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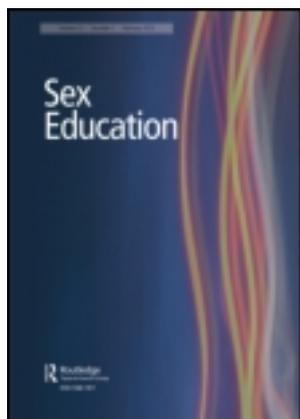
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Understanding parental views of adolescent sexuality and sex education in Ecuador: a qualitative study

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Parents' contribution to sex education is increasingly receiving research attention. This growing interest stems from recognition of the influence that parental attitudes may have both on young people's sexual attitudes and behaviour, and on school-based sex education. Studies regarding parental attitudes towards sexuality are, however, still rare. The two main objectives of this study were to explore parental views about sexuality and to understand parental attitudes towards sex education. Four focus group discussions were conducted with parents from high schools in Cuenca, Ecuador. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that parents held a restricted view about sex education, grounded in traditional religious ideas about sexuality, which led parents to understand it as a morally and physically dangerous activity. Although parents expressed a willingness to make good quality sex education available to their children, they reported having insufficient personal resources to fulfil that objective. The results of this study provide important information about the need to develop and adapt sex education to each specific cultural context, thereby confirming the importance of knowing about the cultural traditions and religious beliefs that may form obstacles to effective sex education for young people in Ecuador.

Keywords: young people; sex education; parents; Ecuador

Introduction

Sexuality is a vital aspect of human development with biological, psychological and social components, which may facilitate identity, well-being, pleasure, affectivity, relationships and reproduction (Formenti 2005; Ahmadi 2010). Sexuality also refers to the human potential of consciousness and specific forms of behaviour that are likely to change at different stages of life (Tiefer 1995; Zubarew 2006). Such a broad-based understanding of sexuality implies that a broad perspective is also needed for sex education. In particular, sex education should go far beyond providing information within a biology or social science course, and should include the nurturing of skills, attitudes and behaviours, as well as critical reflection on personal experiences in the arena of relationships and sexuality (Halstead and Reiss 2006). However, when sex education is understood in such a holistic manner, it presupposes something more than the provision of school-based sex education. It becomes necessary to understand the contribution of a

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range of other factors that, both formally and informally, influence the sexual behaviour of young people.

In reality, the sexual behaviour of young people is influenced by attitudes and values that start to develop long before they begin to attend school. Moreover, during schooling, young people continue to be strongly influenced by messages from the family, peers and the media. Among these, the family – and especially parents – occupies a prime and unique position to guide and help young people to become healthy sexual adults (Miller et al. 1998). Family variables – such as the biological transmission of potential characteristics and the compositional features of families – have an important impact on the sexual development and behaviour of adolescents (Miller, Benson, and Galbraith 2001; Martino et al. 2007; Elley 2010). Aside from these factors, in recent decades much attention has been given to the socialisation and educational processes that occur within families, a trend that is based on the recognition of the potential families have for shaping young people's behaviours, beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality (Fisher 1988; Walker 2004).

Due to growing recognition of its importance, parents' role in sex education has begun to receive attention from researchers, with the main focus being directed at parent–child communication processes (Miller et al. 1998; Rosenthal and Feldman 1999; Walker 2001; Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman 2005; Martino et al. 2007; Usher-Seriki, Smith, and Callands 2008; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009; Elley 2010; Meschke and Dettmer 2012). In contrast, relatively little attention has been given to parental views, values and attitudes towards adolescent sexuality (Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg 1986; Fisher 1988; McKay, Pietrusiak, and Holowaty 1998). Knowledge about parental views is important not only for how these may influence young people's behaviour, but also for how they impact on school-based sex education programmes. The implementation of school-based sex education often provokes clashes and strong reactions from parents (*El Mundo.es* 2011; FEDEPAR 2011; Zenit 2011), reactions that are often grounded in cultural beliefs and mores which influence adults' views about sex education.

