

The Ellen Wilkinson School for Girls

Girls' School Association Research Project

In partnership with the Bedford Girls' School

"What impact has pain management bias had on secondary school girls' physical health and well-being across three generations?"

Authors

Aishawarrya Sivaarulraj

Annabelle Dee

Imani Ifekoya

Olanihun Fagbenle

Safiya Hamid

Sarah Ahmedova

Background

Schools and teachers are responsible for managing medical incidents throughout the school day, and the actions of school staff can impact how students experience pain (Fechner et. al., 2025). Alongside everyday instances of pain, injuries during PE lessons and menstrual pains are two areas of particular interest for pain management in all-girl secondary schools. PE is mandatory for all girls in secondary school, with 12-year-olds being most at risk of sustaining a sports-related injury (Kirkwood, Hughes, & Pollock, 2018; Sun et al., 2025), and it is estimated that between 83% and 90% of secondary school girls experience period pain (Namirembe et al., 2019). This report examines whether there is bias in girls' pain management at secondary school, and whether this has changed over time.

Methodology

In collaboration with Bedford Girls' School (BGS), the following research question was agreed upon: *"What impact has pain management bias had on secondary school girls' physical health and well-being across three generations?"*

Two online questionnaires were then created and published: one for EWS students (Appendix A) and one for parents and grandparents (Appendix B). The questions were designed to produce a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data.

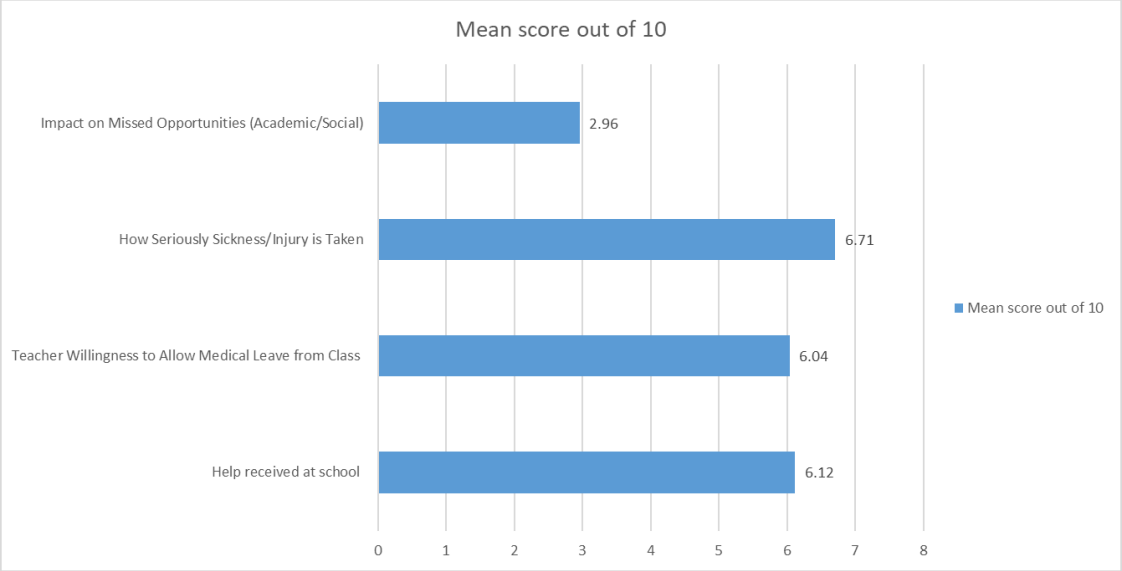
Limitations

The main limitation of this project is its scope, as data was only collected from one school is one obvious limitation, and only 10 adults completed the questionnaire. This impacts the validity of the adult responses and any comparisons between the two groups. It is also possible that some respondents might not have included minor incidents, refused to answer the questions for privacy reasons, or had a language barrier.

