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Parents and children about sexual education

Alina Costin

Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad

costintalina@gmail.com

Abstract. As Jankovic, Malatestinic and Striehl, (2013) point out, sexuality is a key dimension of youth development, with important implications for mental and physical health. Parents are a relevant source of information about sexuality, they have the ability to shape their children's values and behaviour about this dimension of their wealth, and they are also responsible for transmitting this information in the most accurate and positive format possible (Fitzharris & Werner-Wilson, 2004; Ashcraft, Murray, 2017:). In Romanian society, the parents of today's teenagers were educated in the socialist era, in fact, the context in which they lived did not encourage free discussions on sexual issues neither with their parents, nor in school. Sex education was limited to abstinence, the subject being taboo in Romanian families (Mocanu, 2018). Starting from these realities, we conducted a research on assessing the perception of the parent-child couple on the subject of sex education. 82 families of high school teenagers were surveyed about their perceptions of adolescent sex education, its benefits and its role in preventing dropout. The results indicate that adolescents give more realistic meanings to the meaning of sex education than their parents. There is a higher score of parents who appreciate that sex education has no benefits for children, on the contrary. The paper makes suggestions on the need to implement intervention programs that involve parents in a series of strategies that complement discussions about sex, and develop a support system (Miller, 1998, Izugbara, 2008; Ballard, & Gross, 2009).

Keywords. sexual education, parents, attitude, the role and benefits of sexual education

1. Brief introduction to the issue of sex education in Romanian Background

Sex education is a very debated and controversial topic in Romania, which has provoked very serious contradictory discussions, not only among the civilian environment but also among specialists (teachers, psychologists) and government officials. A lot of legislation speaks to a society that is not yet ready to understand that sex education is a dimension of education for life, and that as a slogan circulating in the media says, "sex education is not about having sex." The general perception is that sex education is limited to the transmission of information about sexual reproduction or sexual anatomy. The specialized literature reproductive ability, values, image and perception of one's own body, etc., all these aspects aiming to facilitate the creation of a state of well-being and balance in the relationship with oneself and with others.

The challenges of sex education are many, in fact, so consistent and diverse that the postponement of the bill in this direction has been received with great consternation around academia and beyond. A complex of social, economic and educational factors contributes to the accentuation of more and more serious phenomena such as the increase in the number of minor mothers, the increase of HIV infections, bullying, abusive relationships, etc. The dynamics of

relationships among adolescents is completely different from previous generations, the realities to which they are exposed are often harmful or, in any case, dangerous and often the parent is too busy, absent or unable to manage life issues. For which he himself is not prepared. The parents of today's teenagers are teenagers who lived during the communist period, educated in the spirit of a perfect society, free from social problems or any other nature, educated strictly, obedience, uniformity, etc. The subject of sexual intercourse, even the subject of intercourse, was a taboo, not addressed in the vast majority of families. The new man, the phrase that expressed the ideal of the communist regime, was disciplined and honoured to propagate communist doctrine; the physical punishment was encouraged even requested by the parents in order to discipline the child/student. Psychological maturation, exposure to traditional culture, access to information were intentionally ignored. Autonomy, independence, individualism was not among the purposes of education, in fact, the student was educated to relate to himself as part of the community to which he belongs, with the aim of participating in its development. The preparation provided by sexual education is nothing but the preparation for life, the preparation for relationships, or the lack of it places the young person in a vulnerability that he is not even aware of, vulnerability to emotional or sexual abuse, illness, unwanted pregnancies, and so on

Mihailescu (2014) summarizes some characteristics of socialist education that benefited the parents of today's students: the militarization of education according to the Sino-Korean Asian model, the authoritarian school, restrictions, rules, lack of freedom of expression. Fear and obedience to the teacher were just some of the principles which the students of the socialist period grew up with, the current adults, the parents of today's teenagers.

A similar experience to Romania is that of Turkey in which sex education is not included in the curriculum at any level of study and is a taboo subject among families (Anyanwu, 2004). Çuhadaroğlu (2017) demonstrates the positive impact that sex education has on changing students' sexual attitudes, especially in a conservative country where homophobic attitudes are often identified. Health specialists emphasize the need to address the subject of sexuality in the school curriculum, as a fundamental component of the healthy development of young people.

