



Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences

**EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCE OF
THEORY-PRACTICE GAP (TPG) IN NURSING AMONG UNIMAS
UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE
STUDY**

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72329

Bachelor of Nursing with Honours

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THEORY-PRACTICE GAP (TPG) IN NURSING AMONG UNIMAS
UNDERGRADUATE NURSING STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE
STUDY**

This graduation exercise is submitted in partial fulfillment of requirement for the degree
of Bachelor of Nursing (with Honours)

Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences
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UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK

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Final Year Project Report

Masters

PhD

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ABSTRACT

Background: An existence of gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application is known as Theory-Practice Gap (TPG). Theory-Practice Gap occurs when nurse practitioners, including student nurses and newly graduated nurses, are unable to fully apply theoretical knowledge acquired into real-life clinical settings. Several studies stated that TPG is a global phenomenon and not a new thing. The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and experience of TPG in nursing among UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students. **Methods:** This qualitative study recruited participants via purposive sampling to explore the perceptions and experiences of TPG in nursing among UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. **Findings:** Nursing students perceived TPG in relation to workplace environment, lack of resources and nurse educators' involvement. The nursing students experienced an impact of facing cognitive discomfort and lacking in skills development due to the existence of TPG. Recommendations in bridging TPG among nursing students in nursing education includes nurse educators' approach, alteration in curriculum content and resource provision. **Conclusion:** Theory-practice gap is a crucial issue in nursing education. The nursing faculty should be made aware of the factors leading to TPG and the impact of TPG towards nursing students. **Keywords:** Theory-Practice Gap, nursing students, nurse education, factors, impact, solutions, recommendations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction for the research which includes the background of the study, problem statement, research questions, and objectives of the research and significance of the study.

1.1 Background of study

Nursing incorporates the autonomous and collaborative care of individuals of all ages, families, groups, and communities, regardless of whether sick or well, and in all configurations. It provides health promotion, illness prevention, and care for the sick, disabled, and dying. Nurses represent approximately half of all health care professionals in many countries and play a major role in how health actions are coordinated and implemented, both at the front-line and organizational levels (World Health Organization, 2021).

Bachelor of Nursing with Honors programme in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) requires the pre-registration students to complete their education for four years with the aim to provide a wide array of opportunities in education, practice and research. The two key elements of nursing education are theory and practice. Nursing education comprises both theoretical and practical education in order to prepare student nurses for their duties as a healthcare provider (Kerthu & Nuuyoma, 2019). Throughout nursing education, nursing students are needed to attend theoretical classes and fulfill their

requirement in clinical attachment according to the courses. As nursing is a professional clinical profession, a sufficient clinical attachment is required in order to allow skills development and application of theoretical content into practice (Salifu et al., 2018). While the practice environment dictates the circumstances in which the theoretical knowledge is applied, nursing theory serves as the foundation for nursing practice (Saifan et al., 2021).

The existence gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application is known as Theory-Practice Gap (TPG). Theory-Practice Gap is the divergence between what students theoretically obtained from classes and what they experience during clinical attachments (Utli & Yurt, 2022). Theory-Practice Gap occurs when nurse practitioners, including student nurses and newly graduated nurses, are unable to fully apply theoretical knowledge acquired into real-life clinical settings. A study by Saifan et al. (2021) stated that TPG are largely experienced by nursing students and also newly qualified nurses and can impact their socialization into the professional role. This is due to the integration of theoretical content in practice that does not occur smoothly (Jamshidi, 2012, as cited in Salifu et al., 2018). A study done by Akram (2018) stated that concerns have been raised by educators, practitioners, and students about the growing disparity between nursing theory and nursing practice. This will be inter-related to the competency of nursing care and patient outcomes.

Several studies stated that TPG is a global phenomenon and not a new thing. According to Budden (1994), this phenomenon is well described as a gap between ‘what is taught’ and ‘what is practiced’ in nursing, where the theory focuses on the ideal patient care, while the clinical education concentrates on the reality of nursing work (Saifan et al., 2015). Therefore, this study will be carried out to address the gap between theory and

practice in nursing. In order to explore the existence of TPG among UNIMAS nursing students, they will be required to describe their perceptions and experiences on TPG.

1.2 Statement of problem

1.2.1 Researcher's experience

The author is an undergraduate nursing student in UNIMAS. Throughout four years of nursing education, there is an existence in TPG. This occurrence of TPG is widely being experienced by the nursing students in the faculty as they are unable to fully apply what has been taught during Clinical Skills Laboratory (CSL) sessions during clinical attachment. During attachment in specialized units, the students were brief that certain clinical attachments are only for exposure purposes. This leads to limitations in practicing what has been taught during CSL sessions and theory classes into putting this knowledge into practice. The inability to practice what has been taught are due to various factors ranging from the environment, inadequate resources and nursing educators.

