

Changes in Nursing Students' Attitudes Toward Children with Disabilities Following Clinical Practice: A Quasi-Experimental Study

Abstract

Background: It is essential for nursing students to develop awareness of children with disabilities and their families to ensure appropriate professional attitudes and practices throughout their careers.

Aim: This study aimed to investigate changes in nursing students' attitudes toward children with disabilities following practice in a special education setting.

Methods: This quasi-experimental study employed a pre-test–post-test design. The study was conducted between May 27 and June 11, 2024, among nursing students (N=98) who completed clinical practice at a Special Education Vocational School. The study used a complete enumeration (total population) sampling approach and included students (n=85) who were undertaking clinical practice at the school, volunteered to participate, and met the inclusion criteria. Data were collected using a questionnaire form and the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory. Independent samples t test, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and paired-samples t test were used for data analysis.

Results: The students' mean total attitude score increased from 168.11 ± 16.04 before the practice to 173.38 ± 16.88 after the practice. Post-practice attitude scores were significantly higher among female students and among students who had not previously taken courses related to disability or individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that experiential learning in special education settings may play a significant role in fostering more positive attitudes among nursing students toward children with disabilities. Integrating disability-focused experiential learning into nursing curricula may help cultivate compassionate professionals who are better prepared to advocate for the rights and well-being of individuals with disabilities.

Keywords: Attitude, children with disabilities, nursing, practice, student

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Introduction

Disability is defined as a limitation in an individual's physical and/or psychological functioning resulting from congenital or acquired conditions.¹ According to the National Disability Data System, 381,129 children aged 0–19 years are registered as living with a disability.² Disability is a condition that requires support not only for affected children but also for their families because of ongoing care needs.³ Negative societal attitudes and behaviors toward children with disabilities and their families further complicate their daily lives.^{3–7} Studies have shown that children with disabilities and their families who experience negative attitudes and discrimination face numerous psychosocial challenges,^{6,8–10} including anxiety, depression, and loneliness.^{6,9} Health professionals play a crucial role in promoting the acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities and their families within society.¹¹

Nurses provide care across diverse settings, including schools, hospitals, and workplaces. Consequently, they play a key role in supporting the social inclusion of children with disabilities.^{12,13} Previous studies have shown that nurses encounter various challenges when communicating with and caring for children with disabilities and their families.^{14–18} These challenges may hinder the adaptation of children and their families to the care process and limit the provision of effective nursing care.^{16,18} To fulfill their professional responsibilities, nursing students should acquire adequate knowledge and competencies during their education while also developing essential skills such as empathy and effective communication.^{10,19}

Nurses' responsibilities in caring for children with disabilities include developing individualized care plans, regularly monitoring and evaluating health status, communicating effectively with families, providing educational support, demonstrating empathy and sensitivity, using effective communication skills, advocating for children and their families in legal and ethical matters, and keeping current with developments in disability care.¹¹ However, relatively few experimental studies have examined changes in nursing students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.^{19,20} Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence in this area. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine changes in nursing students' attitudes toward children with disabilities following clinical practice in a special education institution as part of the Pediatric Health and Diseases Nursing course.

Hypothesis

H1: Clinical practice in a special education institution improves nursing students' scores on the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory.

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Materials and Methods

Study Design

This quasi-experimental study employed a pre-test-post-test design. This study is reported in accordance with the Transparent Reporting of Evaluations with Nonrandomized Designs (TREND) guidelines.

Study Population and Sample

This study was conducted to determine the effect of clinical practice in a special education institution, undertaken as part of the Pediatric Health and Diseases Nursing course, on third-year nursing students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. The institution was selected because it serves students with a range of disabilities, including mild intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and combined intellectual and physical disabilities.

A complete enumeration (total population) sampling approach was used. Of the 98 third-year nursing students who completed clinical practice at the special education institution, 85 met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate. Thirteen students were excluded because they did not meet the requirement of attending clinical practice for at least two full days (Fig. 1). The study was conducted between May 27 and June 11, 2024.

Inclusion Criteria

- Voluntary participation in the study,
- Attendance at clinical practice for at least two full days.

