

Original Article

The Role of Clinical Instructor in Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice in Nursing Education

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Abstract

Background: The gap between nursing theory and practice is widely documented and debated in the literature, which defined as the discrepancy between what student nurse acquire through theoretical classroom lectures and what they experience in the clinical setting. Clinical instructors make a valuable contribution to the students learning process by enhance students' learning by creating a positive learning environment and participating as role models.

Aim: The study aimed to assess the presented role of clinical nurse instructor in bridging the gap between theory and practice in perspective of student nurses.

Methodology: A descriptive quantitative cross-sectional design was conducted in this study to identify the knowledge-practice gap in related to clinical instructor factors as perceived by the nurses' students. The study was conducted throughout a period of three consecutive months; from 1st June, 2017 to the end of August, 2017. Subjects were selected conveniently from the available students at the 4 main governmental hospitals of Gaza strip.

Results: The finding also showed there was a significant agreement (mean 3.6, t = 14.6) among student nurses about the crucial role of instructors in reducing the theory-practice gap. Of which, continuous instructor's follow-up in departments help in reducing the gap was captured the highest mean score (3.9, 78%), while the instructor in the practice use theoretical teaching rather than clinical training had the lowest mean score (3.1, 62%).

Conclusion: Nurses are confronted to provide equitable, effective, affordable, and high-quality health care services. There is quite evident that gap's phenomenon does exist and has its strengths as well as areas that can be improved by focus on the clinical instructors' approach throughout creating a positive learning environment, and regularly update their knowledge and skills on the latest trends in clinical practice.

Key Words: Clinical instructor, Gap, Theory-practice, Nurse, Gaza Strip

Background

The gap between nursing theory and practice is commonly documented and debated in the literatures (Berkow et al., 2009; Casey et al., 2011; and Moriarty et al. 2011), that defined as the discrepancy between what student nurse acquire through theoretical classroom lectures and what they experience in the clinical setting (EL Hussein & Osuji, 2017). Despite considerable efforts by the profession, this discrepancy has long been a source of concern to teachers, practitioners, and learners worldwide (Bendal,

2011). It is quite evident that the gap does exist and has its strengths as the area can be improved (Ajani & Moez, 2011). To better understand how clinical nurse instructor could facilitate the integration of theoretical knowledge into practice, it is an essential to assess the current state of knowledge on this gap. Clinical instructors make a valuable contribution to the students learning process by enhance students learning by creating a positive learning environment and participating as role models (Tiwaken, Caranto, & David, 2015).

Moreover, Risjord (2010) argued that the theory-practice gap emerges when theory is not translated into action, adding that coupled with crush of workload on nurses, which does not give them enough time or energy to read and reflect. Another challenge that contributes to this gap is the limited number and experience of newly hired clinical instructors (EL Hussein & Osuji, 2017).

The need for clinical instructors increased in nursing program development, that positioned to participate in both the curriculum development and teaching innovation. Additionally, the clinical instructor needed to create a supportive learning environment for students enrolled in the new program to enable integration of learning specifically related to theory and practice (O'Rae et al., 2017), and hence, the expectational role of the clinical instructor advanced to best facilitate changes to the nursing program's philosophy and objectives to achieve the readiness among new graduate nurses in assuming professional practice, especially with the increasing demands of competent nurses in the different healthcare sectors.

On other hand, oral/aural culture in nursing clarify that nurses prefer to learn from colleagues rather than from text-based or electronic resources (Considine & Khaw, 2011). This culture is supported by the lack of an effective vehicle for transferring knowledge from classroom to practice setting. Other researchers have identified specific contributing factors; that include misinterpretation between gained knowledge and practice (EL Hussein & Osuji, 2017), and students' feelings of powerlessness and abandonment by clinical faculty (Dadgaran, Parvizy, & Peyrovi, 2012; Ousey, Gallagher, 2007; and Jonsen, Melender, & Hilli, 2013).

