

Post-School Period Survey Report

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VICTORIAN
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CHALICE FOUNDATION
POSITIVE MENSTRUAL CULTURE

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Introduction

This survey forms part of the work of the Victorian Women's Trust and the Chalice Foundation on menstrual education. Interested in young Victorian women and girl's experiences of menstruation during their school years, this survey aims to reveal the barriers to a comfortable, supported and well-informed education for young menstruators. What we heard is that menstrual education is not satisfactory to support young menstruators to navigate their periods [comfortably](#) and [proudly](#). This shows us how underacknowledged and under-addressed menstruation is across our communities and reveals the significance of improving Victoria's approach to menstrual wellbeing in schools. This survey hopes to shine light on areas for further change and reform to menstrual education in Victoria to ensure all young women and girls are able to menstruate in dignity, safely, hygienically, and without discomfort, fear or shame.

Survey

The survey opened on the 18th of March 2021 and closed on the 22nd of April 2021. It was posted on social media networks, such as Instagram and Facebook, and respondents were also drawn from the Victorian Women's Trust's body of supporters through an e-newsletter, advertising an open call for young menstruators to take a survey about their experiences of menstruation during their school years. Survey respondents were asked to answer seven (7) questions regarding the form of menstrual education they received, the quality of it, their social and behavioural experiences of the school environment, as well as any changes that would have improved their experience of menstruation at school. Each survey taker was informed at the beginning of the survey that their identity would be kept anonymous and that any personal details would not be ascertained. Seventy-six (76) responses were collected in total, including both qualitative and quantitative information about respondent's experiences of menstruation at school.

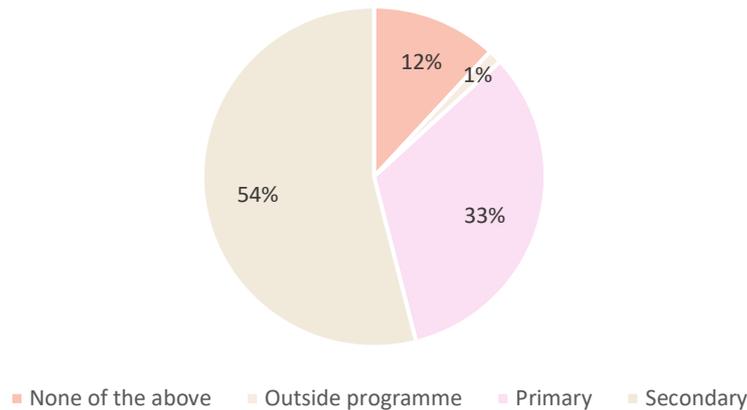
Demographic

While the online survey was open to anyone, the primary aim of the survey was to understand young menstruator's experiences of menstruation and their period during their school years. The term 'young' was loosely defined as any menstruator who had left high school, ranging from the ages of eighteen (18) onwards.

Results

Question 1: Did you receive any form of menstrual education during your schooling?

Did you receive any form of menstrual education during your schooling?



54% (41 respondents) secondary, 33% (25 respondents) primary, 12% (9 respondents) none of the above, 1% (1 respondent) outside programme.

More than half of the survey respondents received menstrual education while at secondary school, or both secondary and primary school:

- "Primary and high school"
- "In biology at high school, outside Catholic program at Primary School"
- "Health classes in school curriculum."
- "Year 7 it was explained as part of a unit on Puberty."
- "Sex ed in primary school - optional after school event briefly explained what a period was. I assume they told us again in secondary school, but I don't remember when/what - in around year 7."

Other forms of education included parents and families, an important source of information:

- "Classes attended with other students and parents."
- "Guest speaker at school with parents too."

