

The Theory-Practice Gap in Nursing Education During the Pandemic Period from the Perspective of Stakeholders: A Qualitative Study

Hediye Utli¹ , Seher Yurt² 

¹ Mardin Artuklu University, Vocational School of Health Services, Department of Elderly Care, Mardin, Türkiye.

² Istanbul Kent University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Nursing Department, Istanbul, Türkiye.

Correspondence Author: Hediye Utli

E-mail: hediyeutli@artuklu.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of theoretical and practical nursing education carried out by distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic and the theory-practice gap in nursing education in Turkey.

Methods: This qualitative study used a descriptive qualitative study. This research was conducted with nursing lecturers and students from two universities in two different geographical regions. Lecturers and undergraduate students participated in the research. The data for the research were collected using the online Zoom program during four focus-group discussions.

Results: Three main themes emerged for the categories of theoretical and practical education emerged during the study: strong structural conditions (technological integration and accessibility) both strong and weak structural conditions (asynchronous participation and changing comfort levels/routines) and weak structural conditions (cold contact and inequality of opportunity).

Conclusion: This study revealed the strengths and weaknesses in the experience of distance nursing education and will guide future planning of nursing education programs and clinical fields.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, distance education, nursing education.

1. INTRODUCTION

The theory-practice gap is defined as the discrepancy between what students acquire through theoretical classroom lessons and what they experience in a clinical setting (1, 2).

The pandemic, which has affected all areas of life, has required a reassessment of perspectives, especially in terms of education. It has also been necessary to evaluate social equality, community support, and the philosophy of openness in education, as well as the economic dimension of education (3-7).

During the pandemic, many countries have switched to a distance education system (4, 8-9). Nursing education, an academic system based on both theory, clinical practice that supports students' cognitive, sensory and psychomotor skills, and students graduate as future professional nurses with a high level of competence and confidence (10). Although there are many advantages to distance education, such as reducing the workload of educational staff, saving time, increasing academic achievement, reducing cost, improving quality, increasing the prestige of a university, overcoming

physical distance and providing flexibility, there are also disadvantages such as lack of social and academic activities in school, lack of interaction, barriers to access, infrastructure costs, and the inability of students to acquire affective and psycho-motor behaviors (6-7, 10-13).

The field of practice provides excellent opportunities for students to convert theory into clinical practice and gain competence in nursing skills prior to graduation (14), but during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to use either the hospital or the skills laboratories. There are growing concerns about clinical experience and psychomotor skills competencies in nursing students who will graduate without having been able to apply them in practice. To ensure an efficient nursing education, all parties need to plan together and set out action plans for the future.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study Purpose

This case study aimed to understand the experiences of nursing lecturers and students who used distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic to examine the effects of such distance education and to determine what action plans are needed for the future and the theory-practice gap in nursing education.

2.2. Study Design

This research used the case study method from among the qualitative research designs (15, 16).

2.3. Settings

The research was conducted with 21 nursing students and 14 lecturers studying at one state (N= 355) and one foundation (N=411) university. The average number of students per lecturers in these two schools, which both offered face-to-face education before the pandemic, was 27. Both universities switched to distance education through online platforms (8,9) as a result of the decision taken by the Turkish National Higher Education Institute on 26 March 2020. Although the distance education infrastructure of both universities existed before the pandemic, it was not actively used until the advent of COVID-19. During the pandemic, theory and

practical training have been carried out through the Learning Management System (LMS) at the state university where the research was conducted, and the Blackboard Learning Management System at the foundation university. Lecturers and students received institutional training in the use of this platform. Not all students had the tools and technical infrastructure required for distance education. Neither the lecturers nor the students had any prior distance education experience for vocational courses.

2.4. Participants

In the study, purposive multilevel sampling was used (17, 18). The representation of perceptions and views of different groups about the subject of investigation is important (15,19, 20) The research was carried out by two female lecturers who had completed PhDs in nursing principles and public health nursing. During data analysis, the lecturers and students were coded by letters and numbers. The demographic characteristics of the participants are given in Table 1 and 2. In determining the participants in the study, the basic criterion was for lecturer, the criteria were that they were teaching practice-oriented nursing courses and had completed a PhD. The exclusion criteria from the study were refusal to participate in the study, the participants having internet problems, the home environment being unsuitable for the interview and screen recording not being allowed. A teach staff who suddenly had a health problem and 3 students who lost the internet were excluded from the study.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of lecturers (n=14)

