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The Impact of Period Poverty on Low-Income Adolescents in the United States

by

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Abstract

Period poverty is an issue that impacts menstruators globally. This creates a significant health disparity for menstruators, including difficulties accessing menstrual products, inadequate menstrual and puberty health education, and shame and stigma that come from societal misunderstandings and misinformation regarding menstruation. This paper examines the effects of period poverty on low-income adolescents in the United States. It looks at the current literature that addresses how the financial and accessibility barriers that cause period poverty, as well as how these causes impact school-aged menstruators. It aims to address the role that schools play in creating safe environments for menstruators, including staff advocacy and menstrual understanding training and distribution of free or affordable menstrual products in schools in a safe and gender-affirming manner. This paper concludes by looking at current legislation on menstruation in schools, including Florida House Bill 1069, which looks to ban discussion of menstruation and reproduction in elementary schools, and Oregon's Menstrual Dignity Act, which aims to provide students with access to menstrual products and encourage staff education on menstruation.

Keywords: menstruation, period poverty, schools, United States, students, accessibility

The Impact of Period Poverty on School-Aged Adolescents in the United States

Menstruation is a natural process that occurs in 1.8 billion people worldwide (UNICEF). However, there are significant factors that stand in the way of access to safe and healthy periods for menstruators globally. These factors, which include the inability to access menstrual products, inadequate menstrual and puberty health education, and social and cultural shame and stigma regarding menstruation, contribute to period poverty, a substantial health disparity that is affecting menstruators everywhere. The multifaceted impacts of period poverty leave menstruators at risk for unhealthy and unsafe practices and knowledge surrounding their periods, especially without access to the proper tools necessary for menstruation; tools that should be accessible to all menstruators.

Understanding the urgency that accompanies period poverty brings awareness to how the issue impacts vulnerable menstruators. The contributing factors of period poverty put young menstruators in a frightening place. This might look like the burden of figuring out how to access menstrual products when their families cannot afford them. It might also manifest in not having a full understanding of why they are bleeding monthly, as they have not had comprehensive menstrual education and neither have other menstruators they know and trust; a generational disparity connects vulnerable menstruators with a lack of education. These barriers leave vulnerable adolescents without the ability to foster their health and well-being.

Period poverty in the United States holds significant negative implications for low-income menstruating adolescents, barring them from access to necessary menstrual products, preparation and knowledge about menstruation, and misconceptions that perpetuate a negative view of periods, all of which can be addressed by thoughtful and impactful policy change within schools that bridges the gap between low-income adolescents and healthy periods.

This paper aims to create space and awareness of what period poverty is and how it is impacting low-income adolescents. The barriers that period poverty creates are diverse and significantly impactful in a negative way; by exploring said barriers and what they mean for students, the opportunity to create space for policy change and implementation of menstrual-affirming practices will begin to emerge.

Literature Review

What is period poverty?

The concept of period poverty refers to a lack of access to resources that promote healthy and safe menstrual cycles. This can range from a lack of education regarding periods by schools, physicians, primary caregivers, and others with little to no access to sanitary products like pads or tampons, or safe ways of cleaning and disposing of menstrual products. Other causes can include cultural taboos and norms that limit education and awareness around periods and the allocation of monthly finances for menstrual products, a significant factor concerning those in low-income and marginalized communities (D'Sa, 2019). This is not an issue independent of the United States and is experienced by people with periods across the globe (Sommer, M., et al. 2016).

Health disparities such as these impact people of all ages, from students who cannot attend school and must miss classes because of menstrual-related pain, infections, or fear of being shamed to those who, depending on cultural norms, may not be able to keep up with tasks and chores or care for their families and those that rely on them. The root of the term period poverty is that there is an issue that exists in the United States, and globally, in terms of menstrual health and education that is impacting people of all ages and their ability to care for their bodies. For some this may include missed days of work or school or inability to function in

work or school environments; using alternative or unsanitary menstrual products due to lack of sanitation supplies or issues in the affordability of menstrual care; feelings of guilt or shame that come from the social taboos and stigma that center around menstruation in our society; and an overall lack of preparedness, comfort, safety, and choice for a menstruator's body, needs, and health (Cotropia, C. 2019).

In the United States and for adolescents in particular, menstruation comes at a time that is already filled with life changes, new hormones, and feelings. Similarly, it can be difficult to adjust to puberty while dealing with health and menstrual disparities simultaneously, yet there is a disproportionate amount of young people who suffer from the impacts of menstrual equity (Okamoto, N. 2018). The lack of conversation and awareness around the issue of period poverty heavily affects menstruators and puts them in dangerous situations and risks of violence, infection, and unmanageable stress and pain, along with societally portraying them as an outcast (Hennegan, J. et al. 2018). By creating more awareness and contributing to the education of menstruation and reproductive rights, we can bridge the gap between menstruators and safe, healthy, and accessible periods. In what follows, I discuss how period poverty impacts low-income adolescents in the United States, from the causes, including access to menstrual products, comprehensive menstrual health education, cultural and societal taboos, and stigma, to how students are impacted.

What causes period poverty in the United States?

Period poverty exists when an individual lacks the basic needs attributed to their menstrual cycle. This can include an overall lack of accessibility to menstrual health hygiene and resources, stemming from poverty, geographical resource deserts, affordability of menstrual products, and access to proper hygiene and sanitation. In addition, there may be gaps in

menstrual health education, and negative stigma and cultural aspects that cause shame and guilt for individuals around their periods (Sommer, M., et al. 2019). Reports show that some of the most prominent resources that those who menstruate are experiencing are a lack of accessibility that range from several issues. A few concerns that can be addressed are sanitization facilities (toilets, showers and baths, laundry) education on puberty and menstruation, and access to menstrual products in general. For the latter, this includes information on the products and knowledge of what their options are, aside from the high costs and possible transportation issues included with attaining these products (Casola, et al. 2022). While these causes can impact those of all age groups who experience menstruation, these effects can heavily impact adolescents and students, who may not have access to the necessary resources that provide them with proper menstrual health. School-aged adolescents in particular go through a difficult time when starting and during puberty and menstruation (Secor-Turner, M., et al. 2022).