Respondents noted that education and information resources focused predominately on menstruation as a biological event and did not address the physical, social, emotional and practical aspects:

- “In grade 5 a school nurse came for a short session with the girls in my class. She talked about starting puberty and managing periods (basically, using pads and tampons, and doing the tampon-in-a-glass-of-water trick). A similar thing happened in grade 6, where the boys and girls were split up (boys with our teacher, girls with our teacher's wife), and they talked about puberty and periods. There was less discussion that time, and there were information sheets during the session, but we didn't get to take them home. We covered menstruation in both biology and health at high school, which was mainly the science / mechanics of it... and again, pads and tampons were mentioned as a way of managing it. There wasn't a whole lot of info about other menstruation products, how much pain was normal, how to track your cycle (except in the context of telling us not to use that instead of condoms), how we might feel at different times in our cycle, how to care for ourselves, or when to seek help.”
- “Studied reproductive health in PD/H/PE.”
- “During sex education in primary and secondary I was taught about the basic biology of menstruation and received period products.”
- “During health classes about menstruation how it works, showing us what products look like.”
- “I remember we got given a goodie bag of pads/tampons in year nine and briefly explained what a period was. No in-depth information though.”
- “There was an external educator that came to school and spoke to the students. The girls were all in one group and were told about what products you can use during a menstrual cycle, how to use them, why we get our period etc.”
- “We were taught about the reproductive process and periods in relation to that, about pads and tampons but nothing about pain management, what's normal and what isn't, related illnesses.”
- “We got taught how to hide our periods. I think at the age of 10 they also taught us what exactly a period was, what parts of the female reproductive system did what and how the egg travels. However, this was all discussed with a level of secrecy, heightening the menstrual taboo. We were separated from the boys when having the discussion and taught of ways to hide tampons in bags.”

There was consensus among young menstruators that the education they received was brief, unhelpful and insignificant:

- “Basic information about using pads and cramps. This was in year 7
- “A 20min session with 180 other girls where a description was given to us on how to insert a tampon and some samples were handed out. We were in yr7.”
- “Hardly any information. The bare minimum.”
- “In a health class maybe but it was brief.”
- “Nothing that was memorable or that helped.”
- “Don't remember the education but I do remember my first period, which arrived one afternoon at school. And I felt totally unprepared.”
- “We did but I walked out of the room [cause] I was only in [yr] 6 and got my period in [yr] 8. It didn't feel relevant.”

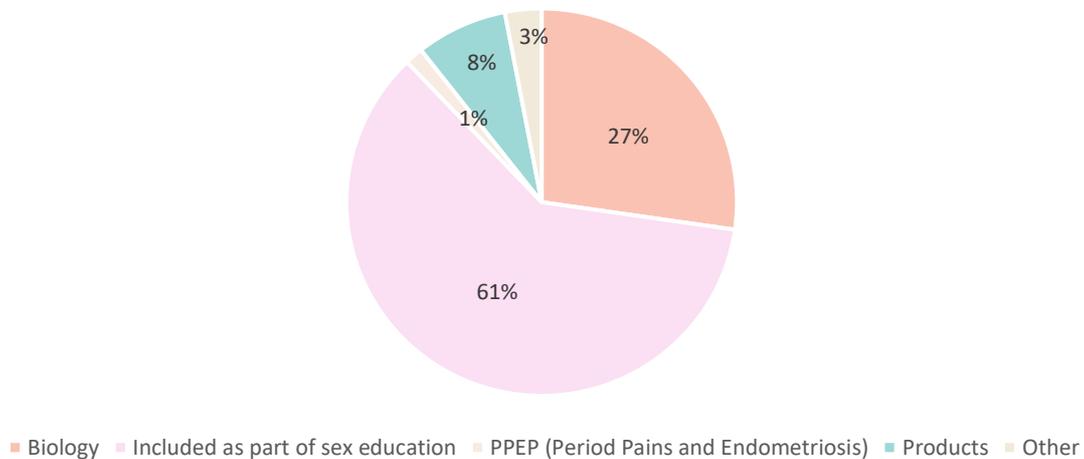
- “My mum told me about periods when I was in primary school.”

One response highlighted the need for ongoing, age-appropriate education for it to be effective:

- “In fourth grade we learned about our own bodies. Then in sixth grade we learned about our bodies again and the bodies of our opposite sex. We even received baggies with starter supplies based on gender.”

Question 2: If yes, what sort of education did you receive?

If yes, what sort of education did you receive?



61% (40 respondents) Included as part of sex education, 27% (18 respondents) biology, 8% (5 respondents) products, 1% (1 respondent) PPEP, 3% (2 respondents) other.