Data Analysis

Student Responses

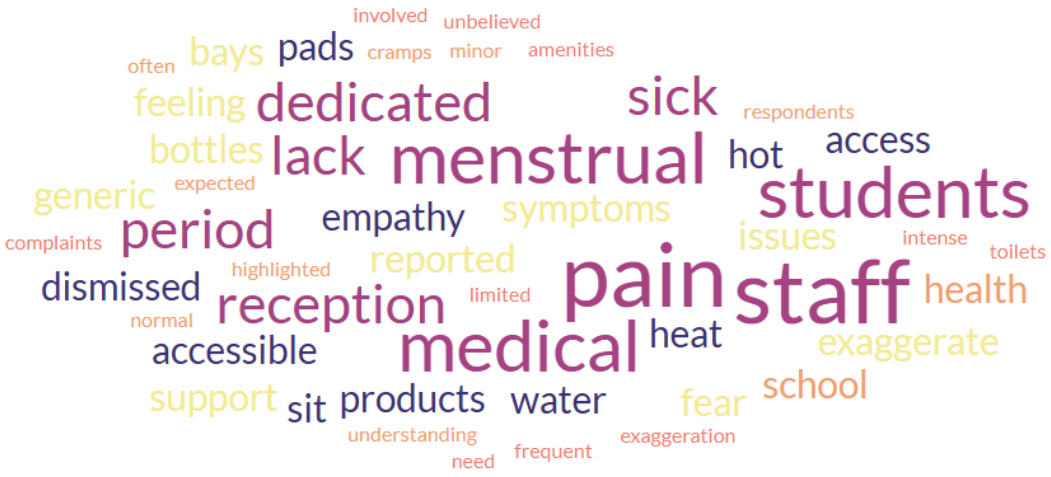
Most students said that the school took their pain seriously, and students rated the help they received an average of 67%. However, 15% of students stated the help they received was poor, rating it 40% or lower. This indicates that the school's healthcare system is functional, but inconsistent. Students rated the extent to which pain management caused them to miss academic or other opportunities as around 30%.



Analysing this data based on year-level revealed various patterns. Year 7s reported the highest amount of satisfaction in terms of health issues and pains. This could be because they are new to school and gradually becoming used to secondary school procedures. They reported an average score of 70% for the level of help they were given, and 75% for how seriously their pain is taken at school. They also experienced the highest rate of being allowed outside class for medical reasons. This could be because of a perception that year 7s are less likely to misuse pain as a reason to avoid class. Meanwhile, students in Years 8-10 reported a significant dip in responses from staff when asking for help for pain, which could indicate bias. They more commonly reported responses from teachers such as "you'll be fine", "walk it off", and "it's just cramps", which many felt was dismissive of their pain.

Year 11s reported the highest score of missing out on academic and social opportunities due to pain management and highest reluctance to ask teachers and staff about their pains. Many mentioned upcoming GCSEs as a factor in their decisions to bear their pain without support.

An analysis of frequently used words in student responses produced a word cloud with "pain" being the largest and therefore most commonly used word, followed by "staff", "students", "medical" and "menstrual".



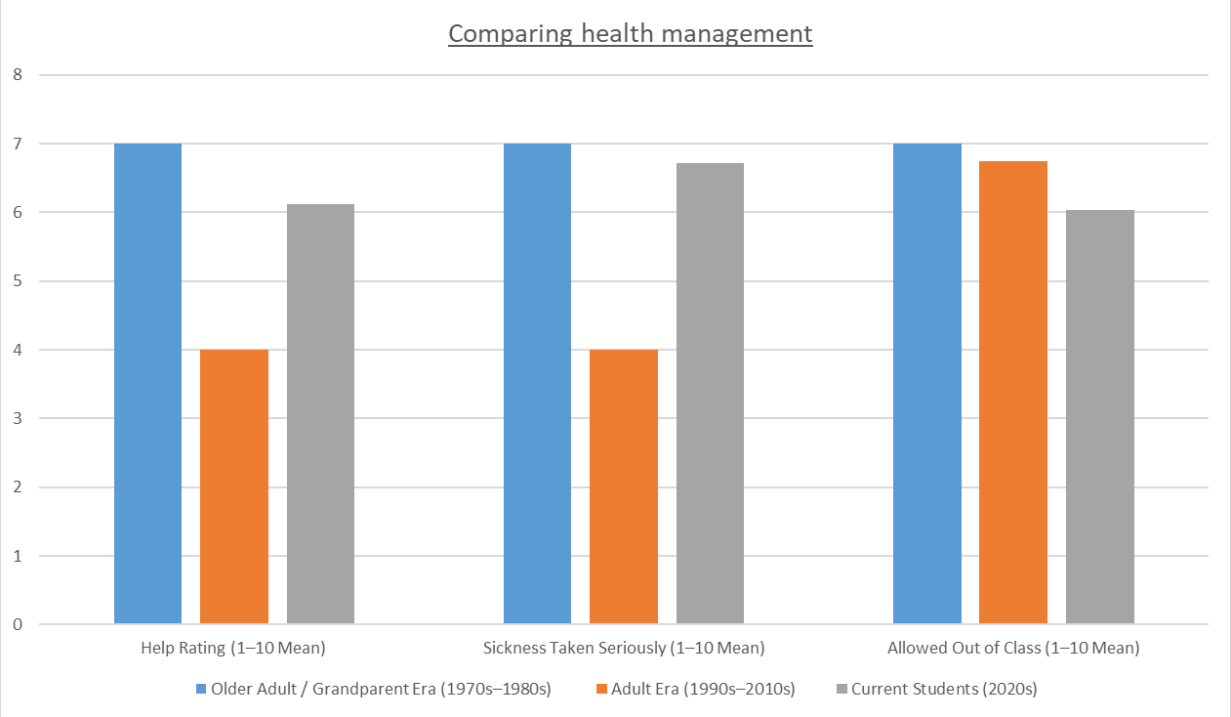
The word “menstrual” is significant, as it is the only word in the above list which was not specifically mentioned in the questionnaire. Students felt it was important to specifically include menstrual pain in their responses and commonly mentioned both a lack of period products, and the need to exaggerate their symptoms due to a lack of empathy or understanding towards their menstrual needs. There were strong emotions expressed in qualitative data, such as feelings of fear and intense pain.