It is generally understood that the changes in hormones that adolescents undergo during puberty cause mood changes and body changes, highly transitional factors of puberty that make these years difficult for a young person to go through. The contribution of social factors adjacent to puberty that occur during this time, such as bullying, conflict with friends, crushes, and dating, we can see exactly how much an adolescent is enduring while embarking on puberty (Cotropia, C. 2019). As if these factors alone were not difficult enough, systemic factors such as marginalization, poverty, and so on create an environment that is simply hostile for adolescents and does not promote the growth, development, health, and well-being that should be emphasized during puberty and menstruation (Trant, et. al. 2022). Period poverty occurs when an adolescent is denied the basic care that they need to develop safely and healthily.

It is crucial to recognize the communities within the umbrella term of low-income adolescents that are disproportionately directly affected by period poverty, such as students of color. For example, Black adolescents have a lower average age of menstruation than White adolescents and are generally more heavily impacted by social issues such as poverty and lack of puberty and menstruation education (Casola, et al. 2022). Students in marginalized communities are essentially left to fend for themselves in terms of accessing menstrual products and learning about their bodies and how to manage their periods, for some at an age that leaves a large gap in the years before they are even able to work a job or obtain a driver's license to drive to the store and purchase essential products for the healthy management of their bodies (Crays, A., 2020).

Access to Menstrual Products

Access to menstruation products is one of the growing concerns around the topic of period poverty. Researchers have found that in the United States, approximately one in four people who menstruate will experience period poverty in their lifetimes (Casola, et al. 2022). This can take place in a variety of ways, such as the cost of menstrual products; access to proper sanitary needs such as clean water; health care; transportation, and others. Adolescents within low-income communities feel the weight of these disparities during menstruation, especially if it is their first time experiencing their period (Casola, et al. 2022). Many young menstruators report feeling less preparedness than those of higher socio-economic status (SES) and found that the overall cost of menstruation, access to transportation, and availability of resources were some of the most substantial barriers (Trant, et. al. 2022).

Research shows that 64% of low-income menstruators in the United States cannot afford menstrual hygiene products and that 21% have difficulty purchasing menstrual products every month. This same research also shows that menstruators with different types of periods struggle

in different ways. Menstruators with heavier periods find that they cannot obtain the number of menstrual products they need to safely manage the hygiene needs of their period. Additionally, menstruators in this study reported that they found difficulty accessing transportation to stores with more affordable period products, as well as difficulties in easily accessing safe and clean public restrooms to address menstruation (Kuhlmann, et al. 2019).

A significant concern in adolescent period poverty discourse is that U.S. schools are not required to provide their students with access to free menstrual products, whether that be from school nurses, available in bathrooms, or from staff. While several states have attempted to include legislation demanding free menstrual products in schools, a study done by Francis and colleagues states that these legislations were very difficult to pass (Francis, et al. 2022). For low-income students, their school might be a safe space to obtain what they cannot rely on outside of school, such as a meal, and access to sanitation. Similarly, access to menstrual products serves the important purpose of advocating for student education and access to basic necessities that are directly associated with their health and well-being, both of which are factors in creating a successful and safe environment for students. After all, there is a significant correlation between school and access to menstrual products and menstrual hygiene management supplies, from lower rates of missed days of school, activities, and the portrayal of disparities linked to gender and class (Secor-Turner, et al. 2020).

Menstrual Health Education

Menstrual health is an important aspect of adolescent puberty education. Still, it is often lacking the information it needs to provide young menstruators with the information and resources they need in the long term. Similarly, sexual and puberty education is severely lacking in the United States, which leads to inadequate information and preparedness for adolescents

(Goldman, J., et al. 2013). Education regarding menstrual hygiene and resources is essential for adolescents in understanding their options regarding sanitary supplies, what to expect from their menses each month, pain management, and possible infections (Trant, et al. 2022).

Many students within marginalized communities report feeling as though they had fewer opportunities for education surrounding puberty and menstruation than those of higher socioeconomic status (SES) and relied on either their doctors, schools, or families to provide them with adequate education and information. Unfortunately, it is estimated that most pediatricians practicing in the United States do not regularly discuss menstruation with their patients, with nearly 40% of healthcare providers holding the assumption that their patients learned about menstruation at school or from their families (Trant, et al. 2022).

Large gaps in menstrual education continue to occur for students without a menstruator in the family, whose families are not open to discussing periods, or who have received insufficient health education in their school (Francis, L., et al. 2022). If only a brief amount of menstrual education comes from a variety of sources, there is bound to be a spread of medically inaccurate information. This also shows up in the menstrual products adolescents gravitate towards, with many reporting that they did not understand what options they had in terms of menstrual products and frequently resorted to whatever their menstruating parent(s) used (Trant, et al. 2022). This results in the adolescent using period products that might not be the best suited for them, especially depending on lifestyle, comfort level, affordability, and ease of use. Lack of understanding of the options available also means they have fewer grounds of knowledge to make these decisions, and might not even know about all the different period products available, especially ones that are less common or have only recently become more widely known, such as menstrual cups or underwear.

In the following section, we will discuss some of the cultural and societal views of periods. To begin, we will acknowledge the connections between menstrual health education and negative perceptions of menstruation. The discourse present around adolescent menstruation education shows that young menstruators find themselves associating more positively with menstruation if they received adequate education and a level of preparedness beforehand (Trant, et al. 2022). Similarly, they found that most adolescent menstruators got their menstrual education from their parents. However, many mothers of adolescent menstruators reported very minimal information and knowledge about menstruation; fathers of adolescent menstruators also lacked information and discussed menstruation with negative connotations (Stubbs, 2008). By lacking in menstruation education, adolescents often find themselves participating in the negative societal view of menstruation before they have begun menstruating.

Cultural and Societal View of Periods

Many different countries and cultures have a variety of taboos and norms surrounding periods, much like the common approach in the United States of avoiding discussion around periods and pretending they do not exist. For example, menstruators in India find themselves in a situation where periods are commonly thought of as dirty and unclean, particularly for the amount of blood and waste that are created from menstruation. Globally, cultures in countries such as India, West Africa, and South-East Africa, cultural and religious beliefs stand in the way of proper period hygiene, restricting menstruators from work, cooking, housekeeping, sexual intercourse, practicing religion, bathing, and other forms of hygiene, to name a few (Sahin, M. 2015). For example, rituals in some parts of India require a woman to wash and bury the garments that they have bled on. Similarly, washing of these garments must be done in secret where they cannot be seen (Garg, S., et al. 2015). In Suriname, other taboos include the belief

that menstruation was associated with black magic, which led to a ritual allowing women to only wash menstrual cloths at night time, and the belief that menstruation was a curse (Kaur, et al. 2017). These examples, in particular, take place across the globe, but these values and taboos exist in the United States as well.