Lecturers	Gender	Age	Profession	Clinical experience period Year/ month (Y/M)	Academic experience period Year/ month (Y/M)	Institution working time Year/ month (Y/M)	University
TS1	Female	43	Nursing fundamentals	6 M	20 Y	20 Y	State
TS2	Female	47	Public health	-	21 Y	21 Y	State
TS3	Female	43	Child health and diseases	2 Y	22 Y	22 Y	State
TS4	Female	33	Nursing fundamentals	-	10 Y	3 Y	State
TS5	Male	31	Child health and diseases	1 Y	7 Y	1 Y	State
TS6	Female	39	Management in nursing	8 Y	7 Y	7 Y	State
TS7	Female	39	Psychiatric nursing	5 Y	12 Y	4 Y	Foundation
TS8	Female	36	Public health	5 Y	13 Y	5 Y	Foundation
TS9	Female	31	Nursing fundamentals	3 Y	3 Y	3 Y	Foundation
TS10	Female	39	Women's health and diseases	5 Y	12 Y	6 Y	Foundation
TS11	Female	47	Surgical diseases	24 Y	3 Y	6 M	Foundation
TS12	Female	45	Internal diseases	8 Y	18 Y	6 Y	Foundation
TS13	Female	29	Surgical diseases	4 Y	5 Y	3 Y	Foundation
TS14	Female	36	Management in nursing	11 Y	3 Y	3 Y	Foundation

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of students (n=22)

Students	Gender	Age	Class	Grade average	University
S1	Female	20	4	3.18	State
S2	Female	20	3	2.43	State
S3	Female	21	3	3.84	State
S4	Female	20	2	3.24	State
S5	Female	20	3	2.94	State
S6	Male	19	1	2.7	State
S7	Female	19	1	2.26	State
S8	Female	20	2	2.86	State
S9	Female	20	2	3.48	State
S10	Female	21	4	3.29	State
S11	Female	21	4	4.00	State
S12	Female	20	1	4.00	Foundation
S13	Male	21	2	3.73	Foundation
S14	Female	20	2	3.15	Foundation
S15	Female	20	4	3.01	Foundation
S16	Female	21	3	3.55	Foundation
S17	Female	21	4	3.70	Foundation
S18	Male	22	4	3.88	Foundation
S19	Female	22	4	3.58	Foundation
S20	Female	20	3	2.98	Foundation
S21	Female	20	3	3.57	Foundation

Note. * According to the students' grade point average of 4
 Overall Academic Grade Point Average (OAGPA) AA:4.00, BA:3.50,
 BB:3.00, CB:2.50, CC:2.00

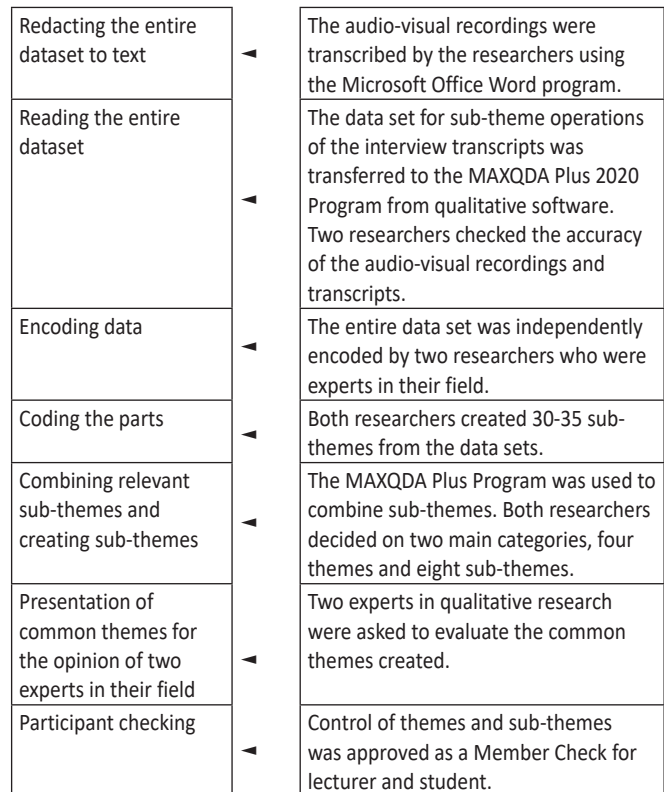
2.5. Data Collection

Research data was collected by focus-group interview via the Zoom online meeting program. A pilot study was conducted with one student and one lecturer to review the content of the interview questions (21). The purpose and process of the research were explained to the participants and from the online platform oral and written consent was obtained from those who agreed to participate in the study. Research data was collected through a semi-structured interview form prepared by researchers in line with the literature and a socio-demographic form (15, 22-24). A total of four focus-group interviews were conducted. Each focus group interview lasted an average of 145 minutes. The interviews were terminated when data saturation was reached (19, 25).

