



Midwifery Education in Practice

Promoting retention, enabling success: Discovering the potential of student support circles



Janice Bass*, Caroline Walters, Jocelyn Toohill, Mary Sidebotham

School of Nursing and Midwifery, Menzies Health Institute Queensland, Griffith University, University Drive, Meadowbrook, Queensland, 4131, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Retention of students is critical to education programs and future workforce. A mixed methods study evaluated student engagement within a Bachelor of Midwifery program and connection with career choice through participation in student support circles. Centred on the Five Senses of Success Framework (sense of capability, purpose, identity, resourcefulness and connectedness) and including four stages of engagement (creating space, preparing self, sharing stories, focused conversations), the circles support and develop student and professional identity.

Of 80 students 43 (54%) provided responses to a two item survey assessed against a five point Likert scale to determine utility. Using a nominal group technique, student's voices gave rich insight into the personal and professional growth that participation in the student support circles provided.

Evaluated as helpful to first year students in orientating to university study and early socialisation into the profession, the circles appear to influence the development of a strong sense of professional identity and personal midwifery philosophy based on the relational nature of the midwife being with woman rather than doing midwifery. This suggests that student support circles positively influence perceptions and expectations, contributing to a shared sense of purpose and discipline connection, for enhancing student retention and future workforce participation.

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1. Introduction

The demographics of the nursing and midwifery profession in Australia and other developed countries confirm that the current workforce is aging (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015; Royal College of Midwives, 2011). In order to meet future workforce needs it is vital that the nursing and midwifery professions attract into and retain students at entry and throughout practice preparation programs. Student retention is a priority across the tertiary sector and is driving a program of work to identify factors known to promote student retention and success. The international literature (Duarte et al., 2014; Green and Baird, 2009; Willcoxson et al., 2011; Wray et al., 2014) confirms that transition to tertiary education presents challenges, not just to school leavers but to all students embarking on a university degree program. As a result most students at some time during the early

stages of commencing University will experience competing pressures on their time and ability to undertake study requirements. Regardless of discipline, a student's inability to meet these demands plays a significant role in student attrition (Fowler and Norrie, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2013). In undergraduate nursing programs the attrition rates are similar for the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Bachelor of Nursing courses in the UK report attrition rates of 24.8% where the majority occurs in the first year (Waters, 2008). Within Bachelor of Midwifery programs in the UK the Department of Health (2013) report attrition rates as high as 27%.

Key factors that significantly affect university attrition globally include lack of preparedness for study, lack of integration, financial responsibilities and difficulties and other personal reasons (Carolan and Kruger, 2011). A study focusing on attrition within health care students noted reasons students began experiencing difficulty included poor clinical placements through ineffective organisation, disappointing clinical experiences and not feeling supported by clinical or university staff, as (Hamshire et al., 2012). Furthermore, a recent study undertaken at the University Campus Suffolk identified attrition occurred due to wrong career choice and confirmed previous findings that withdrawing was a result of academic,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: j.bass@griffith.edu.au (J. Bass), c.walters@griffith.edu.au (C. Walters), j.toohill@griffith.edu.au (J. Toohill), m.sidebotham@griffith.edu.au (M. Sidebotham).

clinical or emotional demands of the program (Hughes, 2013). Stress is a well-recognized factor contributing to attrition rates (Diamond, 2012) and for many students the emotional demands are experienced as stress through inability to manage the work-life balance (Hughes, 2013).

In a comparative study of international attrition rates in Bachelor of Midwifery programs, a student's inability to identify with the profession was significantly linked to early withdrawal (Carolan and Kruger, 2011; van Stolk et al., 2007) highlighting that commencing midwifery students may hold idealized views about midwifery and birth, which they suggest may heighten disillusionment. Similar findings were demonstrated by Green and Baird (2009) who identified family issues, tensions between theory and practice and falling levels of motivation, as key factors leading to student withdrawal from undergraduate midwifery programs. This may be explained by student expectations or lack of preparedness for clinical practice, therefore it is important to support early socialisation and transition into the profession in ways that enable the student to integrate the dissonance experienced between ideology and reality in practice. One factor noted as especially significant in influencing student retention and success is the relationship and contact between the institution and the students (Duarte et al., 2014).

