

Bridging the gap: findings from focus groups on challenges and solutions in the transition from midwifery education to clinical practice

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ORIGINAL

Abstract

Objective

To explore the experiences of student midwives as they transition into clinical practice. This study, conducted as part of a Professional Doctorate, aims to enhance support, supervision and training by identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder a successful transition during their programme.

Methods

A qualitative approach, using purposeful recruitment to select participants who can provide in-depth insights into the challenges and experiences faced during this critical phase. Data were collected through focus group discussions, transcribed verbatim, and thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes and patterns within the data. Ethical consent was obtained through the university's Middlesex Online Research Ethics (MORE) form.

Results

The transition from education to clinical practice in midwifery is marked by several consistent themes across all three focus groups. Participants commonly faced a discrepancy between their expectations and the realities of clinical practice, primarily due to inconsistent mentorship and varying levels of support. The lack of hands-on practical training, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, was a significant challenge, highlighting gaps in their education. Emotional resilience and personal motivation were crucial for navigating these challenges, with participants relying on their passion for midwifery to persevere.

Conclusion

Suggestions for improvement included better integration of practical training with theoretical learning, more consistent mentorship and early placement experiences in less intense environments to build foundational skills. Overall, the themes underscore the need for a more supportive structure and a hands-on approach to midwifery education and training, to better prepare students for the demands of clinical practice.

Introduction

The transition from midwifery education to clinical practice is a critical and often challenging journey for students, marked by a variety of obstacles that can significantly impact their readiness and confidence (Gray & Downer 2020). This period is characterised

by a significant gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and the practical skills needed in real-world clinical settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated this transition, limiting hands-on training and exacerbating the challenges students face. Inconsistent mentorship and the emotional toll of adapting to

high-pressure environments highlight the need for a more supportive and integrated approach to midwifery education. This article explores the key issues that midwifery students encounter during this crucial phase, emphasising the importance of bridging the gap between education and clinical practice to ensure they are well-prepared to provide high-quality care.

Methods

This article reflects on the preliminary findings from three focus groups, which was phase two (out of three) of a Professional Doctorate. The purpose of the three focus groups was to provide insights and groundwork for the forthcoming semi-structured interviews in the final phase of the study. The focus groups were chosen as a qualitative method designed to elicit discussion and descriptive responses from participants, as well as using flexibility to explore student midwives' knowledge and experiences with openness and freedom. Each focus group was transcribed verbatim. Two hundred pre-registration students were invited, and 19 responded and consented to join the focus groups. Each group had six–eight participants separated by year groups, and facilitated and guided (Kumar 2014) by the researcher.

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns or themes within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke 2015) to gain rich insights into the perspectives and experiences of the focus group discussion.

Ethical approval was sought as part of a self-funded Professional Doctorate research on 'exploring student midwives' transition to clinical practice'. The research was granted through the University Research Ethics Review Framework via a MORE form. Particular considerations included the researcher's involvement with all student midwives and ensuring students did not feel obligated to participate because of their professional standing.

Results

Six themes were identified, discussed below.

1. Expectations versus reality in clinical practice

Participants in all three focus groups noted a gap between their expectations and the reality of clinical practice. The students anticipated a supportive learning environment but often faced high-pressure situations and inconsistent guidance from supervisors.

Students felt that their expectations of receiving support and guidance from midwives during their clinical placements were not always fully met. Many entered their placements with the anticipation of close mentorship, hoping that experienced midwives would actively teach and guide them through the complexities of clinical practice. However, the reality often fell short of these expectations, with some students feeling that the demands on practising midwives, such as heavy workloads and

time constraints, left little room for the in-depth teaching and support they had hoped for. This experience highlighted a gap between their theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom and the practical skills required in the clinical environment. Without consistent hands-on guidance, some students felt under-prepared for tasks they were expected to perform, leading to anxiety and uncertainty in their roles.