Other:

- “Just about bleeding monthly and the only product available then”
- “Shine (sex Ed) and Mitiog (Christian sex Ed)”

Young menstruators felt that they were only equipped with an understanding of the biological functions (i.e. reproductive cycle) and disposable products through sex education or biology classes, rather than practical aspects of menstruation such as reusable products, how to use them safely, period pain management and how periods are perceived socially in differing cultural contexts:

- “Mentioned in sex ed mostly from a biological viewpoint - don't remember any info on period pain, products etc.”
- “Biological and reproductive information about menstruation, primarily focussed on function and science.”
- “Brief physiological explanation of menstruation in Health.”

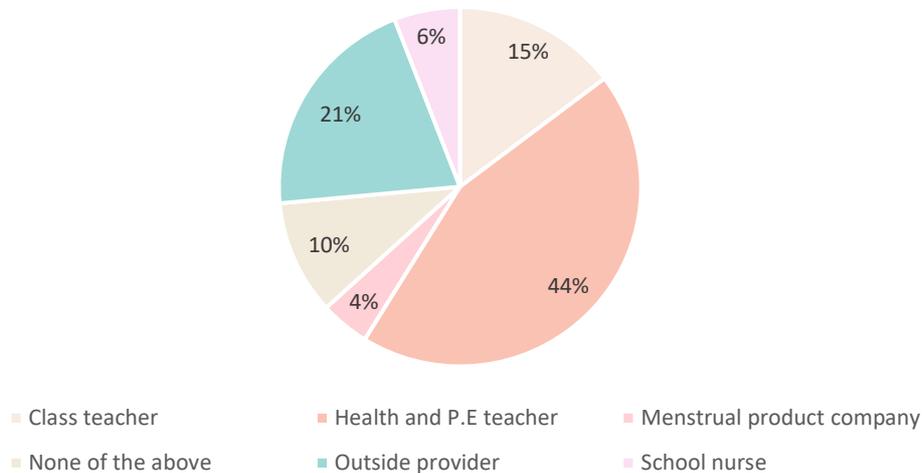
- “I meant to answer products and biology. We were shown the products and diagrams as well as a visual of how much blood is excreted during your menstrual cycle.”
- “Menstrual cycle”
- “And biology and products!”
- “We learned about our bodies. What was happening. Why it was happening. We also learned about products and received some at the end of the presentation.”
- “A bit in biology, a bit in sex ed/health. To our school's credit (as it was Christian), the genders weren't split up for the conversations. But there wasn't a whole lot of information other than the biology of it, and that pads and tampons were our options for managing it. They also said that there was usually no reason for girls to not do PE if they had their periods, but that they would understand if it wasn't possible because of how they were feeling or the products they were using (e.g. girls who didn't want to use tampons wouldn't be made to go swimming).”
- “It was a book about puberty.”
- “50 years ago, we had no education about how to insert a tampon. Pads were regarded as embarrassing but were the only product I could use then.”
- “We were given an info pack sponsored by Libra about products.”

There was a general sense among respondents that the menstrual education provided by schools was inadequate, inconsistent and did not engage with boys:

- “General classes that were 'one offs' to target girls and boys.”
- “It was a breakout class for just the girls (except I left) in a sex education program.”
- “In high school we were given roughly 4 sex Ed lessons per year. Until year 11 when they stopped. In primary school, I believe we spent a little more time per year. Both are insufficient amounts.”
- “Sessions outside of class times.”

Question 3: If you had menstrual education at school who was it provided by?

If you had menstrual education at school who was it provided by?



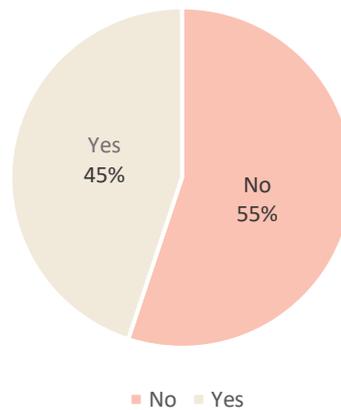
44% (30 respondents) Health and P.E teacher, 21% (14 respondents) outsider provider, 15% (10 respondents) class teacher, 10% (7 respondents) none of the above, 6% (4 respondents) school nurse, 4% (3 respondents) menstrual product company.