Despite the fact that most students felt reasonably good about the assistance they receive at school, their experiences are highly divided, with a smaller but significant group feeling left behind and receiving very little help. This noticeable gap proves that the school's support systems are inconsistent, and may indicate bias.

Inter-generational analysis

Current students rate overall support higher than the 1990s–2010s adults. Multiple adults recalled being forced to take part in physical activities despite their pain. The opinions between the grandparents and present students show the most change. Many grandparents remembered that teachers did not take notice of their pain, whilst current students reported both an increased awareness from staff as well as their own individual voice in calling for improvements. Elderly respondents simultaneously reported high ratings for how health was handled, but their qualitative commentary reflected a culture where health issues were simply accepted without complaint. The responses from adults and grandparents generally reflect a history of pain management in schools where low awareness of pain coincided with a general attitude that students should have high pain tolerance and self-reliance. The

difference shows how schools and children's agency within schools are both changing on the topic of pain management.



Recommendations for change

Most students who took part in the survey requested access and facility improvements such as medical rooms, hot water bottles, and sanitary product dispensers. One student recommended further empathy training for staff, whilst others requested reforms to school bathroom policies such as the introduction of "period passes".

Conclusions

Collected data reveals that there has been a shift in the way pain management is being taken seriously over the past 5 decades. For the older generations, they believe that there is no medical bias, however, current students show a growing belief that there may be bias. While younger students reported higher leniency and empathy in being allowed to leave lessons to relieve their pain, years 8-10 reported a drop in this leniency, which may indicate bias. In the future students wish for pain management in school to be fair and consistent, and more specialised, especially for menstrual pain.

Reference List

Kirkwood G, Hughes TC, & Pollock AM. (2019). *Results on sports-related injuries in children from NHS emergency care dataset Oxfordshire pilot: an ecological study*. J R Soc Med. 112(3):109-118. doi: 10.1177/0141076818808430.

Sun L, Luo L, Yang Y, Wangchuan Q, & Luo J. (2025). *Gender Differences in the Incidence and Types of Sports Injuries Among Female Athletes: A Scoping Review*. J Nurs Manag. doi: 10.1155/jonm/6416101.

Fechner R, Turbitt E, Wakefield E.O., Verhagen A, Pate J.W. (2025). *Improving Pain Outcomes for Children and Adolescents at School via a Socio-Ecological Public Health Lens: A Strengths-Focused Interview Study With Teachers*. Paediatr Neonatal Pain.

