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## **Midwifery students in health visitor placements: the importance of student-mentor relationships**

### **ABSTRACT**

#### *Objective*

The aim of this study was to explore midwifery students and health visitor practice mentors experiences of a health visiting placement for midwifery students, focusing on the student-mentor relationship.

#### *Design*

Interview study

#### *Setting*

East London, United Kingdom

#### *Participants*

Eighteen students and eighteen mentors were invited to take part in an interview. Ten midwifery students (55.5%) and fifteen health visitor practice mentors (83.3%) took part in interviews or provided information via email. Thematic analysis was used to analyse findings.

#### *Findings*

The main study finding was that students reported valuing practice mentors who took the time to get to know them, were welcoming and enthusiastic and planned their time in advance. The mentors in turn spoke highly of the students who were keen and enthusiastic about the placement, but noted that not all students had appeared interested.

#### *Key conclusions*

The findings from this small interview study show that taking time to make the students feel welcome was important to facilitate a student-mentor relationship. Another important factor in whether a student enjoyed their placement was the mentors' advance planning.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Health visiting, Interviews, Student midwives, Placement

## INTRODUCTION

There is a clear UK policy remit for partnership working between midwives and health visitors (internationally known as public health nurses or child and family health nurses) to deliver safe and personalised care for women (Public Health England, 2013). Attending a health visiting placement is a good opportunity for student midwives to learn about health visiting and collaborative working, the latter having been identified as sometimes poor (Aquino, Olander, Needle, & Bryar, 2016). This study reports on a pilot implementation of a health visiting placement for student midwives and specifically explores the role of the practice mentors in students' experiences and learning from this non-midwifery placement.

Practice mentors play a crucial role in student learning (Miles, 2008) and should ideally tailor their teaching to the student's learning needs (Hughes & Fraser, 2011). The research regarding midwifery students' experience of midwifery practice mentors is largely positive (Hughes & Fraser, 2011; Miles, 2008), whilst less is known about the relationship between midwifery students and mentors from other disciplines that students may meet during their training. These relationships may have a long-lasting impact on students' perception of the other discipline and their partnership working once qualified.

### *The placement*

The students attended the health visiting placement in their first placement block in the first year of a three year direct-entry BSc Midwifery programme, by which time the students had some experience of midwifery placements such as delivery suite or community midwifery practice. The placement was organised for five consecutive days and all students were allocated a health visitor mentor. The aim of the placement was for students to learn more about health visiting services. The students and mentors were not provided with any specific preparation for this placement.

## METHODS

### *Recruitment and data collection*

All student midwives who had attended the placement (n=18) were invited by email to participate in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted within five weeks of the placement. Eight interviews were conducted via telephone, one interview was done face-to-face, and one student responded by email. Students were offered a £5 online shopping voucher to thank them for their time.

Mentors (n=18) were invited to take part in the study via email. Twelve of the mentors' interviews were audio recorded and three were recorded using written notes.

Questions for both participant groups were designed to explore students' learning and mentors/students experiences of the placement. The project was granted ethical approval by the authors' University Research Ethics Committee (reference MCH/PR/Staff/16-17/07) and by the Associate Medical Director of the relevant NHS organisation.

### *Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were thematically coded using NVivo software. An iterative approach was used, which followed the steps for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## RESULTS

Ten students and fifteen mentors took part in interviews (10-60 minutes long) or provided information via email. The students ranged in age from 18 to 38 years and represented a mixture of ethnicities. Most students (n=6) had attended all five placement days, the remaining students had attended between two and four days (often absent due to illness). The

mentors were between 26 to 57 years old, a range of ethnicities and had worked in health visiting between 2-16 years. Five of the mentors had been midwives before re-training to be health visitors.

Several themes were identified through analysis (skills and learning, the value of the placement, collaborative working between health visitors and midwives and the potential impact of learning on collaboration). In summary, these themes indicated that students developed knowledge regarding the health visitor role. Whilst the students saw little collaborative practice between midwives and health visitors they were nonetheless positive towards interprofessional working. The mentors were positive about the opportunity to share health visiting practice and were optimistic this would have a positive impact on future interprofessional working.

In the current paper, we present the findings regarding the theme - relationship between students and mentors.

