

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teachers' reflections on menstrual management among urban and rural schoolgirls in South Africa

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Abstract

Menstruation affects all aspects of an adolescent schoolgirl's life, including her educational journey. Experiences of menstruation within the school environment can either positively or negatively affect a girl's schooling career. The purpose was to investigate the role of teachers in the school setting regarding addressing young girls' experiences with menstruation in Cape Town, South Africa. We conducted a qualitative, exploratory study to purposively select six teachers from three, two urban and one rural. Six individual interviews were conducted by the researcher per school and data was transcribed and refined into themes. The main findings included, school attendance, culture, experiences and perceptions of teachers, and recommended key resources. Findings illustrate that there is a direct association between menstruation and school attendance. Challenges such as a dearth of sanitary products create a barrier for school attendance of adolescent girls. An improved understanding of culture and the challenges that menstruating adolescent schoolgirls face is needed to provide proper and adequate support. A language barrier may exist between teachers and learners, including a cultural unwillingness to speak openly about menstruation. Educational policies are needed to address the need for sanitary resources in schools to establish best practice for teachers in dealing with menstruating young schoolgirls. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2023; 27 [2]: 34-44).

Keywords: Menstruation, resources, sanitary products, support, culture, experiences

Résumé

Les menstruations affectent tous les aspects de la vie d'une écolière adolescente, y compris son parcours scolaire. Les expériences de menstruation dans l'environnement scolaire peuvent affecter positivement ou négativement le parcours scolaire d'une fille. L'objectif était d'étudier le rôle des enseignants dans le cadre scolaire en ce qui concerne les expériences des jeunes filles en matière de menstruation au Cap, en Afrique du Sud. Nous avons mené une étude qualitative et exploratoire pour sélectionner délibérément six enseignants parmi trois, deux urbains et un rural. Six entretiens individuels ont été menés par le chercheur par école et les données ont été transcrites et affinées en thèmes. Les principaux résultats comprenaient la fréquentation scolaire, la culture, les expériences et les perceptions des enseignants, et les ressources clés recommandées. Les résultats montrent qu'il existe une association directe entre les menstruations et la fréquentation scolaire. Des défis tels que la pénurie de produits sanitaires créent un obstacle à la fréquentation scolaire des adolescentes. Une meilleure compréhension de la culture et des défis auxquels les écolières adolescentes menstruées sont confrontées est nécessaire pour fournir un soutien approprié et adéquat. Une barrière linguistique peut exister entre les enseignants et les apprenants, y compris une réticence culturelle à parler ouvertement des menstruations. Des politiques éducatives sont nécessaires pour répondre au besoin de ressources sanitaires dans les écoles afin d'établir les meilleures pratiques pour les enseignants face aux jeunes écolières menstruées. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2023; 27 [2]: 34-44).

Mots-clés: Menstruation, ressources, produits sanitaires, accompagnement, culture, expériences

Introduction

Education in sub-Saharan Africa has gained significant national and international attention since the early 1900s^{1,2}. The importance attached to education in sub-Saharan Africa is rooted in the assumption that education plays a crucial role in promoting social and economic development^{3,4}. Through educating women, it comes with multiple

benefits, such as transfer of knowledge, improved prospects for gender equality, and also economic growth of countries^{3,4}.

Reports from African women's education groups and non-government organisations (NGOs) point to the lack of sanitary facilities and clean water supplies on school grounds across sub-Saharan Africa⁵. Schoolgirls are also absent for three to four days per month owing to the fear of

embarrassment which comes with a ‘menstrual leak’ and the unaffordability of sanitary materials⁵⁻⁸. This lack and inaccessibility of the proper and necessary facilities and materials have great emotional, academic and psychological impacts on schoolgirls who experience menstruation at school.

Often, due to their own socio-cultural perceptions, male teachers may play a role in perpetuating negative perceptions such as that they may consider the biological functions of adolescent schoolgirls as negative, sick, or shameful. This is in line with a study by^{6,8-10} who found that male educators expressed discomfort and awkwardness in teaching on the topic of menstruation. Negative attitudes could result in learners experiencing additional challenges that could influence their attendance and performance at school.

There is a gap in research concerning the relationship between menstruation and schooling, which includes investigations into the social, cultural and physical implications of menstruation and the experience thereof in the school environment⁹. Minor efforts have been made about the physical managing of menstruation and the role that teachers play in the management of menstruation in schools¹¹⁻¹².

