

THE THEORY-PRACTICE GAP AMONG NURSING STUDENTS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE NURSING COLLEGES OF SOUTH PUNJAB

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Abstract

**Background:** The theory-practice gap in nursing education refers to the disconnect between classroom knowledge and its application in clinical settings. This gap can undermine nursing students' competence, confidence, and readiness, potentially affecting patient care quality and safety.

**Objective:** To assess the extent of the theory-practice gap among Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students in South Punjab and identify contributing factors.

**Methods:** A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among 76 BSN students from nursing institutes using convenience sampling. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire covering demographics and factors influencing the theory-practice gap, including clinical supervision, faculty support, institutional resources, and student motivation. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were analyzed using SPSS.

**Results:** Most participants (61.8%) strongly agreed that a significant theory-practice gap exists, with 96% acknowledging discrepancies between theoretical instruction and clinical practice. Key contributing factors included inadequate professional clinical instructors (93.4%), weak coordination between academic and clinical faculty (84.2%), limited supervisory support (68.4%), insufficient clinical resources (63-65%), and psychosocial barriers such as low motivation (92.1%) and negative public perception of nursing (75%). Despite access to classroom resources and modern teaching aids, 77.6% reported the curriculum does not meet international standards.

**Conclusion:** The study confirms a substantial theory-practice gap among nursing students, influenced by faculty limitations, institutional barriers, and student-related factors. Addressing these issues through increased clinical instructor availability, mentorship programs, enhanced simulation-based learning, and curriculum alignment with international standards is essential to improve clinical competence and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

The gap that exists between classroom theory and real-world clinical experience is known as the

"difference between the knowledge acquired through formal education and the skills necessary for effective

clinical practice (Tambunan 2024). The premise that theoretical ideas must have immediate practical applications in nursing; else, they are considered irrelevant, is the foundation of the idea of a knowledge-practice divide. The international literature extensively discusses the theory-practice gap. Issues with knowledge and practice have long been a source of contention in nursing education, and there is no simple or ideal answer (Hameed, Abdullahi et al. 2023). Therefore, it is essential for nursing students to understand the theory-practice gap in theory and clinical abilities.

For nursing students to improve their abilities and competencies, which will ultimately affect the standard of nursing practice, clinical learning experiences are essential. Additionally, clinical learning is an essential part of nursing education everywhere. Developing competent and highly skilled workers requires the capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world situations (Mahmoud 2014). The study by Severinsson (1998) concentrated on a supervision program designed to help nursing students close the knowledge gap between theory and practice. According to the study, reflection is a useful tool for combining theory and practice and for fostering significant gains in communication, professional, and interpersonal skills. According to research by Corlett (2000), nursing instructors and students agreed that the theory-practice gap is a serious issue that hinders their ability to solve problems and that its effects must be lessened (Hatlevik 2012).

The theory-practice gap has been linked to a number of variables by prior research, such as insufficient systems, a lack of resources and expertise, unfavorable working conditions, and a lack of cooperation between students, educational institutions, and clinical settings. The literature highlights how difficult it is for nursing students to apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world situations, which jeopardizes patient care and results. The provision of effective and efficient healthcare services can be hampered by a number of difficulties and traps in clinical settings and healthcare facilities (Hashemiparast, Negarandeh et al. 2019).

In nursing education, theoretical knowledge and practical skills are closely related. However, a disconnect between theory and practice makes it

difficult for students to apply their knowledge in clinical settings, raising an important question: how can practical skills be efficiently acquired? The educational system must offer inspiring experiences that expose students to real-world situations, encourage knowledge acquisition, and ease transitions in order to prepare them for the workforce (Shahzadi, Kousar et al. 2017). The beneficial effects of academic achievement in theoretical classroom instruction on the clinical or practical portion of nursing education were confirmed by this study. The study's conclusions contribute to a better understanding of the widely held belief that theory shapes practice. The baccalaureate nursing program still includes both the theoretical and RLE components. The advancement of the practical component of the nursing curriculum is greatly influenced by success in the didactic section (Oducado, Amboy et al. 2019)