Most young menstruators received information through school teachers as a part of health and physical education classes:

- “I’m not sure if it was truly the nurse, but someone came and gave us a whole presentation.”
- “School nurses ran this program.”
- “A & C. In primary school, it was a school nurse (strictly speaking she only worked for high schools, but she went to primary schools anyway). In high school, it was our health/PE teacher and biology teacher. All three were women.”
- “It was the year level coordinator.”
- “Health teacher. Never by a science teacher.”
- “Education part of PD/H/PE syllabus.”
- “A consult on sex education.”
- “We had a lady come in from a company as well, she gave out a lot of free packs. Other than that, I think this was part of year 9/8 health class. Far too late really.”
- “We had a session held outside of school hours that was available to students and parents. This was in year 5 of primary school.”
- “General education regarding how it happens.”

Question 4: If you had menstrual education at school did you find it useful?

If you had menstrual education at school did you find it useful?



55% (38 respondents) no, 45% (31 respondents) yes.

Most frequently, education was limited to a biological perspective of menstruation. Young menstruators found that information and guidance from a more holistic approach that included period management, social and cultural aspects of menstruation and practical information about products would be useful and needed to ensure normalisation of menstruation:

- “No practical info was provided.”
- “I found it useful to learn more about the scientific functioning and biology of my body. The information didn’t assist in creating open dialogue about issues and different experiences of women.”
- “Really practical education on how to insert a tampon would have helped, - small pads are now available and that would have helped. A "save me, it's day one" pack contains clean undies and 3 pads would have been great, though still embarrassing to use I'm sure.”
- “It could’ve been more useful. Only the very basics are covered.”
- “It was educative on the scene/biology side of things. Not so much on the practicalities.”
- “I found what we did to be useful, but super limited. It sort of helped to start conversations with friends, because learning about it at school meant that we knew it was an okay time to start discussing periods with each other. And as part of one health class, our teacher gave us a budget and sent us to the supermarket to work out how we could afford to buy hygiene stuff (pads, soap, deodorant) on a budget. That was handy. I would have liked a lot more information though. A lot of the best information didn't come from school - it was from friend's older sisters and Dolly magazines. There was one-woman GP in town that we all knew to go to for period pain, too - she was good at knowing what was normal and what wasn't.”
- “[Kinda] useful but could have been more tips.”

- “The way the cycle impacted when you were most fertile was not covered well. Alternate forms of sanitary products such as period underwear and diva cups were not discussed.”
- “To some extent of course, but our sex Ed curriculum needs to be updated drastically. There is so much about my body I had to learn elsewhere. Not only is the content that is covered brief, but the lessons are too few and teachers (especially male) make lessons awkward exhibit responses which exacerbate the taboos in our society.”
- “Didn’t cover nearly enough detail or portray menstruation in a positive light.”

Survey respondents found the formal school education they received to be insufficient and cursory. Sources of information were therefore often family, friends or media. Young menstruators believe menstrual education should begin at a younger age prior to their first period and be consistently taught by well-informed teachers:

- “I learned mainly through the books but rarely through the school’s education programs.”
- “I mean it wasn’t the best, but I was still able to get the jist of what they were talking about.”
- “I already had my period before the secondary education and did not find out anything more than I already knew.”
- “Gave some idea of what would happen.”
- “Too brief, needs to be ongoing education with teachers who are confident in the topic.”
- “It was only offered once, once only and I left the room, so I missed it.”
- “It didn’t tell me any new information.”
- “Only to provide the absolute basic knowledge, not enough detail.”
- “My period started three years before the education.”
- “I think it was only one class and was very perfunctory.”
- “Too late. I had been educated by my mum by this point.”
- “Useful at the time but not as in depth as it should have been in hindsight.”
- “Already had my period two years before the presentation.”
- “Yes, because any info was good info, but the majority of info was discovered through other friends and good ol’ Dolly magazine.”

Young people want formal menstrual education to improve knowledge of menstrual health issues that may be experienced throughout the cycle, such as irregular bleeding and reproductive disorders.

- “Gave me an understanding of what’s happening when you get your period and why it occurs. Wish there was some education regarding endometriosis and period pain.”
- “No information was given about endometriosis or PCOS.”
- “Not particularly, wish that they had explained other elements of menstrual cycles such as endo/PCOS and how factors such as stress/over exercise/disordered eating can impact menstruation and fertility... very little education around anything other than the “standard” period.”