The school setting, where schoolgirls spend most of their days, plays an important role in their experience of menstruation. Although Life Orientation classes inform girls about the phenomenon, the quality of lessons and the level of emotional support provided in connection with menstruation varies from school to school, and may often depend on the attitude and skills of the individual teacher. The onset of menstruation often serves as an indicator of a girl’s sexual maturation and entrance into adulthood, thus putting girls at risk for menstruation “accidents” in the educational environment^{9,13-14}. This study aimed to highlight the role of teachers in addressing menstruation amongst schoolgirls, and explored how educators could assist schoolgirls to cope with this phenomenon in schools.

The research question which guided the study was: *What roles should teachers should play in addressing menstruation in the school setting?* The purpose of the study was to investigate the role and experiences of teachers in addressing menstruation amongst schoolgirls, and to offers recommendations for improved assistance to and management of menstruating girls in schools.

Methods

Study setting and study design

The overall aim of the study was to explore the role of teachers in addressing menstruation how they could assist schoolgirls to cope with this phenomenon in school settings. The study sites were three purposively selected schools, namely, School A, a high-income community high school, also referred to as a “Model C” (previously predominantly White school), *School B, a low-middle income high school, and School C, a rural, low-income high school. These schools were selected to indicate how addressing menstrual hygiene management may compare in these specific schools.* The study used a qualitative, exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design.

Sample and sampling

A purposively sample of grade eight female teachers at three public high schools participated in the study. Inclusion criteria were as follows: male or female teachers who had rich experience with teaching Life Orientation, aged between 34-63 years, with teaching experience ranging from 8 to 34 years.

Data collection

In any study, the aim is always to generate extensive, full, rich data from participants.¹⁴ Interviews are one of the most commonly recognised forms of qualitative research, as the researcher becomes the key instrument during data collection and the quality of data.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ In-depth, semi-structured audio-recorded interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were conducted until data saturation was reached. Field- and reflective- and field notes were taken during and after the interviews to enrich the data collected. Participants were assured of confidentiality¹⁸⁻¹⁹ and anonymity of the provided information.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was done immediately after the interviews to capture the revealed themes and sub-themes, which yielded insight into the phenomenon being studied¹⁸. The entire transcription was read twice, in order to gain full understanding of the

data. This process assisted with coding, while the researcher was also observing recurring meanings and patterns. Once themes and sub-themes are indicated, each researcher codes the transcripts independently and compare them to reach consensus.

Rigour

Rigour and trustworthiness were established by ensuring that the findings were credible, transferrable and dependable. Data credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participants and peer debriefing.^{15,17} Trustworthiness ensured that participants were willing to participate, gave their informed, written consent, and was interviewed until data saturation was reached.²⁰⁻²¹ Ethical clearances were granted by the Department of Education, the stakeholders of the school, and the Ethics Research Committee of the University (Registration no: 15/3/29).

Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants in the interviews was male and female teachers, aged from 34 to 63 years with 8 to 34 years of teaching experience at two urban and one rural high school near Cape Town in South Africa. Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the participants at each school, while Table 2 shows the four themes and their sub-themes.

Individual interviews revealed how the teachers' own experiences, understanding their own roles and cultural backgrounds may influence how they addressed menstruation in schools.

Theme 1: School attendance

A study by⁹ found that cultural taboos on menstrual management, parental attitude, religious altitudes and school management of menstruation influenced girls' school attendance.

Biological challenges experienced by learners

Accounts given by the participants below indicate that the most common symptoms experienced by learners were back pain, abdominal pain and dizziness.

'Pain, tiredness, stomach pains, headaches and dizziness' [P1, School A].

'They complain about abdominal pain, extreme discomfort; feeling faint and light-headed' [P10, School B].

'Lower back pain, migraines, lameness, nausea, pain in their sides, diarrhoea, stomach cramps, leg cramps, skin irritation' [P13, School B].

Language seemed to be a barrier at School C, which may contribute to a reluctance among some learners notifying teachers when they experience pain, for fear of being misunderstood. While learners were taught in an English-medium class, their home language was isiXhosa₁. Thus, they were not always able to articulate their experiences.

'They don't really use terminology that is typically related to menstruation. They just say "period". Language is a barrier so they struggle to express themselves' (P2, School C).

'I haven't come across major sicknesses with menstruating girls except some stomach cramps at times' [P5, School C].

Scepticism of teachers

Many teachers felt that students frequently use their period as an excuse, and as a result many teachers lose patience and do not allow girls to leave or be exempt from physical activities.

