

**RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN ZIMBABWE'S HIGHER  
EDUCATION SECTOR: THE CASE OF MIDLANDS STATE  
UNIVERSITY SEXUAL MATURATION RESEARCH PROJECT.**

By

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**Abstract**

*Universities, for a very long time, were viewed as citadels of knowledge but they remained remote and barely relevant to the man or woman in the street. The academics who work at universities are immensely talented and intelligent but remain abstract. This paper aims to discuss the research activities carried out by academics at the Midlands State University in an effort to enhance the quality of people's lives. The paper explains in detail how the University Research Team addressed problems associated with sexual maturation processes. Through a research project code-named **Femshuleni**, the research team, successfully improved the management of sexual maturation process and related problems amongst schoolboys and girls in the Midlands province. In conclusion, the University is hailed for creating knowledge that is relevant to the development of Zimbabwe.*

**Introduction**

Universities are the research engines of society because they continue to create new knowledge but for a very long time universities the world over were about intellectual pursuit, predominantly for its own sake and they educated a very privileged minority. They were placed in cities but were not really part of them. They were places of power and change but remote and barely relevant to the man or woman in the street. University academics were immensely talented but were almost abstract, rigorously intelligent and indulging in activities that were above the daily pursuits of the ordinary folk, and led cloistered lives completely disengaged from the outside world. People from the outside would look on in awe and wondered what went on within the university walls. A university should serve by contributing to the development of an educated and enlightened population, capable of informed judgment and responsible citizenship. It should help to create, preserve and communicate knowledge that contributes to the cultural, social and economic well being of the people. Midlands State University is one such university that plays a distinctive role within Zimbabwe. In addition to offering undergraduate and postgraduate education in arts, social science, natural science, commerce, law and education, the University serves the whole province. It is against this background that staff at the university and neighboring schools embarked on a research project that aimed to empower the disadvantaged girl children in the Midlands province.

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**The problem**

Girls in Zimbabwe and the rest of the world, find it difficult to operate at the same level educationally, economically, emotionally, politically, socially and otherwise as their male counterparts because they go through distressing experiences during the sexual maturation process. However, it is more distressing to realize that girls are expected to cope with these problems quietly, perpetuating the cultural oppression of the girl child (Britton, 1996).

Concerns have been raised over the lack of respect for girls' sexual maturation and this comes from boys and some teachers leading to negative attitudes, which create self-esteem problems for the girl child (Dutoit, 1988). As a result of this, girls become less confident than boys in academic circles. This lack of concentration in class is a problem likely to affect girls more than boys because of the complex nature of what girls go through during the phases of sexual maturation especially during menstruation. There is consensus among educationists that limited participation in class implies limited learning and hence poor performance and achievement. Girls miss school as they try to grapple with problems arising from sexual maturation. This erratic attendance leads to gaps in knowledge and skills that may eventually lead to motivation problems in class. Nziramasanga (1999) argues that the school dropout rate among girls increases with higher levels of education whilst performance and achievement rates decrease.

Similarly, Gordon (1995) also says girls seem to score lower than boys in the sciences and mathematics and they tend to perform better in the arts, humanities and languages. The girls see themselves as weak, not as strong, intelligent or as capable of thinking and concentrating as boys. Several studies (Dutoit 1988; Gordon 1995; Britton 1996) to establish a link between sexual maturation and educational performance have been carried out and what is clear in all of them is that, on average, girls' levels of performance at school are consistently lower than boys and that the gender disparities increase with each level of education.

The following questions beg answers:

- Why do girls perform better at a lower level than boys?
- Are girls adequately equipped to handle the problems arising from sexual maturation so that they are not disadvantaged in the classroom?