Although several scholars have suggested that any study regarding the influence of families on sex education must adopt a contextual approach – in which the specific cultural factors that may influence sexuality and sex education may be taken into account – currently there is only limited scientific literature on this topic in Latin American contexts (Caricote 2006; Puentes Rodríguez 2008). This finding is in contrast with the increasing scientific interest in the topic of sexuality more generally over the last few decades in Latin America. Araujo and Prieto (2008) suggested that this contrast can be explained by two main characteristics of studies on sexuality in Latin America. First, most studies emphasise the political processes sexuality generates. Second, in Latin America, sexuality is still a much stigmatised subject that is more frequently considered as an element to be regulated rather than an object of study (Araujo and Prieto 2008). There are, however, specific characteristics of Latin American culture that are likely to have an important impact on young people's sexual development, for example *machismo* and religion. In Latin American culture, *machismo* refers to a strong double standard with an extreme division of gender roles. For men, *machismo* defines a man's role to be virile, promiscuous, aggressive and authoritarian (Sequeira 2009). For women, *machismo* implies the corresponding traditional female role including submissiveness, virginity until marriage and responsibility for child rearing and non-financial household maintenance – sometimes also defined as *marianismo*. *Machismo* thus refers to a complex set of beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviours according to which men and women have clear and distinct conceptions of their gender roles at home and society (Sequeira 2009). This division of gender roles is directly related to a distinct valuation of certain sexual behaviours and

contributes to a sexual double standard, according to which greater freedom is assumed for men than for women in terms of sexual behaviour (Sierra et al. 2007).

Latin American cultures are also characterised by the strong influence of religion and the church on social policy, especially in the field of (sex) education. More generally, the impact of religion and religious ideas on sexuality has long been recognised (Haffner 2011). Current views about sexuality in Latin America are still strongly based on definitions of sexuality, and on religious teachings that emphasise procreation as the only purpose of sex. These stress sexual behaviour as exclusively reserved for married couples, virginity as highly valued and masturbation and homosexuality as practices to be admonished (Hubbard 1990; Daniluk and Brown 2008).

In Ecuador, in recent years there has been a rejection of formal sex education programmes because the content of these programmes was thought to be incongruous with religious teaching. Moreover, implementing such programmes has been seen as overruling parents' right to be primary sex educators (Ecuadorinmediato.com 2006; Dupret 2007; Clavijo 2011), a right that has been recognised in international agreements (Convención Iberoamericana de Derechos de la Juventud 2005; IPPF 2009) and is guaranteed by the National Constitution (*Constitución de la República del Ecuador* 2008). In the same Constitution, however, the right to autonomous decision-making about sexuality and sexual orientation, and the right to free access to sex education taking into account a gender and empowerment approach, are also recognised. In this respect, it is striking that the last National Census held in Ecuador revealed high rates of teenage pregnancy with consequent hasty marriages, as well as high divorce rates, which are all indirect indications that there is room for improving the sex education young people receive. Of all the cities in Ecuador, Cuenca appeared to perform especially badly in terms of adolescent sexual health indicators (INEC 2012). This may possibly be linked with the fact that Cuenca has also been identified as a city with strong cultural traditions that are reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of its population. This raises questions about how these same traditions might be reflected in the sex education given to young people.

Therefore, the aims of the present study were to (a) explore the views of parents in Cuenca about sexuality; (b) examine parental perceptions and emotions about sex education; and (c) understand the problems parents face in providing sex education within the family.

Methods

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, a qualitative research strategy was chosen. A qualitative approach allows for the examination of a broad range of parental ideas and perspectives on this topic, without imposing strongly preconceived notions from the researchers. This study's primary data were collected during the academic year 2008–2009. The study was based on focus group sessions conducted with both male and female parents of young people attending high schools in Cuenca.

Participants

Since the study was part of a broader research project aimed at improving current sex education programmes in schools, the parents who participated in this study were members of local Parents Committees. In Ecuador, every class has a parents committee constituted by four elected parents who represent parents' views to the school authorities. In three high schools – two public and one private – participating in the broader study,

parents were recruited through initial contact with the high school authorities and were included based on the fact that they had at least one child in the 12–19 year age range at the time of the focus group sessions.