'They are educated enough. They sometimes use it as an excuse to get out of things' [P1, School A].

'Sometimes we lose patience with the girls who use menstruation, its pain and discomfort, as an excuse not to work or to be exempted from physical activities' [P10, School B].

'Some see it as an opportunity to stay absent or go home. I think it depends on the attitude at home' [P3, School B].

'They [female teachers] are more sensitive but not always, as learners tend to manipulate female teachers and use their cycle' [P2, School C].

Theme 2: Culture

This theme highlighted whether menstruation was freely talked about or considered taboo amongst learners who found themselves in the teachers' environment. This in line with the study by⁶ which found that cultural taboos on menstrual management affect girls' school attendance, and that these need to be addressed;⁶ so that girls become more accustomed to attending school while menstruating.

Table 1: Individual interviews - characteristics of the teachers

School	Number of participants	Gender	Age of participants	Teaching Experience
Urban school School A	6	Males and females	34-63 years	8-34 years
Urban school School B	6	Females only	34-63 years	8-34 years
Rural school School C	6	Females only	34-63 years	8-34 years

Table 2: Experiences of Life Orientation teachers about addressing menstrual management in school

Themes	Sub-themes
School attendance	Biological challenges experienced by learners. Scepticism of teachers
Culture	Freely talked about or considered taboo
Experiences and perceptions of teachers	Female teachers' attitudes towards menstruation Attitudes of male teachers
Recommended key resources	Lack of adequate school facilities
Category 1.: Institutional resources	Lack of running water at the school Provision of counselling support at school
Category 2: Economic resources	Donations from organisations or teachers School provision of sanitary towels Medical support for menstrual challenges experienced Lack of provision of sanitary products

Freely talked about or considered taboo

Some teachers specified that menstruation was not discussed, as it was seen as a taboo, while others stated quite the opposite. Several teachers noted that they took it upon themselves to discuss and educate the learners about menstruation.

'I think it is freely talked about in the younger generation and no longer a taboo, but no one truly speaks freely about it. You deal with it on your own' [P2, School A].

'In my home, I speak freely to my daughter and my niece. So, I would say it is freely spoken about' [P7, School B].

'We talk about it a lot, especially during athletics and certain sports. We openly talk to learners during these times to look after themselves and how important it is carrying enough pads. During that time, we educate them on how to deal with menstruation' [P12, School B].

'I'm comfortable speaking freely about menstruation, but not all cultures are that open about it and that goes for most of the kids' [P5, School C].

The suggestion above is that in most girls' homes, it is not discussed, indicating that young girls may obtain all information and support at school rather than at home.

Theme 3: Experiences and perceptions of teachers

This theme includes the sub-themes of female and male teachers' attitudes towards menstruation.

Female teachers' attitudes to menstruation

Most teachers agreed that female teachers were sympathetic and supportive of learners going through menstruation, since they understood what learners were going through and could relate to the learners' experiences.

'I think they are supportive, understanding and have a good attitude' [P2, School A].

'Some learners are very shy and will never come and ask for a pad. Others again are very open about everything' [P2, School B].

'Female teachers are quite empathetic towards it, as we all could relate to the whole process. They are quite aware of the fact that some get it worse than others' [P4, School B].

'They are more sensitive, but not always, as learners tend to manipulate female teachers and use their cycle' [P2, School C].

'They care, because some of them would even take the learners home to go wash and change if they flowed through their clothes' [P3, School C].

These responses indicate that female teachers were sympathetic and involved when it comes to menstruation among learners at school, and reported that they were willing and able to assist girls if required.

Male teachers' attitudes to menstruation

The male teachers who had been sought declined to participate alluded that they may be uncomfortable with the topic. The female teachers noted, that it appears that male teachers tend to distance themselves from the topic as it uncomfortable for them, even though they understood the phenomenon.

'Some are sympathetic, others are not. I suppose it is the way they grew up' [P4, School B].

'I think that they distance themselves from the topic. Perhaps only the L.O. teachers (males) are comfortable speaking about it and understand how girls feel' [P8, School B].

'They have little to no real interaction. It's a "female thing"' [P2, School C].

'They understand, because they would maybe bring the child to the office to be sent home or send them to a female teacher' [P3, School C].

Theme 4: Recommended key resources

Increasingly, education experts concur that a cost-effective way to keep high school girls in school in poor countries is to provide them with sanitary products^{14,15}. Two categories and related sub-themes emerged from the findings.