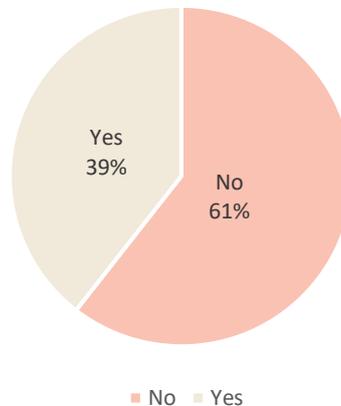
- “It was very much about the 'bits and pieces' and not really about how I would 'feel' during my menstrual cycle.”

Those with a positive and informative education experience attributed it to open discussions about stigmas and taboos surrounding menstruation, as well as, information about how to practically manage menses:

- “From what I remember it was useful. The provider was very enthusiastic and tried to break down the taboo of 'girl things'.”
- “No education on periods themselves was given, only information from the tampon company on how to use their product.”
- “How to use tampons.”
- “I knew what was happening and I don't remember panicking when I got my first period, so it must have been useful. It's too long ago to remember details of the education itself.”

Question 5: Did you feel comfortable and supported having your period at school?

Did you feel comfortable and supported having your period at school?



61% (46 respondents) no, 39% (30 respondents) yes.

The availability of menstrual products by schools helped young menstruators to feel more comfortable, however, having to ask for them was often highlighted as awkward and embarrassing:

- “There were free pads and tampons outside of the nursery but with Panadol or pain killers it's a bit harder to get because the nurse needs your parents' permission.”

- “I felt comfortable because my friends were always supportive, and we often talked about what was happening to us and how we cared for our periods. We also had available period products in our nurse’s office. However, it was embarrassing to ask for the products because they wanted our names and everything before we could receive them.”
- “We were all told at the get go that the health teachers and sick bay had pads and tampons if we ever got stuck. We didn't have a dispenser in the toilets though - there used to be one and it was taken out for some reason, but it would have been helpful. PE teachers were chill about letting you sit out of PE if you felt like crap. There was a spare uniform cupboard if you got blood anywhere. Our teachers always let us use the toilets when we asked, and there were bins in all the cubicles. I don't remember it ever really being an issue. One barrier was probably the uniform. Our summer dresses were a ridiculously light colour, and also light fabric. They would blow up easily and show blood. We kind of got around that because our textiles teacher got us all making little boxer shorts in year 7 so that we could wear them under our dresses. It sounds really funny in hindsight, but we'd all wear these really colourful shorts so that if pads didn't stay in place or our dresses blew up you couldn't see any wings or blood.”
- “Friends were comfortable talking about it, always offering pads/tampons if needed. Felt supported only from friends rather than from the school.”
- “Able to sit out in swimming if desired and always excused to go to the bathroom.”
- “In primary school, one of my teachers had a supply of menstrual products that was made available to all students in later years.”
- “Pads/tampons were not made easily available... had to go to student reception to ask for products if needed.”
- “Yes, only because the receptionists for each schoolhouse would have period products on hand for us to use and we could go to sickbay if we needed.”
- “It was not until y12 that periods were acknowledged openly by the staff. This only happened because a male staff member was appointed year level coordinator at an all-girls school. An announcement was made that a locker containing 'supplies' had been set up and the keys given to the school captain, so ask her for products rather than him.”
- “I had bad porous pain sometimes and would have to walk home in lunchtime to get a pain killer.”

Respondents felt supported by their friends and peers, particularly those that attended same-sex, all-girl schools:

- “But only from friends.”
- “All-girls school, everyone knows how it goes.”
- “It was a girl’s school, so we spoke about it openly. Although in year 7/8 it was more private because not everyone had got it.”
- “Was privileged to go to an all-girls school.”
- “I felt so much shame, and I know others did too. I went to a same sex school and girls would always ask one another to “check” their skirt, terrified they’d accidentally bled on it. We used code names and the only time we brought it

up was to get out of doing PE (although even then we were often met with “physical exercise is the best thing for cramps!”).

- “I got my period in primary school and my mum had to fight to get sanitary bins provided because we didn't have them yet. I then went to an all-girls high school and had a better experience there with my peers but not always with the staff. Since finishing school, I have been diagnosed with adenomyosis and having education about periods during school would have helped me to realise mine weren't normal and I might have been diagnosed earlier.”