The group of participants consisted of 20 parents: 8 men and 12 women. The average age of participants was 44 years old (ranging from 33 to 64). The average number of children they had was two with an average age of 16 years old. The majority of parents were married ($n = 14$), some were divorced ($n = 5$) and one of the participants was widowed. In terms of educational level, 3 parents had only completed primary school, 11 had completed secondary school and 6 had completed higher education. With regard to religious affiliation, most of the parents reported themselves to be Catholic ($n = 19$), with only one reporting herself to be Evangelist, thereby reflecting the distribution of religions in accordance with the national distribution in Ecuador (INEC 2012).

Data collection

The use of focus groups as a method of data collection provided the opportunity to study individual beliefs, attitudes, values, norms and experiences within the context of group interaction (Wagstaff, Abramson, and Pinkerton 2000) as well as to explore more latent attitudes, opinions and behavioural patterns (Byers, Zeller, and Byers 2002). Focus groups of participants included male and female parents, with some participants from each school also being married to one another and taking part in the same focus group. The focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish and were moderated by a female developmental psychologist in her early 40s, although the principal researcher also attended all groups. All discussions were recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy. After participating in the focus group discussions, parents were invited to attend a meeting about sexuality and sex education in which they could discuss their main concerns about their children's sexual development with members of the research team.

Data analysis

Data were processed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which was performed using Atlas-ti software (Muhr and Friese 2004). Transcripts were reviewed by three independent coders. First, the data were carefully read to identify the codes relevant to this research topic, and a list of codes was created. Second, codes were sorted and collated into themes based on which thematic maps of analysis were built. Third, the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of codes and themes were analysed and, for each individual theme, a detailed analysis was conducted in order to identify sub-themes.

Throughout the entire process of analysis, constant comparative method was used, continually comparing the codes against each other, and the codes and themes with the data. After four focus group sessions, data saturation was reached.

Different strategies were used to optimise the reliability of the findings, including coordinated communication between the coders through regular meetings in which analyses were shared, the cross-checking of codes through the comparison of independently derived researcher results, peer debriefing with other project members reviewing the outcome of the study, and member checking with the final report being returned to participants for comment.

The quotations used in this paper were translated into English by the principal researcher and then translated back into Spanish by one of the co-investigators.

The English language quotations were modified where necessary to ensure that the original meanings from the Spanish quotations were retained.

Ethics

Approval for this project was granted by the Institutional Research Board of the University of Cuenca. Parents were informed about the objectives, procedures and benefits of the study. Participation was voluntary and each participant signed an informed consent form in which confidentiality and the anonymous analysis of data were assured.

Findings

Parents were first asked to express their views about sexuality, since understanding their perceptions about sexuality would facilitate a better exploration of their views about sex education.

Parents' views about sexuality

Parents stated that talking about their children's sexuality generates concern and anxiety, especially when referring to current indicators of sexual behaviour among young people in Cuenca, e.g. sexual initiation at increasingly younger ages, the high number of unplanned teenage pregnancies and the consequential requirement to marry.

Parents' narratives revealed that their views regarding sexuality are closely related to the cultural forces and societal traditions that have shaped their experiences. For participants, sexuality was related to moral values and social mores that change neither over time nor from place to place. Of the different features informing parental views, religion and machismo were the most salient factors. Parents recognised that religion – both Catholic and Evangelical – had exerted, and still exerts, a fundamental role in setting the parameters of behaviour in the area of sexuality. In fact, parents referred to religion, and the rules they had learned in, and promoted by, the church, as their immediate point of reference for their understanding of sexuality.

In conjunction with these religious undertones, parents mentioned strong links between sexuality, love and commitment. This demonstrates a somewhat narrow view of sexuality equating sexuality with sexual intercourse, restricted to adult heterosexual couples within the institution of marriage and with reproduction being the main reason for this union.

Parents considered that premarital sex could potentially be seen as debauchery, or would even amount to what they considered to be prostitution:

For me, sexuality should be taken seriously, so I tell my daughter that if you give yourself to your boyfriend [which means having sex with him], and then you break up with him later and another boyfriend comes along and you give yourself to him too . . . that's obscene! That, for me, is like prostitution! And I do not agree with that! (Teresa, age 55)

Furthermore, virginity until marriage and fidelity were viewed by parents as the most valuable qualities to instil in their offspring. This view of sexuality – as something exclusively for adults – implies a lack of acceptance of young people's sexuality and, therefore, parents refused to talk about the use of contraceptives. Most usually, when parents were asked about contraceptive use, the conversation was changed through emphasising the importance of abstinence as the only 'fool-proof' method:

Moderator: Have you talked to your children about the use of contraceptives?