Despite feeling unprepared at times, many students reported a positive experience in terms of the professional atmosphere in the clinical teams, although they initially expected to be treated as junior members, focusing more on learning than contributing. There was also a sense of not always being valued or part of the team; having a supervisor who wanted to teach and who provided support not only boosted their confidence but also fostered a more positive learning environment. However, by contrast, if a supervisor did not openly welcome the student, it could have a detrimental effect on their day and often made them question their chosen career.

One student discussed their feelings around poor supervision and how they were made to feel during the start of one shift:

'I experienced a lot in the first year, like they were just ignoring me, like straight out pretending I wasn't there ... they look at you as a burden, like I have a student with me, a first year, who doesn't know anything, it makes you feel so unwanted. Additionally, not calling the student by their name and using terms like "the student" did not foster inclusivity and belonging ... Like in the first year I used to let the midwives call me "the student" all the time, hardly ever called my name and I hate being called just the student.'

Belonging in the workplace is crucial because it directly impacts both individual wellbeing and organisational success. When employees feel a sense of belonging, they are more engaged in their work.

2. Practical experience and hands-on training

Hands-on practice gap: all groups highlighted the importance of hands-on training and the gap between theory and practice. Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the gap for those who started their programme in September 2021.

Learning from experienced midwives was a crucial component of students' education, providing them with invaluable insights and practical skills that are essential for their development as future midwives. However, students often found that opportunities to learn directly from practising midwives were sometimes limited. The high demands placed on midwives, including heavy caseloads and time pressures, often meant that students had fewer chances for one-on-one supervision or detailed guidance during clinical placements. This limitation made it challenging for students to fully immerse

themselves in the learning process and gain the practical experience they needed to feel confident and competent.

Practical experiences in the clinical setting played a vital role in reinforcing the theoretical knowledge students acquired in the classroom. One student said *'placement has helped me with my theory and theory has helped me with my placement so it goes both ways'*. These hands-on experiences were essential for bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application. However, the level of preparation for these practical experiences varied significantly among students. Some felt well-prepared to handle clinical tasks, while others struggled due to inconsistencies in their prior training or the variability of clinical placements. This inconsistency in preparation often left some students feeling unready for the demands of the clinical environment, contributing to feelings of stress and uncertainty.

The shift to online learning, particularly during periods of restricted in-person interactions, further exacerbated these challenges. The lack of hands-on experience due to online learning created significant difficulties for students, as they were unable to practice and refine their skills in a real-world setting. This gap in practical training hindered their ability to fully grasp the complexities of midwifery practice, making it harder for them to transition smoothly into clinical roles. The absence of face-to-face supervision and the inability to engage in direct care was particularly challenging, highlighting the importance of ensuring that students have adequate opportunities for practical, hands-on learning as a key part of their education. One student emphasised how *'coming out from being online was difficult, because midwifery is such a hands-on kind of muscle memory practice'*, highlighting the requirement to deploy both the clinical practice and theory in unison.

3. Support and mentorship

Inconsistent mentorship: the inconsistency in mentorship and the need for supportive, consistent guidance was a recurring theme.

Students encountered different levels of support from midwives during their clinical placements, which had a significant impact on their overall learning experience. Some students benefited from strong, supportive relationships with their midwife supervisors, who provided consistent guidance, hands-on training and encouragement. These students often found their placements to be highly educational, gaining the confidence and competence needed to excel in their roles. However, others experienced a more fragmented level of support, where the midwives they worked with were either too busy, unavailable or less engaged in the teaching process. This inconsistency in mentorship led to a more challenging and less fulfilling learning experience for these students, leaving them feeling uncertain and underprepared for the demands of clinical practice.

The importance of clear communication and setting realistic expectations from assessors and supervisors was a recurring theme in the students' experiences. When assessors clearly communicated the expectations and objectives of the clinical placement, students were better able to focus their efforts, understand their responsibilities and identify the areas where they needed to improve. This clarity also helped to alleviate the anxiety that often accompanies clinical placements, as students felt more secure in their understanding of what was expected of them. On the other hand, when communication was lacking or expectations were unclear, students were more likely to feel confused, overwhelmed and unsure of how to meet the requirements of their role.

