



Breastfeeding knowledge, attitudes, intentions, and perception of support from educational institutions among nursing students and students from other faculties: A descriptive cross-sectional study



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ABSTRACT

Background: Nursing education aims to promote positive health practices among the general population as well as among nurses themselves. Breastfeeding is one of these important health practices. However, to date there is little evidence regarding the extent to which nursing education affects nursing students' attitudes, knowledge, intentions, and their perception of institutional support regarding breastfeeding.

Objectives: To compare breastfeeding attitudes and knowledge among nursing students and students from other faculties, as well as their perception of their academic institution's support for breastfeeding, and to explore the association between these factors and students' intention to breastfeed during the course of their studies.

Design: This study was a descriptive cross-sectional study.

Settings: The study was conducted at a large university in central Israel.

Participants: One hundred female students from the faculty of nursing and 100 female students from other faculties, of childbearing age, who were either pregnant or mothers.

Methods: The students completed a questionnaire regarding their breastfeeding knowledge, intentions, attitudes, and their perception of their academic institution's support for breastfeeding.

Results: Nursing students' level of breastfeeding knowledge was very high, and higher than that among students from other faculties. However, both groups had similar moderately positive overall scores for attitudes towards breastfeeding. In addition, both groups expressed similar moderate intentions to breastfeed during the course of their studies. Students' perception of their academic faculty as supportive of breastfeeding, their breastfeeding attitudes, and breastfeeding knowledge, were found to predict their intention to breastfeed during the course of their studies.

Conclusions: Nursing programs should place more emphasis on improving nursing students' attitudes towards breastfeeding. In order to promote breastfeeding among students during their studies, it is important to ensure a pro-breastfeeding environment on campus.

1. Introduction

Breastfeeding is of great importance to infants' development. Various short- and long-term medical and neurodevelopmental advantages of breastfeeding have been documented, such as a reduced incidence of infections and certain diseases, and higher intelligence. Moreover, there are short- and long-term health benefits for mothers who breastfeed, such as decreased postpartum blood loss, a lower incidence of postpartum depression, and a lower incidence of both breast and ovarian cancer (Eidelman et al., 2012). The World Health Organization (2014), the American Academy of Pediatrics (Eidelman

et al., 2012), and multiple other professional organizations (UNICEF, 2013) all recommend that infants be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months of their life.

Despite these recommendations and the acknowledged benefits of breastfeeding, rates of breastfeeding remain low. In low-income and middle-income countries, only 37% of infants younger than 6 months are exclusively breastfed. In high-income countries, infants are breastfed for an even shorter duration (Victora et al., 2016). For example, according to the 2015 and 2016 National Immunization Surveys, only 60% of American women exclusively breastfed in the early postpartum period. As the baby grows, this number gradually

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decreases, such that by the age of six months only 25% of mothers still exclusively breastfeed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). Similar statistics have been reported in Israeli surveys (Berger-Achituv et al., 2005; Keinan-Boker et al., 2013). This pattern of a rather high initiation rate and gradual drop in actual practice rates has been observed in other countries as well (Victora et al., 2016).

It has been recognized that nurses play a critical role in changing breastfeeding behaviors. Moreover, nurses are often the sole health care providers available to assist and support the initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding (Spatz, 2011). Nurses may provide necessary information, emotional and practical support, and thus contribute to successful initiation and maintenance of breastfeeding (Britton et al., 2007).

There is evidence that nurses' breastfeeding knowledge and breastfeeding attitudes affect breastfeeding rates (Amick et al., 2016; Ingram et al., 2011). Nurses' knowledge and attitudes may be reflected in their approach to new mothers (Cricco-Lizza, 2006). Practicing nurses with a firm foundation of breastfeeding knowledge are better equipped to counsel lactating mothers. Moreover, they are able to use evidenced-based practice to support breastfeeding, rather than relying on intuition (Bozzette and Posner, 2013).

However, studies show that although nurses generally have a positive attitude towards breastfeeding (Amick et al., 2016; Ingram et al., 2011) and towards providing breastfeeding support (Bernaix et al., 2010), gaps in nurses' breastfeeding knowledge exist (Amick et al., 2016; Bernaix et al., 2010; Deloian et al., 2015; Shaw and Devgan, 2017). This indicates that nurses are not adequately prepared during their nursing studies to promote and encourage breastfeeding.