Serious social phenomena such as underage mothers, unwanted pregnancies, involvement in unhealthy relationships, homophobic attitudes, etc. are maintained by ignorance and lack of basic information about one's sexuality. However, the subject of sex education is very controversial, being understood by traditionalists rather as a promotion of encouraging the beginning of sexual life, or in non-compliance with traditional codes of conduct. Understanding sex education as a dimension of life or preparation for life is a stepping stone, even for some teachers.

Disagreement over the inclusion of sex education in the school curriculum includes issues related to its content and who is responsible for the parent or school - as primary sex educators (Shtarkshall, Santelli, Hirsch, 2007). In Romania, an important segment of parents is against conducting sex education, and the school offers them this freedom. We do not consider that the optional character of the discipline is a solution because, most likely, these parents will consider this subject taboo and will not initiate or develop discussions on the topic of sexuality, so the child remains in a double deprivation. The cited authors support the essential role of parents in transmitting values related to intimate relationships and of professionals in providing specialized information regarding sexual literacy.

2. Literature Review

The subject of sex education remains not only a matter of promoting mental and physical health but also a preparation for life itself. It is up to the parents to guide through discussions

and a comprehensive and mature attitude the vision about the sexual behavior of their children (Dilorio, Pluhar, Belchar, 2003; Aspy, 2007). Sex education is also a particularly important factor in preventing unplanned pregnancy (Grose, Grabe, Kohfeldt, 2014; Cameron et al., 2020). Non-involvement in risky sexual activities and small number of partners have been associated with formal and parental education that encourages abstinence, and the intact structure of the family (both parents up to 18 years) (Haglund, Fehring, 2010). Given the complexity of the factors that shape the availability for the beginning of sexual life Mabray & Labauve (2002) propose the implementation of sex education programs from a younger age, namely children aged 12 to 16 years. The authors propose an integrated intervention in which parents and preadolescents discuss the physical and emotional needs involved in relationship management. They show that very few of the parents, just over 10% and only 5.2% of teachers talk to adolescents about sexual issues, so it is necessary to raise their awareness through programs and information campaigns. (Wilson et al., 2010) It seems that the parents' reluctance to approach the subject of sex is very widespread, the discomfort associated with this topic (Kiran, Minaz, 2019) being determined, it seems, by the sociocultural factor which is a very strong barrier affecting the contents of sex education (Baraitser, Wood, 2001; Roudsari et al., 2013). Awuru (2020) observes that sex education as a priority in the education of the child is conditioned by the way in which the parents interpret, understand what this sex education means. The author identifies several important dimensions in the discussions on this topic between parent and child: discussions about the genitals, about sexual intercourse, discussions about the distinction between female and male roles involved in sexual intercourse, about manners related to the opposite sex. Afifi, Joseph, Aldeis (2008) identify as predictors of effective sexual communication, parent-child quality and the child's perception of parental communication skills.

Ashcraft, Murray (2017) identifies several sources of stress and anxiety experienced by both parents and their children in discussions about sex. The author discovered among others that parents feel embarrassed by feeling that they are revealing too much or intimate information; I have difficulty talking about contraception or sexual abuse. Frequent anxiety is caused by the news that the child is already sexually active. It is just as embarrassing for the child to learn about the sexual life of the parents, to be reluctant to ask questions about the pregnancy, or to ask questions that would arouse the parents' anger or resentment. The authors draw attention to areas of discussion that create discomfort and sourness that often remain undisputed, namely, masturbation, oral or anal sex, abstinence. Attitude in sexual relations is also determined by the source of sexual education; thus, if it is provided by professionals or colleagues, it determines a more liberal sexual vision / attitude (Somers, Gleason, 2001).

It seems that an association can be made between adolescents' difficulty in discussing emotional and behavioral health issues with their parents (Ackard Neumark-Sztainer, Story et al., 2006; Robinson, et al., 2017). They understand the lack of dialogue on sex education as poor parental care. Several studies (Rob, Ghafur, Bhuiya, Talukder, 2006; Turnbull, Van Wersch, van Schaik, 2008; Grose, Grabe & Kohfeldt, 2014) identify a contradiction, namely, the positive attitude towards reproductive and sexual health education that coexists with a poor understanding of the issues related to this topic. Mabray, Labauve (2002) discuss prevention programs that address multidimensional reproductive education, and emphasize abstinence.