Until as recently as the 1980s, a common perception throughout society in the United States was that menstruation was directly related to mental health issues, citing that hormonal fluctuation during one's period would result in "anxiety," "a loss of freedom and control," and "diminished self-esteem" (Stubbs, 2008, p. 58). Research around menstruation and links to mental health and emotion did not stop here, with varying questionnaires being presented by researchers to attempt to document a link between menstruation and mood, including the Menstrual Attitude Questionnaire, the Menstrual Distress Questionnaire, and later, the Menstrual Joy Questionnaire (Stubbs, 2008). While this research likely gained insight into how mood and emotion can change with menstruation, especially as mood changes are a common side effect of menses, I would argue that the emphasis of this research may have had negative consequences on the public and societal perceptions of menstruation. Associating menstruation heavily with mental health, distress, and attitude continues to create and cultivate stigmas identifying menstruators with high emotions, a characteristic that is deemed negative in our society.

It is important to note that negative ideas regarding menstruation often start early. Premenstrual adolescents often associate menstruation with a variety of consequences, including physical pain, mood swings, and limited ability to perform activities, and when noting how they felt about menstruation, were "scared, upset, and worried" (Stubbs, 2008, p, 59). However, varying opinions on menstruation vary at any age. Some who had already received their period found menstruation to be extremely inconvenient and only associated it with negative feelings,

while others found it to be a way to reconnect with their body, especially given the negative relationship with body image many experiences during puberty and pre-pubescent phases. Similarly, some premenstrual adolescents report excitement about the thought of menstruation, seeing it as a sign of maturity, reproductive fertility, and a way to bond with other menstruating friends (Stubbs, 2008).

Social stigma around menstruation continues to be a large factor in negative perceptions of menstruation for both menstruators and non-menstruators alike. For example, Roberts and colleagues (2002) conducted a research study on the perceptions observers have of menstruators, in which a menstruator drops a period product from their bag in a public setting. Nearby observers saw the subject in a negative light while also creating distance between them. The experiment was repeated in the same setting, except with someone dropping a hair clip from their bag. Observers had no negative reaction to this, with the only difference being the presence of a menstrual product (Roberts, et al. 2002).

These reactions are not singular to just the presence of a menstrual product. The thought of menstruation in general often arises negative reactions in our society. Menstruators are often seen as less competent, less intelligent, and less valuable due to menstruation, while simultaneously being valued and diminished for their likely fertility and ability to reproduce (Roberts, et al. 2002). This objectification affects menstruators of all ages, by teaching adolescents that they should find both value and shame in menstruation; that they should aim to be child-bearers but should also remain discreet about the presence of menstruation in their lives.

Historical Significance of Misogyny in Menstruation

Menstruation and menstrual supplies have long been seen in varying cultures and societies in a negative light, often stigmatized as unclean, gross, and inherently painful, while

also depicting menstruators as emotional, angry, and unfit, physically and mentally. The centuries-long stigmatization of menstruation begs the question of where these ideologies come from. Within the past few generations, we can attribute much of our current misogynistic and patriarchal misconceptions regarding menstruation to the capitalistic hold on menstruation and menstrual products that currently exist in our society.

Research done by Przybylo and Fahs (2020) shows how the neo-liberal era of menstrual product advertisements has taken advantage of menstrual rights activism, as a way of incorporating this empowerment as a sales pitch. This research looks at the comparison between current “empowering” menstrual advertisements and a more “crankier” approach that advertises menstruation more neutrally, accepting it for what it is without contributing additional shame or stigma. (Przybylo, et al. 2020).

First, it is important to look at the misogynistic ideals that have existed within menstrual product advertisements over time, which have, in turn, contributed to our negative societal and cultural views of menstruation. Menstrual product advertisements, as portrayed in a variety of different media styles from television to magazine advertisements, often either over-sexualize the female body for the male gaze or imply that menstruation is something of secrecy; that menstrual products should be kept as neutral and discreet as possible to any existence of one’s period (Erchull, 2021). This is prominent in the 1970s, and even at varying times before, when menstrual products were advertised and sold with an abundance of plastic packaging to contribute to making menstruation as discreet as possible, thus furthering the idea of periods as taboo and unthinkable (Weiss-Wolf, 2017). The early history of menstrual product advertisement has been rooted in misogyny, with the implication that menstruation is only for women and that

it should not be discussed further with anyone else, leaving out non-female identifying menstruators and perpetuating the construct of menstruation as “bad” and “shameful”.

Revisiting Pryzbylo and Fah’s research (2020), the authors discuss the current state of menstrual advertisements. These ads look at menstruation as hyper-feminized, often depicting a very specific type of body and person as a menstruator: thin, white, able-bodied women, often participating in athletics and often with the depictions of more stereotypically feminine signals, such as glitter or more “feminine” colors. By taking the “empowerment” approach, period product marketing has shifted in a direction that still is not inherently beneficial to the consumer. Rather than previous marketing of menstruation as discreet and shameful, modern menstruation marketing makes periods ultra-feminized in a way that adheres to outdated gendered norms and forms of empowerment. Simultaneously, it perpetuates an outdated idea of what a menstruator “should” look like, one that lacks body, race, and gender diversity. The author’s counterargument, one that highlights a “crankier” approach to menstrual advertisements, look to push away these more sexist, misogynist, and transphobic ideals in menstrual marketing and instead acknowledges the reality of menstruation; blood, pain, accessibility, and all (Przybylo, et al. 2020).

How does this impact students in the United States?

Discussing and researching period poverty and solutions to the issue is important because it connects people with periods to resources and knowledge that will create safer and healthier periods for as long as they continue menstruating. Education and accessibility of period products and resources are especially important because it teaches menstruators how to navigate their periods safely, with safe products, and provide them with the knowledge of proper sanitation, pain management, and what to look out for in case anything might be wrong. Knowing how to

recognize signs of other reproductive issues, such as delayed or prolonged cycles, abnormal amounts of pain, or other signs of chronic illness such as endometriosis, puts menstruators at an advantage for preventative care. Additionally, advocates for the normalization of diagnosing these illnesses which often go undetected in communities with ample healthcare, let alone marginalized communities.