#### **Problem Statement:**

In nursing education, the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical skills is essential for producing competent and confident healthcare professionals. However, a persistent and concerning gap exists between what nursing students learn in classrooms and what they are expected to perform in clinical practice. This theory-practice gap leads to decreased clinical performance, lack of critical thinking, low confidence, and reduced readiness to handle real patient care situations. Despite the availability of structured nursing curricula, educational resources, and simulated learning environments, many students at different Nursing Colleges in South Punjab report that they are unable to apply theoretical concepts effectively in the clinical setting.

#### **Objective:**

Determine the extent of the gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and its practical implementation in clinical settings.

#### **Research Question:**

"What is the extent of the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and its practical implementation in clinical settings among nursing students at South Punjab?"

## Significance of the Study:

This study holds significant value in the context of nursing education in Pakistan. Bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and clinical practice is essential for producing competent, confident, and independent nurses capable of delivering high-quality patient care. The theory-practice gap not only affects student learning outcomes but also has direct implications on patient safety and healthcare standards. By assessing the extent and causes of this gap, the study provides valuable insights for nursing educators, curriculum developers, and healthcare policymakers. The findings highlight key areas of concern, including inadequate clinical supervision, poor coordination between academic and practical instructors, lack of clinical resources, and student-related challenges such as low motivation and poor professional image.

Understanding these issues will help institutions redesign nursing curricula, improve clinical training environments, and invest in faculty development programs. Additionally, the study will support the implementation of evidence-based strategies such as simulation training, mentorship models, and integrated teaching methods. The ultimate goal is to enhance nursing education, improve student performance, and strengthen the healthcare delivery system in Pakistan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A cohesive set of ideas that explains, interprets, and forecasts natural occurrences is called a theory, according to dictionary definitions. These theories are frequently the result of thorough testing, analysis, and acceptance. The actual performance or execution of a task is referred to as practice. Although this definition might not seem to have anything to do with theory, practice is essential in professional settings because it makes it possible to put theoretical concepts into practice.

There is a serious theory-practice divide in nursing education that leads to student misunderstanding, transitional issues, and poor implementation of evidence-based procedures. This gap can be filled via simulation exercises, which encourage more in-depth education and real-world comprehension. Early integration, consistent practice, knowledgeable teachers, and appropriate technology are all need for

simulation-based learning to be effective. According to the study, practical instructors should clearly explain to nursing students the theoretical underpinnings, justification, and possible outcomes of clinical treatments. Additionally, clinical instructors ought to obtain training requirements, stay informed, and interact with academic professors (Zyoud 2023).

Due to the disconnect between classroom theory and practical application, nursing students frequently experience anxiety during their initial clinical rotations, which makes it difficult for them to complete even simple tasks. When moving from classroom instruction to clinical practice, nursing students frequently experience a reality shock that leaves them feeling anxious, uncertain, and disconnected from their theoretical underpinnings. This underscores the theory-practice divide as a critical issue in nursing education (Shahzadi, Kousar et al. 2017).

The results of the current study, which examines clinical procedures, learning outcomes, and the theory-practice gap, show that nursing students exhibit more theoretical knowledge than practical skills. Because classroom instruction and clinical training are not sufficiently integrated, nursing students' performance suffers and their confidence is damaged, and faculty members' lack of experience in clinical settings adds to the theory-practice gap's continued existence. As a result, integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills should be a top priority in nursing education, with an emphasis on giving students a lot of hands-on experience (Shahzadi, Kousar et al. 2017).