Consistent supervision emerged as a critical factor in the students' development of both confidence and competence. Having a reliable and supportive mentor allowed students to build trust and establish a strong learning relationship, which was essential for their professional growth. Regular feedback, encouragement and constructive criticism from a consistent mentor helped students to refine their skills, address their weaknesses and gradually build the confidence needed to perform clinical tasks independently. In contrast, those who did not receive consistent mentorship often struggled to gain this confidence, as the lack of a stable support system made it difficult to track their progress, seek advice or fully integrate into the clinical environment.

Perceived gaps in education and training, especially in practical skills, were highlighted and the participants suggested improvements for integrating practical training with theoretical learning.

Many students noted a significant lack of structured teaching during their clinical placements, which often left them feeling unprepared and unsure of how to navigate the complexities of midwifery practice. Instead of receiving consistent, organised instruction from experienced midwives, students were frequently expected to rely on self-directed learning to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for their roles. This approach placed a heavy burden on students to independently seek out learning opportunities and resources, which could be overwhelming, especially for those still developing their clinical confidence. While self-directed learning is an important skill, the absence of a well-defined teaching structure sometimes resulted in students missing out on key educational experiences and opportunities for guided practice, leading to gaps in their practical knowledge and skills.

The experiences of some students underscored the need for better preparation and support to address the practical realities of midwifery. Many students felt that while their theoretical education provided a solid foundation, it did not fully equip them for the day-to-day challenges of working in a clinical environment. The intensity of midwifery practice, with its high-pressure situations and complex patient

care needs, often came as a surprise to students, who had not been adequately prepared for these realities. This lack of preparation made the transition from classroom learning to clinical practice more difficult and stressful, highlighting the need for educational programmes to place greater emphasis on practical skills training, real-world scenarios and comprehensive support systems to help students navigate the demands of midwifery.

Students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light significant limitations in online learning, particularly regarding hands-on training. As in-person interactions were restricted and clinical placements were disrupted, students were forced to rely heavily on virtual learning platforms to continue their education. While online learning offered a way to maintain academic progress during the pandemic, it could not fully replicate the invaluable experience of working directly with patients and performing clinical tasks under the supervision of skilled midwives. This lack of hands-on training created noticeable gaps in students' practical skills and confidence, as they missed out on the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-life situations. The pandemic highlighted the essential role that in-person, experiential learning plays in midwifery education and underscored the need for innovative solutions to ensure that students receive the practical training they need, even in challenging circumstances.

4. Personal and emotional experiences

Emotional impact: The emotional impact of both positive and negative experiences was noted across all groups, influencing participants' motivation and resilience.

Students who had navigated the challenges of midwifery education and clinical practice offered valuable advice to future midwives, emphasising the importance of building resilience and actively seeking peer support. They recognised that the journey through midwifery training could be demanding — both emotionally and physically — and advised that developing resilience was crucial for managing the pressures and complexities of the profession. Resilience would enable future midwives to handle the inevitable stresses of the job, recover from difficult experiences and continue to provide compassionate care. In addition to personal resilience, students highlighted the importance of connecting with peers for mutual support. Building a network of fellow students and colleagues could provide a vital source of encouragement, shared knowledge and emotional support, helping midwives-in-training to navigate the ups and downs of their education and early careers more effectively.

The experiences of students during their initial placements varied significantly and this was a key theme. For some, the transition from classroom learning to hands-on clinical practice was

overwhelming. They found themselves facing high expectations and the realities of midwifery work, which could be intense and fast-paced. The sudden exposure to real-life clinical situations, where they had to apply their theoretical knowledge, left some students feeling underprepared and anxious. The steep learning curve and the pressure to perform competently in such a critical field added to their feelings of being overwhelmed during these early placements. This highlighted the need for better preparation and support as students transitioned into the clinical environment, ensuring that they felt confident and capable in their roles.