Period poverty awareness is important and highly impactful regarding menstruators in varying areas across the globe. Hundreds of millions of menstruators in marginalized communities and countries are facing a lack of access to safe menstruation resources (Bonnie, 2016). Adolescents, in particular, report experiencing guilt and shame around their periods and find that they cannot sufficiently manage their periods and period pain, as well as feel they cannot openly discuss their periods with others, leaving them feeling alone and uneducated (Sommer, et al. 2016).

Being deprived of basic information and education regarding menstruation and menstrual health resources can have a substantial negative impact on menstruators. With menstruation being a monthly occurrence for many, educational roadblocks that stem from mishandled menstruation can become rather large over time. Approximately 20% of menstruators report having missed work or school due to their periods (Secor-Turner, et al. 2020). A lack of understanding of PMS, along with the social stigmas of guilt, fear, and shame regarding periods, can lead to negative impacts on attendance, inability to focus on studies, and fear when participating in school lessons and activities. Similarly, for students in low-income and impoverished communities, the added stressors of affordability of menstrual products, access to sanitary areas to provide proper hygiene management and access to health care stand as added barriers to healthy menstruation (Trant, et al., 2022).

Adolescents experiencing these disparities might have a higher likelihood of negative mental health outcomes, and a lack of understanding of how to approach menstruation, which products to use and how to use them, and how to advocate for themselves as menstruators with parents, educators, and healthcare providers. Likewise, an inability to obtain menstrual products or reproductive education leaves a disproportionate number of adolescents at a higher risk for illness and disease, stemming from menstrual hygiene mismanagement and reproductive illnesses such as urinary tract infections (UTIs), reproductive tract infections (RTIs), and sexually transmitted diseases and infections (STDs and STIs) (Francis, et al. 2022). These possible complications can further lead to some of the factors included under the umbrella of period poverty, such as absences from school and healthcare visits, substantial issues for adolescents of families who might otherwise not be able to afford to pay the bill of a doctor's visit, who live in a resource desert and cannot easily access a hospital or reproductive care clinic, or who do not have health insurance.

Summary

Period poverty is an issue that impacts menstruators globally. Period poverty refers to the barriers that stand between menstruators and healthy periods, most often due to financial hardship, lack of awareness and education, and other contributing factors, such as transportation, stigmatization, and geographic location. As a result of period poverty, menstruators cannot properly maintain and manage their periods. This results in negative impacts on their health, well-being, education, and development. It also highlights where change needs to occur around the approach to menstruation, both in the United States and globally.

In the United States, school-aged menstruators have a unique position within the impact of period poverty. The health disparities associated with period poverty range from a lack of

access to menstrual products, inadequate menstrual and puberty health education, and the shame and stigma that is often perpetuated within society and culture in the United States, as well as global influences. These factors can significantly impact an adolescent's school performance, as well as their health and well-being outside of school.

Dealing with the impact of period poverty can cause significant stress in an adolescent's life. They might feel unprepared before or during menstruation, find it difficult to participate in school and extracurricular activities, and associate menstruation with negative feelings and fear, leading to harmful impacts on their mental health. To address these issues, schools should take precautions to bring awareness to period poverty for the well-being of their students, including staff advocacy, menstrual health resources such as free menstrual products, and more comprehensive menstrual health education that gives students gender-affirming and detailed curriculum on menstruation and how to navigate it. By highlighting how period poverty negatively impacts students, there is an opportunity to emphasize the importance of policy change and shame-free and non-biased solutions to ensure the safe and healthy management of periods for menstruators.

Discussion

The issue of period poverty is highly prevalent globally, impacting the lives of adults and children alike in ways that rob them of the basic needs and rights that directly impact their health and wellness. While researching the literature that is currently present on period poverty, I noticed that there was a relatively large gap in research and discussion regarding period poverty in the United States, especially when it comes to school-aged adolescents and those of lower SES. As minors, adolescents do not always have the necessary ability to advocate for themselves, nor might they understand when they are enduring systemic hardship or being

treated unjustly. One might not discover there was an issue if it was never pointed out, even if the effects of said hardship were causing significant and lasting damage to their health and well-being. The nature of the issue of period poverty, and its direct link to an adolescent's health and development, leaves a lot of room to consider how each generation is being impacted and what we can do to ensure adolescents are thriving, both in their future endeavors and their health, without having a constantly added cause for concern. Menstrual equity is the ultimate goal, and providing this to adolescents is crucial to keeping them safe and healthy.

After looking at the data and research that has been done on period poverty and the effects it has had on school-aged children, I would like to propose further ways in which different institutions can advocate for adolescents and lessen the impact of period poverty. I will be discussing this considering the role of schools in providing access to these services for students, as well as a brief discussion of some of the current legislation on school period poverty in Oregon and how Oregon's legislation contrasts with the state of Florida's current proposed legislation to ban discussion of menstruation in schools.

Schools

For many students, especially those of lower SES and living in lower-income communities, school is a sanctuary to provide them with basic needs, even outside of education. This might include a hot meal for breakfast and lunch, a ride to and from school, access to bathrooms, showers, sanitation, and more. With the inability to rely on factors outside of school for necessities, we can acknowledge that schools have the opportunity to provide the needs that allow students to thrive and remain safe and healthy. Menstrual advocacy should be considered and delivered by schools, similar to the provision of these other necessities and services. I propose that schools can accomplish this in a number of ways, including school nurse and

paraprofessional advocacy, providing comprehensive menstrual and puberty education, and allowing students access to free menstrual products.

Nurse and Paraprofessional Advocacy

The role of a school nurse is often to provide basic care for students, acknowledge what symptoms they might have, address temperature and illness concerns, and arrange the next steps in the course of action for whatever illness the adolescent might have (Secor-Turner, M., et al. 2022). Due to the nature of menstruation, from symptoms that can deeply impact a student during their school day to the possibility of needing access to menstrual products, school nurses have the opportunity to advocate for adolescents in a way that other staff members might not be able to. School nurse advocacy is highly important, and if properly trained, their knowledge of menstruation can ensure that students have a trusted adult to turn to and share their symptoms and struggles with their period. This also looks like providing empathy to students, understanding that symptoms like cramps and migraines can be debilitating for some during the day, especially students who have recently started menstruation.

