



What periods, smashing taboos and the sustainability curriculum have in common.

By Loren Smith

Bleeding in your underwear can be a good thing," said no-one, ever, until recently. As far back as 1988, however, period underwear – which negate the need for additional female sanitary products – were being developed.

Now, brands like Thinx and Dear Kate are making period underwear not only acceptable, but daringly cool. They're not only breaking down period stigma – they're smashing it with in-your-face advertising.

A collective of alternate period product providers – including Australian absorbent underwear purveyor Modibodi, and menstrual cup company Lunette – is bringing this boundary-breakage to Australian schools, in the form of resource kits for teachers.

Termed the Sustainable Period Project, it also carries an environmental message.

"A conventional disposable sanitary pad ... takes up to 500 years to break down in landfills," Carol Morris, co-director of Lunette's Australian branch, informed *Education Review*.

"Every menstruating person will need, or throw away, about one shopping bag of rubbish per month."

By contrast, a Lunette menstrual cup lasts 10 years.

Morris explained that once period shame is eliminated, girls can begin to make more informed choices about sanitary products. For her, school is the perfect place for this to occur, as it is formative for knowledge building *and* identity.

"If someone in five years says, 'Oh, I didn't know that there's such a thing as a biodegradable pad,' that's pretty bad if menstruation isn't covered in this new sustainability component in the curriculum."

She outlined the status quo: "At the moment, the main form of sanity product shown to schools is the conventional [plastic-based] disposables. Schools are either approached by or they can apply to companies such as Libra, Kotex and Stayfree and order free sample kits for their schools. It's all branded, and the student gets a little purse with maybe one tampon, one pad and one pantyliner in it. Research has shown that those are going to be their products of choice, because that's what they've always been exposed to, all in a pretty little container."

In 2016, Morris decided to do something about this. She created the idea of the Sustainable Period Project after fielding requests "nearly every month" from students and teachers. It contains products from Lunette (period cups), Modibodi (period underwear), Cloth Pad Shop (cloth pads) and Natracare, Organ(y)c, and TOM Organic (organic cotton pads and tampons).

Some of these products aren't as confronting as many adults may think.

"We've found that most teenagers have actually heard about menstrual cups, because it's coming through on blogs or Instagram feeds," Morris said.

She knows this because in term three last year, the project was trialled in schools. It received "absolutely fantastic" feedback. What surprised Morris was the cross-faculty interest: she thought it would be limited to PDHPE staff. Art teachers brainstormed patterns for menstrual cloths, while economics teachers did cost-per-wear analyses. Yet she wasn't shocked by the general receptiveness of schools. With the rise of third wave feminism in the last five years or so – an example of which is equal pay campaigns – 'period positivity' has concordantly blossomed.

"This is also casting onto schools as well," Morris said. "There's been a heavy emphasis on everyone feeling confident and comfortable in their own bodies, and no-one making you feel ashamed of something that's totally natural."

Most people would support this groundswell, which is linked to sustainability, yet it is very much limited to the developed world, or developed communities.

"We know in some of these more remote and regional [Indigenous] communities, they're still using, for example, football socks, or sitting on a bit of cardboard [in place of menstrual products]. Things like a cloth pad or a disposable pad won't work because some of them don't even wear underpants. So, for example, communities like that might do better with period underpants," Morris suggested. "There's a lot more work to be done. The start of this is just educating students about the options. Once we get the younger generation doing that, we're going to see massive change in the sanitary area in Australia."

The Sustainable Period Project aims to provide resource kits to all secondary schools by 2020 across Australia and New Zealand. To order a kit for your school, or for more information or free downloadable resources, visit www.SustainablePeriodProject.org.

MODERN SANITARY OPTIONS – COMPARISON TABLE

SANITARY PRODUCT	MADE FROM	LIFE SPAN	TIME TO DECOMPOSE	HOW MANY PER CYCLE	COST OVER 10 YEARS
Conventional disposable sanitary pad	Plastics, bleached rayon, cotton	Dispose after use (6–8hrs)	Up to 500 years	Up to 22	\$2000
Conventional disposable tampon	Bleached rayon, cotton	Dispose after use (3hrs)	6 months	Up to 22	\$2000
Cotton disposable pad	100% cotton	Dispose after use (6–8hrs)	1–5 years	Up to 22	\$2000
Cotton disposable tampon	100% cotton	Dispose after use (3hrs)	3–6 months	Up to 22	\$2000
Reusable cloth pad	Cotton, bamboo, PUL	5 years	6–12 months	8–12	\$200–300
Reusable period underpants	Cotton, bamboo, PUL	3–5 years	6–12 months	5–8	\$200–300
Menstrual cup	100% medical silicone	10 years	Incinerate to dispose	1	\$55