Despite the challenges they faced, many students found that positive influences and their core beliefs in the value of midwifery were powerful motivating factors that sustained them throughout their training. The sense of purpose that came from helping mothers and babies, the satisfaction of being involved in such a pivotal life event and the support from mentors who embodied the values of the profession were all significant sources of inspiration. These positive influences helped students maintain their commitment to the field, even when the work was tough. Their core beliefs in the importance of midwifery, the impact they could have on the lives of families, and the deep sense of responsibility and care that underpins the profession kept them motivated and driven to succeed. These factors were crucial in helping them overcome obstacles and remain dedicated to their goal of becoming competent and compassionate midwives.

5. Motivation and passion for midwifery

Core motivations: despite challenges, participants were motivated by their passion for midwifery and the desire to make a positive impact.

Students in midwifery were deeply driven by their passion for helping women, a passion that lay at the heart of their decision to pursue this demanding yet rewarding profession. This strong sense of purpose was a central motivator for them as they navigated the complexities and challenges of their training. Their commitment to supporting women through one of the most significant moments of their lives fuelled their determination to excel, even when faced with difficult or overwhelming situations. The desire to make a positive difference in the lives of women and their families gave students the strength to persevere through the rigorous demands of midwifery education and practice.

The students' core beliefs in the value and importance of midwifery played a crucial role in helping them overcome the various challenges they encountered during their training. These beliefs were deeply rooted in their understanding of the vital role midwives play in ensuring safe and supportive childbirth experiences. Many students felt a profound sense of responsibility to uphold the standards of care associated with midwifery, which included providing compassionate,

evidence-based support to women and advocating for their needs. This strong ethical foundation not only guided their actions but also provided them with the resilience needed to push through obstacles, whether they were academic pressures, demanding clinical placements or the emotional toll of the work.

Passion for midwifery and the desire to provide positive experiences for women were also significant motivators for these students. Their enthusiasm for the profession was often reinforced by their experiences in the field, where they saw first-hand the impact of their work on the lives of mothers and babies. The opportunity to contribute to such meaningful and transformative moments gave them a sense of fulfilment and pride, further deepening their commitment to the profession. This passion was a powerful force that helped them remain focused on their goals, driving them to improve their skills and knowledge continuously, so they could offer the highest quality of care. The students' dedication to creating positive experiences for the women they served was not just a professional obligation but a personal mission that underscored their entire educational journey.

6. Challenges and coping strategies

Adapting to clinical environments: participants discussed the challenges of adapting to different clinical environments and supervisors' expectations.

Students recognised resilience and peer support as essential tools for navigating the myriad challenges they encountered throughout their midwifery training. The demanding nature of the profession often exposed them to high-pressure situations and emotionally taxing experiences, making it crucial for them to develop personal resilience. Resilience allowed them to bounce back from difficult experiences and maintain their commitment to their training, despite setbacks. At the same time, having a network of supportive peers proved invaluable. Engaging with fellow students who were undergoing similar experiences provided a sense of camaraderie and mutual understanding. This peer support system helped students share strategies, offer encouragement and collectively address the difficulties they faced, contributing to a more manageable and supportive learning environment.

The significance of beginning clinical placements in less intense environments as a way to better prepare students for the rigours of midwifery practice was a common theme throughout. Starting in environments that were less overwhelming allowed students to gradually acclimate to the demands of clinical work. This initial phase provided them with the opportunity to build foundational skills and gain confidence in a setting where the pressure was more manageable. Such a gradual introduction was seen as beneficial for easing the transition from academic learning to practical application, helping students develop a solid base before confronting the more intense

and challenging aspects of midwifery practice. This approach was believed to reduce the initial stress and anxiety associated with starting placements, ultimately leading to a more effective and less daunting learning experience.