The theory-practice gap in nursing is acknowledged by nursing educators and practitioners, according to this study. It is essential to put the study's suggestions into practice on both an individual and organizational level. Bridging this gap will greatly improve the quality of patient treatment, as nurses make up the majority of Pakistan's healthcare workforce. The findings indicate that nurses have a moderate understanding of the theory-practice divide. Nurses with an MSc shown the highest level of awareness, followed by those with a diploma, and those with a bachelor's degree demonstrated the lowest. The results show that those with a bachelor's degree know very little, whereas those with an MSc,

who frequently combine teaching and hospital-based treatment, know more(Hameed, Abdullahi et al. 2023).

The theory-practice gap in nursing education is highlighted in this paper, along with its advantages and disadvantages. Our research indicates that improving clinical settings and encouraging cooperation between practice and education are crucial to closing this gap. Theoretical and practical approaches should be combined in nursing schools to give teachers and students the chance to collaborate in cutting-edge clinical settings that advance professional education and expertise(Salah, Aljerjawy et al. 2018).

The theory-practice divide can lead to less than ideal educational experiences and dissatisfied students by negatively affecting patient safety, treatment quality, and outcomes. Newly graduating nurses frequently experience "transition shock," questioning the value of their education and falling back on standard procedures. The gap between clinical practice, nursing education, and communication between educators and healthcare workers is one of the main causes of this problem, according to research. From the viewpoints of tutors and students, this study examined the theory-practice divide in clinical education. Bridging this gap may require addressing it during tutoring. Especially in the early stages of internships, regular, planned conversations between students, tutors, and coordinators could promote open communication and assist students in fusing theory and practice(Carvello, Lupo et al. 2024).

One of the three issues identified by another literature study is the theory-practice gap, which occurs when nurses' abilities are not supported by research or evidence-based practice, resulting in routine-based care rather than well-informed decision-making. The second issue occurs when classroom instruction is not applicable to real-world circumstances because theoretical information is not practically relevant. The final iteration of the problem highlights a crucial relationship difficulty between clinical practice settings and nursing education institutions, raising the crucial topic of how to close the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical nursing(Ngozika Ugwu, Ogbonnaya et al. 2023).

For nursing students, a supervision program helps close the gap between theoretical underpinnings and real-world experience by highlighting the importance of reflection and the ensuing gains in professional, interpersonal, and communication skills while also fostering a positive learning environment. Both teachers and students saw the theory-practice divide in nursing education as a chance to develop problem-solving abilities, but they also recognized the need to lessen its effects, according to research on the topic. While interactive mentorship and participatory teaching techniques can integrate theory and practice, nursing students want safe, supervised opportunities to practice skills(Dadgaran, Parvizy et al. 2012).

For nursing students, clinical rotations are essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical nursing practice. The study's conclusions highlight how crucial it is to improve clinical rotations' efficacy in nursing schools. Nursing education can better prepare students for the difficulties and realities they will encounter as future nurses by introducing an organized approach to clinical rotations and exposing them to a variety of patient groups and healthcare environments(Yaas, Hamarash et al. 2023).

(Danish, Jaffer et al. 2025) examined nurses' knowledge of the theory-practice gap in hospitals of Bahawalpur and reported limited awareness among nurses regarding strategies to bridge this gap. The study identified key contributing factors, including inadequate clinical supervision, poor integration between academic and clinical settings, and insufficient continuing education opportunities. The authors emphasized that strengthening collaboration between educational institutions and hospitals, implementing mentorship programs, and updating curricula to align with clinical realities are essential to minimize the gap. These findings support the current study, highlighting that systemic and institutional challenges in bridging theory and practice are prevalent across nursing education and practice in Pakistan.

Bridging the theory-practice gap is a significant challenge for nursing education in Pakistan, and this subject has received little study attention. We conducted this study in order to close the theory-practice gap in nursing education. In order to

promote a deeper comprehension of real-world applications, research educational institutions should inspire students and offer opportunities for experiential learning.