Exclusion Criteria

- Failure to complete the data collection forms,
- Attendance only during the third week of clinical practice without participating in the first two weeks,
- Repeating the Pediatric Health and Diseases Nursing course.

Intervention

The special education school where the clinical practice was conducted served children aged 15–18 years with mild intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, and combined intellectual and physical disabilities. Nursing students completed clinical practice over a three-week period, attending the institution on Mondays and Tuesdays each week for a total of six practice days. The intervention was implemented as part of a structured clinical placement in the special education setting. On the first day, two to three nursing students were assigned to each classroom. Throughout the placement, each nursing student was responsible for one student receiving special education during the entire practice day.

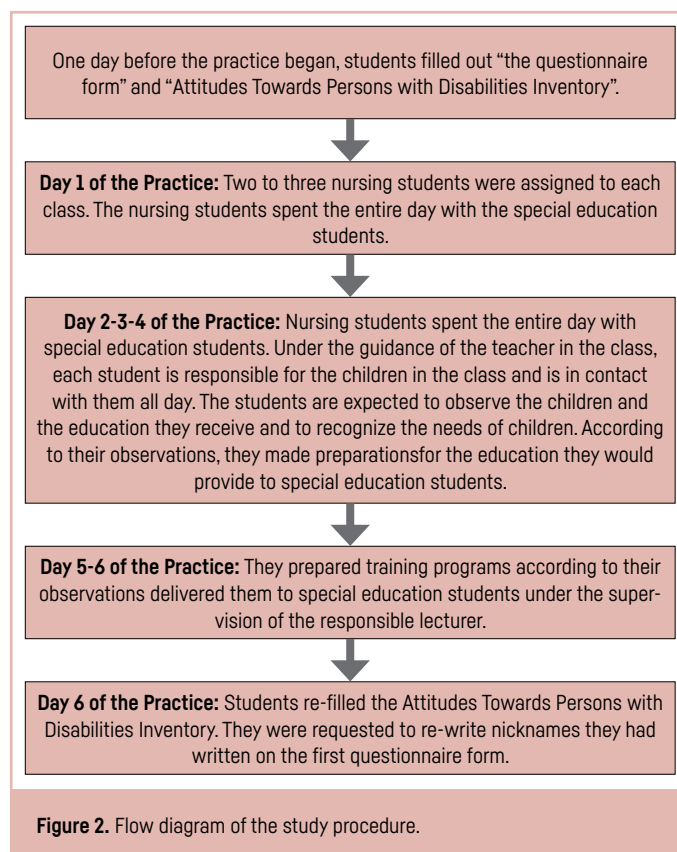
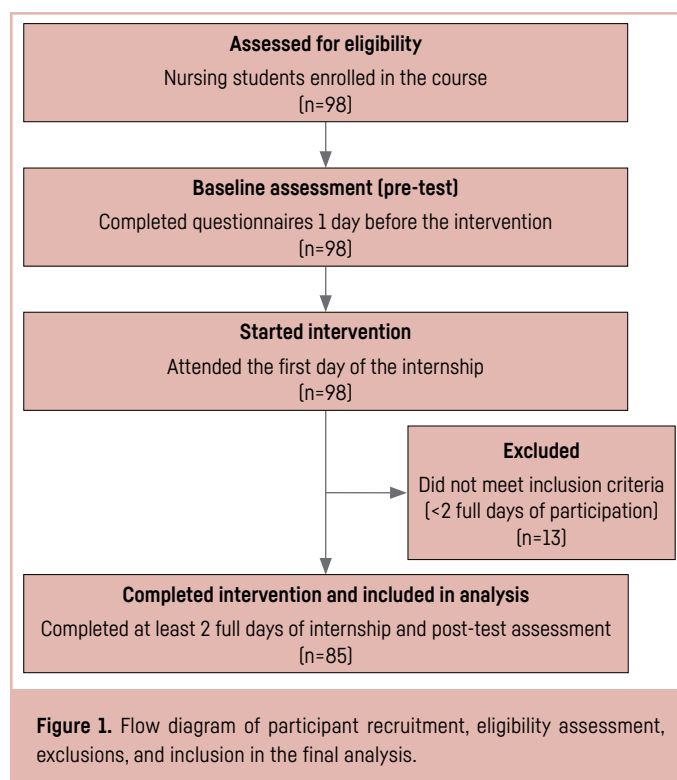
During the first two weeks (Days 1–4), the nursing students observed and interacted with the students to identify their health educational needs. Based on these observations, they developed individualized educational materials. During the final week (Days 5 and 6), the nursing students delivered the planned educational sessions under the supervision of the responsible faculty member (Fig. 2).