In this paper, the researchers argue that while the problem of theory-practice gap is rising, it is not receiving the due attention in Gaza strip that reflects its significance, and hence, the question that continues to challenge nurse educators, is how to help undergraduate nursing students translate theoretical learning from the classroom into their clinical practice, and thereby bridge this disparity between nursing theory and practice.

In pursuit of that question, Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students enrolled with one nursing colleges in Gaza strip were invited to describe how they identified, experienced and responded to the differences between what was taught in class room and what was performed in clinical practice in perspectives of the role of clinical nurse instructor.

Population and Methods

Study Design

A descriptive quantitative cross-sectional design was conducted in this study to identify the knowledge practice gap as perceived by the student nurses. This design is appropriate for describing the status of phenomena or for describing relationships among phenomena and involves the collection of data once the phenomena under study are captured during a single period of data collection (Polit & Beck, 2012).

Setting and Period

The study was conducted throughout a period of three consecutive months; from 1st June, 2017 to the end of August, 2017. Subjects were selected conveniently during the study period from the available student nurses at the 4 main governmental hospitals of Gaza strip; namely El-Shifa complex, European Gaza hospital, Al-Aqsa hospital, and Naser medical complex.

Study Participants

Eligible subjects were nurse students who were available at the target hospitals during data collection period; and were enrolled in BSN program at junior or senior levels of study; 3rd or 4th level respectively. All eligible student nurses involved in the target hospitals at the time of data gathering were invited to participate in the study. The response rate was very high (96.4%) since that among total 140 student nurses, data were obtained from 135 students who consented to participate in the study.

Data Collection Tools

Socio-demographic characteristics of students' nurses were gathered via a self-administered questionnaire in Arabic version. A self-constructed five-rated Likert's scale questionnaire was developed after extensive literature review which went through content and face validity. The questionnaire covered the variables about the role of clinical instructors at nursing faculties in bridging the theory-practice gap.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Palestinian Ministry of Health represented by Human Resources Development (HRD) and the authorized ethical body represented by Helsinki Committee in Gaza Strip. Confidentiality was ensured during and after questionnaire filling and a written consent form, including an inform letter, was signed by all participants.

Data Processing and Statistical Analysis

Data were entered, edited and analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 22.

Frequency and percentage was used in order to describe socio-demographic characteristics of the students.

Furthermore, mean, *t* test and ANOVA were used to measure the perception of students towards the role of clinical instructor in bridging the nursing theory-practice gap. All *P-values* were one-tailed and considered significant when less than 0.05.

Results

Description of the Sample: Among 135 participating student nurses, the greater part (57.8%) was females, and males were 43.2%. The mean age of the study population was show high homogeneity (22.32 ± 2.65) as they were selected from homogeneous target population. More than half of students (56.3%) were enrolled in the senior level of the study (4th level). The students who participated were mainly from medical department (37%), followed by surgical (23.7%), emergency (17.8%), pediatric (10.4%), ICU (5.9) and obstetric (5.2%). The vast of study sample (55.6%) was drawn from El-Shifa Medical Complex as considers the main hospital in Gaza strip.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Study Population

Variables	Category	Frequency "n"	Percentage %
Gender	Male	78	57.8%
	Female	57	42.2%
	Total	135	100
Age	Mean± SD	22.32±2.65	
Student level	Third	59	43.7%
	Fourth	76	56.3%
	Total	135	100
Department	Medical	50	37%
	Surgical	32	23.7%
	Obstetric	7	5.2%
	Pediatric	14	10.4
	ICU	8	5.9
	Emergency	24	17.8
	Total	135	100
Hospital	El-Shifa complex	75	55.6%
	European Gaza hospital	31	23.0%
	Al-Aqsa hospital	13	9.6%
	Naser hospital	11	8.1%
	Other hospital	5	3.7%
	Total	135	100

