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Cultivating a Culture of Support

Summary

A survey was distributed among 200 students enrolled in the three-year BSc Pre-Registration Midwifery program, garnering a 30% response rate, with representation from all three cohorts. The results suggest that while student midwives generally perceive adequate support in their clinical practice, more than half of the respondents feel they lack full support. This article examines support mechanisms by delving into the notion of feeling supported and providing valuable insights into the intricacies of support systems and their efficacy.

Introduction

Support can encompass various forms of assistance, encouragement, and resources provided to individuals to help them navigate challenges, achieve goals, and enhance their well-being. In the context of student midwives, support may include anything from emotional and practical support to personal and professional development to foster growth, collaboration, and learning, offering solidarity, advice, and shared experiences on their journey. Ultimately, support is about creating a nurturing and empowering environment that enables individuals to thrive and reach their full potential.¹

Midwives practice autonomously and are fully accountable as the lead professional for the care and support of women, newborn infants and their families, often in high pressured environments. While it is important to ensure that midwives are trained effectively, it is also important that student midwives complete their training to replace those who leave the workforce.² More research is needed to define what type of support is needed to improve confidence in the early stages of midwifery students. Understanding more about aspiring student midwives and how they see their experience might give an important insight in how they can be supported in their transition to clinical practice.

Ethical approval was sought as part of **Professional Doctorate research** on student midwives' transition to clinical practice. It was granted through the University Research Ethics Review Framework via an Online Research Ethics (MORE) form, particular considerations included the researcher's involvement with all student midwives and to ensure students did not feel obligated to participate due to their professional standing.

This article reflects on the preliminary findings from the survey phase. The purpose of the survey was to provide insights and groundwork for the forthcoming focus group strategy in the subsequent phase of the study. The survey was chosen as a mixed method designed to elicit detailed, descriptive responses from participants as well as using flexibility to explore student midwife's knowledge and experiences with openness and freedom. This method often lends itself to unexpected directions which will support the rigour of the study, such as interpersonal communication which can highlight (sub)cultural values or group norms; making it particularly useful to draw out sensitive and cultural variables, especially for the workplace. The questionnaire comprised seven inquiries offering options of yes, no, or unsure, with an additional space for respondents to elaborate if desired.

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within the qualitative data to gain rich insights into the perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of the survey respondents, making it a valuable tool for understanding complex phenomena. Two hundred students were sent the survey and 30% responded across all three years of the pre-registration 3-year programme.

One particular question, "Do you feel supported in Clinical Practice?" prompted deep reflection on the notion of support. While 46% responded affirmatively, the remainder did not indicate simply 'no,' but rather expressed nuanced sentiments like "sometimes," "not always," or "occasionally." This prompted contemplation on the diverse manifestations, effects, and characteristics of support across various contexts. This introspective process yielded a deeper comprehension of how support shapes individuals' experiences, well-being, and achievements, and what it truly means to 'feel supported.' It was observed that for students, support fosters the development of confidence and competence.³

Results

The results align well with the methodology as it has gauged feelings of support within clinical practice, the data has identified trends, patterns, and variations in perceptions across different groups of students with concrete data of their perception of support. By asking targeted questions about factors that make completing the midwifery programme challenging, the data has shown specific issues that students encounter, which is representative of the student population within the midwifery programme and therefore the results can be generalised to a broader context.

Discussion

Common challenges experienced by student midwives in practice

Effective communication is essential in healthcare settings, but miscommunication or breakdowns in communication can occur, leading to misunderstandings or conflict. Working with challenging people occur in most work environments, including the

NHS, and can be a significant aspect of a student midwife's experience. Some of the common challenges from the survey are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Common Challenges

Communication Issues	Personality conflicts	Workload pressures	Respect and professionalism
Culture and diversity issues	Dealing with challenging families	Conflict resolution	Self-care and support

Strategies for addressing communication challenges can include active listening, clarifying expectations, and using assertive communication techniques. However, there are differences in personalities, communication styles, or even work approaches which can sometimes lead to conflict or tension among colleagues.⁴ Building rapport, practicing empathy, and focusing on common goals can help navigate personality conflicts in the workplace; nevertheless, high workload pressures and staffing shortages in the NHS can contribute to stress and tension among all healthcare professionals. Setting realistic expectations, prioritising tasks, and advocating for adequate staffing levels can help mitigate the impact of workload pressures.