Namirembe P, Nassanga A, Baleke C, Nanyonga B, Kyasanku R, Belfield S, Ssenyondwa D, Haruri EM, Nakalema S, Thomas KA, Ndekezi D, Nelson KA, Torondel-Lopez B, & Weiss HA. (2026). *Menstrual Pain Management, School Absenteeism and Educational Performance Among Adolescent Students: Cross-Sectional Mixed-Methods Analysis Nested Within a Cluster Randomised Trial.* BJOG. 133(4):761-770.

Appendix A

Student questionnaire and quantitative responses

All answers are anonymous. You will not be able to be identified by the data / answers you provide. *

1. I do not understand
2. I understand

Have you or someone you know ever had any injuries, illnesses, wellbeing issues (including minor incidents) whilst at secondary school? If so, what were they? *

(If no, then you do not need to participate any further in this survey.)

Short answer text

When you are sick or injured at school, what happens?

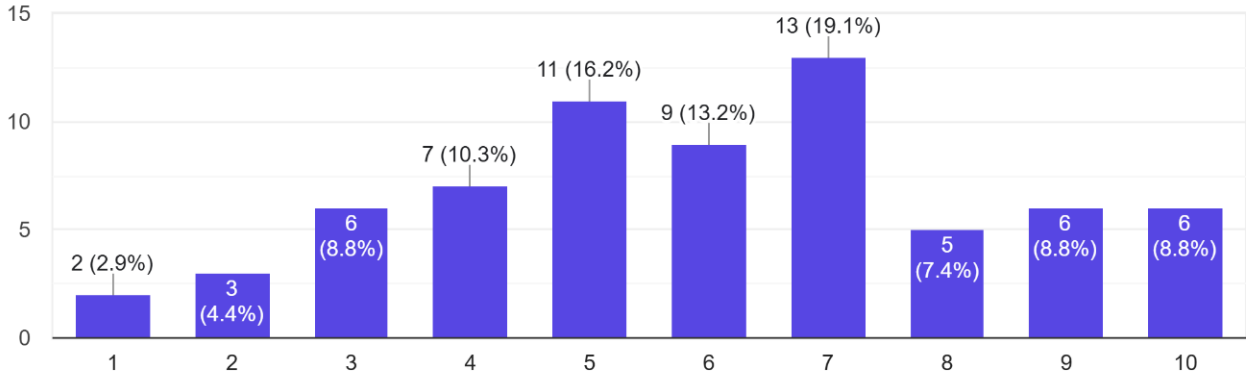
Long answer text

what to do if you are stuck into a class and theres a fire

Long answer text

Do you think treatment and procedures for dealing with sickness or injury at school is fair and consistent?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree

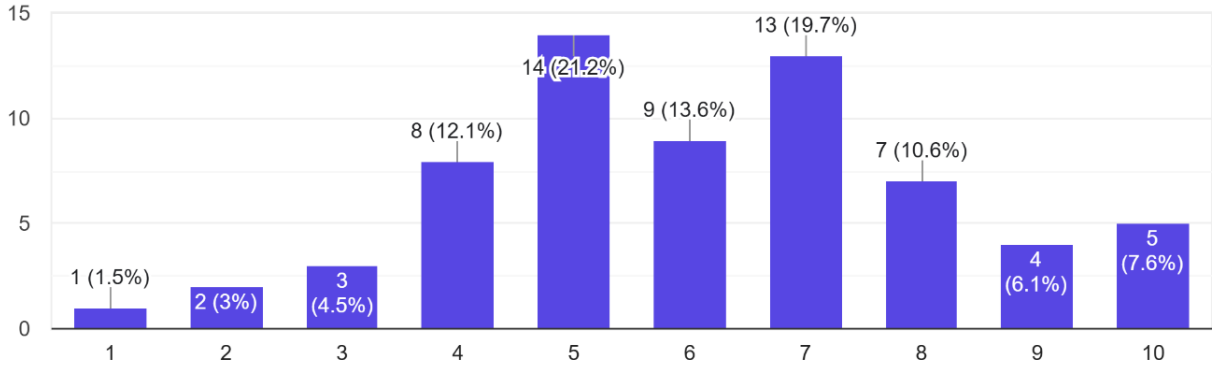


Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Short answer text

How common is it for teachers to allow you out of the classroom for medical reasons?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Very uncommon	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very common