Those that did not feel comfortable and supported instead expressed feelings of shame and secrecy:

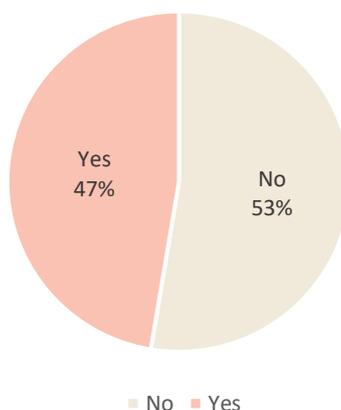
- “Usually felt the need to hide it.”
- “You had to hide it totally.”
- “Shameful, embarrassing.”
- “Pads were bulky back then, and I was very self-conscious about getting one out of my bag and walk all the way to the toilets while trying to hide it. I used to go the whole day without changing to avoid being seen with a pad, then I'd have to clean up from the inevitable leaks when I got home.”
- “Weren't any adjustments available for pain/tiredness. Still hard to take toilet breaks. Had to carry on as normal.”
- “It was hidden away and not really talked about. Felt awkward when I needed to change pads and tampons - trying to keep the products hidden.”
- “More so in high school but there was still an air of it being a secret as a younger teenager. Incredibly uncomfortable and not discussed in primary school.”
- “I was embarrassed about having my period. I was paranoid that I would leak into my clothing and others would see. It was awkward getting out of class to go to the bathroom. Free sanitary products in toilet cubicles would have been helpful. It was hard to get a pad or tampon covertly from your bag and put it into your pocket (if you had one). I recall trying to covertly put a tampon in my bra.”
- But I went to all-girls school, and still felt a bit nervous

Teachers were cited as contributing to and reinforcing negative feelings around menstruation:

- “I remember being told in year 8 by a male PE/Health teacher that having a period wasn't an excuse not to participate in swimming classes, and mocking people for using it as an excuse. Other teachers wouldn't allow us to go to the toilet during class time.”
- “I was sitting in class on the floor with my legs open and the teacher kept looking at me. I had no idea why. I'm still embarrassed about that moment 50 years on.”
- “In younger year levels definitely not. Girls who complained about menstrual pain were not taken seriously by female teachers.”
- “Some teachers were helpful. Others were cumbersome to deal with.”

Question 6: Did you experience bullying, anxiety or shame about your periods at school?

Did you experience bullying, anxiety or shame about periods at school?



53% (40 respondents) no, 47% (36 respondents) yes.

Respondents that did not experience bullying, anxiety or shame felt supported by a community of women. For others, they simply could not remember:

- The girls were always thoughtful and kind. Especially when experiencing leakage.
- I went to an all-girls school
- Don't remember being bullied about this
- No memory of feeling any of these emotions

While some respondents did not experience shame most experienced anxiety and fear, particularly, around the management of their period and leakages:

- "I was very embarrassed that my classmates would know I was having my period. I was anxious about leaks showing through my uniform. There was anxiety if you didn't have your period by a certain age."
- "Just felt anxious about the possibility of bleeding through a light grey thin school dress."
- "I remember girls being laughed at for bleeding through their uniform, or even being shamed for the size of pad they used."
- "Shame and anxiety about taking pads/tampons. Anxiety about going to the bathroom as often as needed. Pain, tiredness and fatigue not catered for."

Young menstruators felt a perceived need to keep menstruation a secret, therefore perpetuating a sense of shame:

- "Constant embarrassment and shame. I tried to hide my trips to my bag to get products month, after month, after month, despite this normal monthly part of a women's (and even human) life."

