



# An exploration of the value of the role of the mentor and mentoring in midwifery



Margaret Moran <sup>a,\*</sup>, David Banks <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK*

<sup>b</sup> *Division of Nursing, School of Life Sciences, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK*

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## ABSTRACT

This research project aimed to examine the perceived value sign-off mentors (SOMs) in midwifery have for their role. Using a phenomenological approach, the results were drawn from in-depth interviews. The project included a literature review, methodology, results and discussion. The results indicate that mentors enjoy their role and they see themselves as essentials to the delivery of pre-registration midwifery programmes and for the supervision and assessment of student midwives. Mentors are not sure if student midwives value their sign-off mentor, or whether senior management is aware of the sign-off role and its value. This project also confirms previous findings from other studies, particularly the problem of finding time to complete student assessment paper work, support students in clinical practice and whether there are enough SOMs within clinical practice. The study does not conclude that the issues raised are distinctive to midwifery, potentially all of the points raised translate to the various forms of nursing practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Sign-off mentors in clinical areas are formerly required to assess the progress of students throughout their midwifery programme and are responsible for 50% of the degree awarded (NMC, 2008a). Sign-off mentors also contribute to the decision to place applicants on the professional register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). Studies confirm that a student–mentor relationship determines the outcome of a practice experience (Casey and Clark, 2011; Wilkes, 2006), with the NMC producing standards which determine what education sign-off mentors should receive (NMC, 2008a) and demonstrating that they value this role. The NMC Code states that “You must facilitate students and others to develop their competence” (NMC, 2008b, p. 5), which ensures that facilitation of learners is a professional requirement. When describing the role of a Band ‘6’ midwife, two members of the NHS Boards examined agreed that, “facilitating the learning of student nurses and midwives is an integral role of the registered practitioner” (NHS Forth Valley, 2011; NHS Lothian, 2011). With this in mind, this study explored the experiences of sign off mentors and the level to which they value this role.

## 2. Literature Search Strategy

The key terms used within the searches were mentor\*, midwi\*, attitude\*, and value, with these key terms identified from the research question as suggested by Fink (2005). The key terms were searched in EBSCOHost (BNI, CINAHL, and MEDLINE). The databases that yielded articles that most matched the proposal subject were CINAHL, Medline, and the AMED database. Critical reading and exercising appropriate judgement further narrowed the selection of articles. The use of inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied and comprised: articles less than 10 years old, English language, nursing and/or midwifery education focus, education in practice, mentoring, mentors, and standards for mentors. The exclusion criteria included: leadership, articles more than 10 years old, and articles that concentrated on student views and opinions/experiences. Some articles were identified as being useful by reading other articles and reviewing references used, which led to the use of older pieces of work being incorporated. Grey literatures, such as policies, documents and guidelines were also reviewed and included: job descriptions for midwives on different pay bands, personal development portfolios for Band 6 midwives, the National Approach to Mentor Preparation for Nurses and Midwives, and the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework. Other documents included further NMC documents, university’s mentorship programme documents, and reports such as the performance management of pre-registration nursing and midwifery education completed in partnership with Edinburgh University and NHS Education for Scotland.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [m.moran@napier.ac.uk](mailto:m.moran@napier.ac.uk) (M. Moran).

To explore mentors views, this study aimed to investigate what value midwives place on their role as a mentor, and to explore the value of mentorship in midwifery practice. The study hoped to establish positive and negative values and discover emerging themes that may reinforce positive views, and if they become apparent, suggest strategies or recommendations for change where negative views are expressed.

### 3. Method

A qualitative study taking a phenomenological approach was conducted. This approach was taken because the most appropriate way to seek detailed insight into the thoughts, experiences and perceptions of mentors is to ask the mentors for their viewpoints. As such, qualitative research generates knowledge of events and processes by gaining understanding from groups, or individuals, which have appropriate experience and determine what that experience means to individual mentors. A qualitative approach that ‘emphasises words’ through interpreting the world of individuals (interpretivist) was found to be an acceptable approach in this study (Bryman, 2012). Our intention was not to describe how midwives feel about their role when mentoring, but instead to understand how midwives value and make sense of the value of their mentoring experience.