Maintaining respect and professionalism in the workplace is essential for fostering a positive work environment. Addressing disrespectful behaviour through open dialogue, setting clear boundaries, and seeking support from supervisors or HR if necessary, can help uphold professional standards. By actively addressing and managing challenging dynamics in the workplace, midwives can contribute to fostering a positive and supportive work environment that ultimately enhances women centred care and outcomes within the NHS. Developing strong conflict resolution skills is essential for effectively managing disputes or disagreements in the workplace, or seeking assistance from a supervisor or HR can help resolve conflicts constructively, however, managing challenging situations in the workplace can take a toll on Midwives' wellbeing. Prioritising self-care, seeking support from colleagues or mentors, and encouraging employee assistance programmes or counselling services can help maintain mental and emotional resilience. By ensuring midwifery students feel supported in their placements through these measures, we can shift the culture towards a more supportive environment, thereby enhancing both their educational experience and the overall culture of care within the profession.

Cultural differences or misunderstandings may arise when with colleagues or birthing people from diverse backgrounds. Embracing diversity, seeking cultural competency training and fostering a culture of inclusion to understand systemic oppression and racism in healthcare which can promote understanding and collaboration in multicultural healthcare environments, improving health outcomes and service user satisfaction.

Clinical Practice

Feeling unsupported as a student midwife within the NHS can be disheartening and figure 2 shows some examples of how they perceived the lack of support.

Figure 2: Examples of lack of support

Lack of resources	High workload	Limited development opportunities
Workplace culture Issues	Emotional support	Advocacy and union support

Lack of resources such as staffing to sign off proficiencies, equipment or training can impact on their ability to succeed and accounted for 16% of the responses. This is further exacerbated by increasing pressures on the number of students in practice and compromising the student experience competing for births and other learning opportunities. A high workload can contribute to stress and burnout, coupled with assessment and homelife commitments which was reflected in 97% of the responses. Providing care during challenging situations, such as stillbirths or maternal complications and historically COVID, can take an emotional toll, so it is essential to encourage accessing employee assistance programs, counselling services, or support groups for healthcare professionals. Building a supportive network of colleagues⁵ and peers who understand the unique challenges of midwifery can also be beneficial.

Addressing issues of support within the NHS may require persistence, patience, and collaboration with colleagues and stakeholders. By midwives and student midwives advocating for their profession, they can contribute to creating a more supportive and fulfilling work environment for learners and midwives within the NHS and better birth outcomes.⁶ Learners will likely receive support from both clinical and academic sources, each playing a crucial role in education and development.⁶

Balancing clinical work with academic responsibilities can be physically and emotionally challenging and one of the biggest obstacles from the survey (82%) was managing time effectively between clinical placements and studying. It can be challenging to juggle clinical shifts with academic coursework and personal commitments. Prioritising tasks based on deadlines and importance, using calendars, planners, or digital apps to stay organised are useful tools to break down larger tasks into smaller, manageable ones.

Theory Practice Balance

Academic coursework, assignments, and exams can add additional stress, especially during busy clinical rotations. Meeting academic expectations while also fulfilling clinical requirements can feel overwhelming, 50% of respondents stated assessment created obstacles in balancing work and study. Balancing clinical and

academic work requires sustained focus and motivation, especially when faced with competing demands and distractions. Staying motivated by reminding yourself of your passion and the ultimate goal of becoming a qualified midwife. Set short-term and long-term goals to keep yourself on track and celebrate small victories along the way. Find inspiration from experienced midwives, role models, or success stories within the field; 100% of respondents stated that clinical placement contributed to their overall development by applying theory to practice and gaining confidence.

