



That Time of the Month

THE IMPACT OF PROVIDING SANITARY PADS TO TEENAGE GIRLS ON THEIR SCHOOLING ATTENDANCE AND PERFORMANCES.

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The research for this report was conducted as a Honours Dissertation based on a request for such research by the Living Hope. This summary report focusses on the findings of the study preceded by a brief introduction.

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project.

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1. Research question:

Drawing on qualitative methods, the research examines whether, how and to what extent the provision of menstrual products by an NGO reduces girls'/young women's school absenteeism.

My research sought to ascertain whether the provision of sanitary product to young women in Masiphumelele has a positive effect on school attendance and performance.

Background: In recent years, there has been an increase in awareness and mobilization by civilians and governments to provide sanitary pads to young girls. The issue of menstrual-related school absenteeism, particularly the narrative of '7 million girls' and the various conversations and debates it provoked in South Africa, have generated considerable interest in and attention to gender-related reasons for absenteeism.

The project: Living Hope's Eve Project has been providing menstrual-related product for young women for twelve years, with an educational component that was introduced in 2018.

Research Methods: Between June and September 2018, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, working with Living Hope. Understanding the situational realities, the teenage girls face in Masiphumelele is essential in solution building.

My fieldwork entailed working with the young girls and social workers during the Holiday program and their After-School program. We created time to incorporate focus groups and paired interviews with the girls outside of these programs. I had formal and informal interviews with those who lead the Eve Project and the social workers who work with the girls. I conducted participant observation at seven of their workshops. Most of the workshops were in isiXhosa. Although white-presenting, which I anticipated might be an obstacle in the work, my experiences in multi-cultural social environments made navigating the spaces I worked in relatively easy. My lack of proficiency in isiXhosa was offset by the assistance of social workers and the young women, who were attentive in assisting me to understand. There may have been some hesitancy on the part of girls who found it difficult to express their experiences; I suspect that, given the stigmas associated with menstruation, it would have been as difficult for them to talk to others as to me.

Sample and techniques: I worked with a group of eleven girls, who were very enthusiastic for the most part. While the sample is not large, it allowed for careful qualitative research. I conducted three focus groups with the girls and each focus group lasted an hour long. I also conducted paired interviews with the girls which ran for 20 to 30 minutes. There was a mixture of girls from primary and high school with the age range of 11 to 16 years old. Zinhle was my key informant among the girls, she helped me organize the girls and interpret the meetings.

2. Findings

Sitting in a circle in the church hall during our first focus group discussion I asked the girls a very generic question, “what does menstruation mean to you?” This gave me an idea of what the girls understand menses to be.

There were three sets of responses focusing on the sociological, physiological and the scientific understandings around menstruation. The girl’s responses were “getting older”, “bodily changes”, “becoming a young woman”, “can get pregnant any time”, “matured”, “feelings such as anger, attitude and mood swings”, “the releasing of eggs”, “uncomfortable”, “stay away from boys”. All these responses show different concerns. The sociological responses show the concerns of what it means to society and to their place in society. The physiological responses were in relation to what it means to their body, how the bodies are changing and how their emotions are moving. The scientific responses are linked to biological explanations such as “the releasing of eggs”.

An appreciation of the Eve Project and everyone involved. The intervention invests time and care for each of the 18 individuals in the program and its positive impacts are seen through increase in attendance and performance in school and their general wellbeing

2.1 DISTRIBUTION AND USE

Scale: The network works; it is scalable. The pads are getting to the girls and they are using them. There is a great appreciation of discretion, both in the distribution of product and also in the attitudes of accepting adults.

Social support. Living Hope goes beyond distribution and is a safe space for the teenagers:

- (i) The girls stated in the interviews that the provision of pads has “made life easier” for them.
- (ii) They were especially appreciative of the role that social workers played in educating them about menstruation and providing a safe space to which they were willing to refer friends.
- (iii) The girls talked about how they are able to come and ask for help with their homework and assignments and this helps them pass thus an improvement in their performances at school which in turn influences better outcomes.

2.2 CONSTRAINTS

Stigma: Despite Living Hope's provision and distribution of sanitary pads there is still stigma and people deal with these stigmas in multiple ways. During my research, girls told stories of crying, parents calling social workers at Living Hope to help and girls feeling too shy to ask for help (seen through leaving letters for the social workers or sending friends to ask on their behalf).

Relation between menstruation and social concern about teenage pregnancy. Menstruation is seen to signal other things, including relating to sexuality, sexual activity and reproduction. It is widely held that 'in our culture we can't talk about these things'; that is, cultural beliefs are held to mitigate against menstrual knowledge. In practice this is not the case, but there remains considerable generalized anxiety about the relation of maturity and reproduction.

Pain and mitigation: Menstrual-related pain remains under-considered in much literature relating to school absence and to women's experiences of menstruation more generally. Many of the young girls commented that back pain and cramping are factors that inhibit them from going to school or concentrating in class. The pain also has an influence on their mood as well. Menstrual pain thus contributes to menstrual-related absenteeism.

Menstrual Product Disposal:

- (i) There is a lack of means to dispose of menstrual product in the school toilets.
- (ii) Environment: The toilet environment makes it difficult to comfortably change and freshen up. The girls reported used pads laying around the floors and pads blocking the actual toilet, thus affecting the way they manage their menses.

2.3 COPING MECHANISMS

Disposal: The girls reported carrying plastic bags to school to keep their used pads and dispose of them at home.

Education: The girls reported the puberty lessons and the social workers have helped in managing the fear and anxieties around menstruation.

School: When the girls feel too sick at school they head to sick bay, which really helps.

Pain management: If the girls experience bad cramping and back pain, they take a day off and stay at home.

3. Recommendations

- The intervention is valued, not only for the provision of sanitary products but also for the role that sympathetic and discrete adults play in supporting and guiding young girls. This role, often invisible, is a critical feature in the project and its importance should be recognized.
- Given the lack of easy access to water and sets of ideas about the links between menstruation and sexual activity, *menstrual pads* seem to be a good solution to managing menstrual waste. *Sanipanties*, while useful, are unlikely to find much support in a water resource-poor area, but this may change as water provision improves and it may be worth contacting organizations that distribute them. There is strong resistance to *tampons*, which remain associated with loss of virginity.
- The bad environment in the school toilets make it difficult to manage menses at school. At present, girls are unable to dispose of used menstrual products at school and carry their used pads in plastic bags during the day until they can dispose of them at home. The young women worry about unpleasant smells. An important step in lobbying/activism might be to encourage the school/Dept Health to buy rubbish bins and incinerators for easier disposal of pads.
- It may be worth considering providing scented bags (like disposable nappy bags) as part of the menstrual product package. At present, most of these are plastic, which poses obvious environmental problems, but there may be other alternatives.
- Notwithstanding the provision of menstrual packs, girls do still miss school. This is tied to pain management.
- It may be worth looking at how to scale up the intervention through links to Dept Education and other NGOs.
- While girls reported being able to ask other women and even men for assistance in purchasing menstrual product, it is clear that the broader social environment is one in which stigmas about menstruation remains. Social workers' roles in breaking menstruation-related stigmas is important and valued.

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