#### *Relationship between students and mentors*

At the core of individual placements' success was the relationship formed between student and mentor. Mentors valued students who were keen and enthusiastic:

*I think she [student] made it very easy because she was very enthusiastic. It wasn't hard work. It was, she was very keen and enthusiastic. I prepared a bit beforehand, for, so that I could give her a range of experiences, and she was just full of enthusiasm for everything and anything that we offered her. (...) I guess, she just made it easy. She made it a pleasure. (Mentor 1)*

However, some mentors commented on students who had not appeared interested in the placement, or had not behaved professionally:

*I felt that she just basically, she didn't really say bye to anyone in the team, she didn't say thank you for having me. We asked for feedback, she didn't give us the feedback. So, I kind of felt like, OK, it wasn't very positive in that aspect. (Mentor 2)*

Most students reported receiving a warm and supportive welcome from the health visiting team, with the mentor taking time to discuss their placement with them. Some students contrasted this with the cooler, more distracted welcome they had received in other placements. They attributed this difference to the slower pace of health visiting work:

*I just really enjoyed [it], the team were lovely, they made me feel so welcome and they really took the time out to like give me a tour of the premises, anyone that walked into the office knew it would be stop the meeting, 'have you met [Student H] our student for the week? She's a midwife student from [university]. Say hello'. Just that made such a difference of being made to feel a part of it. (Student H)*

*In my midwifery practice, any placement that I went to, completely understandable that they wouldn't be so welcoming because they're so stressed out, time constraints, workloads, but with health visiting, incredibly the most welcoming I've ever felt going into a practice anywhere or placement. (Student A)*

An important factor in developing a relationship with their mentor was the mentors' advance planning. Students appreciated those mentors who took time to get to know the student and who had scheduled activities in advance.

*I thought it was good that she did ask me what I wanted to get out of it, rather than saying 'right, OK, come in and we will sort something out for you'. That was really, really nice. And she also gauged my background as well. So sort of found out what you were doing in the past, this was all over the phone like I say, 'what have you done in the past? Were you direct entry to midwifery, or, have you worked in any other clinical areas?' And, like a general educational background as well. (...) That initial conversation I thought was brilliant from her part and from me giving background information as well. (Student O)*

*My mentor, she was lovely. She knew that I was only there for a week and she wanted me to see everything. (Student N)*

Whilst the organised activities were valued by students, these activities were seen as repetitive and did not stop the students from feeling bored and under-occupied at times.

*And then the mentor I was to work with had actually timetabled, she'd printed off for things she'd set for me to do during the week so I knew instantly what I would be doing and some of it, so I was observing the first one year assessments, and it was good but there wasn't really much for me to do so it did get quite monotonous but it was still worth seeing... (Student B)*

## DISCUSSION

The main study finding was that midwifery students reported valuing practice mentors who were welcoming and took the time to get to know them. Some students contrasted this with their midwifery placements, where midwives were perceived to have less time to spend on welcoming students. Most mentors planned the student's time in advance to facilitate a stimulating learning experience. This is in line with previous research with practice mentors



in midwifery-placements (Hughes & Fraser, 2011; Miles, 2008). Noteworthy is that despite these planned activities, students did report feeling bored, comparing it to the more fast-paced midwifery placements.

### *Implications for education*

This small-scale study has identified two important implications for education. Firstly, regardless of placement, it is important to make students feel welcome. Students report feeling anxious and worried about starting placements (Levett-Jones, Pitt, Courtney-Pratt, Harbrow, & Rossiter, 2015) which can be alleviated in part with, information and a positive welcome. Secondly, it is important to support mentors to prepare appropriately. In this study, good practice was illustrated by the practice mentors who had prepared a range of activities (home visits, clinics, meetings with other healthcare professionals) and learning opportunities for the students. This was appreciated by the students, and made their placement more enjoyable. Changes at our university based on these findings include practice mentors being reminded of the importance of a positive welcome when students start a new placement and health visiting mentors being provided with examples of learning activities that can be prepared for student midwives ahead of their placement.

### *Strengths and limitations*

A study strength was that all but one of the interviews were conducted by researchers' independent of the midwifery teaching team, allowing students and mentors to share their true feelings about the placement. That said, participants in this study were a self-selecting sample and all students reported enjoying at least part of their experience. Other students may

not have enjoyed the placement and may have declined to take part in the study because of their negative experience.

### *Conclusion*

This study has shown the importance of taking the time to welcome students to their placement area and to plan appropriate learning opportunities. These findings are applicable to all midwifery placements.

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