In Zimbabwe, both men and women associate menstruation and menstrual blood with connotations of dirt, mess and uncleanness. As a result, a menstruating woman or girl is seen as a source of pollution and cannot cook for her husband lest he falls ill (Stewart, 2004). Black Zimbabweans believe that menstruating women and their menstrual blood are dangerous and offensive, leading to their exclusion from various activities by men (Britton, 1996). Even in Indian societies, women were isolated during their menstrual period, thereby restricting and limiting their activities during the flow (Du Toit, 1998). Menstruation has been for most women and girls a "curse" yet it is a simple body function, which has been mistaught. Evidence from women in the Jakaranda Sannap

Project (ibid) shows that women treated menstruation as a secret, because it is regarded as dirt and shameful. It is again feared that dealing with it publicly makes women and girls shy and uncomfortable.

The assumption to be made is that school girls in general are not empowered to manage menstruation and other sexual maturation related matters due to the insensitivity of society in general, and the school system and the school curriculum in particular, to the needs of the girl child. Thus sexual maturation processes present gender-biased problems that are likely to interfere with the educational process and also affect achievement, putting girls at a socio-economic and political disadvantage later in their lives.

### **Project objectives**

The project was guided by the following objectives:

- To identify gender disparities existing in the school system that relate to sexual maturation problems and how these impact on pupils' learning processes.
- To assess how pupils are prepared to deal with the problems associated with the process of sexual maturation with particular reference to schools.
- To determine the extent to which the education system is responding to the educational needs of pupils going through the process of sexual maturation.
- To develop knowledge and skills required by schoolgirls to produce their own sanitary pads.
- To teach the girl child how to manage the sexual maturation process.
- To disseminate information through drama, music, dance, poetry and electronic media.
- To train teachers in effective management of sexual maturation.
- To design, develop, produce and distribute pamphlets and other educational materials on sexual maturation.

### **Methods**

The initial research that was carried out in 2000 was exploratory and it aimed to critically analyze issues related to the sexual maturation process in a specific setting. The case study research design was used and it involved case studies of three schools in the Midlands province. Two primary schools and a secondary school were selected for study with the schools representing the general education scenario within the Zimbabwean socio-economic context. The schools were chosen to represent both urban as well as rural settings. After careful purposive selection, one rural school, an urban high-density primary school and secondary school were identified to participate in the exploratory study.

Grade 6 and 7 primary school children participated in the study because they fell into the category of those who were just about to experience or were already experiencing the sexual maturation process. The inclusion of secondary school pupils was to gain more insight into the problems associated with the process of sexual maturation and

how schools coped. The assumption was that secondary school pupils were experiencing or had already experienced the process and therefore provided a basis to follow up issues noted at primary school levels. Other key respondents to the in-depth interviews and questionnaires included officials' from the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, officials from the Curriculum Development Unit, schoolteachers, primary school heads, secondary school heads and community members.

Open ended questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions were used as tools for data collection. Stratified focus groups were used to explore pupils', teachers' and parents' ideas, feelings, opinions and suggestions. The discussions focused on what, when and how pupils learn or should learn about the process of sexual maturation, the problems associated with sexual maturation, how the problems were managed and their impact on pupils' participation in school.

Stratified purposive sampling was used to select the pupils, teachers and the parents who participated in each of the focus group discussions. Key informants in the Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, Curriculum Development Unit and primary level teachers colleges were targeted for the personal interviews and questionnaires. Relevant primary school textbooks were identified with the assistance of the primary school teachers and pupils and they were reviewed before fieldwork to determine the levels of teaching, content, aims, objectives, subject matter, organization, and assessment procedures with specific reference to sexual maturation.

## **Findings**

### *Pupils*

Children in the primary schools did not believe they had much to talk about regarding their experiences of sexual maturation since most of them did not know much about the subject at this stage. It was evident from the few who opened up, that the primary school girls were generally concerned about the onset of their periods and anticipated a lot of embarrassment arising from peer reaction, particularly from boys. They were scared of the prospects of menstruating at school where they feared they would experience all sorts of problems.

Most girls in primary schools did not know what to use for protection, where to access protective clothing and sanitary towels or pads and how to use them. Rural schoolgirls were more worried about the fact that the toilet facilities at the schools did not have any provision whatsoever for the management of menstruation. The school in this case was viewed mainly as a problem place with very little if any support for girls' problems and a place where feminine accidents are likely to happen.