### 4. Participants

Practising midwives ( $n = 5$ ) who were functioning qualified sign-off mentors took part in this study. The sampling method was purposive and influenced by issues of convenience. The inclusion criteria involved the participants being experienced in their role, and having access to the research setting in Scotland (UK). The number of participants was limited because this was a small exploratory study employing a phenomenological approach.

### 5. Ethics

The university ethics committee granted permission for this study to be conducted. An NHS Integrated Research Application was not required because we were working with university affiliated midwifery staff, but an NHS Research and Development approval was gained. Informed and written consent was obtained for each participant prior to taking part in this study. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and without an explanation or consequence. All written documents and transcripts were stored in accordance with the [Data Protection Act \(1998\)](#) and local guidelines.

### 6. Data Collection

Individual interviews were carried out in a quiet side room at the participants’ place of work. The following research questions on the semi-structured interview schedule were asked only if the participant appeared to be at a loss of what to say.

- Can you explain what value you place on mentoring?
- What are your perceived rewards of being a mentor?
- Are there challenging aspects to mentoring?
- Can you identify how you would recognise that you are valued?

These questions were designed to ensure that the participant narrated their experience in their own words, without undue interference from the researcher. This method of interviewing is also known as a ‘guided conversation’ (Atkinson, 1998). The researcher was sensitive and reflexive to responses.

The interviews were recorded and the audio data was transcribed within 24 h of the interview. Each recording was listened to and the transcript was read more than once to determine

emergent themes. The analysis of the data was carried out by the researcher and was inductive. From the detailed information gathered, the analysis of the local data was carried out in an attempt to arrive at a more generalised statement around the topic. Coding was carried out by reading the transcripts, highlighting themes and opinions, and then writing notes on the paper beside the highlighted sentence. The researcher initially read through the transcripts, without taking notes, then repeated the process taking notes and identifying themes. Regularities were first identified in the transcripts and were categorised using a comparative process (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). The next step was to develop a list of captured themes and use them as a code for the rest of the data. The researcher repeated this process and reviewed the codes following each interview. A list was then taken for each transcript of the themes, and compared with the other transcripts. It was important not to worry about creating too many codes, as this process should be flexible (Bryman, 2012).

### 7. Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed and eight themes were identified as recurring amongst all five participants. Within text, the participating mentors will be anonymised by coding their quotes as Midwife 1, Midwife 2, etc. To ensure validity and rigour of findings, the themes developed were checked by an independent second researcher who was in agreement with the emergent themes. All that was negotiated was what they would be called.

### 8. Findings

Eight themes were identified in the data and are presented in [Table 1](#).

#### 8.1. Mentors Enjoy the Role and Find it a Positive Experience

All the mentors stated that they enjoyed the role of a mentor. The mentors did not use the word ‘value’ frequently except when prompted.

“I do enjoy the role of a mentor” (Midwife 1).

“Yes it’s a good role to have” (Midwife 2).

“Yes, I love being a mentor” (Midwife 4).

The more senior midwives interviewed said that mentorship is important and enjoyable, but for the students’ experience it would be best if mentors were undertaking the role out of choice. The following quote from Midwife 3 illustrates this point:

“Mentors should want to be mentors” (Midwife 3).

This attitude to the role of a mentor has also been found in previous studies, which examined student opinions of mentors and mentorship (Duffy, 2003). The two more junior midwives were interviewed in terms of least length of time qualified as a mentor stated:

“I think that it should be part of our role (mentoring). It shouldn’t be optional. We (midwives) should mentor students. It shouldn’t be a choice, after all it’s in their contract and part of the job” (Midwife 4).

**Table 1**  
Themes that emerged from analysing the transcripts.

Themes
Mentors enjoy the role and find it a positive experience
Student midwives are the future workforce/midwives/colleagues
The role of the mentor is vital—no mentors = no students
Students’ value mentors for continuity, feedback and planning
Mentors are essential to ensure student progression and development
There is a lack of mentors and there is poor uptake of mentor education
Immediate line managers appreciate and value mentorship but senior managers do not
Lack of time to teach and support students

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