Category 4.1. Institutional resources

This theme comprised three sub-themes: lack of adequate school facilities, lack of running water at the school, and the provision of counselling support.

Lack of adequate school facilities

When asked whether there was a lack of school facilities, the teachers from School A (a government-subsidised, more affluent) and School B (semi-government, less affluent) stated that there was no lack and that the main facilities were adequate and hygienic.

'Enough toilet stalls in the bathroom; running water and soap to wash hands. No, they do not lack the main facilities' [P3, School A].

'No. We have a sick bay and the girls' bathrooms are quite spacious' [P4, School B].

'No. Sanitary bins are in each toilet, collection of the contents is done at least once a week' [P13, School B].

'No, not at all. They are equipped with a very clean toilet as well as the use of the sick bay in the admin building, under supervision' [P16, School B].

However, teachers at School C (a rural school) reported that the facilities were not hygienic and were not always in working condition owing to maintenance and theft issues.

'Yes. The toilets are not hygienic. However, recently the school has employed someone to assist with cleanliness' [P2, School C].

'We have enough toilets. However, the toilets are not always very clean and not all the toilets can flush' [P5, School C].

Ensure that there is running water at the school

While the teachers from the three schools stated that there was running water at their schools, the toilets were often not in working condition.

'No lack of running water' [P1, P2, P4, School A].

'No, we have enough taps and access to water' [P2, School B].

'Not for drinking. There's enough for showering. May be a problem' [P3, School B].

'No, only toilets that are not functioning as they should' [P15, School B].

'Sometimes, yes. There were times when the water pipe burst and when pipes were stolen. Never for long periods though' [P6, School C].

Provision of counselling support at school

All teachers of the three schools agreed that counselling should be provided at the schools as it would benefit the learners, helping them psychologically and emotionally.

'It will help them plan and understand their cycle and how to deal with and understand certain

factors. It also creates a positive awareness during Life Orientation' [P3, School A].

'Counselling could help in the sense that they can be reminded that it is a natural occurrence and to supply them with coping mechanisms. A counselling session, one-on-one, for individual cases would be more beneficial' [P1, School B].

'It would help them to have self-esteem, because normally when it's that time of the month their mood changes to bad, and you are sick. It will boost their self-esteem that it's natural and no need to be ashamed as long as you keep yourself clean and not have a bad odour' [P3, School C].

Category 4.2. Economic resources

Pads and other materials have to be bought for the hygienic management of menstruation. This theme consists of four sub-themes: donations from organisations or teachers, the school's provision of sanitary towels, medical support for the menstruation challenges experienced, and the school failing to provide sanitary towels for learners.

Donations from organisations or teachers

In terms of donations, only one school (School A) mentioned receiving donations from a company. Most teachers stated that sanitary towels and other materials were provided by the schools.

'We do sometimes get donations from Lil-Lets and this helps a lot' [P2, School A].

School provision of sanitary towels

The teachers at Schools A and B stated that the schools provided the female learners with sanitary towels and other necessary materials. The teachers from School C did not directly state whether or not the school provided the girls with sanitary towels.

'We have beanbags to warm them and also help them out with clothing. We do supply them with sanitary towels but this is a burden on the school as the learners do not pay for it' [P2, School A].

'Pads are freely available. Bins (for hygiene purposes) are placed in individual cubicles of the girls' toilet and are regularly decontaminated' [P10, School B].

'Any female learners could go to the secretary at any time when they're in need of sanitary towels or any medication regarding their menstrual period' [P16, School B].

Medical support for menstrual challenges experienced

The Western Cape Education Department's policy does not allow schools to medicate learners. At school B, teachers reported that when students had severe cramps and required medical support such as pain medication, they were unable to provide it. The only form of medical support mentioned by these schools was the sick bays. Although there was no mention of medical support for the menstrual challenges of female learners, suggestions were made about the provision of medication.

'Supply pads and medication for learners, which we are not allowed to give to the learners' [P2, School A].

'The girls will make use of the sick bay should it be needed in extreme cases and be referred to medical practitioners' [P8, School B].

Lack of provision of sanitary products

Many teachers stated that schools were not always able to provide learners with sanitary products and felt that this should be an obligation as noted below. 'The admin office does not always have pads to provide to the girls' [P3, School A].

'There is a lack in the provision of sufficient sanitation at school and teachers should be understanding' [P1, School C].