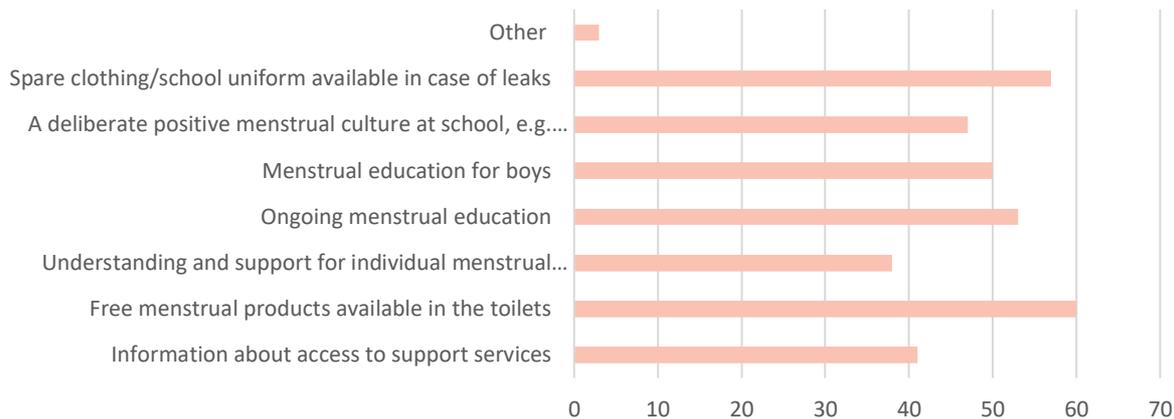
- “There was a slightly odd situation where all the girls in my class sort of knew who did and didn't menstruate yet. When girls got their first period, they kinda stepped up in everyone's eyes. I remember girls getting their first periods at school and other girls being supportive and helpful. Having said that, everyone hid their menstrual products when they went to the toilet (in pockets, up sleeves of our hideous woollen jumpers). And when girls changed their tampons or pads and had to use the bins, they'd do it as quietly as possible so that no one would hear the lid closing, or the sound of peeling plastic off. Or they'd turn the taps on to mask the sound.”

Respondents attributed the anxiety, shame and bullying around menstruating in the school environment to several sources. A large proportion of this stemmed from adverse reactions from boys:

- “Only in primary school because boys were there and very few girls had got their periods. When I had mine there was only one sanitary bin in the toilet, so it was a little stressful and also stressful because I didn't want people to know.”
- “Mostly males would say it was disgusting”
- “A boy took my tampons out of my bag, threw them around and made fun of me.”
- “Girls were bullied for “smelling like period” and told to “just wear a fucking tampon”.”
- “From teachers - as mentioned above.”
- “In Year 7 girls would say things like “She must be on her period, she stinks!”.”
- “Anxiety and shame when in primary school.”
- “Always shame. Never bullying. But our society's media makes sure that all girls feel shame about their periods.”

Question 7: Looking back now is there anything that would have helped you to have a more positive experience of your period during your schooling?

Looking back now is there anything that would have helped you to have a more positive experience of your period during your schooling?



79% (60 respondents) free menstrual products available in the toilets, 75% (57 respondents) spare clothing/school uniform available in case of leaks, 70% (53 respondents) ongoing menstrual education, 66% (50 respondents) menstrual education for boys, 62% (47 respondents) a deliberate positive menstrual culture at school e.g., expressed in menstrual policy, 54% (41 respondents) information about access to support services, 50% (38 respondents) understanding and support for individual menstrual needs, e.g. guidance mentor or school therapist, 4% (3 respondents) other.

Question 8: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

- "No"
- "It's good to reflect on this even now"
- "I graduated in 2013, but I felt strongly that I wanted to have a say."
- "The biggest gap I remember is not learning about much other than the bleeding part of periods. When no one mentions the headaches, or fever, or pain, or nausea, it's hard to know what's normal and what's not. When the only advice is "cramps are normal", you suffer in silence. I didn't find Naprogesic or menstrual cups till I was in my late 20s and it changed my life! School and work would have been a totally different experience for me if I had been armed with more knowledge than where to find tampons in Woolies."

Conclusion

Young menstruator's lived experiences of menstruation are invaluable sources to inform any endeavours to reform Victoria's menstrual education. This survey was born from a desire to understand the impacts of menstrual education and knowledge on young girl's and menstruator's day-to-day lives and schooling experience. The silence and shame surrounding menstruation has led to a school environment where most young girls, women and menstruators feel ill-equipped to manage their period and live free of shame. Young menstruators were clear about what they want and suggested a myriad of ways experiences of menstruation at school could be improved. This includes comprehensive, holistic, and ongoing formal education provided by well-informed teachers to all students, irrespective of gender. To ease distress, young menstruators told us that arrangements should also be put in place to support menstruators, such as, spare clothing, easily accessible sanitary supplies and that schools should be aware of physical, social and emotional needs, such as feeling unable to engage in sports. Most importantly, the results of this survey show that young menstruators want periods to become normalised instead of remaining a source of disgust, embarrassment, pain and confusion.