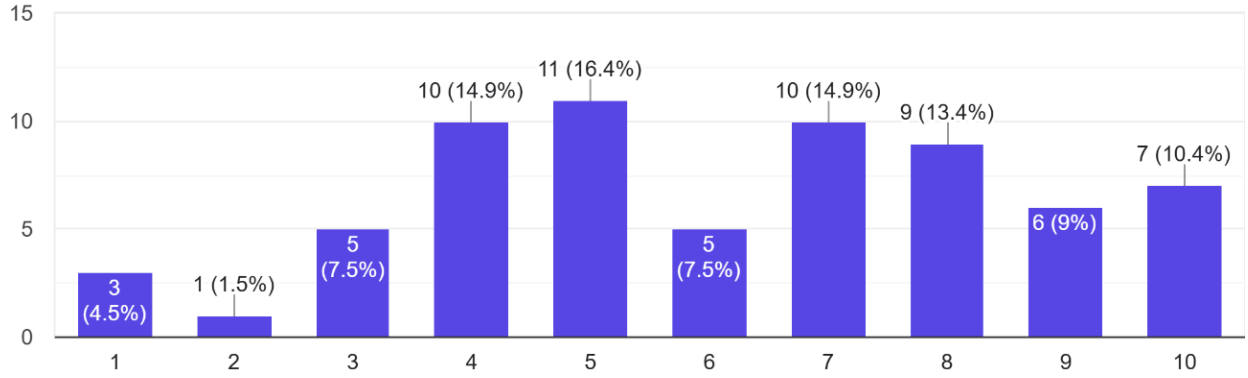


Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Long answer text

How would you rate the help you receive at school on a scale of 1-10?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Poor	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

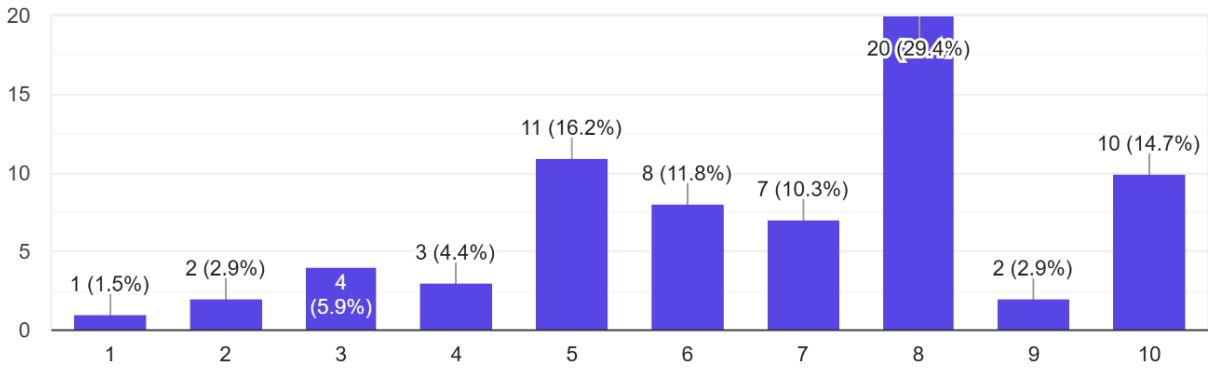


Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Long answer text

How seriously do you think sickness or injury is taken at your secondary school?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○



Can you think of a time when illness or injury was treated with bias, unfairness, was not believed, or was not taken seriously? What happened?

Long answer text

Do you ever feel like you have to exaggerate your symptoms? If so, why?

Long answer text

Have you ever forced yourself to sit through a class while in pain? If so, why?