School nurses have the opportunity to work one-on-one with students to understand through a medical lens if their menstrual needs are being met, including whether they have access to proper sanitation, can afford menstrual products and know how to use them, and can offer resources on how to make sure these needs are met if they are not currently. Although school nurse advocacy is only truly successful with support from school districts, the nature of the relationship between nurse and student allows for a close connection and conversation between both parties. This can help to create awareness around menstruation for students and the disparities they may be facing due to period poverty. This also allows for an environment that

creates more openness and acceptance around menstruation for students and shows them that it is okay to advocate for themselves as well.

However, the availability of school nurses varies between districts, often leaving schools and students without a dedicated health professional on staff or available at all times that students need them. Because of this, training school staff to be knowledgeable in the basics of menstruation is crucial. This does not have to be expert-level knowledge, but students can benefit from a trusted adult staff member who knows where to direct them if they need a menstrual product or a change of clothes, who understands how to use and dispose of menstrual products and is educated on menstruation in general, such as symptoms students might experience or the ability to advocate for students when faced with the adverse reactions some might have to menstruation based on cultural norms and stigmas. Implementing menstrual health education in schools for all staff is a step in the right direction of diminishing the barrier between students and resources. Going one step further, schools could begin to focus on menstrual education and training for paraprofessionals specifically.

The role of a paraprofessional is to provide support to educators and students alike, helping to bridge the gap between one teacher and many students. Their support is essential in ensuring that students do not “slip between the cracks” of the education system, including classroom management and one-on-one help, among other tasks. As discussed in the introduction section, menstrual advocacy within schools is crucial for low-income adolescents, who often are not provided the essential education and resources necessary for safe and healthy menstruation. Including menstrual advocacy within the role of a paraeducator helps adolescents acquire knowledge and resources about their periods that they might have a more difficult time accessing otherwise

This can be done in a multitude of ways, beginning with incorporating menstrual education into training procedures for paraeducators. This might include general knowledge of menstruation, such as what age they can expect students to begin their periods, what symptoms they might be enduring and how that impacts their schooling, and how to advocate for student wellbeing. Similarly, paraprofessionals should be able to provide students with menstrual products and discuss with them how to use them, something that many students have shared they felt underprepared for. Having paraprofessionals educated on menstruation, something that affects a wide amount of the students they are working with, can also help with making sure their knowledge reaches the teachers they are working with. This is especially important with larger classrooms when teachers find it difficult to make one-on-one time with each of their students or have not been able to develop as close of a connection with their students as a paraprofessional might.

Access to Menstrual Products in Schools

The ability to access menstrual products is a crucial determinant of health for menstruating adolescents. There can be difficulties in obtaining menstrual products, especially for low-income adolescents. There are a variety of reasons for this, including the often high cost of period products, the “pink tax” which is a tax placed on menstrual and hygiene products, transportation to stores to purchase menstrual products, and a lack of knowledge regarding the different options a menstruator has for different period products that are available (Diamant, A. 2021). Without consistent and reliable access to period products, a menstruator is left to resort to unsafe and unsanitary practices, such as using a product for too long which can result in infection and illness, or finding a replacement for common menstrual products, like soaking up bleeding with a cloth or toilet paper. Schools can play a significant role in reducing the struggle for

low-income adolescents in accessing menstrual products by implementing a few strategies, including free distribution of menstrual products, installation of free menstrual product dispensers in both gendered and non-gendered bathrooms, and options for a diverse range of products.

Beginning with the free distribution of menstrual products, schools can advocate for the health and well-being of their students by providing access to menstrual products without student concern for cost and transportation. This can be implemented in several ways to ensure that students can easily access these products when they need them. The first option is to install menstrual product dispensers in all bathrooms without a cost barrier, which we will discuss at length later in this section. While many schools already have menstrual product dispensers present in their bathrooms, they are most often included only in female restrooms and cost money for students to obtain a product. Removing the barrier of cost, as well as featuring dispensers in all bathrooms, allows students access to menstrual products when they need them, as well as provides the ability to obtain extra for later in the day when they are no longer at school. The next option is to have them available in different areas of the school, from the teacher's classrooms to the school office, the nurse's office, and other areas where a trusted adult can hand out products to students. This eliminates any worry that menstrual products are being taken for misuse but does come with a few costs. Some downfalls to this approach, mainly if it is the sole option for students to obtain free menstrual products, are that some students might not feel comfortable being open about being on their period or not being able to afford menstrual products. It also puts students who identify outside of the gender binary in a position in which they might fear judgment or questioning for needing a menstrual product, or simply do not feel comfortable sharing their gender identification. However, combining these two solutions, having

free menstrual products available to access both in restrooms and through staff, makes it more likely that students will be able to obtain the menstrual products they need without worrying about economic and financial barriers.

Elaborating more on a previous point made, the installation of free period product dispensers in school bathrooms is also a positive solution to helping students access menstrual products. Further, it is especially important to consider this through a gender-affirming lens, but ensuring that dispensers are installed in both gendered and non-gendered bathrooms. This allows menstruating students who identify as male the ability to access free menstrual products without being secluded to only using bathrooms marked as female. Similarly, it ensures that students who opt to use non-gendered bathrooms will have the ability to obtain free menstrual products as well. The importance of providing free products in bathrooms also allows students the ability to access menstrual products right when they need them and have access to privacy and sanitation solutions, especially if they wish to be discreet about their periods and do not feel comfortable asking a friend or staff member for a menstrual product. In addition to this form of advocacy for low-income students who especially need assistance in accessing affordable menstrual products, schools must maintain the restocking of menstrual product supplies in bathrooms, which maintains this avenue of accessibility and convenience for students.