A follow up of these issues with the secondary schools revealed the same fears. The girls were also worried about the teachers' negative attitudes towards them as they grow up. Teachers, especially males, were generally considered unsympathetic to the needs of the girls. The teachers seemed not to have an idea of what the girls go through as they grow up and insisted on full participation in all school activities. In some cases,

girls reported that they were forced to participate in sport regardless of how they felt about the biological problems they were facing. In class, girls were asked to stand up as they responded to teachers' questions. This practice was considered girl child unfriendly because it is during such times when problems such as menstruation related 'accidents' occur much to the embarrassment of girls but to the amusement of boys.

Boys who were interviewed in this study generally agreed that they tended to be preoccupied with feelings for girls including fantasizing about sex during lessons resulting in erections. Boys often felt too shy to participate in class during an erection and teachers did not seem empathetic. Boys had this to say about the problem: "Girls' short dresses and poor sitting positions during class arouse feelings and participation and time (spent) on tasks is affected" (Samkange & Dzimiri, 2004:174). These experiences and particularly the desire for relationships with girls interfere with learning among boys. Thus boys also experience periods of inattention and embarrassment in class.

Secondary school pupils had a lot to say about how schools could be made better places to stay and learn. All pupils agreed that they should learn more about sexual maturation before they are involved in the process. The children felt that the primary school curriculum was inadequate and did not respond effectively to their needs as they grow up. Most girls felt that their toilets were not adequately designed to help them cope with menstruation. They lacked privacy, were not always clean, had no incinerators to properly dispose of soiled sanitary pads and did not have shower cubicles and changing rooms.

Embarrassment arising from the physical and biological changes as they grow up, such as 'menstruation accidents' worried girls so much that some suggested that girls be taught separately from boys. Progressive and more assertive girls, suggested special education for boys on sexual maturation to help them understand girls better and develop more respect for the girls and the process of menstruation.

#### *Teachers*

Teachers agreed that the teaching of sexual maturation in schools was coincidental in the sense that it was referred to only when an opportunity presented itself during the course of teaching other themes. The focus group discussions with primary school teachers revealed that a major weakness of the primary school curriculum was that it was examination driven. Pupils were taught to pass examinations and therefore issues that were not examinable were not significant. According to the teachers, sexual maturation was not examinable and hence was not a priority in primary schools. Although the teachers were convinced that they had a critical role to play in imparting knowledge on sexual maturation, they generally felt that the system in which they operated was too restrictive and not supportive enough for them to be effective. Some of the teachers confessed ignorance on what to teach and how to teach it.

In secondary schools, where there is a provision for senior teachers to help children to go through the sexual maturation process, the children expressed concern that these

teachers seem to be engaged more in administrative work and hardly paid attention to their specific needs. Schoolgirls in the secondary school that participated in the study felt that their senior woman teacher was not very useful because she was more of a disciplinarian than a counselor. Teachers on the other hand expressed concern over the lack of support from the community regarding the teaching of sexual maturation. The community seems not to give teachers the much-needed cultural freedom to teach sexual maturation in any meaningful way.

### *Parents*

Most of the parents who participated in the study were adamant that they did not want their children to be taught about sexual maturation. They believed that teaching children about maturation would encourage prostitution. However, a few others acknowledged the need to teach something about sexual maturation and teachers would be the ideal people to be involved in the teaching of sexual maturation. Parents emphasized that it was the responsibility of the school to teach children about sexual maturation and yet they were strongly opposed to the teaching of critical aspects of sexual maturation. Teachers on the other hand believed that parents and the community had an important role to play in educating their children on sexual maturation since the issue was fraught with cultural undertones, which they could not adequately handle. There is therefore a lot of controversy surrounding the teaching of sexual maturation as demonstrated by the contradictions arising from the findings of the exploratory study.

From these findings, sexual maturation is indeed an issue to both the girl child and the boy child in the school system. Very little seems to be done to prepare children to manage the process of growing up. In particular, it seems as if schools are not responding adequately to the specific needs of the girl as she goes through the process of sexual maturation. The study also established that both boys and girls have very little knowledge about sexual maturation. The community and the school are not in a position to respond effectively to the specific needs of children, especially girl children, as they try to manage the developmental transformation from childhood to womanhood.