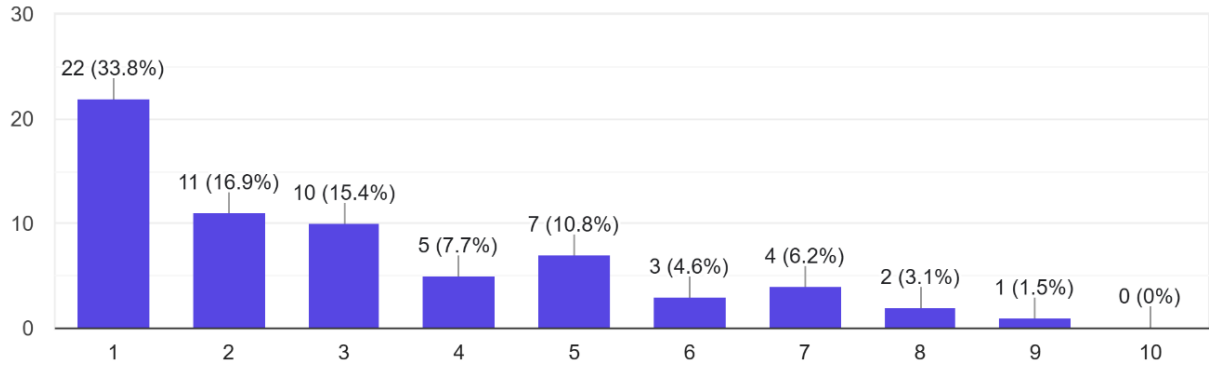
Long answer text

Do you think the way sickness or injuries were treated has affected your education? If so, how?

Long answer text

To what extent have you missed out on opportunities (academic, social, etc.) due to pain mismanagement or lack of treatment at secondary school?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I have not missed out on opportunities	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	I have missed out on most opportunities



Expain your answer above.

Short answer text

What future changes would you like to see regarding medical care in secondary schools for girls?

Long answer text

Is there anything else you wish to say about your experiences of pain management at secondary school?

Long answer text

Appendix B

Adult questionnaire and quantitative responses

All answers are anonymous. You will not be able to be identified by the data / answers you provide. *

☐ I understand

What years did you attend secondary school? *

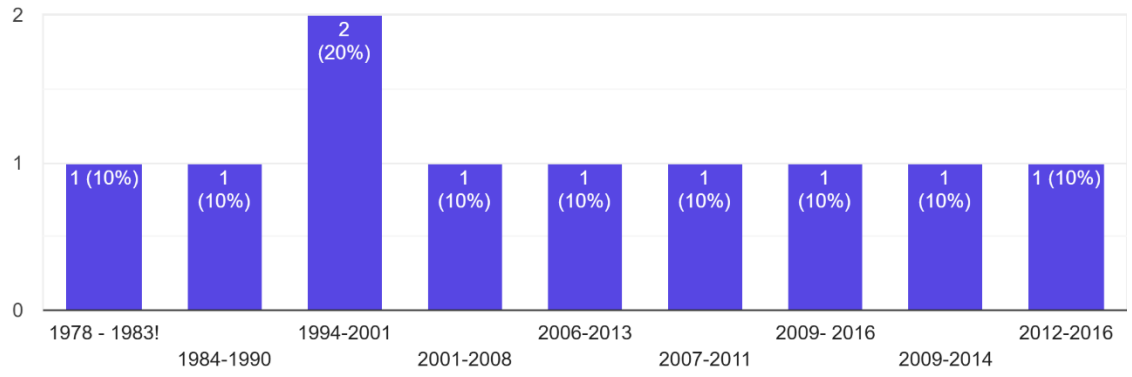
Short answer text

What kind of secondary school did you go to? *

Short answer text

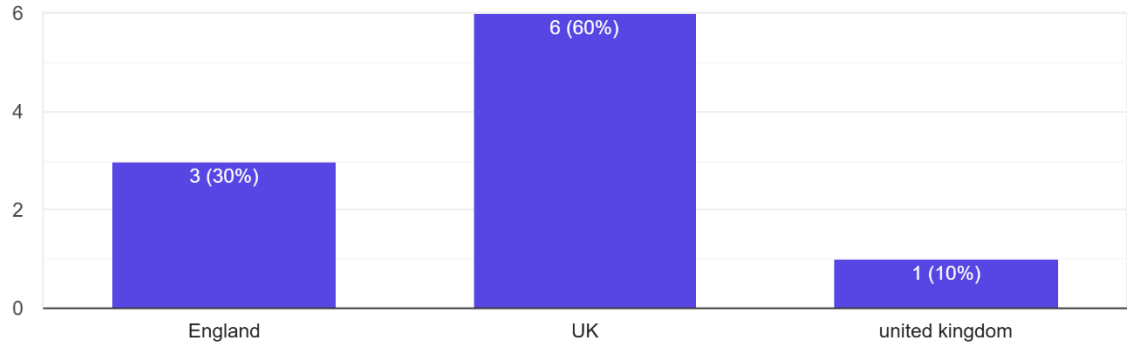
What years did you attend secondary school? *

Short answer text



What country/countries did you go to secondary school in? *

Short answer text



Have you or someone you know ever had any injuries, illnesses, wellbeing issues (including minor incidents) whilst at secondary school? If so, what were they? *

(If no, then you do not need to participate any further in this survey.)