Participant: In relation to that I have said: ‘men can also wait until marriage, [it] is not obligatory to have sexual relations before marriage, men can also be chaste until they get married and then the two of you can learn together. In that way, you’ll also prevent so many diseases that there are nowadays ... sexually transmitted diseases and so on ...’. (Catherine, age 39)

The conception of sexuality as an expression of love within a partnership was reflected in the rejection of other sexual practices such as masturbation. Some parents indicated that masturbation was believed to cause brain damage in young people and sexual problems in their future marriage:

I don’t think masturbation is normal, probably because the mind can be twisted and develop misunderstandings about sexuality: about what it is, and how it is used. (Yadira, age 52)

Somewhat paradoxically, other parents suggested that masturbation might be acceptable for single men as a strategy for avoiding sexual intercourse, but it would not be acceptable for married men, whereas for women, masturbation was not even a topic for discussion.

The influence of religious admonition was also reflected in the opposition that parents showed towards abortion and homosexuality, although parents had different reactions to the two topics. Parents avoided discussing the issue of abortion by expressing their clear and firm rejection of it; they considered it to be a crime and therefore not acceptable under any circumstances:

From the moment you get pregnant, even if the woman has been raped, you could not do anything like this ... because life already exists there! (Mercedes, age 44)

While discussion of abortion was limited, the issue of homosexuality was raised several times during the focus group discussion and generated a series of questions and concerns. Parents expressed a distinct lack of awareness by associating homosexuality with mental illness.

Another important cultural factor that parents brought up was machismo and its relationship to traditional gender role expectations and norms. Machismo implies a double standard with clear differences and inequalities between men and women in terms of sexuality and this was expressed as a clear dichotomy in the parents’ judgements. Women were considered to be vulnerable and in need of protection, while men were presented as being guided by an uncontrollable sex drive and irresponsible in terms of sexual behaviour. As such, abstinence before marriage was expected of women, while for men sexual experience was acceptable and even encouraged. In congruence, the fears and concerns expressed by parents were also different according to their children’s gender. For daughters, parents expressed a permanent fear of the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy and the negative consequences that this could bring, especially because of the social rejection involved. In this context, the depreciation of a single mother became clear as it is linked to economic factors affecting their quality of life:

I am afraid of two things: that my daughter would become a single mother, and that my daughter would not become a professional. Because women, wherever we are, are still in a situation where a single mother is rejected. In my opinion, a single mother will no longer have the opportunity to pursue a career. (Yolanda, age 34)

For sons, parental concerns were more focused on avoiding contracting sexually transmitted diseases and the possibility that they might ‘damage a girl’ for not controlling their sexual urges:

Well, when my son fell in love and started a relationship, I told him: ‘Watch out! Be careful not to harm the girl’ [which means: do not have sexual relations with the girlfriend]. (Mariana, age 52)

Participants did, however, recognise that society has not been fair to women due to the existence of machismo and they expressed an intention to change society for future generations. This intention to change was, however, mainly expressed by those parents who had daughters:

I think that we live in a *machista* society and we are fighting to change it. This is necessary, at least when you have a daughter... that gives you a reason to reflect. (Daniel, age 55)

Parents' views about sex education

In discussing sex education, parents were first questioned about their own experiences of the sex education they themselves had received and, thereafter, they were asked about their experiences of sex education as parents.

Sex education in the previous generation

Parents stressed that during their own adolescence, formal sex education had been almost non-existent:

I am thirty-six years old and nobody has talked to me about it [sexuality], or at least I don't remember. (Edison, age 36)

With regard to sex education at home, participants did not recognise this as a formal process, although they did mention that some topics had been addressed by their parents, and these showed clear gender differences. Women reported that they had received information about menstruation, virginity, fidelity and marriage. In contrast, men reported that they had not received any specific information at home.

