

Supporting autistic midwifery students: fostering inclusion and empowerment

Emilie Edwards



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Despite a growing understanding of autism and its prevalence among health care professionals, little attention has been paid to the experiences of autistic students studying midwifery. Research has indicated a rising number of health care professionals identifying as autistic and this trend likely extends to midwifery students as well (McCowan et al 2022). Moreover, it is important to consider the potential under-reporting of autistic individuals in the health care field, as they may possess strengths that make them well-suited for such professions (McCowan et al 2021).

However, diagnosing autism can be challenging, particularly for women and people from the global majority, leading to disparities in recognition and support (Ferri et al 2018, Strand & Lindorff 2018, Young et al 2020). Even after a diagnosis, autistic students face obstacles related to stereotypes surrounding autism and the discrimination they may encounter following disclosure. This can create a climate of fear, making it difficult for students to speak up about their needs and challenges (British Medical Association (BMA) 2020, Shaw et al 2022). Furthermore, these problems persist beyond graduation, highlighting the importance of addressing these issues at all stages of a midwifery student's journey.

To address these challenges and create a supportive learning environment, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has recognised the necessity of providing reasonable adjustments (RAs) in accordance with equalities and human rights legislation. RAs are modifications that aim to prevent students with disabilities from experiencing substantial disadvantages, thereby ensuring equal access to educational services (NMC 2022).

According to the *Equality Act 2010*, autistic midwifery students are protected against discrimination and are entitled to receive these RAs. Nevertheless, the reality reported by students reveals that there is still much work to be done, as many experience isolation, bullying and anxiety (Shaw et al 2023).

To truly empower autistic midwifery students and ensure their success, a comprehensive approach

involving higher education institutions and midwifery programmes is necessary. It requires challenging the prevailing culture in midwifery education and embracing a neurodiversity-affirmative culture. This approach reframes autism away from the traditional notion of disorder and dysfunction, and instead celebrates it as a form of diversity (Sonuga-Barke & Thapar 2021). For this shift to occur, collaboration between various disciplines is crucial to ensure that appropriate RAs are implemented, both in the university setting and in placement (Tee et al 2010, Doyle & Medhurst 2022).

Moreover, recognising the need for RAs is not enough: midwifery education providers must actively work to eliminate exclusions and actively include autistic students at all stages of their education. The concept of '*active inclusion*', as discussed by the Medical Schools Council (2021) for their educational institutions, can be adapted to the midwifery education context. This involves eradicating barriers from recruitment, curriculum design and assessment processes, thereby fostering an inclusive learning environment that celebrates diversity.

Inclusion extends beyond the confines of the classroom and into practice areas. It is imperative to acknowledge that discriminatory behaviour is an unfortunate reality for many students and that this behaviour profoundly impacts their learning experiences. To support autistic midwifery students during practice, implementing the guidelines for RAs in practice-based learning environments as outlined in Health Education England (HEE)'s *Guide to practice-based learning for neurodivergent students* (2022) is essential.

By recognising the lived experiences of students, this guidance describes some of the necessary support and accommodations that could be provided during practical training.

In conclusion, the experiences of autistic midwifery students have been largely overlooked but it is crucial to create an inclusive and supportive environment for their success. Recognising the prevalence of autism in health care professions and acknowledging its potential under-reporting should prompt institutions to actively address the needs of autistic students.

By providing reasonable adjustments, challenging the existing culture and embracing a neurodiversity-affirmative approach, midwifery education providers can pave the way for a more inclusive and empowering learning experience. Additionally, fostering inclusion in practice areas through the implementation of relevant guidelines will further contribute to the success and wellbeing of autistic midwifery students throughout their educational journey. Only by working collaboratively and valuing diversity can we ensure that these students thrive in their chosen profession.

Author

Emilie Edwards, Senior Lecturer in Midwifery, Department of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Middlesex University, UK. Email: E.Edwards@mdx.ac.uk

For more information on this topic see MIC database search packs: PN156 Autism; M26 Student midwives.

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