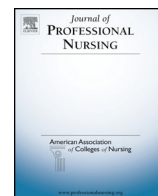




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## Effects of two different psychiatric nursing course on nursing students' attitudes towards mental illness, perceptions of psychiatric nursing and career choices

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## ABSTRACT

This quasi-experimental study was carried out to compare the attitudes towards psychiatry patients of students educated with problem-based learning and students educated with a traditional method in western Turkey. The students' perceptions of psychiatric nursing and their career choices were also evaluated. The sample consisted of 202 students; 130 were educated with a problem-based learning model and 72 were educated with a traditional method. Students educated with the problem-based learning method developed more positive attitudes towards mental illness after the psychiatric nursing course in comparison with students educated with the traditional method. Students educated with the traditional method preferred psychiatric nursing in comparison with nursing students educated with problem-based learning. It is important that the psychiatric nursing curriculum includes topics and programs that will create awareness in students regarding stigmatization of mental illness and its effects. In addition, we suggest that studies are performed to determine the perceptions of students towards psychiatric nursing and the factors that affect their career choices.

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## Introduction

The number of nurses in the field of psychiatric nursing is insufficient in Turkey, as in many parts of the world (Hoekstra, Van Meijel, & van der Hooft-Leemans, 2010; Hunter, Weber, Shattell, & Harris, 2015; National Mental Health Action Plan, 2011; Özbaş & Buzlu, 2011; Stevens, Browne, & Graham, 2013). In Turkey, there are over 500 000 patients with severe mental illness and at least 5 to 6 million patients with mental health disorders who require treatment, and the number of nurses working in the field of mental health was 1677 in 2010 (National Mental Health Action Plan, 2011). The lack of a sufficient number of psychiatric nurses despite the high prevalence of psychiatric disorders is a significant problem (Hunter et al., 2015).

According to the studies carried out, nursing students are unwilling to choose psychiatric nursing as their career, and very few students prefer psychiatric nursing as their area of expertise when compared with other fields of nursing (Çam & Arabacı, 2010; Chadwick & Porter, 2014; Halter, 2008; Happell, 2002; Hoekstra et al., 2010; Rushworth & Happell, 2000; Stevens et al., 2013; Stuhlmiller, 2006; Surgenor, Dunn, & Horn, 2005). The literature survey carried out by Happell and Gaskin found that this is one of the areas that is preferred the least by nursing students (Happell & Gaskin, 2013).

One of the factors that leads newly graduated nurses to avoid psychiatric nursing is the stigma against mental illnesses (Fisher, 2002; Halter, 2008; Happell, 1999; Stuhlmiller, 2006). The factors contributing to this stigma have not yet been understood properly, and this may prevent any increase of interest towards psychiatric nursing and the development of this area of clinical practice (Hunter et al., 2015). A study carried out in Australia examined the attitudes of nursing students towards psychiatric nursing and reported that anxiety related to working with patients with mental illness led to a decrease in interest, and it has been suggested that this anxiety stems partly from negative stereotypes related to mental illnesses and partly from the way students are prepared for a role in psychiatric nursing (Happell, Platania-Phung, Harris, & Bradshaw, 2014). As with any other member of society, nursing students are also affected by the stigma related to mental illness, (Alexander, Diefenbeck, & Brown, 2015; Arkan, Bademli, & Duman, 2011; Bennett & Stennett, 2015) and they may have negative reactions against people with mental illness and may believe that they do not deserve to be helped. This belief discourages nurses from entering those areas of clinical practice where people with mental illness are found (Hunter et al., 2015).

It is a necessity to fight against negative stereotypes in society and decrease the stigma related to mental illnesses, by educational approaches that effectively prepare nursing students for psychiatric nursing (Happell et al., 2014). Psychiatric nursing education includes elements such as theoretical education on psychiatric illnesses and psychiatric nursing as well as preparation for clinical practice and clinical placements. There are varying research results on whether nursing

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education has positive effects on attitudes towards psychiatric patients or not. Studies have indicated that there is a tendency for students to develop positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing as a result of increased theoretical preparation (Happell, 2000; Happell, 2009; Happell & Gough, 2007; Happell, Robins, & Gough, 2008) and time spent in clinical practice (Happell, 2000; Happell, 2008). Positive changes have occurred in the attitudes of many students towards people with mental illness when they have completed their clinical practice in the field of psychiatric nursing (Chadwick & Porter, 2014; Gough & Happell, 2009). However, another study found that many undergraduate nursing students still have negative stereotypes regarding individuals with mental illness despite being well-trained in the field of mental illness (Happell & Gough, 2007).

