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Strategies to Support Clinical Nursing Students Requiring Accommodations for Physical and/or Sensory Disability: A Scoping Review Protocol

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Cover Page Footnote | Note de page couverture

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The number of students with disabilities enrolling in Canadian universities has increased over the past decades. In 1997, about 5% of university students reported having a mental or physical disability (McDonnell et al., 1997); this number increased to about 31% in 2022 (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2022; Epstein et al., 2021). In Canada, universities are legally required to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that students can complete their education (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2024). Although the exact number of nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities is unknown, the number of students requiring accommodation in nursing programs has been rising (Epstein et al., 2021). A physical disability can be broadly defined as any health condition of a physical nature that affects an individual's ability to function. This disability may result in an individual's reliance on assistive devices such as wheelchairs, canes, walkers, and prostheses (e.g., artificial limbs). *Sensory disability* usually refers to the impairment of the senses, such as sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, and/or spatial awareness" (Abdullah et al., 2019, para. 1). It mainly covers the conditions of visual impairment, blindness, hearing loss, and deafness (Abdullah et al., 2019). The types of accommodations that nursing students require vary depending on the nature of the disabilities. Typically, accommodations may be made for physical, learning, or mental health needs, or any combination of these (Epstein et al., 2021; Howlin et al., 2014; Tsui et al., 2024). In addition, as nursing students must complete clinical education in various clinical settings such as acute care hospitals, community agencies, and/or long-term care facilities, they may need accommodations in these settings that are different from those required in classroom settings.

Accommodation Legal Rights and Responsibilities

In Canada, clinical education in nursing uses various models. One of the most common is the preceptor model, in which students in senior years are paired with practising nurses and, in some cases, with other professionals. Students can also participate in a clinical education model in which a group of students is assigned to a clinical faculty member who facilitates their learning (Montague et al., 2023). In other models such as dedicated teaching units, students work with the nursing and interprofessional team in their clinical assignment, with the faculty member in the role of facilitator of the learning process (Marcellus et al., 2021). The complexities within clinical education models mean barriers may exist in how schools of nursing are able to meet the needs of students with disabilities in practice settings (Horkey, 2019; Khanlou et al., 2018).

In Canada, the federal and provincial levels of government guide accessibility requirements for post-secondary institutions. In Ontario, accessibility requirements are governed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Ontario Human Rights Code (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2018). The requirements are further outlined in the OHRC's Policy on Accessible Education for Students With Disabilities, which specifies the legal rights and responsibilities to support students with disabilities in an educational context (Lanthier et al., 2023). Students who require academic accommodations are responsible for seeking support through the accessibility office at their post-secondary institution. In some post-secondary institutions in Canadian provinces, such as in British Columbia and Ontario, students are required to disclose their disability needs to the accessibility office to receive accommodations. This process ensures that the nursing program is not informed of the specific nature of the disability. Once the appropriate documentation is submitted, the accessibility office provides the student with a letter outlining the required accommodation(s). Accommodations that fall within the nursing program's control are generally easier to implement. For example, the letter may specify that the student requires 1.5 times the allotted duration for written exams or an exemption from working night shifts during clinical placements. Since students themselves must decide when to access and disclose their accommodation needs (OHRC, 2018; Tsui et al., 2023), this very autonomy may present challenges if

students are hesitant to share this information until after the confirmation of their clinical placement. Delays in reporting accommodation needs can create challenges for the program in planning and negotiating with clinical agencies or other stakeholders in meeting the accommodation needs.

Stigma and Discrimination

Further challenges to meeting accommodation needs in clinical education include stigma and discrimination. Some disabilities are visible, while others are not. This visibility can make it difficult for the nursing faculty to protect the privacy of the student or the confidentiality of the accommodation. Moreover, the discourse that describes people with disabled bodies as deficient or lacking can result in stigma and negatively affect students' willingness to self-identify and access resources (Maheady, 1999). In instances in which a student's disability is visible, exposure to stigma and discrimination can occur without disclosure from the student because they may be perceived as being unable to complete the duties as outlined by the schools of nursing or nursing regulatory bodies (Luckowski, 2016). In clinical education models in which students are working alongside nurses in the clinical setting, there is also a risk of inaccurate assessment and judgement regarding a student's abilities, which could ultimately lead the student to be unsuccessful in their clinical education (Maheady, 1999). Therefore, it is important to find ways to protect students' privacy while ensuring that nursing faculty have the resources they need to support students effectively (British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives [BCCNM], 2021; College of Nurses of Ontario [CNO], 2012; Epstein et al., 2020).