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a researcher-developed Questionnaire Form for Nursing Students and the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory.

Questionnaire Form for Nursing Students: The questionnaire collected information on participants' age, sex, economic status, the presence of individuals with disabilities among family members or close acquaintances (e.g., friends), previous education related to disability, and perceived difficulty communicating with individuals with disabilities.

Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory: The Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory was developed by Kaner et al.²¹ as part of the How Society Understands Disability project conducted by the Prime Ministry Administration for Disabled People in 2008. The instrument consists of 43 items organized into six subscales and uses a five-point Likert scale. Participants indicate their level of agreement with each statement by selecting one of five response options: strongly agree [5], agree [4], undecided [3], disagree [2], or strongly disagree [1]. The six subscales are Educational Environment (EE), Interpersonal Relationships (IR), Working Life (WL), Family Life (FL),



Personal Characteristics (PC), and Competence-Independent Living (CIL). In the original study, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.88. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were 0.56 (EE), 0.80 (IR), 0.74 (WL), 0.67 (FL), 0.74 (PC),

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Descriptive characteristics	n	%
Sex		
Female	62	72.9
Male	23	27.1
Economic status		
Income less than expenses	6	7.0
Income equal to expenses	65	76.5
Income greater than expenses	14	16.5
Family member with a disability		
Yes	5	5.9
No	80	94.1
Individual with a disability in the immediate social environment		
Yes	30	35.3
No	55	64.7
Previous disability-related education		
Yes	9	10.6
No	76	89.4
Difficulty communicating with individuals with disabilities		
Yes	6	7.0
Partially	70	82.4
No	9	10.6
Total	85	100.0

and 0.83 [CIL]. Negatively worded items (Items 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 28, 33, 37, 39, 40, 42, and 43) were reverse-scored. Subscale scores may be interpreted individually or combined to produce a total score. Total scores on the scale range from 43 to 215. The score ranges for the subscales are 3–15 for Educational Environment and Family Life, 9–45 for Interpersonal Relationships and Working Life, 7–35 for Personal Characteristics, and 12–60 for Competence–Independent Living. Higher total and subscale scores indicate more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. In the present study, the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.92 for the pre-test and 0.93 for the post-test. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales were 0.55 [EE], 0.77 [IR], 0.80 [WL], 0.69 [FL], 0.77 [PC], and 0.76 [CIL] in the pre-test, and 0.51 [EE], 0.80 [IR], 0.80 [WL], 0.71 [FL], 0.80 [PC], and 0.84 [CIL] in the post-test.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire form and the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory one day before beginning clinical practice. To match pre-test and post-test responses while maintaining anonymity, students were asked to create and use a unique identifier code. Following completion of the three-week clinical placement, participants completed the inventory again on the final day of practice using the same pseudonym (Fig. 2).

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 23.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the data. Because the data were normally distributed, parametric statistical tests were used. Independent-samples *t* test was used to compare two independent groups, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was used to compare three or more independent groups, and paired-samples *t* test was used to compare pre-test and post-test scale scores.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from KTO-Karatay University Non-Drug and Medical Device Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2024/019, Date: 09.05.2024), and institutional permission was granted (Permission No. 240179073). Before data collection, participants received written information describing the

Table 2. Comparison of students' scores on the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory before and after clinical practice