Parents indicated that their experiences of sex education at home had been based on an informal process in the control and repression of sexuality, resulting in feelings of loneliness and frustration:

My life was very repressed in my teens. My father was very strict and controlling in that respect. Back then, my life was very limited, my youth was like a lonely field ... that was a life that I've never lived. (Luis, age 55)

With regard to sex education at school, participants recognised that they had received sex education, but they also said that it had been largely focused on biological aspects and on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

Sex education at home nowadays

When parents were asked about current efforts to address the topic of sexuality with their children, their comments ran along two lines: on the one hand, they expressed their desire and willingness to provide sex education at home, but on the other hand, they mentioned several significant obstacles to doing so. Parents indicated that their main limitation was their own lack of knowledge. In addition, parents mentioned that their children had received so much information already and, as a consequence, they refused to talk about the topic anymore, which gave parents the feeling that 'they already know everything!' Furthermore, parents also indicated that talking with their children about sexuality generated feelings of shame and anxiety.

Broaching the issue of sexuality was a polarised problem for parents based on their gender. Informants conveyed that, in most cases, it was the mother who talked about the issue with the children, and that daughters received more attention than sons. The role of the father seemed to be restricted to that of an authority figure, warning children about

risky situations, preventing the transgression of rules and giving reprimands or punishments in the case of transgression. Even though some parents considered the father to be the best person to talk to their sons, they also recognised the fact that fathers do not generally talk or communicate about this topic with them. Moreover, and quite strikingly, communication between father and daughter in the area of sexuality was thought to be disrespectful and an intrusion into a daughter's privacy.

Gender differences are thus indicative of cultural patterns whereby girls and boys receive disparate forms of sex education. For daughters, parents reported that they seek intimate communication and aim to be careful and somewhat repressive with them, while for sons, a repressive approach was less evident and communication was less frequent.

Parents expressed clear aims for communicating about sexuality. It was clear that their main objective for sex education was to prevent premarital sex and to promote abstinence. To reach this goal, parents described using different strategies to forestall the onset of sexual intercourse and especially to protect their daughters. These strategies included formal discussion, threats, life project promotion and efforts to develop values, while other strategies focused on more informal processes such as modelling and controlling.

The majority of strategies took the form of a kind of intimidation. Sex education in families appeared to be mainly based on informing children about the risky aspects of sexuality and creating a climate of fear around sexuality:

[When] I talk to my daughters, [I do] not just tell them that sex is bad, but I tell them about venereal diseases, that the worst things that can hurt a woman are AIDS and HPV, which is a major cause of cancer of the uterus, and many other things ... I also tell her that she might be affected psychologically (Magui, age 44)

This fear of sexuality was also engaged by threatening young people in order to prevent them from taking sexual risks:

Once my daughter asked me: 'Daddy, what would you do if I got pregnant?' and I told her: 'You would have to have your child and then you would need to sell candies to bring him up. You would have to stop studying and start working!' (Miguel, age 54)

It was important for some parents to emphasise long-term life goals, stressing that sex would interfere with the attainment of these goals. Parents stated that they stressed that an unwanted pregnancy would lead to a lost opportunity to gain entry to a profession and so early commencement of sexual activity may go against success in later life.

Thus, parents often framed their method of sex education as developing values in their children, stressing that the best strategy to help their children to face reality was moral education. Values mentioned by parents were chastity, fidelity and respect for self and others. These values were often emphasised through some form of modelling as a way of teaching their children about sexuality:

We can be a role model for them. To create the environment where they grow up and where they learn from the time they are children. It is not only necessary to talk about sex, and to say: 'sex ... and sex!' I think if we have defined moral and ethical principles, that is enough. (Silvia, age 52)

As common as modelling were efforts to more directly control children's behaviour. Parents' comments showed that they used a variety of tactics to control their children and they cited several examples of strategies they undertook, such as setting strict curfews, giving them rides to and back home from parties, getting to know their friends and activities, checking their belongings – even diaries – and establishing rules for social interaction with romantic partners (e.g. teenagers are not allowed to spend time alone with a romantic partner).

Sex education in schools

Parents indicated that they trusted teachers as sex educators, believing that they do have the correct information and skills needed to address sexuality in a professional way. Despite the fact that parents saw schools as the best place to provide sex education, they also mentioned that the education their children currently received in schools merely provided biological information without focusing on values education. In addition, sex education at school was perceived as being given too late when young people already have too much information from various other sources that are not considered to be the best influence.