2.6. Data Analysis

The procedures carried out during the data analysis stage were as follows:

The maxqda 2020 software program, which is used in qualitative data analysis and helps analyze various data such as focus group, video, audio file, literature, visuals, was used (26).



2.7. Ethical Considerations

Consent for the research was obtained from the Noninvasive Clinical Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Dicle University (Number: 302, July 2020). Institutional permission was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences, Mardin Artuklu University (Number: 53920853-200-, December 2020) and the Maltepe University School of Nursing (Number: E-87517843-605.01-000.001.25440, December 020).

3. RESULTS

The themes that emerged regarding distance nursing education during the COVID-19 pandemic were developed in two stages. In the first stage, they were divided into two categories: “structural conditions for theory education” and “structural conditions for practice education. Then the “structural conditions for theory education” were gathered under three themes: strong structural conditions, both strong and weak structural conditions and weak structural conditions in the “structural conditions for practice education” category, only the theme of weak structural condition was obtained. A total of eight sub-themes was found.

Structural conditions for theory education

Theme 1: strong structures

In the strong structural conditions theme, the sub-themes most mentioned by both academics and students were technological integration (n=43) and accessibility (n=23).

- **Sub-theme 1: technological integration**

Both teachers and students have acquired new technological skills in distance education during the period of the pandemic in Turkey (27-29). Distance education is essential in times of emergency situations like pandemics. The students stated that their use of databases had increased, they had followed professionals in the field, discovered many online sites, and actively used YouTube. One student said: "I discovered many academics and many sites during this period. I began studying foreign sources more in this period" (S3). Lecturers, on the other hand, learned computer technologies. One lecturer said: "We had to support our classes with extra videos because we couldn't guide them [in person]. Naturally, we learned about technology. We learned how to fix videos, edit and use animation programs" (TS13).

- **Sub-theme 2: accessibility**

It has been reported that in Turkey it actually became easier for students to communicate with their instructors than before the pandemic (27,29). Students focused on the benefits of access to lecturers and lecture videos and the ability to rewatch them. One student said: "All our lessons are being recorded. We can open them again and again and watch them and take notes whenever we want. We have the opportunity to research and learn the subject from the computer without any delay" (S14).

Theme 2: both strong and weak structures

The second theme in the "structural conditions for theory education" category was the theme of both strong and weak structural conditions, with sub-themes of asynchronous participation (n=25) and changing comfort levels/routines (n=22).

- **Sub-theme 1: asynchronous participation**

Asynchronous participation is the opportunity for individuals to create work plans according to their own speed, ability, and interest in the educational process. However, asynchronous participation also reduces interactivity among participants in education. The students who participated in our research stated that they preferred asynchronous participation because it sometimes provides a sense of comfort and sometimes because the home environment is not suitable. One student said: "I'm the only girl in the house. I have to do a lot of house chores. At the same time, I may have to do different things while listening to lessons. So, I don't turn on the camera, this can be also called 'feeling comfortable'" (S3).

- **Sub-theme 2: changing comfort levels/routines**

Students noted that they experienced changes in their daily routines along with distance education (n=22). Students returned to their family homes during the pandemic. During this period, they stated that they had problems with sleep, nutrition, changes in physical activity, inability to adapt, their home being overcrowded, inability to get up in the morning and lack of motivation to attend class. One student said: "When I came to school during the face-to-face education period, at least it was clear what time I had to get up. Now I'm taking the class as soon as I get up. Eating and sleeping are also very affected." (S16). Lecturers, on the other hand, noted that they had difficulty balancing their roles in the home and roles in the work environment: "I go running around and cook, then I come back and start the lesson. My sleep pattern is disturbed. I am experiencing a conflict of roles. I don't have five minutes for myself. This role confusion is really tiring me out" (TS1).

Theme 3: weak structures

The most common sub-themes of the weak structural conditions theme in the "structural conditions for theory education" category were cold contact (n=41) and inequality of opportunity (n=26).

- **Sub-theme 1: cold contact**

Students and lecturers stated that distance education led them to understand the value of face-to-face education. One student said: "We're stuck in our house right now. Actually, it's not an educational period that makes us happy. We have a lot of being distant from our environment and not being able to communicate one-to-one with our teachers" (S1). Lecturers, on the other hand, stated that they had a very difficult time teaching to the screen without students: "During distance education, we try to reach out the students without being able to make eye contact, without using gestures and facial expressions, without entering into a one-to-one relationship" (TS7).