Scale/subscale	Pre-test Mean±SD	Post-test Mean±SD	Test
Total score	168.11±16.04	173.38±16.88	<i>t</i> =-3.401 p=0.001
Educational environment	13.62±1.35	13.94±1.13	<i>t</i> =-2.332 p=0.022
Interpersonal relationships	36.50±4.33	37.96±4.32	<i>t</i> =-3.179 p=0.002
Working life	35.90±4.16	36.44±4.41	<i>t</i> =-1.286 <i>p</i> =0.202
Family life	9.40±2.02	9.58±2.25	<i>t</i> =-0.952 <i>p</i> =0.344
Personal characteristics	27.82±3.28	28.74±3.52	<i>t</i> =-2.801 p=0.006
Competence–independent living	44.85±4.83	46.70±5.65	<i>t</i> =-3.077 p=0.003

study's purpose and procedures. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before enrollment, and only students who voluntarily agreed to participate were included in the study. Permission to use the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory was obtained from the relevant copyright holders.

Results

Thirteen students were excluded from the study because they did not meet the inclusion criterion of attending clinical practice for at least two full days. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 85 students (Fig. 1). The participants had a mean age of 21.75±1.20 years. Their demographic and descriptive characteristics are presented in Table 1.

The students' mean total score on the Attitudes Toward Persons with Disabilities Inventory increased from 168.11±16.04 at baseline (pre-test) to 173.38±16.88 after completion of the clinical practice (post-test). This increase was statistically significant. Significant improvements were also observed in the Educational Environment, Interpersonal Relationships, Personal Characteristics, and Competence–Independent Living subscale scores following the clinical practice (Table 2).

Comparison of the pre-test scores according to participants' characteristics showed a difference only with respect to perceived difficulty in communicating with individuals with disabilities (*p*=0.005). Post hoc analyses indicated that this difference was observed between students who reported having difficulty communicating and those who reported no difficulty (*p*=0.004), as well as between students who reported partial difficulty and those who reported no difficulty (*p*=0.042). This difference was no longer evident in the post-test assessment (Table 3).

Comparison of the post-test scores according to participants' characteristics revealed significant differences by sex (*p*=0.039) and previous education related to individuals with disabilities (*p*=0.028) (Table 3).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that nursing students had above-average attitudes toward individuals with disabilities before the clinical practice. Previous studies conducted among students in Faculties of Health Sciences have reported mean attitude scores ranging from 157 to 172.^{22,23} Consistent with these findings, our results suggest that nursing students generally hold positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. In contrast, a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among nursing students in selected private colleges in Birgunj found that more than half of the participants (61.1%) had negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.²⁴ Positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities are essential for promoting their well-being and supporting their families and caregivers. Nurses who demonstrate positive attitudes are more likely to establish effective therapeutic relationships, encourage individuals with disabilities to express their needs and

Table 3. Comparison of pre-test and post-test total attitude scores according to participants' characteristics

Characteristic	Pre-test		Post-test	
	Mean±SD	Test*	Mean±SD	Test*
Sex				
Female	168.98±14.94	t=0.815	175.67±15.63	t=2.093
Male	165.78±18.86	p=0.47	167.21±18.85	p=0.039
Economic status				
Income less than expenses	155.16±13.70	F=2.162	174.83±13.37	F=1.151
Income equal to expenses	169.15±15.67	p=0.122	174.60±16.77	p=0.321
Income greater than expenses	168.85±17.27		167.14±18.36	
Family member with a disability				
Yes	170.80±22.03	t=0.383	175.60±7.70	t=0.300
No	167.95±15.77	p=0.702	173.25±17.31	p=0.765
Individual with a disability in the immediate social environment				
Yes	169.40±18.25	t=0.542	175.86±16.94	t=1.000
No	167.41±14.84	p=0.589	172.3±16.84	p=0.320
Previous disability-related education				
Yes	166.44±17.61	t=-0.329	161.77±12.82	t=-2.233
No	168.31±15.96	p=0.743	174.76±16.84	p=0.028
Difficulty communicating with individuals with disabilities				
Yes[1]	154.50±26.49	F=5.591	159.83±20.97	F=2.721
Some difficulty[2]	167.64±14.44	p=0.005	173.71±16.35	p=0.072
No[3]	180.88±11.93	1<3 2<3	179.88±15.02	

