

Young people's perspective of school-based resourcing for menstruation

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KEY POINTS

- Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that schools must take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools. Eight percent of menstruating students in Aotearoa New Zealand miss school due to problems accessing period products.
- Students want more education about menstruation and how to manage it; information about atypical menstrual symptoms; and when, where, and from whom to seek help.
- Free and discrete access to period products at school would promote students' attendance and alleviate worry and embarrassment.
- Students want menstruation to be normalised so they can navigate their periods more easily and comfortably.
- Students want greater support for what they experience during menstruation, including pain and discomfort, and catching up on missed schoolwork.

Young people should not miss out on education because they are menstruating; a normal part of life. The importance of supporting students who menstruate is recognised internationally, with countries increasingly making period products freely available. This article reports on research that provides an insight into the perspectives of 10 secondary school students who experience menstruation about how school-based resourcing for menstrual management impacts on their wellbeing and overall development and offers advice for teachers that students would find helpful. Young people at secondary school who menstruate want: more education about menstruation; a greater understanding of their experiences by others; menstruation to be normalised; and supportive relationships and resources to enhance their wellbeing.

Introduction

I feel like it definitely should be normalised. I feel like it shouldn't be something that people have to keep a secret. It shouldn't be looked down upon. It's a normal thing that happens to everyone. (Darcy, Year 12)

Adolescents and rangatahi who experience menstruation learn to handle the physical nature of menstruation and the sociocultural and political discourses around it that can create internalised taboos, secrecy, and shame (Krusz et al., 2019). During their schooling years, students need physical resources and important and appropriate education that can help combat shame, stigma, and other negative connotations in the dominant discourse around periods; this would help the normalisation and social acceptance of menstruation (Agnew & Sandretto, 2016). Schools can help students by providing access to period products, minimising other reported challenges, and contributing positively to education around menstruation (Ministry of Education, 2021). As Darcy clearly identified, menstruation does not need to be a secret; it's normal.

Students who menstruate should not be denied any rights identified by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) due to a natural bodily function. Article 28 states that young people have the right to education, including the need for schools to take measures that encourage regular school attendance (United Nations, 1989). School attendance can drop when students do not have access to products to manage their periods, such as blood collection items and pain relief. These products provide the opportunity for students to continue participating in their normal daily lives unhindered by the physical implications of menstruation (Cotropia, 2019).

Access to resources and support

Many countries recognise the importance of supporting students who menstruate by making period products freely available. England launched a scheme to make period products available to all students in schools and educational organisations who need them up to 19 years old (Department for Education, 2020). Scotland introduced a bill that makes period products free to everyone who menstruates, making products accessible from schools, colleges, universities, and other public bodies (Scottish Parliament, 2021). Australia, India, Canada, Kenya, and Malaysia have removed taxes on tampons in order to make the price more accessible (BBC News, 2020).

In June 2021, the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa launched the Access to Free Period Products programme—*Ikura | Manaakitia te whare tangata*—Period products in schools (Ministry of Education, 2021). A variety of pads and tampons were made available in about 1,470 schools and kura that opted into the programme for 2021; the wide range of products ensured that students from a diversity of cultures, development, and ages are able to use appropriate items. The aim of the programme is to “reduce access barriers, improve school attendance, sports involvement, and tertiary participation” and “improve wellbeing, reduce financial strain, promote positive gender norms and reduce stigmatisation of menstruation” (Ministry of Education, 2021, para 5). The programme is part of a wider government-led initiative, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, with an aim to improve children's access to their rights and therefore improve and support their wellbeing (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019).

Aotearoa's Youth 2000 survey involved 7,891 Years 9–13 students in the Auckland, Waikato, and Northland regions of Aotearoa (Fleming et al., 2020). It found that 8% of students who menstruated had missed school due to lack of period products. This was even greater for Māori and Pacific students (15% and 14%, respectively). Thus, accessibility to menstrual products is a barrier to students' rights to education, which is further influenced by school decile and student ethnicity. A similar pattern was found in the US; nearly 13% of students had been absent from secondary school at least once due to lack of access to menstrual products (Cotropia, 2019).

The need for education

The literature reviewed for this study, Hylton (2021), showed that menstruation is mainly addressed in school using a medicalised lens; the physical bodily process are explained to students in ways that distance students from their bodies by reducing them to their biological processes (Fingerson, 2005). Feedback from students in Aotearoa's pilot programme to provide free period products in schools showed that students wanted to learn more about "periods, period products, and other practical elements of managing their period such as tracking" (Ardern & Tinetti, 2021, para 9). Menstruation education should move beyond just discussing it as a biological process and include the practical management practices and its social and cultural position (Wootton, 2018). When this happens, student individuality and identity are respected and acknowledged.