Students discussed various coping strategies that were crucial for adapting to the diverse expectations and pressures of midwifery training. One key strategy was actively seeking help when needed. Students learned to reach out to mentors, supervisors and peers for guidance and support, recognising that asking for assistance was an important part of their professional development. Additionally, learning to adapt to different expectations was a critical component of their coping strategies. Midwifery practice often involved shifting between different clinical environments, each with its own set of demands and expectations. Students needed to be flexible and open to adjusting their approach based on the specific context and requirements of each placement. This adaptability not only helped them manage the varying challenges they encountered but also enriched their overall learning experience by exposing them to a broader range of practices and perspectives within the field.

Discussion

The transition from education to clinical practice in midwifery is a complex and multifaceted journey; as revealed through discussions in all three focus groups, many felt unprepared for practice (Jadalla 2024). A prominent issue that emerged was the significant gap between students' expectations and the reality of clinical practice. While students anticipated a supportive learning environment, they often found themselves in high-pressure situations with inconsistent guidance from supervisors. This discrepancy highlights a need for better preparation and more realistic expectations to be set during their education.

Practical, hands-on training is crucial for midwifery students, yet many have found this aspect of their education lacking, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The shift to online learning exacerbated the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, leaving students feeling unprepared for the demands of clinical practice. Without sufficient practical experience, students struggled to apply their classroom learning to real-world situations, underscoring the need for a more integrated approach to education and training (Moncrief et al 2023).

Support and mentorship are critical components of a successful transition but these were found to be inconsistent across different clinical environments. Some students received adequate guidance, which bolstered their confidence and learning, while others were left to navigate the complexities of clinical practice with minimal support. This inconsistency in mentorship affected their ability to learn effectively and perform their duties confidently. Ensuring

consistent and supportive mentorship (Baird et al 2022) could significantly enhance the learning experience for midwifery students.

The emotional impact of both positive and negative experiences in clinical practice plays a significant role in shaping students' motivation and resilience. Personal and emotional support, particularly from peers (Buchanan et al 2024), was identified as a key factor in helping students navigate the challenges they faced. Many participants found motivation in their core beliefs and passion for midwifery, which helped them persevere despite the difficulties.

Adapting to different clinical environments and supervisors' expectations posed additional challenges. Students had to develop resilience, seek peer support and engage in self-directed learning to overcome these obstacles (Embo & Valcke 2019). The ability to adapt to varying expectations and practices was crucial for their success in clinical placements. Early placement experiences in less intense environments, such as community settings, were suggested as a way to build foundational skills and confidence before transitioning to more demanding areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unique challenges, particularly with the shift to online learning and the resulting lack of hands-on, practical experience. These limitations highlighted the need for a more flexible and adaptive approach to midwifery education. Post-pandemic adjustments, including catching up on practical skills and dealing with the emotional impact of the pandemic, were necessary to address the gaps in training.

Despite the challenges, students were driven by their passion for midwifery and a desire to make a positive impact. This intrinsic motivation was a strong factor in their perseverance and commitment to the profession. To better prepare midwifery students for clinical practice, there is a need for a more supportive, structured and hands-on approach to education and training. Integrating practical training with theoretical learning, ensuring consistent mentorship, and providing early placement experiences in less intense environments are essential steps in bridging the gap between education and clinical practice. By addressing these needs, midwifery education can better equip students with the skills and confidence required to excel in their roles and provide high-quality care to women and their families.

Conclusion

The transition from education to clinical practice in midwifery reveals significant challenges, including a gap between students' expectations and the realities of clinical practice, particularly in high-pressure situations with inconsistent guidance. Practical, hands-on training — crucial for bridging theory and practice — was notably lacking, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving students feeling unprepared. Inconsistent supervision across clinical

environments further compounded these difficulties, affecting students' confidence and learning. Emotional support, particularly from peers, was essential but often insufficient and the need to adapt to varying clinical settings added to the stress. Despite these challenges, students' intrinsic motivation remained strong; however, there is a clear need for a more integrated, supportive and realistic approach to midwifery education to better equip students for their roles in clinical practice.

These limitations underscore the need for a more holistic, supportive and integrated approach to midwifery education that better prepares students for the complexities of clinical practice.

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For more information on this topic see MIC database Search Packs: M26 Student midwives; M23 Preceptors and mentors.

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