Discussion

This study highlighted the role and experiences of teachers in addressing menstruation amongst schoolgirls, and explored how educators may assist girls in the school setting. Through interviews with female teachers from three schools (Schools A, B and C), four core themes emerged, namely, school attendance, culture, experiences and perceptions of teachers, and recommended key resources, with their own various sub-themes, are discussed.

Consistent school attendance is evidently important, as it determines how familiar a child is with their schoolwork and affects their

performance. The biological symptoms of menstruation are a challenge in the school setting, with many girls staying away from school for a few days every month. Previous studies have reported that during menstruation days, learners are not able to pay attention and listen attentively in class owing to both pain and the constant worry of leaking^{22,24}. This is in line with the current study, in which teachers from Schools A (government) and B (semi-) stated that learners frequently complained of pain, fatigue, cramps, dizziness, headaches and nausea. Clearly, these are not ideal circumstances in which to participate in school activities or absorb new knowledge.

Educators from School C (the rural school) noted that learners experiencing similar symptoms as those in more affluent schools tended to be less expressive about their discomfort, simply saying the word 'period' to explain their condition. In this school, a language barrier seemed to exist between the learners and their teachers (who were English-speaking), as learners were taught in English, while their home language was mainly isiXhosa¹. (The Xhosa language, also known as isiXhosa, as an endonym, is a Nguni language and one of the official languages of South Africa and Zimbabwe. Xhosa is spoken as a first language by approximately 8.2 million people and by another 11 million as a second language in South Africa, mostly in Eastern Cape, Western Cape, Gauteng and Northern Cape). Learners' inability to express themselves clearly can frustrate both parties. In another study, the menstrual experiences of young girls in poor and rural settings who received little instruction and guidance about menstruation was that it was frightening and confusing to them^{7,24}. In the current study, it was mentioned that some teachers approach girls' menstruation with scepticism, believing that they use menstruation as an excuse not to participate in physical activities or to stay at home. As learners are often able to manipulate teachers, educators tend to reduce sympathy towards girls on their period who may be experiencing real pain and difficulty^{25,26-33}.

Culture plays a significant role in the way menstruation is perceived, as it naturally influences individual beliefs, reactions and overall management of certain phenomena. The attitudes and behaviour of girls regarding the menarche (first period, or onset of menstruation) and menstruation

generally develops through the interaction between cultural beliefs and individual experiences²⁶⁻²⁸.

Sources of information for young girls vary, and include their mother, school, friends and the media. Some studies have shown that people still have generally negative attitudes toward menstruation and regard it as taboo^{9,27-34}. Not much attention is paid to the emotional needs of females considering this momentous change in their bodies and the surrounding uncertainties of menarche and menstruation. This lack of emotional support, together with secrecy, may result in young girls regarding menstruation as a taboo or shameful topic. It appears that while most teachers are comfortable assisting girls and speak freely about the topic, this is not the case in many girls' homes.

Teachers from School A stated that menstruation is no longer regarded as a taboo topic and is freely discussed amongst a more aware younger generation, while teachers from School B highlighted that educational efforts are attempted to reduce the secrecy amongst young girls regarding menstruation. As it was viewed as a private matter, menstruation was still considered taboo at School C, and was not openly discussed. One teacher stated that while she felt comfortable speaking about it, most cultures and children were not.

Interestingly, the responses from the more advantaged and urban schools showed a sense of openness towards menstruation, while those from the rural school were more negative in nature. Women and girls are disadvantaged in communities or cultures where menstruation is considered taboo, since there is a lack of dialogue and knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management²⁷⁻²⁹. Thus, if the culture considers menstruation as taboo, the individual will be socialised to adopt these negative perceptions and beliefs^{21,33-35}.

Most teachers in all three schools agreed that parents were mostly supportive of their daughters' needs during menstruation. However, teachers from Schools B and C noted that because of the socioeconomic status of the communities, many parents were unable to purchase the necessary sanitary pads for their daughters. This issue was not raised by teachers in School A, a more affluent and semi-government school. This illustrates the association between socioeconomic background and attitudes of parents.

If pads were more affordable, it is likely that parents would encourage more positive attitudes towards menstruation, and ensure that their daughters attend school while menstruating.

Attitudes of male teachers have a direct association to culture. Unfortunately, no males were available to be interviewed for this study. Teachers from School B mentioned that the male teachers tend to distance themselves from the situation and often sent girls to the office or to female teachers for assistance. The teachers from School C concurred. However, they noted that most of the male teachers were thoughtful and understanding towards schoolgirls during their menstrual period.