Finally, schools can help aid in the access to free and affordable menstrual products by providing a diverse range of products for students, as well as comprehensive instructions on why different products are beneficial and how students can use them for full safety and effectiveness. Menstruators are commonly only given two options when it comes to choice in menstrual products: menstrual pads or tampons. However, there is a range of other products, from reusable menstrual cups to period underwear and cloth pads that can be washed after every use and helps

to prevent leakage. Depending on access to sanitation supplies, which can be a disparity that low-income adolescents might deal with, reusable menstrual products might be a beneficial option in their low cost, as the student would not have to continuously find the means to purchase or access more menstrual products each week and month of their period. Similarly, different menstrual products can be more or less effective and beneficial depending on the student's lifestyle, depending on common factors for students including whether they are active in sports and need a secure menstrual product to prevent leaking. By providing information on these products, schools are opening up a new option for students who might not have been aware that there were more options available than the two most common products. Similarly, schools are performing an act of solidarity and advocacy for their students, especially those who fall into the low-income bracket and do not have the means to access period products. By stepping up in this way, schools show their students that they are a person first and foremost; that their needs must be met before they can fully show up and be successful as a student.

To answer the overarching question of how schools can afford to provide menstrual products to students, we can turn to a few solutions. The first is to advocate for legislation that allocates funds toward schools to promote menstrual health and hygiene, including access to free menstrual products, such as Oregon's Menstrual Dignity Act, which we will discuss later in this paper. The second is to make strides towards implementing community collaboration including fundraising drives where community members can donate menstrual products to schools, as well as partnering with local community health clinics and organizations to ensure access to free menstrual products for students. This might also include vetting systems within our schools that can identify low-income students who are at higher risk of not being able to access menstrual

health hygiene options, and working to implement resources that help them specifically to avoid the effects of systemic health disparities such as period poverty.

Menstrual Health Education

Puberty education, along with sexual health education, is lacking in the United States. Students of all ages find themselves without comprehensive education on what is happening in their bodies, which leads to the lack of preparedness and misunderstanding of puberty that was discussed earlier in this paper. Some states do not require that puberty and sex education be medically accurate, meaning that information can be solely based on educator opinion and further contribute to the misinformation about adolescent health. By including valuable and factual information about menstruation in the puberty education curriculum, schools can do their part in reducing the stigma that accompanies menstruation and help ensure that adolescents are knowledgeable about their bodies and are prepared for menstruation.

In theory, menstrual health education in schools should consist of a lot more information than it does currently. We can generally expect puberty education to occur anywhere between grades 5 through 8. Traditionally younger students are divided into separate groups of boys and girls, where they are taken into separate classes to learn about male and female biology and puberty. Young girls are taught about menstruation separately from boys and are generally only given a brief amount of basic education, such as the difference between menstrual pads and tampons, hormone changes, monthly bleeding, and the possibility of pregnancy.

While we could assume that even the bare minimum of information is better than no puberty education at all, the shortcomings of puberty and menstrual education in schools cause significant harm. This is especially true for adolescents who do not have outside resources to inquire about menstruation further, such as those in single-parent households and without a

menstruating parent, which is a component of period poverty. There is crucial information that is missing from these broad teachings, which leaves adolescents unprepared and uneducated.

Missing information that is extremely important for adolescents to understand about menstruation includes the menstrual phases: which consist of menstruation, the follicular phase, ovulation, and the luteal phase, and occur in a cycle throughout the month, as well as possible symptoms of these phases and what a menstruator's body is doing in each of these phases.

Having an understanding of this allows adolescents to understand when their period will come each month, the possible meanings behind symptoms they are feeling, and how and why menstruation occurs in the first place.

Further, current puberty and menstrual education rarely divulge the specifics behind menstrual products, including different options and how to use them. It is most common that a young menstruator will learn about pads and tampons, and maybe even receive one of each during the class. They might learn briefly about what these products are and how to use them, but unless they are educated further about their other options, such as menstrual cups, menstrual underwear, and so on, they will never know how to decide what works the best for them, their body, and their lifestyle. Schools have a responsibility to include this information in their menstrual education curriculum further because many menstruators will simply use the products that their menstruating caregivers, siblings, and friends have used.

The division of gender in menstrual and puberty education classes is also an issue and has been occurring for decades. Young adolescents are divided into groups of "boys" and "girls" to learn about puberty separately, diminishing the experiences of menstruators who do not identify as "boy", "girl", or within the gender binary. What this implies to young menstruators is that their period is something of secrecy; do not talk about it with the boys. It also shows young

non-menstruators that there is something inherently wrong with menstruation; that they are being saved from having to learn about it. In the long run, this contributes to stigma, guilt, and shame regarding menstruation, because it teaches menstruators to keep their periods a secret and it teaches non-menstruators that they do not need to be educated on the topic. Further, this common structure of education is creating generations of non-menstruators who lack sympathy and understanding towards menstruators, even though it is nearly guaranteed that they have a menstruator in their life whom they care about. Periods are a large and important part of a menstruator's life; potential non-menstruating friends, partners, and family members must be equally aware of menstruation.

Similarly, the division of puberty education classes by gender leaves those who do not identify as a boy or a girl completely out of the conversation. It creates an uncomfortable environment where non-binary and transgender students feel as though they have to identify as something they are not, and puts unnecessary gendered boundaries on periods. It forms a false and toxic narrative that only girls and women can menstruate, which further creates a lack of resources and an excess of negative stigma for those who do not identify as female but still menstruate. By providing only a basis of knowledge about menstruation and separating groups by gender, we are failing menstruators and non-menstruators alike in their understanding and care of one another.

By acknowledging the shortcomings of puberty education in schools, we can begin to adjust the applied curriculum in ways that cultivate knowledge for menstruators and non-menstruators about periods; what happens during menstruation, why menstruation occurs, menstrual products, and so on, and also creates acceptance and understanding of diversity and

inclusivity from a young age. That leads us to ask how puberty education can be different, and why schools must change their curriculum.

The main issue within puberty education currently is the separation of gender between classes. As discussed prior, this leaves a gap in knowledge for non-menstruators, which opens up the door for negative stigma, misinformation and misconceptions, and a lack of empathy towards menstruating friends, family, and partners throughout life. Similarly, it leaves adolescents who do not identify as male or female in a position that does not take into account their education and well-being, as well as gender representation on a spectrum. By approaching puberty education with students learning alongside one another, there is more opportunity for communal growth and understanding, potentially with more room for conversation and willingness for young non-menstruators to know about menstruation in a deeper and more cultivated form, while also affirming gender diversity within the classroom and adolescent communities.

