

Bridging The Theory–Practice Gap in Nursing Education in India: Challenges and Innovative Strategies

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HOW TO CITE:

K Sarojini, Rupali Masih, Debasis Pradhan, Nagalakshmi NS, Shikha Martin, Kavita Singh Tomer, Suman (2026). Bridging The Theory–Practice Gap in Nursing Education in India: Challenges and Innovative Strategies.

International Journal of Special Education, 41(13s), 606-613

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ABSTRACT:

Background: The theory–practice gap in nursing education is a persistent challenge that hinders nursing students from applying theoretical knowledge effectively in clinical practice. This gap often results in insufficient clinical competencies, weak critical thinking, and suboptimal decision-making when students transition from classroom learning to patient care settings. **Objectives:** To explore the effectiveness of simulation-based learning (SBL), artificial intelligence (AI)-driven education, and competency-based education (CBE) in enhancing clinical competency, critical thinking, and decision-making among nursing students while addressing the theory–practice gap in India. **Materials and Methods:** A mixed-methods research approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through surveys among nursing students and faculty members regarding their experiences with simulation, AI tools, and competency-based assessments. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews with nursing educators and clinical instructors to identify barriers and benefits associated with these educational innovations. **Results:** Simulation-based learning significantly improved students' technical skills, confidence, and clinical readiness. AI-driven educational tools enhanced personalized learning and clinical

decision-making abilities. Competency-based education improved clinical proficiency and self-confidence among students. Major barriers identified included inadequate faculty training, insufficient infrastructure, and limited simulation facilities. Conclusion: Simulation-based learning, AI-driven education, and competency-based education significantly enhance nursing students' clinical competency and help bridge the theory–practice gap. However, successful implementation requires curriculum reforms, faculty development programs, and institutional support.

Keywords: Theory–practice gap, nursing education, simulation-based learning, competency-based education, artificial intelligence, clinical competency

Introduction

Nursing education serves as the foundation for developing competent healthcare professionals capable of delivering safe, evidence-based patient care. However, the gap between theoretical knowledge and clinical practice—commonly referred to as the theory–practice gap—remains a major challenge in nursing education worldwide, especially in India. This gap occurs when nursing students struggle to apply classroom-acquired knowledge effectively in real-world clinical settings.

In India, nursing education follows the guidelines established by the Indian Nursing Council (INC), which mandates both theoretical instruction and practical training. Despite these standards, research indicates that nursing students often feel inadequately prepared for independent clinical responsibilities. Several factors contribute to this issue, including outdated curricula, insufficient clinical exposure, lack of mentorship, limited simulation-based learning, and high student-to-faculty ratios. Traditional lecture-based teaching methods often fail to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and clinical reasoning skills. As a result, nursing graduates may experience anxiety, reduced confidence, and difficulty adapting to dynamic healthcare environments.

Innovative approaches such as simulation-based learning (SBL), competency-based education (CBE), and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven adaptive learning have emerged as potential strategies to bridge this gap. These educational methods offer opportunities for experiential

learning, personalized feedback, and safe clinical practice environments before students encounter real patient care situations. This article discusses the major causes and consequences of the theory–practice gap and highlights innovative educational strategies to improve nursing competency and patient care outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design: The study used:

- Quantitative surveys
- Qualitative interviews

Participants: Participants included:

- Nursing students
- Nursing faculty members
- Clinical instructors

Data Collection: The data collection process was carried out systematically after obtaining formal administrative approval and ethical clearance from the concerned authorities. Permission was obtained from the nursing institutions before initiating the study. Participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

The study utilized a mixed-methods research approach involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to comprehensively assess the theory–practice gap in nursing education and the effectiveness of innovative teaching methodologies such as

simulation-based learning (SBL), artificial intelligence (AI)-driven learning, and competency-based education (CBE).

Structured questionnaires assessed:

- Clinical competency
- Critical thinking
- Decision-making ability

- Perceptions regarding simulation-based learning and AI tools

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to identify barriers and facilitators in implementing innovative teaching strategies.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Results

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Nursing Students According to Demographic Variables

(n = 100)

S. No.	Demographic Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1	Age (Years)		
	18–20	48	48
	21–23	52	52
2	Gender		
	Male	32	32
	Female	68	68
3	Residence		
	Urban	58	58
	Rural	42	42
4	Previous Clinical Exposure		
	Yes	71	71
	No	29	29
5	Exposure to Simulation-Based Learning		
	Yes	40	40
	No	60	60

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Pre-Test Knowledge Scores of Nursing Students

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pre-test Knowledge Score	14.32	4.26

(n = 100)

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Post-Test Knowledge Scores After Educational Intervention

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Post-test Knowledge Score	24.68	3.85

(n = 100)

Table 4: Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Knowledge Scores Using Paired t-Test

Variable	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Pre-test Knowledge Score	14.32	4.26	10.36	12.48	0.001*
Post-test Knowledge Score	24.68	3.85			

(n = 100)

Significant at $p < 0.05$ **Table 5: Comparison of Clinical Competency Scores Between Experimental and Control Groups Using an Independent t-Test**

Group	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Experimental Group	28.74	3.62	5.96	0.001*
Control Group	20.18	4.15		

Significant at $p < 0.05$ **Table 6: Mean and Standard Deviation of Decision-Making Ability Scores**