The strongest reasons for selecting psychiatric nursing as a career are considered to be thorough preparation of the students for the role of psychiatric nursing and the belief that this field will make valuable contributions to both the patients and society (Happell & Gaskin, 2013). Whereas it has also been determined in a recent study that student beliefs regarding how psychiatric nurses can contribute to the recovery of patients have no effect on interest towards pursuing psychiatric nursing as a career (Happell et al., 2014). In addition, 1 study has found that having clinical experience influences only a small number of students to work as psychiatric nurses (Hunter et al., 2015). Even though nursing education and clinical environments make positive changes in the attitudes towards people with mental illness, the ratio of students selecting psychiatric nursing as a career is very low (Chadwick & Porter, 2014; Happell & Gaskin, 2013; Hunter et al., 2015; Stevens et al., 2013). The development of positive attitudes in students towards psychiatric nursing during nursing education might help to increase the number of nurses who prefer this area of clinical practice. Studies have shown that 1 of the primary means of overcoming the insufficiency of psychiatric nurses in the healthcare system is through theoretical courses (Happell & Gaskin, 2013; Happell, Welch, Moxham, & Byrne, 2013), and that an effective learning environment can be attained through the use of different education methods at nursing schools and the regulation of the educational content (Alexander et al., 2015). In addition, students will be influenced positively if they see favorable psychiatric nursing role models at the psychiatry clinics (Happell et al., 2008; Henderson, Happell, & Martin, 2007).

Problem-based learning (PBL) has become a popular approach in nursing education all over the world (Applin, Williams, Day, & Buro, 2011) and is a student-centered method that allows students to acquire the skills of solving problems, and self-learning (Barrows, 2002). In the PBL method, students work in small groups and take responsibility for their own learning. Since the material (for example, scenarios) provided for students in this training method is associated with clinical interventions and is applicable to these interventions, student learning motivation is high (Duman & Sen, 2012; Happell, 1998). Using the PBL method plays an effective role in the development of positive attitudes towards psychiatric nursing and psychiatric patients as well as in the acquisition of the basic skills of psychiatric nursing (Çam & Arabacı, 2010; Cooper & Carver, 2012; Happell, 1998; Happell, 2000).

The use of PBL in psychiatric nursing programs is described in 3 studies in the literature (Happell, 1998; Happell, 2000; Happell & Rushworth, 2000). Two of these studies report that the knowledge, skill, and interest of students towards psychiatric nursing increased with the use of the PBL method (Happell, 1998; Happell, 2000). In the other study, student preference for psychiatric nursing in the PBL group were determined to be at a statistically significant higher level than those of the students educated with the traditional method (Happell & Rushworth, 2000). As a result of these studies the PBL method could be seen as a beneficial method of education for increasing the interest of students towards psychiatric nursing, and leading to it becoming a popular and desired option in the future. In addition, it could aid in removing the myths related to this speciality (Happell, 1998; Happell, 2000; Happell & Rushworth,

2000). Even though these results are important especially with regard to the negative perceptions towards psychiatric nursing, it is not possible to come to a definite conclusion because a control group was used only in 1 of these studies, and the psychiatric nursing preferences of the students were evaluated as the only variable (Happell & Rushworth, 2000).

If psychiatric nursing as a career is to be selected it is important for the students to develop positive attitudes towards their patients, as well as the future of psychiatric nursing, to ensure that patients receive the care they deserve. Nursing education is responsible for ensuring that the graduates include willing nurses for serving the needs of psychiatric patients. It is important that nursing programs develop strategies for preparing the nurses to meet the mental health treatment requirements of patients and to encourage the students to consider entering this area of clinical practice. We hope that the results of this study will be of benefit for nursing schools by encouraging them to question the education methods they use, examine the psychiatric nursing education content, and plan clinical practice.

This study was performed to compare the attitudes of students educated using PBL with those educated using the traditional method before (pre-test) and after (post-test) a psychiatric nursing course, with regard to psychiatric patients, psychiatric nursing and career preferences.

#### *Hypotheses of the study*

- H1.** There is a statistically significant difference between the attitudes towards mental illnesses of nursing students educated with the PBL method and with the traditional method after a psychiatric nursing course.
- H2.** There is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions towards psychiatric nursing of nursing students educated with the PBL method and with the traditional method after a psychiatric nursing course.
- H3.** There is a statistically significant difference between the career choices of nursing students educated with the PBL method and with the traditional method after a psychiatric nursing course.

#### **Materials and methods**

The research used a quasi-experimental study with control group design to compare the effects of PBL and traditional education on undergraduate nursing students' attitudes towards psychiatric patients, psychiatric nursing, and career choices.

#### *Settings*

The study was carried out among students from 2 different nursing schools in western Turkey. The nursing school where education is by the PBL method has been providing nursing education for 21 years. Education based on problem solving has been used in this school for 15 years. In this school, students study in small groups of 13 to 15 people. Students are given scenarios including the problem, and are expected to specify and learn the information they need to solve the problem, and finally to solve the problem by themselves. In this method, the teacher is not in the active position anymore. The school where education is provided by the traditional method has been giving nursing education for 4 years, and in this nursing school education is teacher centered and courses are given by the teachers.

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