1.2.2 Existence of Theory-Practice Gap

There is still a gap between theory and practice among nursing students as the integration of theoretical knowledge does not occur smoothly. This gap has been experienced by nursing students, which can lead to incompatibility with the clinical setting and frustration with nursing practice. As a result of the existence of TPG, nursing students tend to conclude that their education appears to be useless and following the traditional routine is a better option (Iraqpour et al., 2018). Monaghan

(2015) as cited by Greenway et al. (2019) suggests as TPG begins during pre-registration education, it will give an impact to the clinical skills capabilities among nursing students. Theory-Practice Gap is concerning because it primarily has a negative impact on patient safety while also rendering the clinical experience for the inexperienced nursing student in the clinical setting less than acceptable (Saifan et al., 2021). Salifu et al. (2018) stated that the existence of TPG may lead to an adverse impact on socialization into the professional role. Nursing students perceive that the gap between theory and practice are multifactorial and have the potential to influence quality of care and patient outcomes due to reduced physical assessment skills (Saifan et al., 2021). This occurs due to ritualistic practice that is being practiced in the clinical settings which is performed without consideration of clinical needs.

1.2.3 Lack of research

Research on TPG among nursing students is still lacking in Malaysia, especially in Sarawak. There are limited research materials found regarding the topic TPG in Malaysia.

1.3 Research Questions

The following questions are used to explore the perceptions and experiences of TPG in nursing among UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students:

1. How do the UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students perceive TPG?
2. What are the impacts experienced by UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students due to the existence of TPG?
3. What are the recommendations to bridge the Theory-Practice Gap (TPG) in nursing education among nursing students?

1.4 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and experience of TPG in nursing among UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students.

1.5 Research Objectives

- (i) To explore UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students' perceptions towards TPG.
- (ii) To identify the impacts experienced by UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students due to the existence of TPG.
- (iii) To describe the recommendations to bridge the Theory-Practice Gap (TPG) in nursing education among nursing students.

1.6 Significance of study

The study on TPG in nursing among undergraduate nursing students will provide an original and unique data into the body of nursing knowledge as no similar studies on the perceptions and experiences of TPG in nursing among undergraduate nursing students is found in Sarawak, Malaysia.

The first group that will benefit from the findings of this study is the Department of Nursing (DoN), Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS), UNIMAS. There is

currently a lack of awareness regarding TPG among the DoN as TPG is still largely experienced by the undergraduate nursing students in the faculty itself. The findings will provide insights into future plans for the department to bridge the gap between theory and practice in FMHS.

The second group that will benefit from this study is the nursing students and nurse educators of the DoN from FMHS, UNIMAS which include the nursing lecturers and clinical instructors. This research will provide understanding to the nursing students on their perspective regarding the application of theoretical education to the clinical setting. The undergraduate nursing students can use these findings as a reference in their current nursing education. Nursing lecturers and clinical instructors play an important role in teaching and guiding students in applying theories into clinical settings. The findings from this study will aid nurse educators in cooperating with new strategies for better involvement of students in the clinical settings.

The final group to benefit from the findings of this research are the patients. The findings from this research will help in improving the quality of patient care as this study suggests solutions to bridge the TPG. This enables nursing students and newly graduated nurses to apply theoretical knowledge into practice. With the betterment of clinical practice, the quality of patient care will improve.

1.7 Defining Terms

1.7.1 Theory-Practice Gap

According to Utli and Yurt (2021), the theory-practice gap is the divergence between what students obtained through theoretical lessons and what they actually

experience during clinical attachments. In this study, TPG refers to describing the perceptions, experiences and understanding towards the existence of the gap between theory and practice during clinical attachment among nursing students.

1.7.2 Experience

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2019), experience is a process of obtaining knowledge or skill from doing, seeing or feeling things. In this study, experience refers to an encounter on TPG by UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students during their clinical attachment throughout their nursing education.

1.7.3 Perception

Salifu (2016) stated that perception is an individual's viewpoint, belief or opinion towards something. Hence, for this study, perception refers to the point of view of UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students towards TPG. This includes their thoughts on the existence of TPG during their nursing education period.

1.8 Summary

Throughout the chapter, this study will be focusing on the perception and experiences of TPG in nursing among UNIMAS undergraduate nursing students. The exploration towards this research will provide insights to the research questions, problems statements, objectives, and also discussing its relevance to the current body of knowledge in nursing.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the rationale of this study, reviews past research that is related to this study and makes recommendations for further study related to TPG. The information obtained for this literature review was retrieved from Google scholar, ResearchGate and Pubmed. Keywords used to search for related research studies were “Theory-Practice Gap”, “nursing students”, “nurse education”, “factors”, “impact”, “solutions”, and “recommendations”. Articles collected are in range from 2013-2023. The outcome of literature review is divided into three sections: (i) Perception towards TPG among nursing students, (ii) Impact experienced by nursing students due to the existence of TPG, and (iii) Recommendations to bridge TPG in nursing education.