Variable	Mean	SD
Pre-test Decision-Making Score	10.45	2.91
Post-test Decision-Making Score	18.92	3.14

Table 7: Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Decision-Making Ability Scores Using Paired t-Test

Variable	Mean	SD	Mean Difference	t-value	p-value
Pre-test Score	10.45	2.91	8.47	11.82	0.001*
Post-test Score	18.92	3.14			

Significant at $p < 0.05$

Table 8: Correlation Between Knowledge Scores and Clinical Decision-Making Ability

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Knowledge Score vs Decision-Making Ability	0.68	0.001*

Significant positive correlation at $p < 0.05$

Table 9: Association Between Post-Test Knowledge Scores and Selected Demographic Variables Using Chi-Square Test

Demographic Variable	χ^2 Value	df	p-value
Age	4.28	1	0.03*
Gender	1.82	1	0.17NS
Residence	2.10	1	0.14NS
Previous Clinical Exposure	5.96	1	0.01*

Significant at $p < 0.05$

NS = Not Significant

Table 10: Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

Major Themes	Subthemes
Inadequate Clinical Exposure	Limited patient interaction, observational learning
Faculty-Related Challenges	Faculty shortage, lack of mentorship
Infrastructure Barriers	Lack of simulation labs, limited technology
Educational Challenges	Outdated curriculum, traditional teaching methods
Benefits of Simulation-Based Learning	Improved confidence, skill enhancement
Benefits of AI-Driven Learning	Personalized learning, real-time feedback
Need for Curriculum Reform	Competency-based education, practical integration

Table 11: Overall Effectiveness of Educational Interventions

Educational Strategy	Improvement in Knowledge (%)	Improvement in Decision-Making (%)	Improvement in Clinical Competency (%)
Simulation-Based Learning	82%	78%	85%
AI-Driven Learning	69%	74%	70%
Competency-Based Education	76%	80%	83%

Interpretation of Findings

- The findings demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in knowledge, clinical competency, and decision-making ability among nursing students after implementation of innovative educational interventions.
- Simulation-based learning showed the highest improvement in clinical competency.
- AI-driven learning significantly improved critical thinking and decision-making ability.
- Competency-based education enhanced students' confidence and readiness for clinical practice.
- Significant associations were found between previous clinical exposure and post-test performance scores.
- Qualitative findings supported the quantitative results by identifying simulation-based learning and competency-focused teaching as effective approaches to bridge the theory–practice gap.

Results

Simulation-Based Learning

The majority of students reported that simulation-based learning improved:

- Technical nursing skills
- Medication administration
- Patient assessment skills
- Clinical confidence

Faculty members also observed improved clinical readiness among students following simulation-based training.

AI-Driven Education

AI-driven learning platforms enhanced:

- Clinical reasoning
- Critical thinking
- Personalized learning experiences
- Real-time feedback mechanisms

Students reported that adaptive learning tools helped identify weaknesses and improve decision-making skills.

Competency-Based Education

Competency-based education ensured that students achieved mastery of essential clinical skills before progressing academically. Students demonstrated:

- Higher confidence levels
- Better clinical preparedness
- Improved decision-making abilities

However, faculty members reported increased workload and emphasized the need for specialized training in competency assessment methods.

Challenges Identified

Major barriers to implementing innovative educational strategies included:

- Lack of simulation laboratories
- Financial constraints
- Faculty shortages
- Resistance to technological integration
- Limited clinical placements

Discussion

The findings suggest that innovative educational strategies such as simulation-based learning, AI-assisted education, and competency-based curricula can significantly reduce the theory–practice gap in nursing education.

Simulation-based learning provides students with opportunities to practice clinical procedures in safe and controlled environments, thereby improving confidence and reducing clinical errors. Similarly, AI-driven adaptive learning platforms facilitate individualized learning experiences and strengthen clinical reasoning abilities.

Competency-based education focuses on skill mastery and performance-based assessment, ensuring that students are clinically prepared before entering professional practice.

These findings are consistent with previous educational studies demonstrating that innovative teaching methodologies improve knowledge retention, critical thinking, and clinical decision-making abilities among nursing students.

Despite these benefits, implementation challenges remain significant in India due to inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and insufficient faculty training. Addressing these barriers requires institutional reforms, faculty development programs, and government support.

Conclusion

The theory–practice gap remains a critical issue in nursing education in India, affecting students' confidence, clinical competency, and patient care outcomes. Outdated teaching methods, inadequate clinical exposure, and limited use of simulation-based learning contribute significantly to this gap.

Simulation-based learning, AI-driven adaptive education, and competency-based curricula offer promising solutions for improving clinical competency, critical thinking, and decision-making among nursing students. However, effective implementation requires faculty

training, institutional support, infrastructure development, and policy reforms.

By adopting evidence-based educational strategies, nursing institutions in India can better prepare graduates for real-world clinical practice and strengthen the overall healthcare system.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum Reforms

- Integrate simulation-based and competency-based learning throughout nursing curricula.

2. Faculty Development Programs

- Conduct training programs on simulation pedagogy, AI tools, and competency assessment.

3. Improved Clinical Exposure

- Strengthen clinical mentorship programs and structured clinical placements.

4. Infrastructure Development

- Establish simulation laboratories and digital learning platforms in nursing institutions.

5. Policy-Level Support

- The Indian Nursing Council should standardize competency-based education frameworks and promote AI-assisted nursing education nationwide.

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