**Methodology**

This study employed a descriptive quantitative cross-sectional design to identify and assess the theory-practice gap among nursing students. This design was chosen as it effectively examines the existing conditions of a phenomenon within a defined population and allows for cost-effective data collection and analysis. The study was conducted across various nursing institutes in South Punjab from October 1, 2024, to April 1, 2025. A total of 76 Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students participated in the study. The sample size was calculated using Cochran’s formula. A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used to select participants based on accessibility and willingness to participate. The inclusion criteria consisted of BSN (Generic) students from all semesters except the first, while nursing faculty, internship students, and CNA students were excluded from the study. Data were collected through a close-ended structured questionnaire divided into two sections. Part I gathered demographic information such as age, gender, and current academic year, while Part II explored key factors contributing to the theory-practice gap, including instructor support, clinical environment, institutional resources, and student motivation. Data collection was carried out in person within the

respective college premises during scheduled academic hours. Participants were informed about the study’s purpose, and voluntary participation was ensured through informed consent. Each student was allotted 15-20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. After collection, all responses were coded and entered into SPSS software for analysis. The variables under study included *Knowledge* (measured through clinical exposure, faculty support, institutional resources, student preparedness, and workplace conditions) and the *Theory-Practice Gap* (assessed through knowledge-practice discrepancies and student confidence levels). Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarize participant responses and measure the overall level of awareness regarding the theory-practice gap among nursing students.

**RESULTS**

**Demographic Characteristics**

A total of 76 Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students participated in the study. Among them, 59.2% were female and 40.8% were male, reflecting the traditionally female-dominated nature of the nursing profession. This gender distribution highlights the continuing predominance of women in nursing education while acknowledging the growing participation of male students in the field (Table 01 & Figure 01).

Table 01. Gender Distribution of Participants

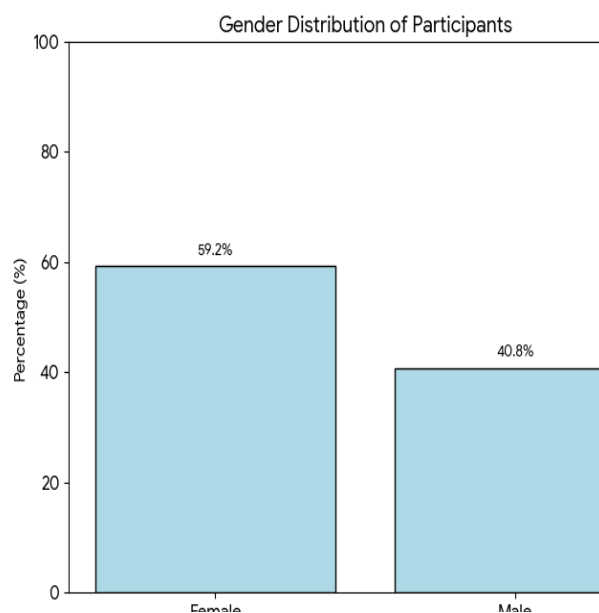
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	31	40.8%
Female	45	59.2%
Total	76	100.0%

Most participants (69.7%) were between the ages of 18 and 22 years, indicating that the majority of nursing students were in the early stages of adulthood and likely enrolled in the BSN program

soon after completing their secondary education. A smaller proportion (28.9%) were aged 23-27 years, and only 1.3% were aged 28-32 years.

Table 02. Age Distribution of Participants

Age (years)	Frequency	Percentage
18-22	53	69.7%
23-27	22	28.9%
28-32	1	1.3%
Total	76	100.0%



All respondents were enrolled in the BSN (Generic) program. The largest group of students (31.6%) belonged to the third year, followed by 30.3% from

the second semester, 28.9% from the final year, and 7.9% from the second year. This distribution reflects a balanced representation of students from various academic stages (Table 02 & Figure 02).