International studies have found that young people who menstruate often do not know the characteristics of a typical period or common menstrual health-related conditions, such as endometriosis and dysmenorrhea, that may indicate they need medical help (see, for example, Bush et al., 2017). With education, students are more likely to seek medical help for abnormal menstrual symptoms; thereby "reducing the burden of disease physically, socially, psychologically, economically, and clinically" (Bush et al., 2017, p. 456).

Period poverty is a global issue. It has been defined as "the lack of sufficient resources needed to manage menses, such as toilet, bathing, and laundering facilities; general menstrual education or information; and basic menstrual management supplies" (Casola et al., 2022, p. 374). In the US, one in four menstruators are likely to experience period poverty at some stage in their lives (Casola et al., 2022). In Aotearoa, the Youth 2000 survey revealed a lack of access to period products was causing students to miss out on education and other opportunities (Fleming et al., 2020). Wootton (2018), in Aotearoa, sought to explore the impact the lack of access to period products has on

students in the Tairāwhiti district. However, Wootton (2018) found that the 11 16–17-year-olds she interviewed were reluctant to discuss the issue, which she put down to a sense of shame and a failed identity as a woman.

Cultural messages about menstruation may also cause anxiety and impact negatively on young people's self-esteem. In Aotearoa, through colonisation and misinterpretations of tikanga Māori surrounding menstruation, *te awa tapu* (the sacred river)—a name given to menstruation—has been stripped of its sacredness and has imposed negative attitudes on menstruation (Hayden, 2019). Reclaiming *te awa tapu* through the lens of *ngā tūpuna* Māori can impact positively on women's wellbeing (Murphy, 2011).

In Aotearoa, the 2020 Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum has been updated from the 2015 curriculum, and addresses these areas of educational need, providing clear guidance on menstrual topics to cover. Key learning focuses include: examining cultural and religious approaches to periods, interrogating the design and sustainability of menstruation products; knowing about pubertal changes and how they relate to social norms; and being informed of contraceptive choices and how they relate to wellbeing (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Students' experiences

This study shared in this article explored young people's perspectives on the value and quality of school-based menstrual education and resourcing, and how these resources impact on their wellbeing and development. A qualitative approach was used involving 10 female students from a co-educational secondary school. In 2021, the school signed up for Ikura Manaakitia and received their first shipment of products in June 2021. This included a variety of pads and tampons that were stored in an unlocked

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cupboard outside the First Aid Officer's office and were available for students to access during school hours. Each menstruating student was allowed and encouraged to collect up to two packets of products containing 12 items per cycle; an adequate amount for the average menstruator according to the Ministry of Education (2021).

Individual, semistructured interviews were carried out with 10 students who were participating via a convenience snowball sample. The interviews covered *education* including how and what was covered in the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, how helpful it was, and to what extent the students needed to do their own personal research to understand menstruation and its effects. The interviews also covered *resourcing* including the ease of access to period products at school, impact on participation, and general effects of menstruation on the students' wellbeing.

An inductive thematic analysis showed that the students wanted more extensive menstrual education in a timely manner and access to period management products without feeling embarrassed about asking for them. Students, especially those whose menstrual pain and discomfort were ongoing issues, felt most supported by talking with others who understood menstruation. These findings led to two key messages.

Message 1: We need education, understanding, and ease of access

Students lose important learning time when experiencing a period. Ashley (Year 12) said:

Throughout my entire period I've no concentration, no motivation to do anything. So, it's like you sit in class and it's really, really hard to focus and keep going. And especially when you've got cramps as well and you can't, like, leave class to go heat up a wheaty bag or something. So, you kind of have to sit there and like, ignore what, like the pain and keep pushing through.

Students need helpful knowledge about menstruation and strategies:

I think it would be helpful if you had prior knowledge to menstruation, but you know, if you're coming from somewhere else and your family is very ... like that, you know, that they don't really talk about that stuff—like it's very taboo—I don't know if it would be that helpful, because you'd probably end up having a lot of questions. If you're coming from a background like that, they probably won't feel comfortable talking about it. (Shannon, Year 12)

Students want to access toilets and products without feeling *whakamā*—embarrassment and frustration—especially when their teacher does not let them leave the class:

I'm like, okay, 'Can I go to the toilet?' And then sometimes they [the teachers] say 'No, because you should have gone at lunch', and I'm like, 'I should of, but I didn't, because, you

know, I didn't have to.' And then, I couldn't say it. It was so embarrassing; there's a whole class behind me. (Maia, Year 12)

Amy (Year 12) added, "You have to make an excuse to get out of class and go to the office because it's just embarrassing to say to your teacher, 'I got my period, I need to go get a tampon'." She explained that all students were prohibited from going to the toilets during class time to prevent students from vaping there. However, it affected students who needed to access the toilet for genuine reasons. Amy felt overlooked, excluded, and ultimately worried, saying, "What if it's an emergency? ... Like, what do you do? What do you expect us to do?" Two of the students had needed to leave class during class time to attend to their menstrual needs and "[got] in trouble" for doing so.