### **Intervention Strategies**

In response to the findings of the exploratory study of sexual maturation, a research team from the University explored strategies that could be used to implement the practical recommendations spelt out in the research findings. The implementation of the project findings was launched after permission from the Ministry of Education Sports and Culture was granted, on 21 September 2002 whilst the Rockefeller Foundation (USA) provided the funds for the research project.

A stakeholder's workshop was identified as the entry point to the implementation of the project research findings. The workshop was aimed at mobilizing support for the cause of the girl child and to develop the necessary coalitions/partnerships to facilitate the articulation of sexual maturation issues. It was also meant to consult on

implementation strategies or initiatives on sexual maturation. Participants invited to attend the workshop were in two categories: The first category included teachers, school heads, and representatives from professional associations. The second category comprised parents, community leaders, non-governmental organizations, church organizations, the business community, and the sister ministries of Health and Child Welfare, and Youth Development, Gender and Employment Creation. The involvement of the business community yielded positive results in that companies such as Mespina, National Blankets and Swisette donated fabric off cuts, which were used for the training in the production of sanitary pads by school children.

At the workshop, the school heads accepted their critical responsibility in creating an enabling school environment. They further gave an undertaking to do all within their powers to make sure that the project would succeed. The drama and home economics teachers had their roles spelt out. They left the workshop well motivated and looking forward to the training that was identified as a prerequisite to the development and production of materials. Universities and colleges were challenged to include in their curriculum, topics relating to sexual maturation while policy makers made an undertaking to ensure that all participating schools create a conducive environment for the implementation of the project.

#### *The Femshuleni sanitary napkin*

The lack of adequate sanitary protection among school going girls was the major finding of the sexual maturation exploratory study. This lack of sanitary protection impacts negatively on the performance, persistence and achievement of the girl child. As an immediate response to the problem of lack of sanitary protection among schoolgirls, the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the Midlands State University launched a special project that designed and produced a new product nicknamed '*The Femshuleni Sanitary Napkin*'. The pad is reusable and can be made from old vests, t-shirts, towels and any other old cloth materials thereby overcoming the costs of buying new material.

The initial awareness of the Femshuleni Napkin was done during the First Stakeholders' Workshop. Training of the trainers on how to make the pad was done at district level. The Research Team provided material requirements such as fabric, sewing thread, scissors, needles, paper patterns and pamphlets with instructional methods of how to produce the sanitary napkin. Demonstrations were done step by step so that all trainees could easily follow the procedures. The introduction of the Femshuleni Sanitary Napkin in the schools was good news to the majority of the teachers. Church organizations and women's clubs also showed interest and requested the Research Team to help them to make their own sanitary pads. Some schools that had not been included in the pilot study expressed interest in the project. To show their determination, they went ahead and got patterns on how to make the Femshuleni Napkin from neighboring schools that had received training from the Research Team. This is proof that the project received tremendous support in the province, and yielded positive results.

Workshops to teach teachers and community members how to make the 'new pad' were conducted in all the districts in the province. In the Mberengwa district for example, there was so much enthusiasm that a proposal was made to organize a local show to display the various methods and materials that could be used to produce sanitary napkins.

#### *The sanitary tank*

The Research Team in liaison with the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture organized competitions among all secondary schools in the province which offer metal work as a subject to design and produce a 15 litre sanitary tank model for use in toilets by rural schools. The results were very positive and the participating schools displayed the model tanks at a Science and Technology exhibition show in Gweru. Schools looked forward to seeing production, in big quantities of sanitary tanks to be used in school toilets. Realizing the impact of the research project on community development the Minister of Science and Technology, Dr Olivia Muchena, during a discussion with the Research Team members said, "This is what research should do. It must provide answers to social and economic problems faced by the nation. I look forward to the full implementation of the project at national level."