Following gender inclusion, schools can also benefit puberty education by creating a more comprehensive curriculum around adolescent health, particularly in the way of menstruation. As a menstruator, I think back to my own experience with menstrual and puberty education and found it to be lacking in several important aspects of adolescent health and well-being. The educational material we were given did not cover menstrual products in their entirety, aside from pads and tampons, nor how to use them; we were not taught the different phases of menstruation and the symptoms and bodily processes we could expect during these phases; nor were we given resources on where to access menstrual products if we could not afford them, or how to know if our periods were regular, and so on. For students in low-income families and communities, gaps in menstrual education are directly correlated to the health and well-being of menstruators. From my own experience in menstrual education, I believe I would

have been significantly more prepared for menstruation than I was, along with my classmates, had the previous information been included within the puberty health curriculum. Leaving out important information, especially for adolescents who primarily get their information from educators within their schools, leads to disparities in menstruation and the factors of period poverty that were discussed at the beginning of this paper.

Schools must make a conscious effort to analyze their puberty and menstrual health education programs to identify what is missing within the curriculum, and what can be elaborated on. For low-income adolescents, having a wider understanding of menstruation can help to alleviate some of the more specific factors of period poverty, such as hygiene and sanitation by educating them on how to properly care for themselves during menstruation and how to properly dispose of menstrual products, as well as how they can do these things at school if they find it difficult to access proper sanitation supplies outside of school. This also helps students who do not have menstruators in their family, or whose families have undergone generations of menstruators who have not had access to comprehensive period education, as these students rely on school puberty education to fill in those gaps. Similarly, gender inclusion and gender-affirming menstruation curriculum aids in other factors mentioned, such as stigma and shame, by involving both menstruating and non-menstruating students in the education and understanding of periods.

Comparing School Menstruation Education in Florida and Oregon

The presence of menstrual health education within schools has been up for debate recently. In this section, we will be taking a closer look at the current state of menstruation education in Florida, specifically, House Bill 1069, sponsored by Florida State Representative Stan McClain (R), which aims to prevent adolescents in elementary schools from learning about

sex and puberty health topics, including menstruation, reproductive health, and sexually transmitted diseases. We will be comparing this to Oregon's House Bill 3294, the Menstrual Dignity Act, which aims to provide greater access to menstrual products for students in all schools K-12, community colleges, and universities, including providing them in both gendered and gender-neutral bathrooms.

Florida's HB 1069

Florida House Bill 1069, which has also been dubbed the "Don't Say Period" Bill as an expansion to Florida House Bill 1557 - the "Don't Say Gay" bill, is a legislative bill designed to police the teachings of menstrual and reproductive education in schools. This bill includes specific restrictions to menstrual education, including topics on human sexuality and the use of pronouns, sexually transmitted infections, and menstrual and reproductive health. With this legislation, which was signed into the senate in May of 2023, only students in grades 6 through 12 would be allowed to learn about these topics, excluding adolescents in kindergarten through 5th grade. Similarly, the bill allows parents to restrict their children from certain educational materials and requires educators to teach students that a person's sexual identity is their biological sex at birth. House Bill 1069 expands across all of Florida's school districts, and if educators were to go against these new requirements, they will likely face punishment.

Florida lawmakers' intentions with this House Bill are to eliminate "harmful" educational materials from being used in schools and to increase the transparency that school districts have of what students are being taught. Examples of harmful materials in Florida classrooms consist of images of sexual anatomy in sexual and reproductive health education classes, and books and other materials that promote diversity in human sexuality, including pronouns and gender. However, what Florida completes in this legislation are dangerous restrictions on natural bodily

processes that menstruators go through, as well as unsafe practices that damage the well-being of students who do not identify with their assigned sex at birth.

Legislation like Florida's House Bill 1069 effectively works to continue the effects of period poverty for adolescents, which in turn impacts marginalized populations, including low-income adolescents, in disproportionate amounts. A highlight of the issues within this bill is that students in grades 5 and below are barred from learning about menstrual education. This bill does not take into account that a student may begin menstruation before the sixth grade. If these students do not have other trusted adults to look to for guidance on menstruation, such as a healthcare provider or a menstruating parent, they are likely to be uneducated on menstruation and unable to deal with their periods. This further perpetuates the idea of period poverty, and contributes to cultural stigmatizations of menstruation, implying that periods are taboo and should not be discussed, especially within schools. This is especially dangerous for adolescents who rely on schools and comprehensive menstrual and puberty education to prepare them for their periods, along with how to manage them, proper sanitization, what their bodies are doing during menstruation, and what their options are for navigating menstrual blood.

The overall effect of anti-menstruation education legislation leaves students without knowledge of their bodies, which in turn leaves them without the ability to understand their rights, and what reproductive justice looks like, and without a voice to discuss their concerns and questions. Similarly, it bars educators and health professionals from doing their best to connect students who are lacking in resources to opportunities to develop and thrive through menstruation and puberty. It takes away the ability to pinpoint a health disparity and work to bridge gaps in resources and knowledge, and rather, further diminishes communities without access to education and knowledge that is crucial to their health and well-being. It also works to

disclude and alienate those who do not identify within the gender binary, making educational spaces hostile and unsafe for them and discluding them from the acknowledgment of their identities within their schools.

Oregon's HB 3294

Oregon's House Bill 3294, also known as the menstrual dignity act, is working to make menstrual products more available and inclusive in all Oregon schools, including grades K through 12 as well as community colleges and universities. This legislation requires that all public schools in Oregon provide free menstrual products to all menstruating students, regardless of their age, gender, and SES. House Bill 3296 will implement this in several ways: first, schools will be providing students menstrual products and cost-free dispensers in a way that grants students privacy and accessibility, as well as in a way that is also gender affirming.

This means that planning will go into what type of product dispenser is selected, including a variety of menstrual products for students to choose from, and placing them in both gendered and non-gendered bathrooms. Second, schools will implement comprehensive education on menstrual health within their sex and puberty education curriculum in a way that is gender-affirming and does not imply any shame or negativity about menstruation. Finally, all schools will be required to complete a form that allows them reimbursement and funding to ensure the accessibility of menstrual supplies for students. The Menstrual Dignity Act also recommends staff training on menstrual health and students' needs, the ability for students to voice how and where they need support, and the availability of engagement and transparency between families and staff.