By recognising these obstacles and implementing strategies to address them, the learners can effectively balance clinical work with academic responsibilities and maximise their learning. Effective feedback in clinical practice is essential for professional growth and ensuring high quality care, so feedback needs to be timely, specific, constructive, goal orientated, in context and fosters a culture of reinforcement that involves a two-way dialogue and follow up to address any ongoing challenges or concerns, 76% of respondents found one to one discussion was helpful to improve their experience over any other type of feedback.

Support

By incorporating these elements into feedback practices, clinical preceptors, supervisors, and colleagues can effectively support the growth and development of learners in clinical practice, ultimately contributing to enhanced care and outcomes and empower learners to be supported.

Good Support

Distinguishing between good support and poor support is crucial in understanding the impact of support systems on individuals. Good support is responsive and attentive to the needs and challenges of individuals, providing timely assistance and guidance when required.⁷ Good support empowers individuals by fostering independence, confidence, and self-efficacy, enabling learners to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals. Good support addresses various aspects of an individual's well-being, including emotional, practical, and professional needs, ensuring a comprehensive approach to support. It promotes growth and development by offering constructive feedback, opportunities for learning, and pathways for advancement. Good support systems are sustainable and adaptable, capable of evolving to meet changing needs and circumstances over time.⁸

Poor Support

Whereas poor support systems may be unresponsive or inaccessible, leaving individuals feeling unsupported and isolated in times of need, perpetuating dependency and reliance on external assistance, undermining individuals' confidence and autonomy. There can be a lack of coherence and coordination, resulting in fragmented or inconsistent assistance that fails to address individuals' needs comprehensively. Instead of fostering growth and development, poor support systems may hinder progress by offering limited opportunities for learning, feedback,

or advancement. These systems are often unsustainable or inadequate, failing to provide the necessary resources and infrastructure for long-term support and success.

By recognising the differences between what good and poor support is, individuals and organisations can work towards establishing and maintaining effective support systems that promote well-being, resilience, and growth.

Limitations

Low response rates may undermine the credibility and general applicability of survey outcomes. Surveys frequently depend on pre-set response options, possibly oversimplifying intricate matters and overlooking crucial distinctions in participants' experiences. This study is divided into three phases, and these insights will contribute to its progression.

Implications for Practice

Given that more than half of the student midwives feel they lack full support in clinical practice, it is imperative to strengthen support mechanisms in both clinical and educational settings. By implementing supportive practices, educational institutions and healthcare organisations can create a more supportive and nurturing environment for student midwives, ultimately enhancing their learning experiences and preparing them for successful careers in midwifery practice.

Finding a balance between clinical placements and academic coursework is crucial for student midwives. Recognising the emotional toll of clinical practice and promoting self-care practices among student midwives could involve incorporate wellness activities into the curriculum, encouraging regular or even ensuring breaks take place during shifts, and fostering a supportive environment where students feel comfortable seeking help when needed.

Feedback plays a vital role in professional growth. Ensuring that feedback in clinical practice is timely, specific, and constructive can help student midwives identify areas for improvement and build confidence in their skills. Implementing regular feedback sessions and encouraging open communication between students and supervisors can facilitate this process.

Conclusion

Support is crucial in moulding individuals' experiences, nurturing their welfare, and enabling their achievements. It acts as a shield against stress, boosts self-assurance, encourages a feeling of empowerment and positivity, aids continuous learning, improves academic performance, and fosters a sense of inclusion. Moreover, support acts as a driver for personal development, resilience, and satisfaction, emphasising its essential contribution to the flourishing of both individuals and communities. By addressing these areas, we can enhance the

support system for student midwives without placing additional loads on practicing midwives.

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