Existing literature has explored the experiences of nursing students with disabilities in clinical practice, with some studies emphasizing the need for specific accommodations during clinical placements (Epstein et al., 2021; Luckowski, 2016; Tsui et al., 2023). However, clinical education settings are often inaccessible for students with disabilities due to various barriers that can prevent their full and effective participation on equal terms with their peers without disabilities (Luckowski, 2016; Montague et al., 2023; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). These barriers may include a lack of access to necessary resources, such as accessible stethoscopes or masks that facilitate lip reading, as well as resistance or reluctance from nursing students or staff to accept or implement proposed accommodation plans (Marcellus et al., 2021).

Preliminary Search

We conducted a preliminary search of PROSPERO, MEDLINE, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and JBI Evidence Synthesis. We identified two scoping reviews (Epstein et al., 2021; Horkey, 2019) and two integrative reviews (L'Ecuyer, 2019; Levey, 2018) on the topic of accommodations for disability in nursing education. However, these reviews did not address our review question. The scoping review by Horkey (2019) explored accommodations for pre-licensure nursing students with disabilities in clinical placement; however, it was conducted over 5 years ago and did not focus on strategies for physical and/or sensory disabilities. A second scoping review, Epstein et al. (2021), focused generally on the experiences of nursing students with disabilities and of instructors but did not discuss strategies for addressing accommodations in clinical practice. Levey's (2018) integrative review considered universal designs for instruction in nursing education but did not address clinical education specifically. The integrative review by L'Ecuyer (2019) explored the clinical education of nursing students with learning difficulties but did not include students with physical and/or sensory disabilities.

While previous research has mainly focused on students with mental health or learning disabilities (BCCNM, 2021; CNO, 2012; Epstein et al., 2020; Maheady, 1999), there is limited understanding of how to best support nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities during clinical education placements (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). These strategies may involve resources,

processes, policies, interventions, and tools implemented by academic institutions, clinical agencies, instructors, or peers or even initiated by the students themselves. The goal is to foster a more accessible clinical learning environment for students with disabilities, ensuring they can fully engage in their clinical education.

Scoping Review Aim

To create a more inclusive and accessible learning environment for this population, this review aims to identify current strategies that have been used to support nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in clinical settings. Thus, with emerging literature, we intend to use the JBI scoping review methodology to identify strategies that have been implemented in nursing education to support students with physical and/or sensory disabilities during their clinical placements. This method of inquiry is ideal for mapping and exploring the current literature on identifying effective strategies for nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in the clinical learning environment, as it draws from a broad range of study designs and evidence types to inform the findings (Peters et al., 2020).

Review Question

The question guiding this scoping review is the following: What is the available evidence on strategies that have been implemented to support the clinical education of nursing students who require accommodation for a physical and/or sensory disability?

Inclusion Criteria

Participants

This review will focus on studies involving nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in regulated nursing programs that include clinical education as part of their curriculum. This review will consider nursing students in diploma, undergraduate, or graduate programs, including nurse practitioner programs. Studies that include health professional students as a general group will be excluded unless the data for nursing students are disaggregated. In addition, studies that focus on nurses with physical and/or sensory disabilities in the workplace or those seeking accommodations with their employer will be excluded.

Concept

This review will focus on identifying accommodation strategies that have been implemented by nursing programs to support the clinical education of nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities. Studies that focus solely on accommodations for learning or mental health concerns will be excluded. However, studies that identify strategies for addressing both learning or mental health concerns and physical and/or sensory disabilities will be included, provided that the strategies implemented specifically for physical and/or sensory disabilities are discussed separately. Only strategies that have been implemented will be included. Theoretical studies about strategies that are not implemented in clinical education will be excluded.

Context

This review will include studies that discuss accommodation strategies for the clinical education of nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in the global context. Studies will not be restricted by geographical location, language, or clinical care setting.