- **Sub-theme 2: inequality of opportunity in education**

It has previously been determined that most students and lecturers studying at universities in Turkey have electronic devices and internet services that allow them to access distance education (27,28). However, the majority of the students who participated in the study stated that they could not participate in the course synchronously due to financial difficulties and lack of infrastructure. Distance education created inequality of opportunity, especially among students living in rural areas. A lecturer at state university said: "Those living in the village in particular experience connection problems. Internet quotas are very insufficient, and they have trouble accessing the classes" (TS3). A student at the foundation university said: "I am very glad that our university. My friends, who were studying at the state university, were constantly upset that their connection kept breaking all the time during the course" (S18).

Structural conditions for practice education

In the category of “structural conditions for practice education”, the sub-themes most commonly mentioned by both academics and students in the weak structural conditions theme were an increased sense of inadequacy (n=19), and dissatisfaction (n=13).

Theme 1: weak structures

- Sub-theme 1: increased sense of inadequacy**

Students stated that they felt inadequate in terms of clinical practice during the pandemic, and that learning only through visual tools was not enough. One student said: “It will be almost a year and a half. We’ll start our employment before we’ve had a chance to practice. We haven’t gained enough experience” (S10).

- Sub-theme 2: dissatisfaction**

The dissatisfaction sub-theme was expressed only by lecturers. They stated that they were caught off guard by having to provide distance practice education, that both they and the institutions had not been able to adapt, and the students they were educating were perceived as inadequate by society in general. One lecturer said: “We were not ready for this process. We don’t have an efficient infrastructure. We don’t have virtual reality classes or online simulation classes. Therefore, we couldn’t connect theory and practice” (TS4). Another lecturer said: In the comic, a patient asked a student if they were a nurse student who graduated in 2020, and the student says yes. The patient told the student to ‘Stay away from me! You didn’t get a good education!’. Society does not have confidence in the students we have educated during this period” (TS3).

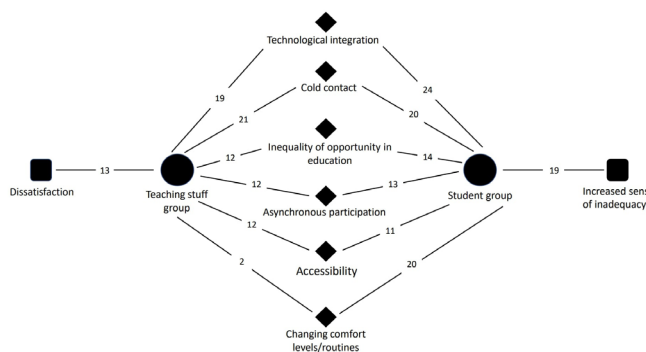


Figure 2. Two case analyses of teaching staff and students.

4. DISCUSSION

In this study, during the pandemic, the inability of nursing students to integrate their theoretical knowledge with practice seems to have deepened the default gap between theory and practice.

In the institutions where the research was conducted, theoretical education was provided through the Blackboard Learning Management System and the Learning Management System (LMS) programs. It has been determined that these programs are sufficient in theory. Simulation laboratories, case solutions, games and art programs in order to properly deliver practice education (30-33).

Well-structured virtual reality simulations for practice education is a teaching method that enables asynchronous participation (34). Cloud-based case simulations allow the student to visualize thought processes and re-observe actions as a result of repeating clicks throughout a case. Cloud-based simulation products such as EHR Go and NovEx can be used to improve clinical reasoning (5). Practice nourishes and strengthens theory. To deliver adequate practice education, universities must provide the necessary infrastructure, and lecturers must specialize in technology-based simulation applications.

In this research, accessibility was a strong structural factor in theoretical education. In their study of 220 college students, Civril et al. (12) similarly mentioned the theme of accessibility. Accessibility to educators allows students to set their own learning goals and develop their professional competence (5,35-36). Kaya and Akin Isik (6) in their qualitative research with in Turkey, they mentioned the theme of “disconnection of communication with the trainer”. These differences may be due to differences in infrastructure and faculty competencies.