Clinical Instructor-related Factors

The results of Table 2 showed there was a significant agreement (mean 3.6, $t = 14.6$) among student nurses about the crucial role of instructors in reducing the theory-practice gap. Of which, the participants declare that the instructor's follow-up in departments help in reducing the gap was captured the highest mean score (mean= 3.9, $p < 0.001$). This result support that follow-up of instructors plays an imperative role in bridging the theory-practice gap. The same as, there was a significant agreement about instructor's communication skills, uses time effectively, use case study approach, and applies nursing procedures as taken in the theory for the purpose of bridging the theory-practice gap (mean= 3.8, 3.7, 3.7, and 3.7 respectively). Furthermore, there was a significant agreement (mean= 3.6, $p < 0.001$) towards the instructor plans the training activities upon arrival at the place of clinical training; while showed less agreement towards the instructor is familiar with what taught in theoretical courses. This might truly reflect the need for harmonization and keep clinical instructors updated of what thought in class room.

On the other hand, there is an insignificant neutral agreement about instructors focus in the practice in theoretical teaching rather than clinical training of students. This result support the clinical instructors using clinical teaching approach rather than class room approach in the clinical setting.

Table 2: Mean score of clinical instructor-related factors

No.	Items	Mean	SD	%	t	P-value
1.	Continuous instructor's follow-up in departments help in reducing the gap	3.9	1.0	78.0	10.1	<0.001
2.	The instructor plays a major role in bridging the gap	3.8	0.9	76.0	9.5	<0.001
3.	Instructor's communication skills helping in reducing the gap	3.8	1.0	76.0	9.1	<0.001
4.	The instructor uses the time effectively to reduce theory practice gap	3.7	0.9	74.0	9.6	<0.001
5.	The use of the instructor for the case study approach in training is an effective way to bridge the gap	3.7	1.1	74.0	7.4	<0.001
6.	The instructor applies nursing procedures as taken in the theory as much as possible	3.7	1.0	74.0	7.9	<0.001
7.	The instructor plans the training activities upon arrival at the place of clinical training	3.6	1.0	72.0	7.8	<0.001
8.	The instructor is familiar with what taught in theoretical courses	3.5	1.0	70.0	5.9	<0.001
9.	The instructor in the practice use theoretical teaching rather than clinical training	3.1	1.1	62.0	0.8	0.434
Mean score of clinical instructor		3.6	0.5	72.0	14.6	<0.001

The mean score (>3.40) is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, and relative weight >60%

Table 3: Association between sociodemographic characteristics of subjects and gap

Collage	Mean \pm SD	F	T	P
Palestine college of nursing	3.8 \pm 0.5	5.485		0.001
Islamic university	3.4 \pm 0.7			
University college	3.9 \pm 0.6			
El-Azhar university	3.5 \pm 0.7			
Student level				
Third level (Junior)	3.7 \pm 0.6		0.613	0.541
Fourth level (Senior)	3.6 \pm 0.7			
Gender				
Male	3.6 \pm 0.6		-1.120	0.265
Female	3.7 \pm 0.7			
Hospitals				
El-Shifa Medical Complex	3.5 \pm 0.7	1.87		0.09
European Gaza hospital	3.6 \pm 0.8			
Al-Aqsa hospital	3.6 \pm 0.6			
Naser Medical Complex	3.9 \pm 0.5			
Departments				
Medical	3.5 \pm 0.6	2.454		0.037
Surgical	3.9 \pm 0.6			
Obstetric	3.5 \pm 0.9			
Pediatric	3.3 \pm 0.7			
ICU	3.9 \pm 0.6			
Emergency	3.8 \pm 0.7			

The mean score (>3.40) is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Inferential Statistics

The results of Table 3 exhibited there was a statistically significant difference ($F=5.48$, $p = 0.001$) between colleges' name of nursing and demonstration of the role of clinical instructors in bridging the theory-practice gap. Of which nursing students belong to university college and Palestine college of nursing were reported the highest mean scores (3.9 \pm 0.6, and 3.8 \pm 0.5 respectively) for the effort of clinical instructors in bridging the theory-practice gap; whereas nursing students belong to Islamic university and Al-Azhar university were quite less mean score (3.4 \pm 0.7, and 3.5 \pm 0.7 respectively), which it is could reflect that Palestine college of nursing and university college having worthy effort for their clinical instructors in bridging the theory-practice gap.