Oregon's Menstrual Dignity Act aims to bridge a gap between students and possible difficulty accessing menstrual products. They have pinpointed the issue of period poverty within

schools and are actively working to find and incorporate solutions to the problem. These findings come from being aware of and understanding how period poverty affects students, regardless of gender and age. Similarly, it works to target all students, rather than the oftentimes difficult process of narrowing down the students of lower SES who are in the most need. The program as a whole is Oregon's way of changing the narrative around menstruation, specifically the social and cultural norms that depict menstruation as disgusting and shameful, and approaches menstruation education in a way that helps students with awareness and understanding of their bodies.

This legislation benefits students, especially those actively experiencing period poverty, in several ways. As discussed earlier in this paper, some of the key factors of period poverty are inaccessibility to menstrual products, lack of comprehensive menstrual health education, and social and cultural stigma. The Menstrual Dignity Act singlehandedly targets each of these factors to bring awareness and solutions to those experiencing period poverty, as well as those who are at risk of period poverty at any given point in their lives, from changes in life circumstances to economic changes.

With its main goal, HB 3294 provides access to menstrual products that are necessary for students to safely and healthily go about their daily lives while menstruating. This provides them the chance to engage in their education, participate in extracurriculars, and regularly attend school during menstruation, without having to worry about the risks that accompany inaccessible menstrual products, from possible infection to leakage and embarrassment. Similarly, it offers the opportunity for staff to be educated on menstruation, how to best support the students they are interacting with, and the chance for students to receive valuable education and information on menstruation, menstrual products and how to use them, and other factors that ensure they are

prepared for their periods. It also aims to follow through with all of these factors in a way that grants students respect and understanding when it comes to menstruation, by changing the way that menstruating and non-menstruating students view and understand menstruation.

The act also acts on four separate pillars to provide students with menstrual dignity, including privacy, inclusivity, access, and education. This is particularly helpful to students within more vulnerable communities, offering them space to receive the help they need, safe and judgment-free access to menstrual products, and education on the processes happening within their bodies and how to navigate them. By including a comprehensive view of menstrual dignity and how it should be approached by lawmakers, school staff, and students alike, there is more room to enact the bill in the way it was intended; to ensure students have access to menstrual products and are safely prepared to go through menstruation in a way that does not vastly disrupt their lives and education or put them in a vulnerable place.

There is a stark contrast that is visible between Florida House Bill 1069 and Oregon House Bill 3294. It is important to acknowledge and understand how menstruating students are being helped and hurt by the decisions of lawmakers. While Florida HB 1069 is effectively working to dismantle menstrual education and preparedness, as well as gender-affirming practices, we can look to states like Oregon for a representation of positive changes that can be made in the lives of menstruating students. Oregon's menstrual dignity act creates space to unlearn the shame and negative stigma that has been perpetuated onto menstruation and those who experience it while providing students with reliable and safe access to menstrual products, as well as support and assistance from educated and knowledgeable staff.

Conclusion

The negative implications of period poverty are not something that can be overlooked. This is an issue that targets vulnerable populations globally and puts their health and well-being as menstruators at risk. The scope of this paper looks at how period poverty impacts low-income adolescents specifically. It is important to acknowledge that low-income adolescents often belong to other marginalized communities, and experience further social and health disparities that accompany marginalized identities in the United States. As discussed throughout this paper, inadequate access to menstrual health resources puts significant barriers and risks on the shoulders of low-income adolescents, challenging their education, health, and well-being. The consequences of period poverty are apparent in many ways and are detrimental to the development of a young menstruator.

There are a few key areas to focus on that change the narrative around menstruation and pick up the pieces left by the effects of period poverty; the ability to access menstrual products is one of those areas. Without access to proper and sanitary menstrual supplies, menstruating adolescents are at risk of school absences, poor health, increased likelihood of infection, and significant stress associated with finding ways to access menstrual supplies or finding an alternative. By addressing this issue, there is more understanding of where there is room for improvement. Schools specifically can target this issue by providing access to free menstrual products in schools in a way that is safe, private, and gender-affirming, as seen in Oregon's Menstrual Dignity Act.

Comprehensive menstrual health education is another important area that can vastly change the circumstances for low-income adolescents experiencing period poverty. This paper looks at how schools can approach this barrier, with suggestions to implement more staff education and training, to ensure that students have access to a safe and trusted adult if they need

assistance or support when it comes to menstruation. This also includes creating menstrual and puberty health curriculum that pinpoints menstruation in a way that provides a comprehensive understanding of menstruation, menstrual phases, and how to use menstrual products, including approaching menstrual health education through a gender-affirming lens that includes menstruating and non-menstruating students alike, despite their gender identity. Staff advocacy and comprehensive menstrual and puberty education are instrumental in ensuring students have support to prepare them for menstruation.

Further, this paper compares Florida House Bill 1069 and Oregon House Bill 3294, two starkly different pieces of legislation that approach menstruation in schools. Florida HB 1069 looks to create a barrier between students and menstruation education, banning those younger than grade 6 from learning about periods and reproductive systems. It also looks to eliminate gender-affirming practices and understanding in schools and puberty education and allows families of students to place barriers on the naturally occurring processes that their students can learn about.

On the opposite side of this is Oregon HB 3294, a bill dubbed the Menstrual Dignity Act that aims to safely and respectfully connect students with menstrual health supplies in a way that grants them privacy, safety, and gender-affirming care. This includes placing free menstrual products in the bathrooms of all public schools in Oregon and aims to provide more comprehensive training for staff on the topics of menstrual and reproductive health. Legislation like this is crucial in ending period poverty and serves as a positive representation that schools and lawmakers everywhere can look to for guidance.

In conclusion, this paper serves to address an issue that is greatly impacting those in poverty, specifically adolescents in the United States. Period poverty greatly impacts the overall

health and well-being of young menstruators, and with provisions made to break down the barriers between low-income adolescents and safe menstruation, adolescents are alleviated of the burden that is period poverty. Moving forward, the goal of this paper is to continue the advocacy for menstrual rights and to propose a change that is crucial and beneficial to menstruators everywhere, but specifically low-income adolescents. This knowledge and the suggestions provided can help in creating a future that connects menstruators with the supplies and education they need for safe and healthy menstruation.

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