Types of Sources

This scoping review will include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods study designs. Additionally, systematic reviews, as well as text and opinion papers, will be considered for inclusion. The review of grey literature will be limited to nursing professional organizations, as described in the methods below. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses will also be searched for relevant research addressing the formulated review question.

Methods

The planned scoping review will follow the JBI methodology for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020) and adhere to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018).

Search Strategy

The search strategy will aim to identify both published and unpublished literature on accommodation strategies for nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in clinical education. We conducted an initial limited search of MEDLINE (Ovid) and CINAHL (EBSCO) to find relevant articles on the topic. We then used the terms in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, as well as the index terms assigned to them, to develop a comprehensive search strategy for CINAHL (see Table 1).

Table 1

Search Strategy

	Query	Limiters/expanders	Last run via	Results
1	"student* with a disability" or "student* with disabilit*" or SWD or disab* or "mobility impair*" or "mobility disorder*" or "physical disabilit*" or "physical disorder*" or "physical impair*" or "dependent ambulation" or deaf or deafness or "hard of hearing" or DHH or "hearing loss" or "hearing impair*" or "hearing disorder*" or "low vision" or "vision disorder*" or "visual disorder*" or "visual* impair*" or "vision impair*" or "vision loss" or "special needs"	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	271,276
2	clinic* or educat* or placement* or residenc* or practice or practicum or training or school* or program* or course*	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	3,219,830

3	accommodat* or adapt* or modif* or support* or accessib* or mainstreaming	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	1,045,175
4	"nursing student*" or ((nurse or nurses or nursing) N6 student*)	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	62,383
5	(MH "Students with Disabilities") OR (MH "Hearing Disorders+") OR (MH "Vision Disorders+")	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	65,557
6	(MH "Education, Nursing+") OR (MH "Education, Clinical+") OR (MH "Student Placement") OR (MH "Schools, Nursing")	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	109,526
7	(MH "School Accommodation") OR (MH "Mainstreaming (Education)")	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	2,595
8	(MH "Students, Nursing+")	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	44,351

9	S1 OR S5	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	280,878
10	S2 OR S6	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	3,220,734
11	S3 OR S7	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	1,045,175
12	S4 OR S8	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	62,525
13	S9 AND S10 AND S11 AND S12	Search modes – Boolean/Phrase	Interface – EBSCOhost Research Databases Search Screen – Advanced Search Database – CINAHL Complete	301

Note. CINAHL (EBSCO): Search conducted June 2023. The default fields for unqualified searches are Title, Abstract and Subject headings, PubMed ID (PMID), Digital Object Identifier, Author.

The search strategy, incorporating all identified keywords and index terms, will be tailored for each information source included. The reference lists of articles selected for inclusion will also be examined to identify relevant sources. Publications in all languages will be considered. Titles and abstracts not in English will be screened using artificial intelligence (AI) to assess eligibility. Full-text articles meeting the inclusion criteria will be translated using AI and verified by the multilingual review team (Haghiri-Vijeh et al., 2025). However, limitations in AI translation accuracy and feasibility may affect the inclusion of

some sources. Articles that cannot be reliably translated will be excluded and documented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

The literature search will include the following databases: MEDLINE (Ovid), CINAHL (EBSCO), ERIC (EBSCO), APA PsycInfo (EBSCO), Web of Science, and Scopus. Additionally, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses will be searched to identify unpublished and grey literature. A limited number of relevant nursing websites (Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing, American Nurses Association, Canadian Nurses Association, International Council of Nurses) will also be searched using keywords such as "nursing students," "education," "clinical," and "accommodation." There is no date restriction for the studies included in this review.

Sources of Evidence Selection

Ten sources will be pilot-tested to ensure reviewers agree upon what to include. Subsequently, at least two reviewers will independently check each title and abstract to ensure it meets the criteria for the review. The piloting process involves sending 10 sources to the review team and asking them to send the lead reviewer their decisions for inclusion or exclusion. The entire team then meets to discuss any discrepancies. Full-text versions of potentially relevant sources will be obtained and uploaded to Covidence for review. As with the title and abstract screening, a pilot test involving five sources will be conducted to ensure consistency among reviewers. Subsequently, two or more independent reviewers will evaluate the complete texts against the established inclusion criteria.