*t=independent-samples t test; F=one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

preferences, and facilitate access to healthcare services. Furthermore, as respected members of society, nurses' attitudes may influence public perceptions and contribute to greater social acceptance and inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

The present study demonstrated that nursing students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities improved following clinical practice in a special education setting. Improvements were particularly evident in the domains of Educational Environment, Interpersonal Relationships, Personal Characteristics, and Competence-Independent Living. Similar findings have been reported by Özkan et al.¹⁹ In their study, third-year nursing students completed an educational program that included films depicting individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, as well as case-based discussions addressing the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and their families. Following completion of the educational modules, the students participated in clinical practice for 2.5 days per week over a three-week period. The intervention resulted in an improvement in nursing students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, as reflected by higher overall attitude scores after the program. Likewise, another study²⁰ found that participation in experiential learning activities related to the care of individuals with disabilities significantly improved nursing students' attitudes. A systematic review²⁵ also concluded that disability-focused educational programs positively influenced the attitudes of nursing and medical students toward disability. However, a pilot study by Edwards et al.²⁶ reported that a curriculum intervention involving interaction with individuals with disabilities did not produce significant changes in nursing students' attitudes. Differences among studies may reflect variations in curriculum content. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study support the value of providing nursing students with structured opportunities to interact directly with individuals with disabilities during their clinical education.

Before the clinical practice, students who reported no difficulty communicating with individuals with disabilities demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes than those who reported partial or complete difficulty. No significant associations were found between attitude scores and the other descriptive characteristics examined. Previous studies²⁷⁻³⁰ have similarly reported that factors such as economic status, having a family member with a disability, or knowing someone with a disability are

not significantly associated with attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Our findings are consistent with this body of evidence.

Following the clinical practice, female students demonstrated more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than male students. Similar findings have been reported in several previous studies.^{29,31} In contrast, Rakap et al.³ found a significant gender difference favoring male students. Taken together, these findings suggest that sex may be associated with attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. However, the direction of this association remains inconclusive. Further studies are needed to better understand the role of sex in shaping these attitudes.

Another notable finding was that students who had not previously received disability-related education demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes after the clinical practice than those who had received such education. This finding differs from several studies reporting more positive attitudes among students who had received disability-related education.^{32,33} Conversely, Kaldık [2022] has found no association between disability-related education and attitudes.³⁴ These inconsistent findings may be explained by differences in educational content, teaching strategies, and instructional approaches.

Limitations

The study sample consisted of nursing students from a single institution who voluntarily participated in a clinical placement in a special education setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The short duration of the intervention (six clinical practice days) is another limitation, as it may not have been sufficient to capture sustained changes in attitudes. Additionally, participants were not selected using a random sampling method. Another limitation of this study is that, although the overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale indicated acceptable internal consistency, the Educational Environment subscale demonstrated relatively low internal consistency ($\alpha=0.55$). Therefore, findings related to this subscale should be interpreted with caution. Finally, because students receiving special education were transported between home and school, nursing students had limited opportunities to interact with their parents or caregivers.

Conclusion

The study found that nursing students demonstrated above-average attitudes toward individuals with disabilities before the clinical practice and that these attitudes improved significantly following the intervention. The greatest improvements were observed in the domains of Educational Environment, Interpersonal Relationships, Personal Characteristics, and Competence-Independent Living.

Based on these findings, integrating structured, disability-focused experiential learning opportunities into undergraduate nursing curricula is recommended to enhance students' empathy and communication skills when caring for individuals with disabilities. Such experiences have the potential not only to strengthen these competencies but also to prepare future nurses to advocate for the rights, autonomy, and inclusion of individuals with disabilities. In the present study, the intervention period was necessarily brief because students rotated through multiple clinical placements as part of the course. Future studies should evaluate the effects of longer-term clinical practice on nursing students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the KTO-Karatay University Non-Drug and Medical Device Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2024/019, Date: 09.05.2024).

Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before enrollment.

Conflict of Interest: The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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