



Palestinian parents’ attitudes towards sex education programs: a cultural perspective

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine Palestinian parents’ attitudes towards SE in school, and attitudes’ relationships with parents’ demographic characteristics. The study included 206 Palestinian parents (150 mothers, 56 fathers), with average age of 39.35 (SD=8.10), where 127 aged ≤ 40 and 123 held academic degrees. The Participants filled categorical questionnaires which were examined by Chi-Square test. Findings indicated that the majority of parents (88.8%) supported SE as mandatory; however, they restricted discussing some contents, and preferred discussing contents that prevent premarital sex. Demographic characteristics differences showed that mothers, non-academics and younger parents held more conservative attitudes towards SE compared to fathers, academics and older parents. These innovative findings highlighted cultural aspects, suggesting that Palestinian parents perceive SE as an Abstinence-only education rather than comprehensive, and see it as an additional monitor for children’s sexual behavior. The findings also shed light on gender social roles, academic and age influence on attitudes.

Introduction

Sex education (SE) is a process of acquiring information relating to sex and building sexual health by helping students to form attitudes, values and beliefs regarding identity, relationships and intimacy (SIECUS in Pandey, 2015). SE includes several contents in different domains, such as biological information (Gordon, 2011); social skills (i.e. Joubbran et al., 2012; Gordon, 2011); and answering young people’s concrete questions (Weissblei, 2010). This process should be adapted to the learners’ age (i.e. Benson, 2009; Gordon, 2011) and to their culture (i.e. Benson, 2009; Weissblei, 2010).

Parents’ attitudes towards the implementation of SE programs

Review of the relevant literature shows that parents from diverse cultures, usually support the introduction of SE in schools (i.e. Constantine, et al., 2007; Ito et al., 2006; McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humphreys, & Markham, 2014; McKee, Ragsdale, & Southward, 2014). In states where parents support these programs they also influenced their contents (i.e. Dent & Maloney, 2016; Leung-Ling & Chen, 2017; McKee et al., 2014)

Cultural Influences of Palestinians- Citizens of Israel

Despite the fact that SE are elective in Israel, Palestinian schools lack these programs. This lack is explained by schools boards’ concerns about parents’ negative reactions (Daa’bool, 2002)

A follow-up of the opinions of Palestinian parents, citizens of Israel, on issues related to their children’s SE shows an equal discrepancy between completely rejecting and totally supportive. Parents’ views are reflected in social networking pages, through Arab media and in social gatherings. An analysis of the reasons that parents explain their acceptance or rejection of children's sex education does not always coincide with the stated objectives of the ministry of education

Demographic characteristics and parents’ attitudes towards SE

Review for very limited studies investigated this topic show relationships between parents’ demographic characteristics, such as their gender, educational level and age on the one hand, and their attitudes towards SE on the other hand. For instance, Joubbran et al (2012) found that Palestinian women more than men supported SE as a mandatory program. AugsJoost et al. (2014) showed that Californian mothers were more supportive for condom education and availability than fathers. Ling and Chen (2017) showed that Chinese parents with education until high school, were more reluctant to have their children learn about love, sex, courtship and contraceptives before completing their college, compared to parents with higher education.

Research questions

Investigating parents’ attitudes towards SE is still new, and understanding the relationship between parents’ attitudes and their demographic characteristics is even newer, our study aspired to respond to the following two questions:

1. What are the attitudes Palestinian parents hold towards SE programs.
2. Are Palestinian parents’ attitudes towards SE issues related to their gender, education and age?

Hypotheses

First hypothesis assumed that a lower support for SE implementation will be found among parents in general.

The second hypothesis assumed that there would be correlations between the parent’s attitudes towards SE in school and their demographic characteristics, so that mothers, academic parents (with university degree) and parents aged ≤ 40 would express higher support for including SE contents more than their counterparts: fathers, non-academic parents and those aged ≥41.

Methodology

Participants

The study included 206 Palestinian parents (150 mothers, 56 fathers), with average age of 39.35 (SD=8.10), where 123 parents are academics (University graduate); 127 parents are ≤ 40 years of age. Average age was 39.35 with SD=8.10. 90% of parents are Muslims: 49% religious, 43% conservatives.

Research materials

Demographic questionnaire was specially constructed for the present study. The questionnaire included 11 questions composed to elicit information such as the participants’ sex, age, religion, education, economic status, number of children in the family, and level of knowledge concerning sex education.

Questionnaire testing parents’ attitudes towards SE. This questionnaire was developed by Blendon (2004). The questionnaire was translated into Hebrew by Joubbran (2010). Some questions underwent amendment, and the amended version was then translated into Arabic in corresponding to academic validity.

The Arabic questionnaire included 42 items which constitute of different scales. For the purpose of this study, we focused on items 8-33 which examine attitudes towards SE. The majority of the items are measured on nominal scale, except for item 16 which is measured on ordinal scale. Items 10, 26, 30,32, and 33 we measured on an interval scale.

Internal reliability of the Hebrew questionnaire was 0.97 for items 8-33. Internal reliability of the translated Arabic questionnaire was 0.82.

Research variables

First independent variable: Gender (1) men , (2) women.