There is a growing awareness of the importance of building strategies to support retention into the first year of university programs that can be built upon as the student progresses through their degree (Hamshire et al., 2012). It has been suggested that student support strategies be embedded throughout the program so that support is tailored to meet students' needs as opposed to focusing on 'just-in-time strategies' (Kift, 2009). Lizzio (2011) describes five areas of student need that must be met to facilitate student success. The five-senses of success framework proposes that developing a sense of capability, purpose, identity, resourcefulness and connectedness are key factors in predicting student satisfaction and progression within their program. The framework is consistent with the literature on student development and has been shown to be predictive of student satisfaction and successful outcomes (Lizzio, 2011).

The Lizzio five-senses of success model was adapted for midwifery students with an increased emphasis placed on the development of a sense of professional identity as a midwife and used to guide the student success initiatives developed across the student lifecycle within a Bachelor of Midwifery program in South East Queensland. All curricula and extracurricular activity is guided by the model recognising the importance of enabling students to develop a sense of connection to each other, their program and the midwifery profession. The development of resourcefulness, capability and a sense of purpose all contribute to the ongoing development of a professional midwifery identity which is a known predictor for student success (Sidebotham et al., 2015).

A key lifecycle strategy to promote student success introduced into the first semester of the first year of the Bachelor of Midwifery program was the lecturer facilitated student support circle (SSC). The purpose of this paper is to describe the structure and aim of the SSC initiative and report on the impact the group sessions have on the development of the five-senses of success within a cohort of midwifery students.

1.1. Contextual background

The study was conducted within a three year Bachelor of Midwifery program based in South East Queensland. Students were able to select a full-time or part-time pathway. The curriculum philosophy is based on a social emancipatory model of transformative education that empowers students to be active

participants within their own learning, in the health care system and engaged in making a difference to the lives of others (McAllister et al., 2007). The aspiration of this educational approach is to support the integration of midwifery theory and practice and promote deep personal learning leading to perspective transformation. The program was established in 2010 using a blended learning model that underpins the curriculum. Blended learning involves a combination of face to face learning and technology assisted learning using a variety of platforms and tools (Bliuc et al., 2007) providing benefit to students and institutions enabling flexibility and optimum use of resources to support learning (Derntl and Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005).

Students entering the Bachelor of Midwifery program, attend an initial three day orientation and ten days of face to face 'intensive' lectures and laboratory sessions linked to course content. On completion of intensive teaching, students continue their study within the online environment with synchronous lectures and discussion groups facilitated by the course lecturer. Clinical practice within the program commences in semester two and students are placed in one of four partnered clinical practice sites for the duration of their program. Each student has a named practice lecturer who works across the university and clinical practice site. This lecturer provides a structured weekly group based tutorial support session for students linked to course material from the second semester of the program.

Early pilot work undertaken within the program demonstrated the value of bringing students together within a lecturer facilitated supportive environment in semester one to enable the students to connect with each other and the university academics. These early post intensive engagement opportunities were lecturer led, wholly linked to practice focussed course content, and only available to students enrolled in the preparation for clinical practice course. This excluded students in the first year of the part time pathway. These students reported feeling isolated and disconnected from the program which represents a clear risk factor for attrition (Green and Baird, 2009). Additionally eligible students chose not to attend the earlier content focussed groups, as they couldn't see the value and purpose but focused on the online content of the program.

Routinely collected commencing student data confirmed that many of the known risk factors for attrition were present within the 2015 first year Bachelor of Midwifery cohort group, and this is reflective of data collected since the program commenced in 2010. All students were female with more than half of them (58%) having primary carer responsibility. The majority of students were older than 25 years (61%), and whilst 32% of students were enrolled on a part-time pathway more than half of the total cohort (52%) were working in paid employment for more than 11 h per week. Additionally 19% of students identified as low socio-economic. Student support circles were introduced into the program in semester one 2015, as a strategy to mitigate known risk factors for attrition and bring all students together around a structured program of activity to develop the five senses of success and prepare students for professional practice.

1.2. Intervention

The aim of the SSC was to provide a supportive, nurturing and safe space for student midwives to connect with each other and their lecturers on the journey towards becoming a midwife. The SSC model (Fig. 1) was designed to create a student centred environment that cultivates the development of holistic and integrative approaches to thinking about midwifery and childbirth, whilst supporting the development of the five senses of success for the individual student, especially the sense of professional identity. Through shared story telling students explored the relational

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