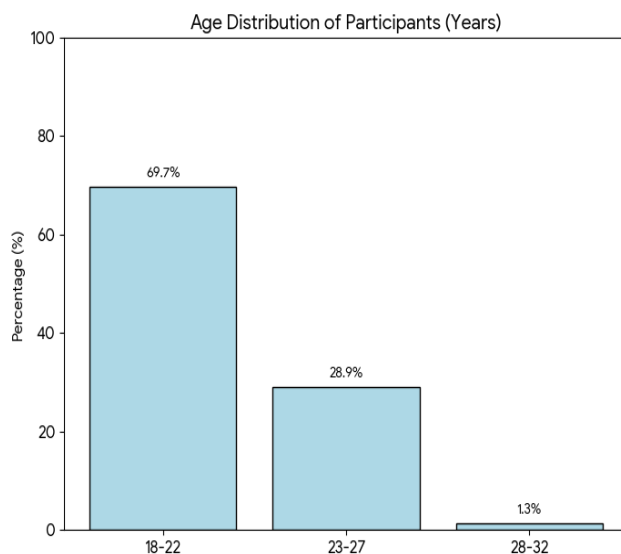


Figure 02: Age Distribution of Participants

**Findings Related to the Theory-Practice Gap**

The study aimed to identify the extent of the theory-practice gap and the contributing factors affecting nursing students' ability to apply classroom knowledge in clinical settings.

A substantial proportion of participants (61.8%) strongly agreed that a significant gap exists between theoretical instruction and clinical practice. Furthermore, 96% of respondents acknowledged that the discrepancy between what is taught and what is practiced is a persistent concern within their institutions.

Key challenges identified include:

- i. Lack of professional clinical instructors (93.4%)
- ii. Inadequate communication between theory and practice teachers (84.2%)

- iii. Limited supervisory support (68.4%)

- iv. Shortage of clinical resources, including equipment (63.2%), mannequins (64.5%), and training space (53.9%)

- v. Poor administrative support for implementing new training methods (55.3%)

- vi. Insufficient student evaluation guidance (73.7%)

- vii. Psychosocial barriers, such as low motivation (92.1%) and negative public image of nursing (75%)

Despite these challenges, 81.6% of students reported having access to educational resources, and 90.8% acknowledged the availability of modern audio-visual aids in classrooms. However, 77.6% expressed concern that the current curriculum does not align with international nursing education standards (Table 03, Figure 03)

Table 03: Student Perceptions Regarding the Theory-Practice Gap

No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	The clinical instructor does not have enough time to discuss student issues.	-	26.3%	11.8%	60.5%	-
2	The supervisory relationship between clinical instructor and student is not supportive.	2.6%	22.4%	6.6%	59.2%	9.2%

No.	Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree
3	There is a lack of communication between theoretical and practical teachers.	1.3%	11.8%	2.6%	53.9%	30.3%
4	There is a need to increase the number of professional clinical instructors.	1.3%	2.6%	2.6%	50.0%	43.4%
5	Clinical instructors lack authority to change institutional practices.	-	7.9%	27.6%	46.1%	18.4%
6	Administration does not support new clinical training methods.	-	18.4%	26.3%	48.7%	6.6%
7	There is insufficient guidance on student assessment and evaluation.	-	18.4%	7.9%	64.5%	9.2%
8	There is a shortage of clinical training settings.	-	38.2%	13.2%	40.8%	3.9%
9	There is a shortage of equipment in clinical settings.	-	17.1%	18.4%	56.6%	6.6%
10	There is a gap between what is taught and what is practiced.	1.3%	-	2.6%	34.2%	61.8%
11	Nursing students are not supported by experienced nurses.	-	13.2%	5.3%	69.7%	11.8%
12	There is a shortage of physical space in clinical training.	5.3%	26.3%	14.5%	51.3%	2.6%
13	There is a shortage of multimedia resources.	2.6%	11.8%	14.5%	65.8%	5.3%
14	There is a shortage of mannequins in skills labs.	-	5.3%	30.3%	57.9%	6.6%
15	Students lack personal motivation affecting learning.	1.3%	1.3%	5.3%	50.0%	42.1%
16	Students face an inferiority complex due to the poor image of nursing.	-	7.9%	17.1%	63.2%	11.8%
17	Educational needs differ between male and female students.	1.3%	10.5%	22.4%	57.9%	7.9%
18	Students have access to educational resources (internet, library, etc.).	2.6%	13.2%	2.6%	81.6%	-
19	Classrooms provide a conducive learning environment with audio-visual aids.	1.3%	3.9%	3.9%	84.2%	6.6%
20	The nursing curriculum does not meet international standards.	-	2.6%	19.7%	65.8%	11.8%

