came to teach, it was strange because I had to learn the new boundaries and limits the students had with their teachers and think there is still a hierarchy here you have to respect; it just isn't as clear because the relations between the students and teachers are much less formal."

While all dress codes and customs alone cannot be directly linked to a rise in disrespect or poor performance, there is a trend present that connects an association of comfort and familiarity to relaxed academic performance. I don't think that when students at our school graduate and they begin to function in a more professional environment after high school this general allowance of acting and dressing more "laid back" is one that might not be permitted.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that students should lean into that familiarity and freedom—it is something that won't last forever. However, the conventions of the outside world should be kept in mind when regarding behavior during school hours; this flexible setting is meant to encourage creativity but not to the detriment of respect. ●

Sixteen-year-old Olivia Amiri is a little girl with big advice! Sharing insights and observations on the world around us, her message is clear: kids are still the best teachers to remind grown-ups of the simple joys in life. livonlife.com

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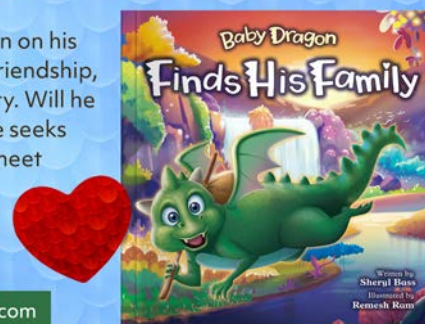
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