Second independent variable: Educational level (1) Non-academic (2) Academic.

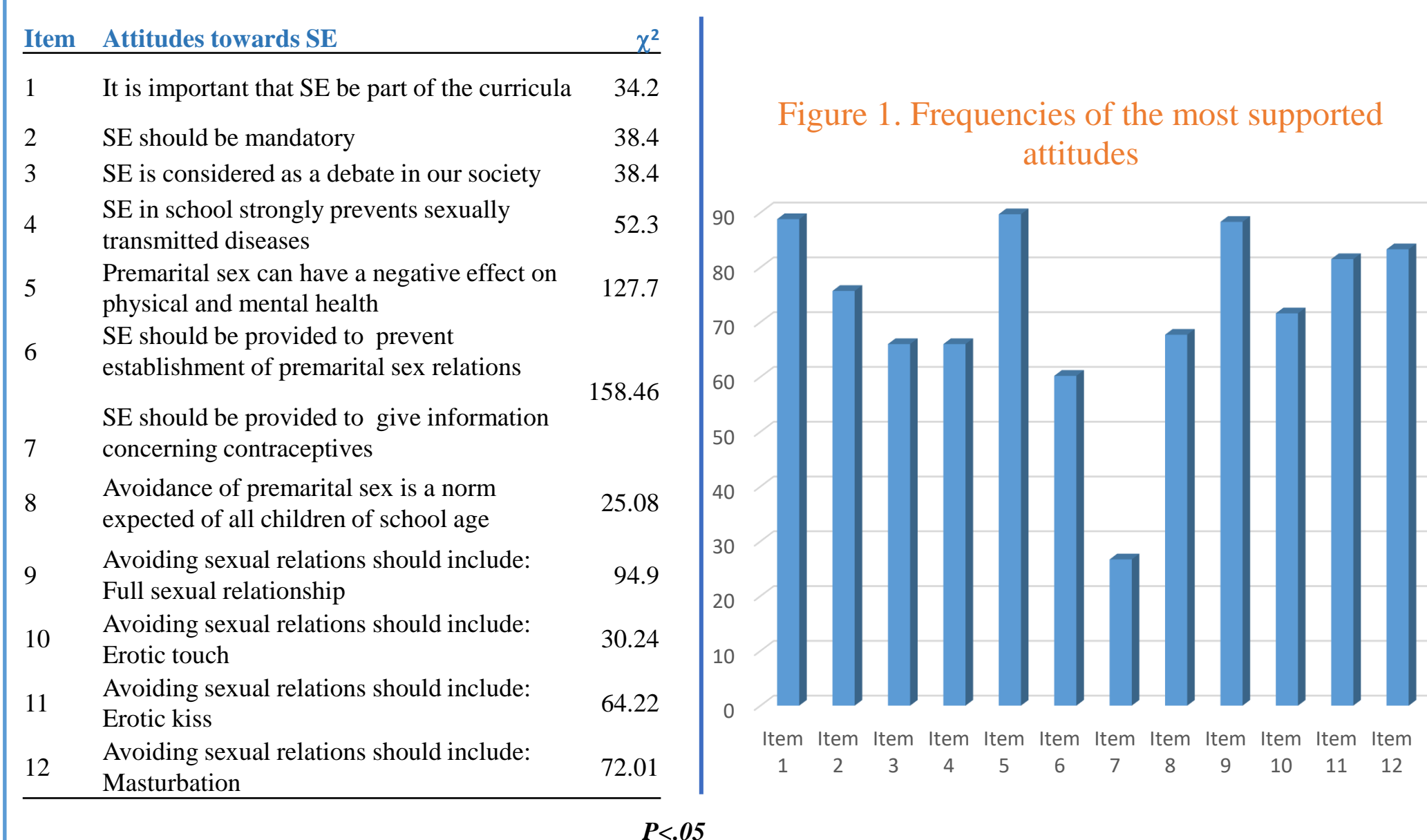
Third independent variable: Age group (1) ≤40 ,(2) ≥ 41.

Testing hypotheses:

Chi-Square test for goodness of fit was used for the items on nominal scaled, and univariate test was used for the items on interval scale. All the tests were conducted on SPSS version 21.

Results

Table 1. Chi-square test results for the most supported attitudes (≥51% agreement) of parents towards SE contents, by frequencies and χ^2 values . N= 206.



First Hypothesis: parents’ attitudes towards SE implementation and its contents.

As shown in table 1, the results revealed an overwhelming support for SE endorsement at schools and its contents. While the majority of parents saw that SE is a debated topic in the society, they strongly agreed that it should be considered as a mandatory program and a part of the curricula. Parents strongly believed that students need boundaries to be set for them on sex issues, and they need to learn about those boundaries. Parents also saw that the purpose of SE at school should be preventing premarital sex relations, and that SE is very influential in this prevention. Most of the parents believed that premarital sex can have negative effect on physical and mental health; they agreed that premarital sex avoidance is a norm expected from all people of all ages; this avoidance should include: full sexual relationship, erotic touch, erotic kiss, and masturbation.

Second Hypothesis: the relationship between parents’ attitudes towards SE and their demographic characteristics.

