

Perceptions of care homes as practice learning environments for pre-registration nursing students: A systematic-narrative hybrid literature review

ABSTRACT

Background: The ageing population is increasing demand for skilled nurses in long-term care settings, such as care homes. However, attracting qualified nurses remains challenging. Pre-qualification experience could enhance skills, recruitment and retention, but requires greater understanding and support of care homes as learning environments.

Aim: To identify and synthesise research evidence related to care homes as learning environments, and to investigate factors influencing learning within such settings.

Design: Systematic-narrative hybrid review.

Data sources: CINAHL, PubMed, Medline, Scopus, Web of Science, Nursing and Allied Health and Google Scholar were searched for research articles published between January 2014 and October 2023 which sought to explore the learning opportunities of nursing students in care homes. Studies published in English were considered.

Review methods: Retrieved articles were assessed for suitability, quality and inclusion through title and abstract examination facilitated by the use of an appropriate critical appraisal tool (PICO). Articles were read, and re-read, evidence extracted, tabulated, and then synthesised using a thematic approach. Reporting is consistent with PRISMA guidelines for reporting systematic reviews.

Results: 4203 articles were screened, 31 studies matched the inclusion criteria. Three key themes were developed through thematic synthesis: (i) Positive but challenging experiences (ii) Barriers to learning include lack of registered nurses, time pressure and high workload, and lack of financial investment (iii) Facilitators of learning in care homes include positive supervisory relationship, effective orientation and reception, and partnership and collaboration between educational institutions and care home settings.

Conclusion: This review reveals the potential of care homes as settings that offer valuable learning opportunities for nursing students, as well as a sector that support the future needs of an ageing population. Advocating for policies that specifically address the support of nurse education and nurses in this environment is warranted.

Keywords: care homes, nursing students, nurses, clinical learning environments, pre-registration students, nurse education.

1. Introduction

Nursing is a practice-based profession which involves learning that combines theory with learning in practice settings (Koivisto et al., 2017). Practice learning is a crucial aspect of pre-registration nursing education internationally, including in the United Kingdom (UK) and Europe (EU), where pre-registration nursing programmes require students to undertake 2300 practice hours in a range of settings (NMC, 2023; Barker et al., 2016). The diversity of practice settings enables students to gain knowledge and skills across various practice situations (Bramer, 2020; Koivisto et al., 2017) and can foster deeper understandings of the importance of therapeutic relationships (Levett-Jones et al., 2018). Both the method of teaching and an environment conducive to learning are important (Henderson et al., 2010). When students are immersed in a supportive environment that promotes engagement, they are more likely to thrive in their studies and achieve their goals (Rusticus et al., 2023). Such environments, enable students to flourish, and assist them in developing the skills and judgement necessary for effective nursing practice (Alrashidi et al., 2023).

Practice placements influence students' decisions regarding future employment (Boyd-Turner et al., 2016). Using a wide variety of placement settings is therefore pivotal in providing opportunities to care for people in multiple environments, offering students a broad vision of their potential career choices (Boyd-Turner et al., 2016). While pre-registration nursing courses generally involve a range of acute and community experience, increasing demands for placements in alternative contexts, including care homes, highlights the importance of adequately preparing nurses for the diverse realities of future healthcare (Collett et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2017). Placement supervision models vary between countries (Mathisen et al., 2023; Tuomikoski et al., 2019; Vinales, 2015). In the UK placement learning is supervised and assessed by both practice supervisors and practice assessors who have undertaken required preparation (NMC, 2018). In contrast, other countries often employ 'mentoring' models which can differ in operationalisation, regulation, and mentor preparation (Tuomikoski et al., 2019). Thorough preparation, alongside quality placement supervision and support can have a lasting positive impact on nursing students' initiation into the nursing profession (Helgesen et al., 2016). Practice supervisors or mentors use diverse learning strategies and feedback to encourage student learning, with the aim of integrating theoretical knowledge into practical application (Lee and Chiang, 2020; Vinales, 2015). However, the education of these 'supervising' nurses is equally vital to ensure their preparedness for working with students, as well as delivering high-quality care in an ever-evolving healthcare environment (Tuomikoski et al., 2019).