Message 2: Let's normalise menstruation

Students want menstruation to be normalised and need support from others:

Someone sees you and you're in pain, They're like [whispers] 'Do you have cramps?' and you're like [whispers] 'Yeah.' And they're like. 'Oh my God, I feel so sorry for you.' (Ashley, Year 12)

I have a lot of girlfriends that talk about it; it definitely normalises it for me ... that kind of shows that the more you talk about it, the more normalised it is ... I think it's definitely getting better, especially with things like TikTok where they [influencers] talk about it. (Jamie, Year 12)

Students mentioned the importance of supportive relationships, especially from those who had navigated the experiences and management of menstruation. Amy explained that:

It sucks to say that asking for something when you're on your period is embarrassing, but it is because it's just not normalised ... One time I was talking to my friend about periods and a guy friend came up to us and he was like, 'Ew, that's so gross. Why would you even talk about that?'

Students also experienced this attitude at home. Millie (Year 12) explained that talking openly about menstruation at home was:

a little weird because my brother and my dad ... look at me like, 'Why are you saying this in public?' But it's a completely normal process for women and girls. And so, I'm like, oh, why should I have to be secretive?

These sorts of experiences restrict students' language and actions, making them try to be discrete about anything related to their periods. Maia used coded language to draw less attention to herself when asking for pads at the office by whispering to the staff member, "I got my monthly". Their actions were designed to ensure that others could not tell they were menstruating. Ashley mentioned the embarrassment around people seeing "loose products"; students would hide them up their sleeves to conceal

the fact that they were menstruating. Shannon (Year 12) explained how embarrassment affected taking pain medication and changing products:

I used to be really embarrassed to take ... Panadol or Ibuprofen in front of ... my class. So I'd always feel like people were watching and being ... 'Oh, she has her period'. Like, and just like, I felt like they just knew. And also, like, leaving class with your bag to go to the toilet. I used to try to avoid that. I would go during intervals and lunches and, you know, time everything and count the hours and be like okay, I'm fine until this, this time and then I have to go change it.

Final comment

Menstruation is normal. It should not disrupt and create barriers to students' school life or be a cause of a lowered state of wellbeing and development (Ardern & Tinetti, 2021). Simply by ensuring young people have access to menstrual education and resources demonstrates one way a school can enact Article 28 of the UNCRC that identifies the need for schools to take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools. Given 8% of menstruating students in Aotearoa New Zealand miss school due to problems accessing period products (Fleming et al., 2020), a relatively simple solution is to afford these young people the means and the right to attend class. Schools can support equal access to education by enabling and supporting students in their management of menstruation and its symptoms (Macleod et al., 2020).

Teachers can, and in many cases do, normalise menstruation through education, and through the HPE curriculum. As shown in this study, validating students' menstrual experiences and helping create a safe place for them to manage their periods with dignity is important for young people's wellbeing. The students who shared their experiences through this study expressed a desire to access their educational rights and support their wellbeing and development.

Suggestions for teachers

- Explore different ways to incorporate education about menstruation into learning and teaching as part of the curriculum (e.g., HPE and other curriculum areas) which will help normalise the topic; explore menstruation through the lens of period products and sustainability; examine how the media portrays menstruation; and discuss menstruation with students.
- Teach menstruation across the secondary year levels, with an emphasis on menstrual management. Become familiar with health providers in your area, for example, Endometriosis New Zealand,¹ and consider using their resources to teach your students along with the Relationships and Sexuality curriculum.

- Use social media to bring menstrual education into the classroom. Many students already follow content creators that openly discuss menstruation, for example, The Period Place.² Provide ways for students to share these creators with their peers and into classroom discussions.
- Get your school to sign up to Ikura Manaakitia—the free period products in schools programme. Ensure products are easily and discretely accessible. Information about Ikura Manaakitia³
- Display/use prompts such as posters or cards in safe spaces such as counselling offices to promote conversation about menstruation with staff members who can provide relational support to students.

Notes

1. <https://nzendo.org.nz/>
2. <https://www.instagram.com/theperiodplace/>
3. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/wellbeing-in-education/ikura-manaakitia-te-whare-tangata-period-products-in-schools/information-for-schools-and-kura/>

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