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Nery et al. (2015) and D.J. Whitaker (1999) confirms that parents are not prepared to address sexuality in discussions with their children and that when they do, it is superficial and incomplete. Klein et al, 2005 emphasize the importance of workshops with parents dedicated to sex education programs that facilitate awareness of the importance of these discussions with children and the construction of a relaxed environment that promotes dialogue. Regarding this dialogue and its relevance on the sexual life of the child, McNeely et al., (2002) find that mothers' values and beliefs as well as relationship satisfaction have a greater impact on daughters than on sons.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Objectives and hypothesis

The perceptions of the parent-child couple regarding the role and benefits of sexual education in the context of current controversies on the necessity of it being included in schools.

Hypotheses

1. Parents' perception of sex education correlate significantly with adolescents' perception regarding the matter.
2. Parents' perception about sex education's benefits correlates significantly with adolescents' perception regarding the matter.
3. Parents' perception about sex education's role correlate significantly with adolescents' perception regarding the matter.
4. There are differences between parents and adolescent opinion regarding that sex education in school can prevent dropping out of school.
5. There are differences between parents and adolescent opinion regarding that the lack of information about sex education can be a cause of the increase in the number of pregnant minors.

3.2. Participants

The field survey was conducted at the level of Arad municipality by surveying a number of 82 families of high school teenagers, with 14 fathers (17.1%) and 68 mothers (82.9%), and 42 teenage boys (51,2%) and 40 teenage girls (48,8%). A total of 61 families (74.4%) live in the urban area and 21 families (25.6%) live in the rural area.

3.2. Instruments and method

In order to carry out the research, a sociological questionnaire consisting of xx items was developed, based on the data collected within a number of 2 focus groups. The questionnaire is structured so that it can be applied to both parents and adolescents, and refers to the perception regarding the sexual education, its benefits and role in life education

For testing the first three hypotheses we developed a non-experimental, correlational study, having as dependent variables:

- 1) parents' perception of sex education and adolescents' perception of sex education
- 2) parents' perception of the benefits of sex education and adolescents' perception of the benefits of sex education
- 3) parents' perception of the role of sex education and adolescents' perception of the role of sex education

For testing hypotheses 4 and 5 we used a quasi-experimental, unifactorial, cross-sectional design, having as independent variables the status of the subjects (parents' sample and adolescents' sample). The dependent variables consisted of the scores of the subjects on the questionnaire items that explore if sex education can prevent school dropout and unwanted pregnancies among adolescents.

4. Results and discussion

In order to carry on the correlational study, we calculated the descriptive and scattering statistical indices for the tested variables (parents' and adolescents' perception of sex education, its benefits and role for the life education, the lack of data about sex education in real life setting, on the both samples taken in the study (table 1.1.). Following the descriptive analysis it is observed that the conditions of using a parametric correlation (symmetrical distributions, approximately equal standard deviations) are fulfilled, therefore we used the Bravais - Pearson parametric correlation coefficient.

Table 1.1. Descriptives and scattering statistical indices for tested variables

	N		Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
	Valid	Missing				
Perception (P)	82	0	1.2805	1.0000	1.00	.50368
Benefits (P)	82	0	1.1585	1.0000	1.00	.45730
Role (P)	82	0	3.3171	4.0000	4.00	1.02894
Perception (A)	82	0	1.8659	2.0000	2.00	.68064
Benefits (A)	82	0	1.2683	1.0000	1.00	.49811
Role (A)	82	0	3.1951	5.0000	5.00	2.00271

Table 1.2. Correlation indices between the tested variables

		Perception (P)	Benefits (P)	Role (P)	Perception (A)	Benefits (A)	Role (A)
Perception (P)	Pearson Correlation	1	.287**	-.388**	.471**	.582**	.312**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009	.000	.000	.000	.004
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82
Benefits (P)	Pearson Correlation	.287**	1	-.108	-.050	.407**	.155
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009		.333	.657	.000	.166
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82
Role (P)	Pearson Correlation	-.388**	-.108	1	-.503**	-.361**	-.414**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.333		.000	.001	.000
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82
Perception (A)	Pearson Correlation	.471**	-.050	-.503**	1	.326**	.327**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.657	.000		.003	.003
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82
Benefits (A)	Pearson Correlation	.582**	.407**	-.361**	.326**	1	.343**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.001	.003		.002
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82
Role (A)	Pearson Correlation	.312**	.155	-.414**	.327**	.343**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.166	.000	.003	.002	
	N	82	82	82	82	82	82