2.1 Perception of Theory-Practice Gap (TPG) among nursing students

2.1.1 Understanding of TPG among nursing students

Various studies have shown different perceptions on the participants' understanding towards TPG. According to a study by Bazrafkan and Kalyani (2018), it is being perceived that TPG is an occurrence when lessons in the classroom are unable to be used during clinical training and in work with patients. Theory-Practice Gap is also perceived as a missing link between theoretical and practical knowledge (Ugwu et al., 2022). Kertu and Nuuyoma (2019) stated that knowledge that is taught in the classroom is not always applicable within the

clinical setting or in the hospital. However, nursing students realize the existence of TPG as they experienced it during their clinical practice and interpreted it as a failure in matching theoretical nursing knowledge into practice (Ugwu et al., 2022). Utli and Yurt (2022) mentioned in their study that nursing students felt deficient in both theory and practical as there is a shortfall between theory and practice since students obtained more of theory compared to practice. Nursing students understand TPG as an issue that leads to confusion because knowledge learned in the classroom is ideological and does not connect with the clinical setting (Kertu & Nuuyoma, 2019).

2.1.2 Factors leading to existence of TPG perceived by nursing students

2.1.2.1 Nurse Educators

Nurse educators which include lecturers, clinical instructors (CI), local preceptors (LP) and clinical staff are individuals that influence the gap between theory and practice among students. Lack of collaboration, unsupportive staff behavior, and inadequate communication between instructors would prevent students from utilizing their educational potential (Irajpour et al., 2018). Multiple studies have shown how nursing students mention nurse educators as factors that lead to the existence of TPG. This is because lacking in support from nurse educators will reduce students' eagerness to learn and pursue nursing education (Bazrafkan & Kalyani, 2018). According to Saifan et al. (2015), clinical instructors' lack of support includes being mistreated by having a critical attitude toward students who do not perform well in clinical.

Besides, the gap may arise from the result of students following substandard care provided by inexperienced staff or instructors, following the hospital's routine and clinical instructors' lack of proficiency with some equipment (Irajpour et al., 2018) as they may have lost touch with nursing practice due to prolonged absence from clinical settings (Salifu et al., 2018). Due to limited experienced nurse educators, a study by Salifu et al. (2018) indicated that when the student-clinical instructor ratio is increasing, it reduces learning opportunities. According to Saifan et al. (2015), it is stated that although clinical instructors may exhibit a wealth of information, many struggle to apply theory to practice due to a lack of experience.

Nursing students observed that clinical staff are more task-oriented and lack the comprehensively taught skills and embedded knowledge obtained prior to entering the clinical setting (Kertu & Nuuyoma, 2019). Certain students experienced being neglected by clinical staff as they prefer to work and teach students from training centers and consider them to be more intelligent as compared to university students although no study has shown that diploma or certificate nursing students are more intelligent compared to degree nursing students (Kertu & Nuuyoma, 2019).

2.1.2.2 Clinical environment

Different clinical surroundings and exposures will be present in various clinical settings. These lack of exposures may be due to certain contributing factors. In terms of management, due to poor administration, students are forced to participate in clinical experiences that are not directly relevant to their learning

goals (Salifu et al., 2018). Large number of students in one ward (Saifan et al., 2015) and patients being the priority compared to students' learning (Irajpour et al., 2018) leads to a greater disruption of theory and practice from the students' perspective (Bazrafkan & Kalyani, 2018). This matter will indirectly lead to students being left as passive observers (Odetola et al., 2018). A study by Kertu & Nuuyoma (2019) stated that the time allocation to students for clinical placement was insufficient to allow them to follow compelling clinical cases and advance clinical learning (Salifu et al., 2018). It is proven that inadequate exposure in clinical settings inhibits the students from integrating theory into practice (Kertu & Nuuyoma, 2019). Some students may be exposed to staff nurses still practicing old methods (Ugwu et al., 2022) when providing care to patients. Greenway et al. (2019) stated that poor practise as a result of socialization issues, such as a lack of role models among ward staff and a sense of powerlessness to question practises for fear of being ridiculed.

2.1.2.3 Limitation in equipments and infrastructure

A limitation in resources and infrastructure will also contribute to the existence of TPG. Universities should provide the essential infrastructure in order to provide an adequate practice education (Utli & Yurt, 2022). A particular setting lacks certain components and equipment, making it difficult to access specialized equipment and to complete a typical procedure, for example (Irajpour et al., 2018). Although public institutions handle a large volume of patients, allowing for adequate practice exposure, these facilities often appear to have a lack of basic