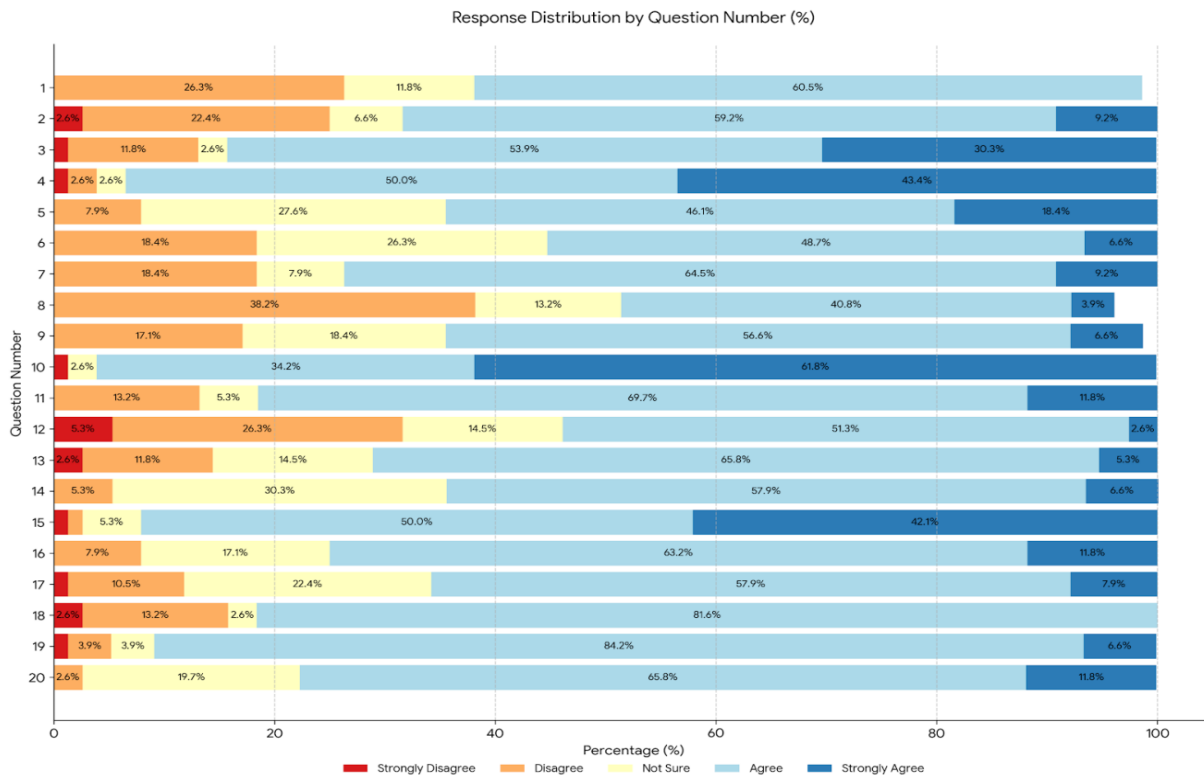


Figure 03: Student Perceptions Regarding the Theory-Practice Gap

Summary of Findings

The findings clearly indicate a significant theory-practice gap among nursing students. The major contributors include insufficient qualified clinical instructors, inadequate institutional support, limited communication between academic and clinical faculty, and a lack of essential clinical resources. Psychological and motivational barriers further exacerbate this gap. Despite adequate classroom facilities, the persistent misalignment between theoretical education and clinical application continues to challenge the overall effectiveness of nursing education programs in South Punjab.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to explore the theory-practice gap among nursing students. In this study, 61.8% of students strongly agreed that a theory-practice gap exists. Similarly, in the original article by Shahzadi et al. (2017) conducted at the University of Lahore, 68% of students reported a clear mismatch between theoretical teaching and clinical training.