Table 2. Univariate *F* test for the attitude “SE in school protects students from physical sex-related problems” as a dependent variable. Gender, educational level and age as independent variables (N= 206).

	Gender		Educational level		Age		Overall Univariate test	Sig.
	Fathers	Mothers	Non-AC	AC	≤40	≥41		
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)				
	4.16 (0.10)	4.75 (0.08)	4.25 (0.08)	4.83 (0.10)	4.24 (0.08)	4.39 (0.10)		
F value (η ²)	6.21* (.03)		1.06 (.005)		1.32 (.007)		2.79**	.008
*P<.05, **p<.01								

1. Gender differences:

The results presented in table 2 show a main effect for gender seeing SE as a protection from physical sex-related problems, mothers more than fathers believe in this attitude.

Table 3. Chi-Square test for the relationship between gender and parents’ attitudes towards SE (N= 206).

Attitudes towards SE in school	Fathers n=56	Mothers n=150	df	X ²	V
Avoiding premarital sex should include complete sex relation	67.7	92.4	1	7.51**	.21
Avoiding premarital sex should include erotic touch	58.1	67.5	1	5.22*	.18
SE in school should be elective	33.9	16.0	4	12.527*	.24
SE in school should be mandatory	64.3	80.0			
* <i>p</i> <.05, ** <i>p</i> <.01					

Table 3 shows Chi-square test results for gender differences in attitudes towards SE contents. As the table indicates, women more than men believed that avoiding premarital sex should include full sex relation as well as erotic touch, and they supported the endorsement of SE as a mandatory program more than men. No significant differences were found among gender for other tested attitudes (sig >.05).

2. Academic level differences:

As for the relationship between attitudes and academic level of parents, Chi- Square test results revealed significant differences between academic and non-academic parents in assignment of SE contents to different school levels. A large percentage of academics saw the following items as more suitable for junior high school: Masturbation (39.7%), intimacy (58.9%), communication with the partner about sexual relations (50.7%) respectively, compared to lower percentages among non-academics (30.3%; 14.3%; and 33.1% respectively). **Apportion** was chosen by academics as more appropriate to senior high school (53.4%), high percentage of non-academics saw this content as non-appropriate (30.1%).

3. Age groups differences:

The results presented in table 4 show that age groups of parents differ in their attitudes towards some of SE contents. Large proportion of parents aged ≥41 thought that homosexuality is wrong compared to parents aged ≤40 who thought so. However, the same proportion of parents aged ≤40 agreed that students should learn about homosexuality without discussing whether it is acceptable or wrong, compared to only 17.7% of parents aged ≥41.

Table 4. Chi-square test results for the relationship between parents’ age and their attitudes (N= 206).

Attitudes towards SE in school	Age group		df	X ²	V
	≤40 (n=127)	≥41 (n=79)			
Learning about homosexuality is: acceptable	11.1%	19.0%	6	13.23**	.25
wrong	29.4%	45.6%			
Students should learn about homosexuality without discussing whether it is acceptable or wrong	29.4%	17.7%			
*P<.05, **p<.01					

Discussion

This study was the first to investigate Palestinian parents attitudes towards SE taking into consideration some demographic characteristics. Against to our expectations, the results of the first hypothesis showed overwhelming support for SE at schools and to some of its contents. In general, those findings are in concordance with previous Western studies (i.e. McKay et al., 2014; McKee et al., 2014; Fentahun et al., 2012), as well as studies conducted in the Middle-East (i.e. Makol-Abdul et al., 2009; Jourbran et al., 2012). However, the contents chosen for SE reflect the parents’ conservative perspectives and their tendency to restrict SE for biological aspect and preventing pre-marital sexual relations (Abstinence-only SE), rather than comprehensive SE. This is at odds with other studies (i.e. Dent & Maloney, 2016; Joubbran et al., 2012; Leung Ling & Chen, 2017) where parents also restricted SE to Abstinence- only program.

Apparently, Palestinian parents attitudes are in concordance with the Arabic cultural values regarding sex, which does not allow speaking about sex in the public, and it prohibits any kind of premarital sexual relations (Abu-Baker, 2002; 2007); accordingly, we see that Palestinian parents perceive SE as an extra monitor to their children’s sexual behavior.

Examination of the relationship between parents’ attitudes and their demographic characteristics is still underrepresented in the literature. Our results showed that mothers, non academic parents and parents aged ≥41 relatively hold more conservative attitudes towards SE compared to their counterparts. As for gender differences, we refer differences to social expectations from mothers as acculturation agents who are responsible for teaching their cultural values to their children. As for academic levels and age groups, the results are in consistent with Ling and Chen (2017) study which showed that older parents and those with non-academic degrees held more conservative and constrictive attitudes towards SE.

Our study maps comprehensive picture of Palestinian parents’ attitudes towards SE; this picture contributes to schools educators in their decision-making concerning SE; also it may assist professionals in identifying “mistaken” attitudes towards sexual issues, and for building appropriate SE programs at schools. Our new Arabic questionnaire is a methodological contribution, and our findings may open the doors for future studies about more specific SE contents or their relations to more demographic characteristics.

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