#### *Advocacy through drama*

Community theatre was identified as one of the most effective medium of communicating the research findings since the teachers, pupils and parents could sit together and be entertained while getting relevant messages on sexual maturation. To ensure quality production of community theatre, consultative meetings were held with experts from Amakhosi Theatre Company in Bulawayo. The Research Team had to go to Bulawayo to exchange notes with theatre professionals at Amakhosi on how best community theatre could be used to disseminate sexual maturation information to schools. The discussions resulted in the identification of two trainers from Bulawayo who came to Gweru to train drama teachers from all the districts in the Midlands province. The Theatre Skills Training Workshop for district coordinators was held at Senga Training Centre (Gweru) on 6 February 2003. Subsequent workshops for district training were held between April and June 2003.

In March 2004, the Research Team launched drama and writing competitions on sexual maturation for both primary and secondary schools. The competitions were aimed at promoting the production and use of the Femshuleni Napkin. The competitions also encouraged dialogue on sexual maturation by both boys and girls.

Ten districts in the province took part in the competitions, which kicked off on 21 March 2004, and these were Chiwundura, Mvuma, Gokwe, Zvishavane, Mberengwa, Gweru, Kwekwe, Shurugwi, Zhombe and Nembudziya districts. At each one of these districts, pupils competed in essay writing, public speaking, poetry, drama and debate. All competing schools received prizes and certificates. Winners from each district proceeded to compete at the Provincial Festival, which was held on 23 July 2004. The



guest of honor was the Deputy Provincial Education Director, Mr B.T. Dhlodhlo had this to say about the performances; “You have managed to talk about issues considered to be taboo in public without offending anyone.” The majority of the plays focused on the problems faced by the girl child, which are related to menstruation and the misconceptions that some parents have about early maturation. The spectators were so thrilled with the performances that they wished the event could be made an annual event. One school head said, “These performances should not just be limited to the Midlands Province. There is a lot that the nation would benefit from these plays because they are of high quality and packed with relevant messages, which would assist even in school management. Please go national”.

Through drama, poetry and public speaking the nagging problems common among maturing children were discussed. It was through drama/theatre that many confirmed their misconceptions, beliefs and disbeliefs about sexual maturation. It can be concluded that theatre had a great impact in breaking new ground i.e. talking about sexual maturation publicly. An official from the Department of Social Welfare, present at the provincial schools drama competition, had this to say, “This is a very good, relevant and practical way of handling problems faced by the youth. If possible always take us on board as this addresses our core business”

A representative from Msasa Project simply said, “Please don’t waste time piloting. Get sponsorship and go national with your research initiatives. This will tremendously improve the conditions in schools”

The Research Team collaborated with National Television of Zimbabwe (NTV), which produced thirteen episodes of a talk show on issues of sexual maturation.<sup>0</sup> Recording of the show was done in March 2005. The ultimate goal was to reach a wider audience using television and challenge the nation to talk about issues of sexual maturation so as to avail policy makers with information, which could be used in establishing more girl friendly school environments.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Midlands State University through a project of this nature, has demonstrated to the nation that its lecturing staff are active contributors to national and international development by carrying out research studies that address the needs of its surrounding environment. Through these research activities, the University is making a major contribution to the advancement of society. The following recommendations were made to improve the management of the sexual maturation process amongst school going boys and girls:

- There is need to consult children who are the major stakeholders on issues that affect them such as sexual maturation.
- There is need for curriculum review especially at primary school level, to accommodate sexual maturation and facilitate the proper management of sexual maturation experiences and the resultant problems.

- Schools need to change the way they view the girl child and her specific problems arising from sexual maturation.
- Teachers need to be staff developed at school level so as to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage sexual maturation.
- Schools need to be sensitized on the importance of providing proper facilities to be used by the maturing girl child. While it is important to acknowledge the economic limitations experienced by the schools, funds should be sourced to put up the necessary support facilities.
- There is need to launch similar projects in other provinces of the country.

While this research project has confirmed that sexual maturation is a serious issue in children's education, within the Midlands province, there is need for broader research to determine the extent to which sexual maturation among school pupils is a national issue.

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