

Menstruation Friendly Schools Project
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Introduction

Irise International aim to ensure that menstrual periods are not a barrier to girls attending and succeeding at school. Since 2011, the effects of various menstruation-related interventions on schoolgirls' attendance and attainment have been measured and refined to create an evidence body for creating sustainable improvements in schools. Their approach is rigorously underpinned by evaluation and is supported by leading academics in the field.

Project description

The Menstruation Friendly Schools Project (MFS) aims to produce sustained improvements in educational outcomes for girls by reducing menstrual-related barriers to school attendance and participation. A triad of interventions were used: menstrual and puberty-related education; menstrual product provision via local suppliers; and activities to engage and involve the wider community. The project was conducted in the Jinja region of Uganda, with 20 schools and their associated communities taking part. Evaluation of student attendance and educational attainment, and their knowledge of and attitudes towards menstruation, was conducted at the baseline (late 2017 / 2018), midpoint (late 2018 / 2019), and end of the project (2021). Evaluations utilised data from District Education Offices and surveys of Primary 6 and 7 students.

Project evaluation results

Selected evaluation data of key metrics are presented in **Table 1**. Absenteeism was self-reported by a sample of Primary 6 schoolgirls, attainment was assessed through the exam grades of Primary 7 schoolgirls, and retention (i.e., avoidance of students dropping out of school) was estimated through the proportion of Primary 7 schoolgirls who registered to sit exams, but then failed to attend. Knowledge of, and attitudes towards, menstruation were assessed by surveying samples of Primary 6 students. Retention of students is particularly challenging to measure, as local sources of data such as school registers are frequently inaccurate, and self-reported measurements are not possible as the absent students cannot be surveyed. A proxy measurement of students who registered to sit exams and then failed to sit them is used as an indication of retention but is anticipated to be a substantial underestimate of true retention, as not all students register to sit exams.

The COVID 19 pandemic and subsequent disruption has complicated the relationship between baseline, midpoint, and endpoint data as the effects of the MFS project could no longer be identified through comparing pre- and post-pandemic evaluations. The endpoint evaluation has therefore been adjusted to compare attendance, attainment, and retention among MFS project schoolgirls with non-MFS project schoolgirls. Data collection for this is on-going, and therefore only results for 2018 and 2019 are presented. Results for knowledge of, and attitudes to, menstruation are presented for all three project evaluation points.

Table 1: Key evaluation metrics for MFS project

	Baseline 2018	Midpoint 2019	Endpoint 2021
Self-reported days of menstrual-related absenteeism per month among Primary 6 schoolgirls	1.17	0.58	^a
Proportion of Primary 7 schoolgirls achieving Grade 1 or Grade 2 in Primary School leaving exams	65%	75%	^a
Number of Primary 7 schoolgirls who registered to sit Primary School leaving exams and did not attend	4 of 302	2 of 403	^a
Proportion of Primary 6 schoolgirls with adequate knowledge of menstruation and puberty ^b	28%	56%	86%

Proportion of Primary 6 schoolgirls with positive attitude towards menstruation ^c	29%	77%	78%
Proportion of Primary 6 schoolboys with adequate knowledge of menstruation and puberty ^b	9%	59%	43%
Proportion of Primary 6 schoolboys with positive attitude towards girls during menstruation ^c	39%	42%	68%
Notes			
<p>^a Data collection on-going; not comparable with pre-pandemic evaluations</p> <p>^b Test of key menstrual- and puberty-related knowledge; approx. 100 schoolgirls and 100 schoolboys sampled; score of 80% or greater rated 'adequate'</p> <p>^c Test of attitudes towards menstruation by situation-based questions; approx. 100 schoolgirls and 100 schoolboys sampled; 'adequate' score means students responded in a way that would not cause harm to themselves or others</p>			

Conclusion

After one year of the MFS project (from 2018 to 2019), significant improvements in attendance among schoolgirls, equating to an additional 7 days in school per girl over the school year, was observed. Significant improvements in academic attainment, as indicated by substantially increased proportions of girls achieving top grades in their primary school leaving exams, was also shown. The proxy measurement for schoolgirl retention (number registering for, and then missing, exams) appears to indicate a small improvement, although further work is necessary to confirm whether this proxy measurement correlates with true schoolgirl retention, and the strength and significance of this improvement.

The MFS project demonstrated very strong and significant improvements in knowledge of, and attitudes towards, menstruation among schoolgirls and schoolboys between 2018 and 2021, despite the unprecedented disruption and trauma of the COVID 19 pandemic. Given the significant interruption to school-based learning in 2020 and 2021, the community-based aspects of the project may have been particularly relevant to its apparent resilience; qualitative investigations can be used to explore this further.

Overall, the project has demonstrated substantial improvements to educational attendance and attainment among schoolgirls, as well as understanding of and attitudes towards menstruation among schoolgirls and schoolboys. As such, the MFS project has achieved its intended outcome of reducing menstrual-related barriers to girls' education and provides a compelling model for effective school-based interventions.

Report author

Heather Purshouse is a PhD candidate at The University of Stirling, Scotland, and produced her thesis on management of menstrual waste in African cities. She has lead-authored publications on menstrual hygiene and menstrual stigma in Malawi, and produced a short documentary film on menstrual restrictions in rural Nepal. She is undertaking an independent review of Irise International's projects in East African schools, funded by the IAPETUS Doctoral Training Partnership.