Moreover, junior students' level was showed a slight insignificant higher mean score of the

efforts of clinical instructors in bridging the gap than senior students level (3.7 \pm 0.6 vs 3.6 \pm 0.7). The same as, there is an insignificant statistical difference between mean score of reporting the significant effort of clinical instructors in minimizing the gap with regard to the gender of students, which it is truly reflect that all nursing students, regardless of their gender, exposed to the same clinical instructors. The same as, an insignificant difference was observed between hospital's name, and the presented role of clinical instructors in minimizing the gap. This result is obviously reflecting that all settings of clinical nursing practices in Gaza strip were belong to the governmental hospitals, which having the same facilities and standards of work. As far as, there was a minor significant difference ($F=2.42$ & $P=0.037$) between department and students' responses toward the significant role clinical instructors in bridging the gap, since intensive care unit, surgical and emergency were captured

the highest mean scores for the significant effort of clinical instructor in minimizing the theory-practice gap (3.9 ± 0.6 , 3.9 ± 0.6 , and 3.8 ± 0.7 respectively); whereas the mean scores were quite less for the departments of pediatric, medical and obstetric (3.3 ± 0.7 , 3.5 ± 0.6 & 3.5 ± 0.9 respectively).

Discussion

Many researchers have found that gap between theory and practice in nursing does exist (Berkow et al., 2009; Casey et al., 2011; and Newton et al., 2010), as well as the area that can be improved (Ajani & Moez, 2011). The results of the study revealed that there is a gap between theory and practice in nursing education, which were related to clinical instructor factors. Lambert & Glacken (2005), and (Tiwaken, Caranto, & David (2015) declare that the effective supervision by clinical teachers in clinical environment as its vital for students learning. Working closely with clinical teachers can foster students' confidence and help them to find meaning in their practice learning experience (Bradbury-Jones, Irvine, & Sambrook, 2010), as well as guide the students to doing the right interventions and improve their skills and knowledge in preparation to becoming a full-fledged nurse (Tiwaken, Caranto, & David (2015). A great percentage of the participants in our study agreed that continuous instructor's follow-up in departments, using case study approach in training and good instructor's communication skills will contribute in bridging the gap.

On the other hand, EL Hussein & Osuji (2017), Ajani & Moez (2011), and Rozina, & Tazeen (2011), support our results that clinical educators must be familiar with what taught in theoretical courses and constantly having up to date, consistent, and valid information to ensure the necessary knowledge and skills for successful practice. Furthermore, EL Hussein & Osuji (2017) illustrate that research within practice is an important strategy to enhance the integration of knowledge into practice; and thus, minimizing the theory practice gap.

Conclusion

The study reflects that clinical instructors make a valuable contribution to the students learning process, that may enhance students learning by creating a positive learning environment and participating as role. There were some similarities between the results of this study with other previous literature and confirmed that some of the factors are universal in global nursing education, while other factors still locally affecting the

theory-practice gap in nursing education at nursing faculties of Gaza strip.

In the light of our study results, there is quite evident that gap's phenomenon does exist and has its strengths as well as areas that can be improved. There are strategies available to overcome this issue, which focus on the clinical instructors' approach by involving them in the curriculum revision and having a liaison between the education and the practice areas. Therefore, the authors encouraged nursing faculties to view clinical instructors and supervision as part of their teaching function and quality improvement strategy.

From this perspective, the nursing faculties must be harmonizing the theoretical nursing approach with clinical practice approach, and give opportunities for both clinical instructors and students to work within a more creative clinical environment that will promote and add to the professional knowledge base of nurse education. Lastly, further qualitative in-depth studies are recommended in order to explore the experience of clinical instructors, and identify the perception of educators regarding clinical nursing education. This ultimately could lead to a tremendous impact on integration of knowledge and transferring knowledge from classroom to practice setting.

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