The population is living longer with multiple health care needs which is likely to lead to an increased number of individuals receiving personal and health care whilst residing in long term settings such as care homes. (Kingston et al., 2018; Barker et al., 2021). This increase in care home residents with multiple complex health care needs has implications for nurse education and nursing workforce provision (Holt et al., 2023; O'Connor et al., 2018). In this review, the term 'care home' is employed to denote a comprehensive institutional

environment where continuous care is provided to older adults 24 hours a day, seven days a week, including facilities equipped with both on-site and off-site nursing and medical personnel (Froggatt et al., 2017). This facility is characterized by a home-like atmosphere offering continuous support for individuals, often older people, who typically have complex care needs, are vulnerable, and require assistance with activities of daily living (Sanford et al., 2015).

Although students gain a range of experience related to the care of older people during their pre-registration nurse education, in the UK this predominantly is under the remit of the national health services which does not include care homes. While care home environments have been used for student placements in the past (Gonella, et al., 2019), some challenges persist (Laugaland et al., 2021; Kgongwana & Van Schoor, 2022). Despite growing awareness of the importance of exposing nursing students to a variety of care environments, including care homes (Laugaland et al., 2021; Tveit et al., 2023), these settings remain underutilized for practice placements and in the UK, students are not routinely placed in care homes. However, studies have shown that practice placement in non-traditional settings, such as care homes, results in overall satisfaction and improvement in the practice learning environment (Jadzinski et al., 2023). Care homes provide a unique setting for interprofessional collaboration and offer greater autonomy to students compared to acute settings (Huls et al., 2015). Nursing students who attended practice placements in aged care facilities gain knowledge, and have positive attitudes towards age-related conditions, including dementia (Lea et al., 2015). With the continuous increase in the ageing population and comorbidities (Mckee et al., 2021), the utilisation of care homes could be pertinent as a component of the health system's response to the ageing population. The growing significance of this setting within the UK healthcare system cannot be underestimated and requires further investigation. Hence, it is important to explore and understand care homes as 'learning environments' for nursing students.

Previous systematic reviews on learning in care homes and residential aged care facilities have focused on learning processes and competencies (Husebø et al., 2018), been limited to specific methodologies (Keeping-Burke et al., 2020), and cover outdated search periods (to 2015 and 2018). The review reported here used a systematic narrative hybrid approach (Turnbull et al, 2023; Rusli et al., 2023) to encompass what is known about care homes as learning environments, the learning experience of nursing students in care homes, and overarching discussions surrounding care home learning.

The term 'care home' in this review is used interchangeably with nursing homes, residential aged care facilities and long-term care and denotes a residential facility where registered nurses work.

Aim

This study aimed to identify and synthesise available evidence on care homes as learning environments for nursing students. The following research question was used:

- What are the factors reported as influencing educational experiences and learning opportunities for nursing students in care homes?

2. The Review

2.1 Methods

Acknowledging the potential constraints of traditional narrative reviews in the era of evidence-based practice, the systematic review has become highly regarded given its pre-established methodology (Basheer, 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Byrne, 2016). It is argued that systematic reviews (using predefined narrow questions, mechanistic processes, and data summation) and narrative reviews (addressing broader topics, often via synthesis and interpretation) serve different purposes and are complimentary (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). We used a 'systematic narrative hybrid review' methodology based on the work of Turnbull et al., (2023) and Rusli et al., (2023). This approach is hybrid in that it integrates elements of a systematic literature review (in the literature searching, selection and appraisal processes), with a narrative approach (to the summarising and analysis of the literature found) for a more descriptive and interpretative synthesis of the collated research papers (Turnbull et al., 2023; Rusli et al., 2023). This method encourages transparency and a 'balance of breadth and depth' through comprehensive searching, and inclusion of a range of studies based on clear parameters and criteria (Rusli et al., 2023 p. 3). The reporting followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) Extension for Scoping Reviews guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018).