Reasons for excluding full-text sources will be systematically documented and reported in the scoping review. At each stage of the selection process, any discrepancies between reviewers will be addressed through collaborative discussion, with a third reviewer consulted when necessary to ensure consensus. The complete search outcomes will be detailed in the final review and visually represented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021).

Data Extraction

Two independent reviewers will extract data from the studies in the scoping review using a custom data-extraction tool developed for this purpose. The data extracted will include details about the nursing programs, nursing students' demographics, types of physical and/or sensory disabilities, country or region, methodology, type of accommodations needed, accommodations strategies suggested, and accommodations strategies implemented. In addition, when identifying strategies to support nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in practice settings, the team will consider various avenues (e.g., institutions and peers) through which students accessed accommodations. A draft extraction tool is provided (see Table 2).

Table 2

Data Extraction Instrument

	Data extracted
Authors (references)	
Year of the study's publication	
Country	
Purpose	

Study design	
Sample size	
Nursing programs: • Diploma nursing program • Undergraduate nursing program • Second-entry nursing degree program • Internationally educated nursing program • Nurse practitioner program • Other Clinical placements: • Acute care (hospital) ○ Medicine unit ○ Surgery ○ Step-down unit ○ Maternity and newborn ○ Intensive care unit ○ Emergency room ○ Mental health ○ Psychiatric care • Rehab • Community care placement • Virtual	
Nursing students' demographics • Age • Gender identity/gender expression • Sex • Sexual orientation • Ethnicity • Religion • First in the family to attend college • English as a second/additional language	

• Immigrant or child of immigrant parent	
Type of physical disability	
Type of sensory disability	
Type of accommodations needed	
Accommodation strategies implemented	
Experiences of secondary mental health illnesses (such as anxiety and depression) when accommodations were not met	
Findings	
Author's recommendations	

As a pilot test of the extraction tool, each reviewer will extract two included reports independently, and the team will meet to discuss discrepancies to ensure that the tool captures all the relevant data and to promote consistency of extractions among reviewers. Through a collaborative process, the extraction tool will be adjusted as needed to ensure accuracy and relevance. All changes made to the tool will be thoroughly documented and reported in the final scoping review. Any disagreements between reviewers will be addressed through discussion, and if consensus cannot be reached, a third reviewer will be consulted to ensure consistent decision-making. Authors of papers will be contacted twice to request missing or additional data, where required.

Data Analysis and Presentation

We will use conventional content analysis to inductively categorize strategies for nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities in a clinical learning environment. Conventional content analysis will allow the formation of broader categories based on coded data. We will summarize results using descriptive statistics and evidence tables to clearly and pragmatically present the findings. The data will be presented as a table detailing key characteristics of all the included studies, along with strategies identified for supporting accommodations for nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities during their clinical placements and any author recommendations. A descriptive summary will be provided alongside the tabulated findings to explain how the results align with the review's objectives and research question. Our reviewer team consists of students with living experiences of physical and/or sensory disability who have navigated the complexity of clinical placement. Moreover, our team includes nursing faculty who have experience in supporting students with physical and sensory disabilities by providing strategies to address their needs during clinical placements. Finally, we will present our preliminary findings at several conferences to receive consultation on the review process and to validate the findings.

Limitation

This scoping review will follow the JBI methodology and will not include a critical appraisal of results; therefore, it will have limited implications for practice and for making recommendations.

Conclusion

Beyond achieving success in a nursing program, we must understand the scope of accommodations available to nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities and promote their adoption, as a lack of access can impede the mental well-being of these students (Moreland et al., 2022).

As the number of people with physical and/or sensory disabilities who are entering the nursing profession increases, programs and educators must understand how to meet the needs of these students and facilitate the completion of their nursing education. Within nursing education, clinical placements pose unique challenges to providing accommodation for students with physical and/or sensory disabilities that need further exploration. To address this need, this scoping review aims to map the literature on strategies that have been implemented during clinical placements to accommodate the needs of nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities during their nursing education. In mapping the literature, we anticipate that we will uncover gaps toward which research could be directed to better understand the needs of these students. Moreover, findings will offer suggestions for future revision to curriculum, policy, and programming in nursing education to support nursing students with physical and/or sensory disabilities who need accommodations to complete their clinical placement.

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