The current study found that synchronized participation in the lesson by students was poor. Other studies have also determined that the synchronized participation of nursing students in the course was low (10,37). Collaborative learning methods with peers encourage dialogue and provide deeper

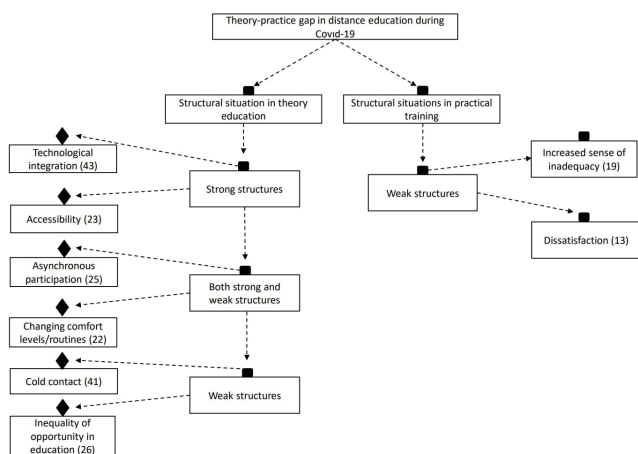


Figure 1. Theme and sub-theme map for theory and practice.

learning. They also facilitate the development and application of knowledge and skills (13,38). This finding suggests that there is a need for teaching methods and motivational tools to support students' synchronized participation in lessons.

Work and life balance is being able to fulfil one's personal responsibilities and desires while also maintaining one's role in the business and/or professional fields (39). The current study found that participants were unable to maintain a balance between the work and home environment. In the literature, nursing students stated that their home environments were only partially suitable for distance education (6,11,37). In the interviews conducted by Suliman et al. (33) with 18 nursing students it was determined that female students in particular had difficulties in balancing their family responsibilities and school lessons during online classes. The students who participated in our research stated that their sleep patterns were disturbed. The reason for this difference may have been due to their domestic lives, changes to their routines and habits in order to adapt to the new situation, and the stress experienced because of the pandemic.

The participants stated that cold contact was a weak structural factor in theoretical education. Similar to our research, other studies also determined that students studying in health professions during the pandemic preferred this kind of education (10,27,33, 40-41). In distance education there is no immediate communication or touch, it is hard to model or teach compassion and empathy (42). In Seah et al.'s (42) study an online "communication and cultural diversity" lesson module was created to strengthen student-patient communication, and virtual group discussions and therapeutic communication was carried out with patients and students in a clinic. Students' use of such interactive classroom practices can be efficient in improving their skills and eliminating the emotional gap in care.

Financial insufficiencies and lack of infrastructure may reveal the inequality of opportunity in distance education during the pandemic. Research has revealed that nursing students experience internet connection/infrastructure problems (6,10,37,41). It has been shown that those with high incomes have more convenient access to online education and databases than those who do not, and are also more successful in learning (5,13,30,32-33,43). Private and public institutions should offer opportunities to students to eliminate inequality of opportunity in education. University libraries should provide free internet access, and databases should be free and made easier to access.

As practical training was not provided to the nursing students who participated in our research under the necessary conditions during the pandemic, their sense of inadequacy with regard to their professional skills was more intense during this period. It has been reported that nursing students feel inadequate both in their theoretical and in their practical education (6,11,36-37). Virtual practical learning environments are defined as supportive for developing knowledge, skills and attitudes to improve competence

(44,45,46). Proposed implementing effective transition programs such as peer support, supervision, in-service training, simulations, mentoring and feedback to strengthen the experience of newly graduated nurses in health care settings and support the learning process.

The lecturers who participated in the research stated that they were unprepared for distance education, they were not able to provide sufficient guidance to the student, especially in practice education, and they were therefore dissatisfied. Today, the rapid development of technological software and hardware for education leads educators to constantly question their own technological competence (47,48). It is extremely important that educational institutions provide the necessary educational and infrastructure services to lecturers to help them develop in these areas.

5. CONCLUSION

The possibility for asynchronous participation in theoretical courses allowed students to participate when they were ready to learn. However, it also decreased lecturers' interactions with students and had a negative effect on their motivation. This indicates the need for teachers to make more efforts to provide interactive learning environments in online education. Distance education caused significant negative change in the routine health behaviors of both students and lecturers. There is a need to work to resolve the problem. There is a need to increase infrastructure investment to promote the use of augmented reality, virtual reality and web-based simulations, and game-based teaching tools in order to create interactive classroom environments with real cases for practice education. Policies aimed at eliminating the inequality of opportunity in distance education are also necessary. Intensive internships should be provided in the summer months in nursing programs in order to reduce the sense of professional inadequacy. Conducting more intensive and long-term in-service training programs for nurses who graduated during the pandemic period may help to replace the deficiencies in this period.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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