2.2 Search Strategy

The PICO framework (Patient/Population, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome) facilitated definition of both search terms and inclusion and exclusion criteria (Tables 1, 3) (Eriksen & Frandsen, 2018; Stern & McArthur, 2014). To ensure a comprehensive search, a detailed list of search terms was generated, including synonyms, Boolean operators (AND, OR), truncations, and asterisks (see Table 2). The following databases were searched, Cumulated Index in Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), PubMed, Web of Science, Medline, Scopus, Nursing and Allied Health, and Google Scholar. To identify relevant publications reflecting current trends and practices, and to ensure applicability of review findings to current education and healthcare, the search period covered January 2014 to October 2023. The review included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research studies. No geographical limiter was applied. To supplement the electronic search, a further hand search was performed on reference lists of the included papers.

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 3) were defined based on the PICO framework, ensuring consistency with the search strategy and selection of studies most relevant to the research question.

2.4 Study selection

Publications were imported and managed using EndNote (Clarivate, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), which facilitated several steps in the review process: removal of duplicates (n = 572); title and abstract screening (n = 3631) based on inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 3); importation and review of full texts (n = 247) using the same criteria; and grouping of identified publications (n = 31) for final information extraction and synthesis. Publications were excluded (n = 216) if they focused on literature reviews, residents, families, Covid-19, palliative or end-of-life care, or acute and other settings. The reference lists of the final selection were hand searched but yielded no additional publications.

2.5 Quality appraisal

To assess the quality of each article, the appropriate critical appraisal tool was chosen to match the research design. The 10-items Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative checklist was used to assess the quality of qualitative studies (CASP, 2018). The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal tool for analytical cross-sectional studies (JBI, 2020) was applied to the quantitative studies. For research which had employed a mixed method approach, the Mixed Method Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was used (Hong, et al., 2018).

Each study was reviewed, scored, and given a classification of 'yes', 'no', 'can't tell' or unclear based on CASP, JBI and MMAT questions. A study received one point for each question that was answered 'yes', with a maximum of up to 10 points for CASP, 8 points for JBI and 7 points for MMAT. These points were added to calculate a total score for each study as shown in Table 5. The total score for each paper was used to judge the overall quality of the research. Using CASP a low-quality qualitative paper was judged to have a total of score of between 0-3/10, moderate quality 4-6/10 and a high-quality paper 7-10/10. All quantitative papers were scored out of eight with low quality judged 0-3/8, moderate quality 4-5/8, and high quality 6-8/8. Finally, the quality of mixed methods studies were scored out of 7 (low 0-2, moderate 3-5, high 6-7). One researcher (ORA) reviewed and scored all thirty-one articles, discussed and agreed the resulting scores with the wider research group (SHA, PJG, LYM, AS).

2.5 Data extraction and synthesis

Data extraction involved compiling relevant text and information from each paper into a data extraction table, which included summary headings: authors, year, country, settings, study aim and design, sample, data collection and analysis methods, main findings, and quality score (Table 5). Each paper was read in-depth, and the findings from the paper summarised in the document. Once data extraction had been completed for each paper, comparison could be made across and between the articles. Analysis was used to identify the commonalities and differences between research studies. To synthesise the data, one of

the authors (ORA) carefully examined the selected papers. The key points were extracted and summarised to align with the research objective.

The papers were re-read and examined with specific attention to the findings and an inductive analysis approach was used to identify and categorise themes and sub-themes. The analytical approach was informed by thematic synthesis (Ryan et al., 2018) which involves six steps; becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The studies were read multiple times, and notes were taken about their findings. The initially generated published papers were combined, and patterns identified across the data were categorised (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018) and synthesised to generate broad themes. The findings from each paper were thoroughly reviewed to identify factors influencing the quality of education and learning opportunities provided for the nursing students in the care homes.