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

1. The Pearson correlation indices calculated (table 1.2.) show a significant positive correlation between parents' perception of sex education and adolescents' perception regarding the matter, with a coefficient value $r = .471$ and a significance threshold $\text{sig} = .00$.

The perception of sex education was assessed by the question "What do you understand by sex education?", for both parents and adolescents, with three possible answers: (a) Educational program in which the period of beginning of sexual life and the associated risks are discussed; (b) Educational program in which the sexual act is explained; and (c) Information on sexual development and reproduction, contraception, types of relationships, counseling and support against sexual abuse.

Regarding the opinion of parents, the majority (61 subjects, respectively 74.4%) understand sex education as an educational program in which the period of beginning of sexual life and the associated risks are discussed; 19 parents (23.2%) understand by sexual education an educational program in which the sexual act is explained; and only 2 parents (2.4%) think that sex education is information on sexual development and reproduction, contraception, types of relationships, counseling and support against sexual abuse (see Figure 1.1.).

Regarding the opinion of adolescents, the majority (43 subjects, respectively 52.4%) consider that sex education is an educational program in which the sexual act is explained; 25 adolescents (30.5%) consider that sex education is an educational program in which the period of beginning of sexual life and the associated risks are discussed; and 14 adolescents (17.1%) think that sex education is information on sexual development and reproduction, contraception, types of relationships, counseling and support against sexual abuse (see Figure 1.1).

Perception about sex education

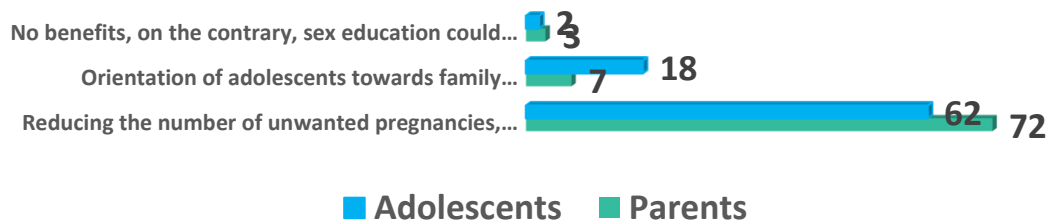


Figure 1.1. Perception of sex education

Therefore, the first hypothesis, which explores parents' and adolescents' understanding about sex education is supported by the statistical analysis, there are observed significant associations between the studied dimensions.

Following the analysis, we can say that *sa cum era de asteptat, exista similitudini intre perceptiile parintilor si copiilor lor in ceea ce priveste sensul educatiei sexuale; desi ambii cred ca este vorba despre un program educational, cei mai multi dintre parintii inteleg ca rolul ei este de a-l informa pe copil despre riscuri si de a-i furniza informatii de baza/introductive referitoare la acest subiect. Copiii, insa sunt de parere ca educatia sexuala are ca scop informarea privind actul sexual in sine.*

2. The Pearson correlation indices calculated (table 1.2.) show a significant positive correlation between parents' perception of the benefits of sex education and adolescents' perception regarding the matter, with a coefficient value $r = .407$ and a significance threshold $sig = .00$.

The perception of the benefits of sex education was assessed by the question "What do you think are the benefits of sex education?", for both parents and adolescents, with three possible answers: (a) reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and the formation of harmonious mature personality; (b) orientation of adolescents towards family formation, birth and education of children; and (c) it has no benefits,

on the contrary, sex education could lead to the early onset of sexual life and a higher number of partners.

Regarding the opinion of parents, the majority (72 subjects, respectively 87.8%) think that the benefits are: reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and the formation of harmonious mature personality; 7 parents (8.5%) think that the benefits are: orientation of adolescents towards family formation, birth and education of children; and only 3 parents (3.7%) think that sex education has no benefits at all, on the contrary, sex education could lead to the early onset of sexual life and a higher number of partners (see Figure 1.2.).