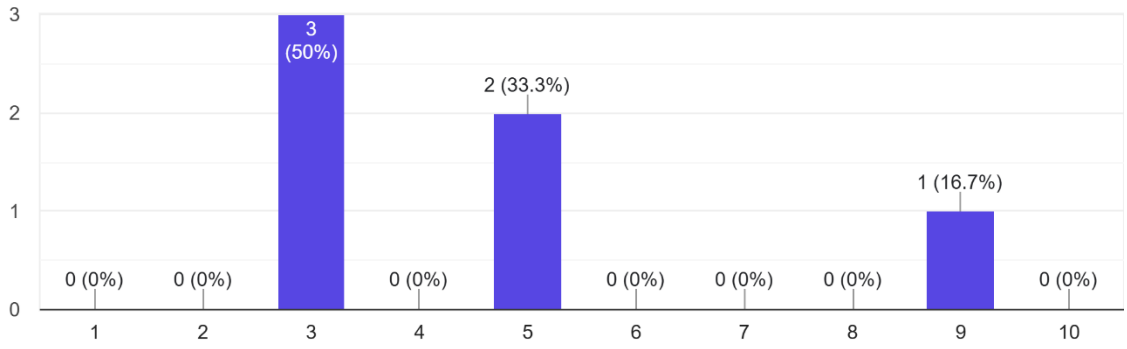
Short answer text

If you were ever sick or injured at secondary school, what help did you receive?

Long answer text

Do you think treatment and procedures for dealing with sickness or injury at school were fair and consistent?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Strongly Disagree	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Strongly Agree



Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Short answer text

How common was it for teachers to allow you out of the classroom for medical reasons?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Very uncommon	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very common

Explain why you have chosen the above number.

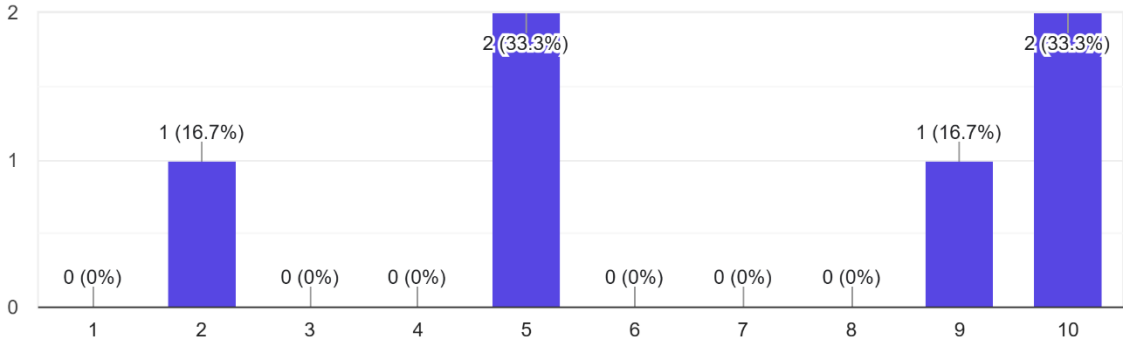
Long answer text

Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Short answer text

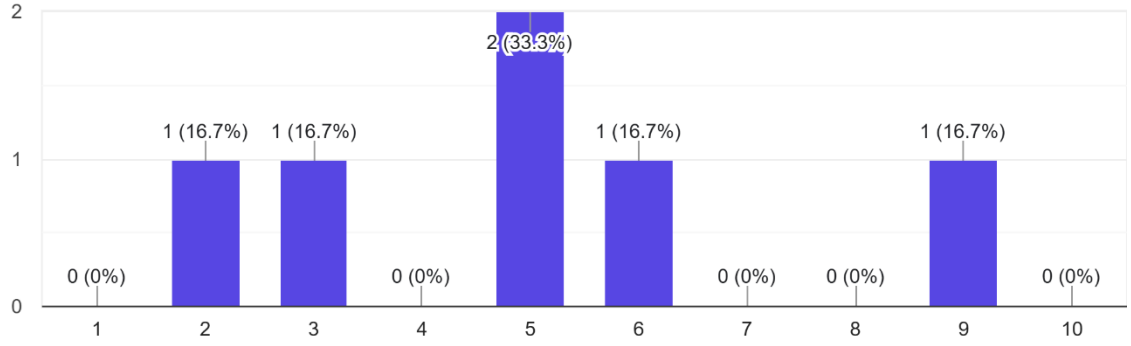
How common was it for teachers to allow you out of the classroom for medical reasons?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Very uncommon	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Very common