Generally, at schools in sub-Saharan Africa, there is a lack of adequate water and sanitation facilities for young girls^{5,35-36}. Most teachers at School A stated that the school had adequate facilities, while teachers at School B stated that their school offered adequate facilities, including sanitary bins in toilets, and a sick bay. Teachers from School C stated that adequate facilities were lacking, and toilets were not always hygienic or in working condition. In addition, a lack of running water was often caused by burst or stolen pipes in the school.

There was a significant difference between the urban schools and the rural one, as the more advantaged schools (Schools A and B) made no mention of a lack of facilities, while School C's facilities seemed inadequate. The areas in which the schools were situated play a role, as the socioeconomic status of the community affects the availability of funds to manage the school, and the availability of adequate and reliable facilities. In order to identify interventions and ways to help girls during their menstrual period, it is essential to understand the structural challenges in the school environment from the girls' perspectives^{5,7,10}.

When asked whether organisations or teachers personally donated sanitary products, or whether the school provided these, school A occasionally received donations of pads, and was also able to provide these at the request of the individual. School B teachers stated that pads were freely available at the office, and learners could approach the office staff at any time. Teachers at school C stated that they had a current need for sanitary pads, as they did not receive any donations.

As many girls in all three schools come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and not all households can afford sanitary products; they rely on the availability of these resources at school. An intervention that took place in Ghana found that after receiving free sanitary pads for six months, female learners were absent from school far less frequently than before, and also showed higher levels of concentration and participation in school activities²³⁻²⁵. Thus, by making sanitary pads available at school, donors or the government can appreciably influence the school career of female learners and positively affect their view of themselves as capable and consistent scholars and students.

There seemed to be little support regarding the emotional- and psychological needs of menstruating females, especially those at the onset of their menstruation experience^{9,12-13}. Services such as counselling support at schools would be beneficial to the overall wellbeing of menstruating schoolgirls who sometimes experience mood swings, feelings of shame or the desire to withdraw during menstruation. Teachers concurred that provision of counselling support should be offered to learners, to enable understanding and self-acceptance among some of, specifically, the shy girls.

The broader environmental systems such as the medical, educational and recreational resources in a community indirectly influence the individual's life^{30,34}. When a school is situated in a poor neighbourhood, it may often mean that the schoolgirls typically may not be able to afford sanitary products. This lack of basic resources affects the menstruation experience of schoolgirls, who are dependent on the school. As the issue is not discussed in the home for some, the support they receive at school will be the only support received. The experience of menstruation need not be as negative as it is for many, who are driven to use substitute materials such as rags and even newspapers to cope with their bleeding. When all schoolgirls possess the necessary materials, and have access to sanitary, functioning toilets, disposal units and soap, together with teachers' understanding and support, the experience of menstruation will not be as disruptive as it is currently. The inevitable result will be that more girls will remain in school consistently during the course of the year.

Limitations

The study was limited by the fact that, owing to their busy schedules, some female teachers were not available to participate. In addition, all the male teachers declined to be interviewed. The study was undertaken in one geographical area and this may represent a limitation. Future studies using more diverse samples and from a broader region may be helpful in confirming the findings. Given the nature of the topic, it is possible that social desirability bias may have impacted on responses. Future studies using different methodologies may be beneficial in further corroborating the findings.

Conclusion

Interviews with teachers yielded valuable data regarding the effect of menstruation on school attendance, the effect of culture on girls' experiences of menstruation, the perceptions of teachers, and the key resources that teachers recommend to overcome some of the problems associated with girls' menstruation at schools. Menstrual complaints, challenges with obtaining sanitary products and cultural taboos about discussing menstruation may be directly associated with girls' school attendance. A need has been identified for a better understanding of the topic by both learners and teachers, specifically regarding religion and culture, and more consistent provision of sanitary products by all schools.

Recommendations

School counselling may address the emotional or psychological aspects of menstruation for young girls at this time of profound change. School principals should consider approaching the provincial Education Department to offer sanitary products on a regular basis, and to make a priority of providing adequate sanitary facilities at all schools. This would go some way to improving the menstrual hygiene management and school experience of schoolgirls. Teachers should also examine their own experiences and perceptions in terms of menstruation, as their personal experiences and attitudes may positively or negatively affect the girls they teach.

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Contribution of the authors

TF conceptualised and designed the study. TF drafted the manuscript with input from MM and AP. TF collected and analysed the data, supervised by MM and AP. All authors reviewed the manuscript, which was edited by TF. MM and AP approved the final manuscript for publication.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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