Regarding the opinion of adolescents, the majority (62 subjects, respectively 75.6%) consider that the benefits are: reducing the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and the formation of harmonious mature personality; 18 adolescents (22.0%) consider that the benefits are: orientation of adolescents towards family formation, birth and education of children; and only 2 adolescents (2.4%) think that sex education has no benefits at all (see Figure 1.2.).

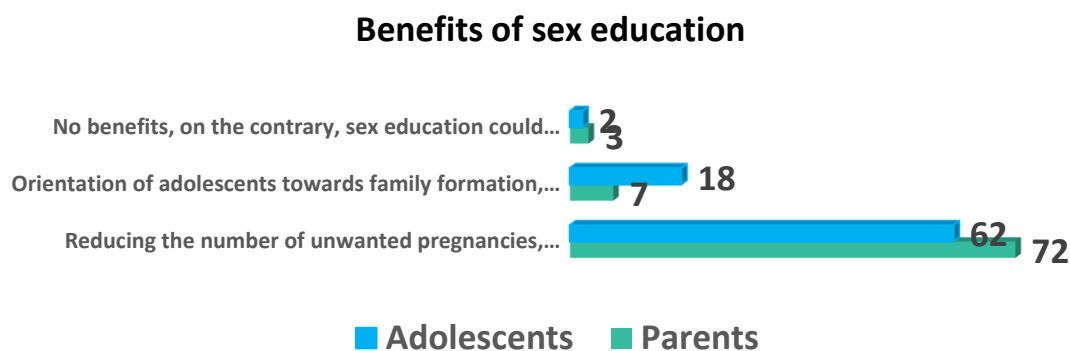


Figure 1.2. Benefits of sex education

Therefore, the second hypothesis, which explores parents' and adolescents' understanding about the benefits of sex education, is supported by the statistical analysis, there are observed significant associations between the studied dimensions. Pondereaza cea mai mare a parintilor si copiilor apreciaza ca cel mai important beneficiu al educatiei sexuale este reducerea cazurilor de transmitere a bolilor sexuale si prevenirea sarcinilor nedorite; surprinzator este inasa procentul mai ridicat al parintilor decat cel al copiilor care cred ca educatia sexuala nu are nici un beneficiu.

3. The Pearson correlation indices calculated (table 1.2.) show a significant negative correlation between parents' perception of the role of sex education and adolescents' perception regarding the matter, with a coefficient value $r = -.414$ and a significance threshold $sig = .00$.

The perception of the role of sex education was assessed by the question "What do you think is the role of sex education?", for both parents and adolescents, with three possible answers for parents: (a) to correctly inform the adolescent about age specific changes; (b) to explain what sexual health is and its importance in general health; (c) to guide in the correct decisions regarding the sexual life and the relations with the others; (d) all of the above. The adolescent sample has 3 possible answers as follows: (a) to correctly inform the adolescent about age specific physiological changes; (b) to stop sexual intercourse outside of marriage; and (c) to explain what sexual health is and its importance in general health.

Regarding the opinion of parents, 16 parents (19.5%) think that the role of sex education is to explain what sexual health is and its importance in general health; 6 parents (7.3%) think that sex education role is to correctly inform the adolescent about age specific changes; also 6 parents (7.3%) think that sex education role is to guide in the correct decisions regarding the sexual life and the relations with the others; and the majority of parents (54 subjects, respectively 65.9%) think that the role of sex education are all of the above (see Figure 1.3.).

Regarding the opinion of adolescents, 37 adolescents (45.1%) consider that the role of sex education is to correctly inform the adolescent about age specific physiological changes; and 45 adolescents (54.9%) consider that the role of sex education is to stop sexual intercourse outside of marriage (see Figure 1.3.).