Parents expressed a wish for the chance to gain more knowledge to enable them to address this issue. They wondered whether schools could help them to become better sex educators, suggesting that schools should offer sex education for parents as part of the curriculum:

I would really like to take lessons about sexuality, it would allow us to educate and guide them [the children]. All schools should have these programmes. Courses for parents of high school students would be ideal. (Francisco, age 54)

Discussion

This study has explored parents' views about sexuality and sex education for young people in a Latin American context. It revealed that parents hold a restricted view of sexuality in which cultural values such as conservatism, religious beliefs and machismo are reflected, and where the societal pressure to maintain tradition seems to create a situation of uncertainty, confusion and concern. In line with tradition, parents understood sexuality as being connected to moral and physical dangers. This was clearly illustrated by their positive attitudes towards virginity and their use of strategies to protect their children, especially their daughters, from the risks that expressing sexuality was perceived to involve. In the current study, parents related sexuality to the moral values promoted by the church. As a result, sexuality could only be accepted if properly channelled into and within a marriage (Osborne 1995; Caricote 2006). This vision fits with the understanding that sexuality is intended exclusively for procreation, implying that all forms of sexual expression and enjoyment other than heterosexual intercourse are considered 'bad' or 'sinful' (Hubbard 1990; Daniluk and Brown 2008). The denial and rejection of certain behaviours, such as masturbation and contraceptive use, lead to an avoidance of parent-child communication, avoidance that might be currently filled by other sources (e.g. friends, peers, Internet, media) that may not always offer accurate information.

Parents in this study reported not having received a satisfactory sex education themselves when they were young (Ingham et al. 1998). The fact that parents had not received sex education – in terms of formal discussion at home – was reflected in their concerns about assuming their role as their own children's sex educators (Walker 2004; Meschke and Dettmer 2012). In the current study, parents associated a lack of understanding about sexuality with feelings of fear and repression and expressed the hope that their children would be spared from such feelings, mentioning their intention to provide good sex education at home. Despite these intentions, though, parents described several obstacles to reaching this goal. The obstacles mentioned by this group of parents are in line with those previously reported, and included a lack of knowledge and sources of information (Kakavoulis 2001; Gonzalez-Lopez 2004; Kirana et al. 2007), lack of communicative skills (Soper and Tristán 2004; Walker 2004), embarrassment (Ingham et al. 1998; Rosenthal and Feldman 1999; Fogarty and Wyatt 2006) and lack of a formal sex education model to follow (Soper and Tristán 2004; Walker 2004).

In the present study, mothers appeared to be responsible for talking with their children about sexuality. This also confirms findings of previous studies (Miller et al. 1998; Miller, Benson, and Galbraith 2001; Caricote 2006; Kirana et al. 2007; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009; Lagina 2010; Meschke and Dettmer 2012). Although fathers participated enthusiastically in the focus groups and showed interest in getting involved in the process of their children's sex education, their current actual involvement seems to be limited (Meschke and Dettmer 2012).

Also in line with previous research (Moore, Peterson, and Furstenberg 1986; Miller et al. 1998; Rosenthal and Feldman 1999; Walker 2001, 2004; Gonzalez-Lopez 2004; Caricote 2006), it appears that formal discussion about sexuality in the family more often takes place with daughters than with sons. This finding may be explained by the double standard present in Latino cultures, which implies that in cases of unwanted pregnancy, the woman is the one who would assume responsibility and be confronted with the direct consequences (Miller et al. 1998; Gonzalez-Lopez 2004). However, in this study, participants also discussed how unfair society has been for women, which also seems to be an important factor in understanding the emphasis given to sex education for their daughters.

The onset of sexual relationships and the possibility of an early pregnancy were seen as losing the chance to lead a successful life and to attain socio-economic independence. Parents linked the importance of preserving virginity with their daughters' future socio-economic success in the context of a society where there are clear power imbalances between the sexes. Virginity maintained until marriage was seen as a requirement for improving living conditions in a society with large differences between socio-economic strata, in which an early pregnancy is linked with the cycle of poverty. This interpretation of parental concerns in terms of their socio-economic significance rather than the preservation of virginity *per se* has been previously identified in Mexican emigrant fathers (Gonzalez-Lopez 2004) and goes beyond the validation of virginity as a religious concern. More exploratory research is needed to better understand this shift in the meaning of virginity.

