



## An evaluation of a teaching strategy: The use of literature when teaching pre-registration midwifery students on pregnancy and loss



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### SUMMARY

Facilitating emotional intelligence and insight in midwifery can be challenging, and the purpose of this paper is to illustrate how this can be nurtured through the use of poetry, in particular Seamus Heaney's poem *Elegy for a Still Born Child*. Students' ability to gain insight into the experience of bereaved parents and achieve an emotional grasp of the situation through vicarious experience were evaluated.

Qualitative data from evaluations was content analysed and significant themes emerged. Students' comments clearly support the suggestion that use of this poem has enhanced emotional intelligence. The data also indicates that vicarious experience gained through reading this poem has helped to nurture sensitivity and professional insight into the impact of still birth on a father.

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### Introduction and Background

Many midwives feel inadequately prepared for the interpersonal and emotional roles that practice often demands (Henderson, 2001; Hunter and Deery, 2005). In this paper emphasis is placed on the importance of emotional intelligence and the use of poetry to provide vicarious experience. An evaluation of the impact of poetry on the emotional insight of pre-registration midwifery students in relation to pregnancy loss was undertaken with the ultimate aim of developing emotional insight. The poem *Elegy for a Stillborn Child* by Seamus Heaney was used to provide the vicarious experience and this paper presents an evaluation of the success of this method on students.

#### Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence (EI) refers to our ability to recognise our own feelings and those of others and encompasses managing emotions effectively in ourselves and in our relationships. Emotional social intelligence is a range of emotional and social skills which enable individuals to express themselves and understand others. The importance of EI has been highlighted by Goleman (2004, 2011) who argues that EI is an important social skill that is essential to the process of empathy. EI, therefore, can be defined as a multi-dimensional concept representing core abilities which identify processes, manage emotions and enable individuals to deal with life events and be more successful in personal relationships

(Akerjordet, 2009). This is particularly relevant to midwifery as Hunter (2006); Walsh (2007) state that forming meaningful positive relationships is vital in midwifery practice. The development of EI ensures that feelings are acknowledged and not dismissed or suppressed (Goleman, 2011). As a consequence of this there emerges an enhanced understanding of self and others and this helps develop more insight into the complex situations that professional relationships bring within midwifery practice.

*"It is generally accepted that very little of our lives is governed by logic alone. It is rather our emotional world that motivates our decisions and actions"* (Freshwater and Stickley, 2004 p. 91).

Combining the management of emotions with self-awareness is essential for the development of EI (Jordan and Troth, 2004). The development of EI, unlike intellectual intelligence, requires experience and exposure to good role models and exemplars (Begley, 2006). Sometimes young or inexperienced midwives lack this insight into the needs of women. This problem can be overcome by using literature to nurture insight into issues facing others. For example, Heaney's poem (1969) *Elegy for a Still Born Child* can draw us into the emotions of a couple who have experienced the loss of a child. Literature is:

*'a window through which we can see into the experiences of others.'* (Begley, 2003 p.129)

This method of facilitating the development of EI is particularly useful in educating students for practice and raising the profile of emotional awareness in pre-registration midwifery training programmes (Begley, 2010).

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### Vicarious experience

The individual needs to discriminate and respond appropriately in demanding situations, and for some without having had real experiences the best that can be offered to the student is vicarious experience. Vicarious experience can be acquired through reading about the experiences of others. The midwife who has not experienced loss of a pregnancy can come closer to understanding how this has an impact on the father while the focus is usually on the emotional needs of the woman involved—become emotionally involved in the lives depicted in the story (Begley, 2003). This level of insight is needed if an individual is to become focussed on what is happening to particular people in specific contexts and approach them with compassion and moral sensitivity (Begley, 2010).

Heaney's response to his friend's loss when his baby is still born is the subject of the poem *Elegy for a Stillborn Child* and he sensitively captures the depth and extent of the emotional trauma suffered by both parents. The poem is haunting and the imagery is successful in generating an emotional response in the reader.

#### Seamus Heaney's poem *Elegy for a still born child*

I.  
Your mother walks light as an empty creel  
Unlearning the intimate nudge and pull  
Your trussed-up weight of seed-flesh and bone-curd  
Had insisted on. That evicted world  
Contracts round its history, its scar.  
Doomsday struck when your collapsed sphere  
Extinguished itself in our atmosphere,  
Your mother heavy with the lightness in her.

II.  
For six months you stayed cartographer  
Charting my friend from husband towards father.  
He guessed a globe behind your steady mound.  
Then the pole fell, shooting star, into the ground.

III.  
On lonely journeys I think of it all,  
Birth of death, exhumation for burial;  
A wreath of small clothes, a memorial pram  
And parents reaching for a phantom limb.  
I drive by remote control on this bare road  
Under a drizzling sky, a circling rock.  
Past mountain fields full to the brim with cloud.  
White waves riding home on a wintry lough.

### Literature in Professional Education

Heaney's poem *Elegy for a Stillborn Child* was used with pre-registration midwifery students in a year two training programme. The objective of using this poem was to highlight issues relating to pregnancy and loss and in particular the development of emotional insight into the parents' experiences. Students were given written information on the teaching evaluation method and the poem as part of their preparative reading so that it could be used as a stimulus for discussion prior to the teaching session. Students were asked to read the poem and discuss the insights and understanding that they gained and the implications these might have for practice. The students within the pre-registration midwifery programme come from a variety of backgrounds, and there was a wide range of life experience throughout the group. There is an extensive range of literature that can be used to enhance insight in this way, but the amount of time required to read such works

needs to be taken into consideration. This poem is reasonably short and could be easily read and reflected on in 15 to 20 min. The session followed immediately after a teaching session of Pregnancy and Loss.

### Aim

To evaluate the use of poetry (*Elegy for a Stillborn Child*) and to establish its impact on the emotional insight of pre-registration midwifery students in relation to pregnancy loss.

### Methodology

#### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee and Office for Research Ethics.

#### Design

This evaluation is a Descriptive Qualitative Study based on naturalistic inquiry which, provides comprehensive summaries of a phenomenon assisting the investigator to understand in depth phenomena (Polit and Beck, 2011).

#### Setting

Data from the questionnaires and the focus group was collected over one collection point (cross sectional) in the normal class room setting within the University where the participants felt comfortable and were familiar with the environment.

#### Sample

A non-probability convenience sample of 35 students was used six being the minimum to compile a focus group and 35 being the maximum number in the class. Investigators have easy access to students enrolled on year 2 of pre-registration midwifery training and are the most appropriate to provide information for the evaluation. All students in the class were invited to participate.

#### Consent

Prior to the teaching session on pregnancy loss an email was forwarded to all the students containing the poem, information on the evaluation and on the teaching strategy. Written consent was requested and obtained from the students wishing to participate.

#### Phase 1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used was based on a previously validated tool by Begley et al. (2010) to evaluate the use of literature to facilitate insight in end of life care. The anonymous questionnaire consisted of five questions and asked the students to provide qualitative commentary on three specific areas—emotional insight, feelings and future implications for practice.

#### Phase 2 Focus Group

Ten students participated in the focus group which lasted approximately 30 min. This group of students had previous exposure to pregnancy loss in both theoretical and practical contexts. Also some may have had exposure through a personal experience.

### Analysis

Responses from the semi structured questionnaire were analysed using content analysis. The focus group was digitally recorded and notes were taken. Informal discussion and sharing of ideas took place.

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