How would you rate the help you received at secondary school on a scale of 1-10?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Poor	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	Excellent

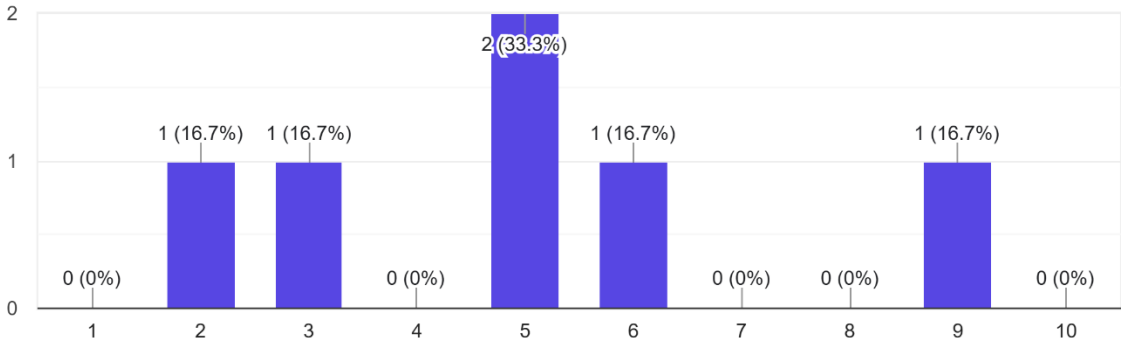


Explain why you have chosen the above number.

Long answer text

How seriously do you think sickness or injury was taken at your secondary school?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Can you think of a time when illness or injury was treated with bias, unfairness, was not believed, or was not taken seriously? What happened?

Long answer text

Did you ever feel like you have to exaggerate your symptoms? If so, why?

Long answer text

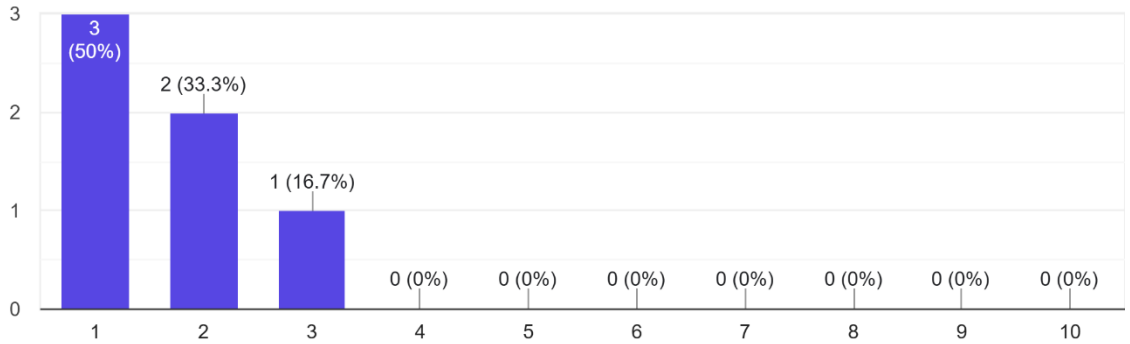
Have you ever forced yourself to sit through a class while in pain? If so, why?

Long answer text

Do you think the way sickness or injuries were treated has affected your education? If so, how?

To what extent have you missed out on opportunities (academic, social, etc.) due to pain mismanagement or lack of treatment at secondary school?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
I have not missed out on opportunities	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	I have missed out on most opportunities



Expain your answer above.

Short answer text

From your understanding, what is different in how schools treat medical issues from when you went to school until now?

Long answer text

What future changes would you like to see regarding medical care in secondary schools for girls?

Short answer text

Is there anything else you wish to say about your experiences of pain management at secondary school?

Long answer text