Studies reveal that nursing students' breastfeeding knowledge is generally inadequate. For example, in Darwent and Kempenaar's (2014) study, student midwives' overall mean score for breastfeeding knowledge was 35/45, while in a study by Payghan and Kadam (2012) only 30% of nursing students had a high level of breastfeeding knowledge. Similarly, a study by Ahmed and El Guindy (2011) reported that nursing students' overall mean score for breastfeeding knowledge was 12/24. However, nursing students generally tend to have rather positive breastfeeding attitudes (Ahmed and El Guindy, 2011; Darwent and Kempenaar, 2014; Payghan and Kadam, 2012), although in the study by Ahmed and El Guindy (2011) nursing students expressed neutral breastfeeding attitudes.

Ahmed and El Guindy (2011) conducted a comparison of both nurses/nursing students' and women's breastfeeding attitudes and knowledge which may provide information regarding nursing students' preparation for the role of breastfeeding promoters in the future. Darwent and Kempenaar (2014) conducted a similar comparison which found that student midwives' breastfeeding knowledge was slightly higher than that of breastfeeding women's, but they had similar breastfeeding attitude scores.

Return to work is often cited by women as a reason why they discontinued breastfeeding (Brown et al., 2014), while various workplace factors such as perceived employer support (Spitzmueller et al., 2016), reduced work load, availability of a dedicated space to pump breast milk such as a lactation room, sufficient pumping breaks, and encouragement from colleagues and supervisors (Tsai, 2013), were found to be predictors of breastfeeding continuation after mothers' return to work.

In Israel, it is very common for students to become parents during the course of their studies, and these new parents often spend considerable time on campus. Therefore, environmental factors related to academic facilities may be of importance for breastfeeding initiation and continuation. However, it is not known how students perceive institutional support for breastfeeding and how that perception affects their intention to breastfeed. It is also unknown how nursing students in particular perceive support for breastfeeding provided by their academic faculties. This is especially important, as one cannot expect them to become breastfeeding promoters in the future if they themselves are

not provided with such support.

The purpose of the present study is to compare breastfeeding knowledge and attitudes among nursing students and students from other faculties, as well as their perception of support for breastfeeding provided by their academic faculty, and to explore the association of these factors with students' intention to breastfeed during the course of their studies.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

The study had a descriptive cross-sectional design.

2.2. Setting and Sample

Participants included a convenience sample of 200 female Israeli students from a large university in central Israel – 100 students from the faculty of nursing and 100 from other faculties. Inclusion criteria: students fluent in Hebrew, of childbearing age (18–46), who were pregnant or already mothers. Two hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed and 200 were returned complete for a response rate of 90%.

2.3. Instrument

The research tool was a questionnaire constructed by Kavanagh et al. (2012). The questionnaire was translated into Hebrew using the back translation method, tested for external and internal validity, and adapted to the needs of the current study. Three content experts from the field of women's health evaluated the questionnaire and made small changes for grammar and clarity. Permission was obtained from the original authors to use the questionnaire. The final version included 53 items and examined students' sociodemographic characteristics (11 items), past experience with breastfeeding (6 items, for example: "Have you ever breastfed?"), faculty support for breastfeeding (8 items, for example: "The lecturers allow breastfeeding in class", Cronbach's alpha = 0.82), the student's attitudes towards breastfeeding (12 items, for example: "Breastfeeding is cheaper than formula", Cronbach's alpha = 0.59), intention to breastfeed during studies (3 items, for example: "I intend to breastfeed my child during my studies on campus", Cronbach's alpha = 0.86). Answers to statements on institutional support for breastfeeding, students' attitudes towards breastfeeding, and intention to breastfeed during studies were given on a Likert scale of 1–4, with 1 – "disagree" and 4 – "strongly agree". Moreover, the questionnaire explored whether the student had a breastfeeding role model (2 items, for example: "Are you familiar with a woman who breastfed for 6 months?"). Answers to these statements were yes/no. Furthermore, the questionnaire included 11 knowledge questions and examined the student's level of knowledge about breastfeeding (for example: "Women who breastfeed have a lower risk of contracting breast and ovary cancer than women who do not breastfeed", Cronbach's alpha = 0.77). Here the answers were correct/incorrect, with one point given for each correctly answered item up to a maximum possible score of 11 points.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Tel Aviv University. The questionnaires were distributed to students during class breaks by the researchers. Each student received an explanation of the study's aims. Participants were assured that their anonymity would be maintained and were told that the research findings would be used for research purposes only. Completion of the questionnaire took about 10 min.

Statistical analysis was carried out with the SPSS software version 25. A descriptive analysis of the research variables was performed.

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