This consistency between both studies highlights the systemic nature of the issue across nursing institutions in Pakistan. In our study, 93.4% of students emphasized the shortage of professional clinical instructors, while 81% of students in Shahzadi et al.'s study also expressed dissatisfaction with the availability and involvement of clinical instructors during practical rotations.

A primary concern raised was the lack of sufficient clinical supervision. About 68.4% of students indicated that their instructors did not provide adequate support or feedback during clinical rotations. Moreover, 93.4% highlighted the shortage of qualified clinical instructors, reinforcing the notion that well-prepared faculty are essential in guiding students effectively through real-life situations. These findings emphasize the need for trained clinical educators who are not only experienced but also actively engaged in student learning.

Moreover, this study revealed inadequate institutional support and student evaluation, with

73.7% of students in our study and 70% in Shahzadi's study citing inconsistent evaluations and lack of constructive feedback. Additionally, 55.3% (our study) and 60% (Shahzadi's study) reported administrative resistance to modern clinical teaching methods, emphasizing the need for policy reforms and strong leadership.

Communication between theory and practice instructors was another critical issue. A large portion (84.2%) of students reported weak coordination between academic and clinical faculty, resulting in inconsistencies and confusion in learning expectations. This lack of integration is a significant barrier to ensuring continuity in education and skill development.

Students also reported material limitations, including a shortage of clinical equipment (63.2%), mannequins in skills labs (64.5%), and adequate physical space (53.9%). These shortages hinder hands-on learning and prevent students from developing clinical confidence in a simulated environment before encountering real patients.

Furthermore, psychological and social factors played a key role in shaping student experiences. Over 92% of students reported low personal motivation and attributed this to the poor public perception of the nursing profession. This sense of inferiority reduces engagement and affects the student's confidence in clinical performance, which could ultimately compromise the quality of care provided.

In summary, the study reaffirms that the theory-practice gap is a multidimensional issue influenced by faculty limitations, poor infrastructure, and individual motivation. It underscores the urgent need for systematic changes in clinical education to ensure that students are not only knowledgeable but also competent and confident practitioners.

## CONCLUSION

The study aimed to assess the gap between theoretical knowledge and clinical practice among nursing students. The findings revealed a significant theory-practice gap, with 61.8% of students strongly agreeing that there is a disconnect between classroom learning and clinical implementation. Despite the availability of learning resources like internet and libraries, students reported multiple challenges in clinical settings, including insufficient support from

clinical instructors, poor communication between theory and practice faculty, and a lack of essential training resources. Additionally, psychological factors such as low self-motivation and the negative societal image of the nursing profession contributed to students' lack of confidence in applying theoretical knowledge practically.

## LIMITATIONS

The sample size was relatively small (n=76).

Only BSN students were included, excluding diploma and post-RN students.

Data collection relied on self-reported responses, which may be biased.

Time constraints prevented follow-up interviews or qualitative insights.

No follow-up or long-term observation was conducted.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the number of qualified and professionally trained clinical instructors.

Establish regular communication and collaboration between theory and practice faculty.

Modernize clinical evaluation methods for better assessment.

Improve availability of equipment, mannequins, and space in clinical skills labs.

Develop structured mentorship programs for student support in clinical areas.

Introduce workshops and motivational sessions to build student confidence.

Promote the professional image of nursing through awareness campaigns.

Provide faculty development programs focusing on practical teaching strategies.

Implement simulation-based learning to bridge classroom and clinical learning.

Revise the curriculum to integrate more hands-on experiences.

Conduct multi-institutional studies for broader insights and policy planning.

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