In accordance with the view of sexuality being exclusively for adult couples within marriage, young people's sexuality needs to be repressed, regulated and continuously watched over. As a consequence, strategies used for bringing up offspring take the form of warning, threatening and controlling, an educational style that has previously been identified in Latino families (Raffaelli and Ontai 2001). Although it has been reported that parental control is associated with a lower frequency of risky sexual behaviours among young people, it has also been shown that excessive or coercive parental control is associated with negative outcomes in behaviour (Miller, Benson, and Galbraith 2001). Moreover, sex education based on a limited view of sexuality, with a clear double standard and a focus on control, restriction and warning about risky situations, implies a lack of recognition and non-acceptance of the sexual rights of young people. These rights are, however, recognised in different international agreements (Convención Iberoamericana de Derechos de la Juventud 2005; IPPF 2009) and are stated in the National Constitution, which mentions the right for free, informed, voluntary and responsible decision-making about sexuality and sexual orientation (*Constitución de la República del Ecuador* 2008).

In line with their views about sexuality, parents reported providing sex education at home that could best be characterised by an abstinence-only approach. Parental support for an abstinence-only model may conflict with the contents of programmes that are currently implemented in high schools, creating a confusing environment for young people. Furthermore, parents' refusal to provide information about contraceptive methods limits

young people's access to sexual health, which goes against the furtherance of the achievement of universal access to reproductive health as stated in the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2000).

Faced with uncertainties and confusion as primary sex educators, parents turn to schools for help, expressing their confidence in the capability of teachers and schools to provide sex education. However, in common with previous studies, parents had several suggestions for improving sex education in schools, including the fact that school education should go beyond a limited biological approach and include a focus on values and the relational aspects of sexuality (Kakavoulis 2001), and that sex education at school should start at an early stage (Kakavoulis 2001; Kirana et al. 2007).

Finally, as a strategy for promoting and improving their participation in the sex education of their children, parents suggested that schools should offer specific parent training programmes. Such programmes should not only provide parents with information and knowledge, but also help to develop the skills needed to better approach the topic of sexuality and improve communication with their children. This suggestion fits well with previous research that emphasised the potential of schools to help parents improve communication about sexuality (Miller et al. 1998; Walker 2001, 2004; Fogarty and Wyatt 2006; Kirana et al. 2007; Ballard and Gross 2009; Lagina 2010; Meschke and Dettmer 2012).

This study has several limitations that should be mentioned. First, there was a rather broad age range among the young people whose parents participated. For this reason, it is not possible to identify specific concerns or ideas that parents might have in relation to the age of the children and their specific phase of development. A second limitation is that parents who participated in this study were members of the parents committee at each high school, meaning that they were elected by the other parents to be representatives for the school authorities. This procedure could create bias as these parents may be especially involved and concerned about the education of their children in general and sex education in particular. Linked with this limitation is the fact that the group of parents who participated in the focus groups was somewhat heterogeneous in terms of age and level of education.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer important insights that may facilitate the improvement of educational strategies and educational programmes about sexuality for young people in Cuenca. After a long history of failed attempts to provide sex education programmes, these results highlight the importance of understanding cultural traditions and religious views on sexuality that may constitute obstacles to the success of such programmes. These results also emphasise the need to identify opportunities for sex education in which the cultural characteristics of the population to which it is oriented are recognised. Sex education based on scientifically appropriate knowledge may help to overcome myths and taboos about sexuality. The study also articulates some of the confusion and uncertainty of young people's parents being caught between traditions and their wish for a better future for their own children, an uncertainty that reflects the ignorance of the parents regarding the sexual rights of young people and the need for a learning space for parents. The findings from this study may inspire school authorities and social scientists to improve the environment in which young people develop, incorporating a sexual rights approach as required by national and international legal frameworks. Policy-makers may also find the findings helpful as a means of making future decisions more evidence-informed.

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