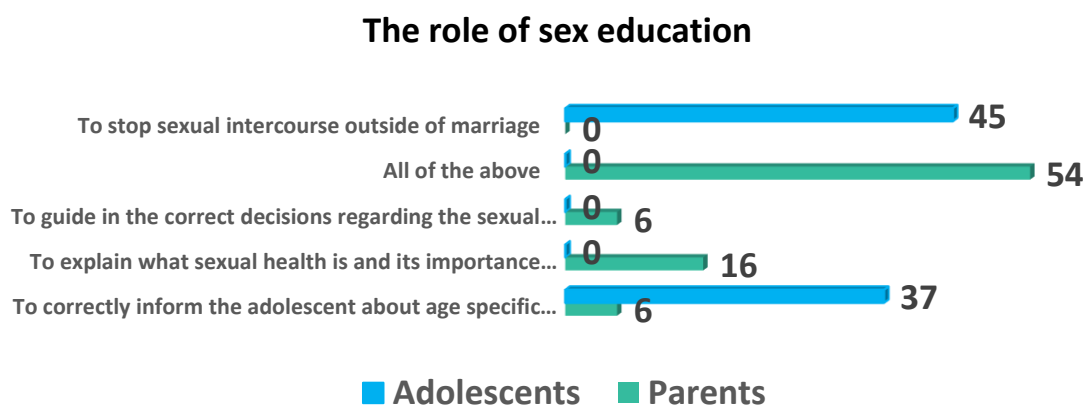


Figure 1.3. The role of sex education

4. The question "Do you think that sex education in school can prevent dropping out of school?", assess the extent to which sex education may prevent school dropout. By applying the t test for paired samples, significant differences were observed, with a coefficient value $t = 2.503$ and a significance threshold $sig = .014$, between the opinion of the parents and that of the adolescents, the opinion of the parents being stronger ($m = 2.00$) than that of adolescents ($m = 1.60$). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis, which explores parents' and adolescents' differences regarding the aspect that sex education can prevent school dropout, is supported by the statistical analysis, there are observed significant differences between the parents and adolescents.

5. The question "Can the lack of information regarding sex education be a cause of the increase in the number of pregnant minors?", assess the extent to which lack of sex education may be a cause of unplanned pregnancies in adolescents. By applying the t test for paired samples, significant differences were observed, with a coefficient value $t = 2.293$ and a significance threshold $sig = .024$, between the opinion of the parents and that of the adolescents, the opinion of the parents being stronger ($m = 1.24$) than that of adolescents ($m = 1.12$). The fifth hypothesis, which explores parents' and adolescents' differences regarding the aspect that the lack of information can be a cause of unplanned pregnancies in adolescents, is supported by the statistical analysis, there are observed significant differences between the parents and adolescents.

5. Conclusions

The literature indicates a hesitant attitude, marked by prejudices, misinformation, taboos that parents display on the subject of sex education, despite their beliefs that this subject is very important. In the Romanian society we find the same attitude described above, maintained by the lack of information programs and education in schools. This work captures a sample of the parent-child / adolescent couple; we find among parents, adults aware of the role of sex education, and yet, not enough information about its role and benefits.

There are positive correlations between the perceptions of parents and children, however, it is also signaled differently which indicates the separation of children from the opinions of parents. Friends or the media, or other media, may at some point be the main providers of information about the content, role, and benefits of sex education. Even if the percentage is small, we find among the respondents, parents convinced that sex education does more harm, its benefits being zero. A small, but not irrelevant, segment of adolescents responded differently to this item, indicating a possible need to reconsider the information provided by parents.

These findings highlight the need to implement interventions applied to adolescents and parents. It is imperative that parents be informed about the stages of children's sexual development, about the "natural" need that adolescents take care of or have to relate correctly to their sexuality. Interventions should target and encourage parents to be included in a range of strategies that complement gender discussions.

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Appendix 1

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Lack_inf_P	1.2439	82	.43208	.04771
	Lack_inf_A	1.1220	82	.55311	.06108
Pair 2	Prev_dro_P	2.0000	82	.98131	.10837
	Prev_dro_A	1.6098	82	1.29344	.14284

Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Lack_inf_P & Lack_inf_A	82	.546	.000
Pair 2	Prev_dro_P & Prev_dro_A	82	.253	.022

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Lack_inf_P - Lack_inf_A	.12195	.48152	.05317	.01615	.22775	2.293	81	.024
Pair 2	Prev_dro_P - Prev_dro_A	.39024	1.41208	.15594	.07998	.70051	2.503	81	.014