3 Results

3.1 Study characteristics

The search strategy and selection process are presented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Moher et al., 2009; Fig. 1). A total of 31 studies were included (see Table 4), the majority reported qualitative research (n = 14), with eleven quantitative (n = 11), and six mixed methods (n = 6). Studies were based in nine countries as follows: Norway (n = 14), Australia (n = 8), Canada (n = 3), Ireland (n = 1), United Kingdom (n = 1), Finland (n = 1), Sweden (n = 1), Italy (n = 1), United State of America (n = 1). Most study participants were nursing students in their first, second and third year, reporting their learning experiences in care homes. Other participants include RNs, program and course leaders, practice coordinator, university staff and care support workers. Fourteen of the analysed studies are qualitative research studies with small sample sizes compared to quantitative studies. Many studies documented a higher number of female participants than male participants.

3.2 Thematic findings

3.2.1 Theme 1: Positive but challenging experiences

Authors of seven studies reported that students found care home learning positive, but sometimes challenging as a learning environment (Laugaland et al., 2021; Carlson & Idvall, 2014; Brynildsen et al., 2014; Berntsen et al., 2017; Boscart et al., 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2019; Salamonson et al., 2015). Students described a range of valuable learning, with enhanced clinical skills being reported as acquired through exposure to diverse patient populations (Laugaland et al., 2021), interdisciplinary collaboration (Suikkala et al., 2016), and the delivery of person-centred care (O'Connell et al., 2017; Smyth et al., 2022). Despite perceptions that aged care facilities were undervalued compared to acute clinical placements, students reported satisfaction with the relationships formed and the care provided to residents and their families (Ryan et al., 2018). Contributing to this positivity was the slower-paced environments of care homes, coupled with supportive mentorship which

was reported to boost students' confidence in undertaking assessments and hands-on tasks (House et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2018). Authors reported that students expressed satisfaction with their care home placements, feeling equipped with a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills transferable to other care environments (Boscart et al., 2022; Brynildsen et al., 2014).

Nursing students associated their learning experiences in care home with a sense of responsibility and independence (Gonella et al., 2019). However, these experiences were also challenging for students due to their exposure to older patients with diverse health conditions (House et al., 2015). Students described their placements as intricate, demanding and sometimes stressful (Dalsmo et al., 2022; House et al., 2015). They experienced a range of emotions when caring for elderly residents and dealing with sickness, frailty and death. (Dalsmo et al., 2022). Additionally, concerns about assuming responsibility for their own learning were documented as significant challenges (House et al., 2015; Dalsmo et al., 2022; Laugaland et al., 2021).

Several of the authors mentioned issues linked to autonomy and competencies in their papers (Lea et al., 2015; Gonella et al., 2019; House et al., 2015; Kulla & Slettebø., 2023). The nursing students said that in the care homes, they often worked autonomously and were able to act independently (Gonella et al., 2019). Similarly, the staff in the care home facility from study reported by Kulla & Slettebø (2023, p. 4), was described as "Open to new ideas" and having "Confidence in nursing students to practice independently", which added to the student's positive experience. Nursing students in another study (Moquin et al., 2018) engaged in learning opportunities which developed through job shadowing, assisting them to move into advocacy roles. They built positive relationships and spent quality time with the residents which afforded them opportunities to provide person-centred care and learn specific strategies to care for residents with dementia (Moquin et al., 2018).

This theme underscores the potential of care homes to provide diverse learning opportunities for nursing students. Some of the authors highlight the role of care homes in offering a variety of practical learning opportunities, that are beneficial for developing students' assessment and communication skills (House et al., 2015; Dalsmo et al., 2022; Boscart et al., 2022; Stanescu-Yadav & Lillekroken, 2023). The care home sector also provides an additional platform for enhancing students' understanding of dementia and equipping them with knowledge about palliative care (Lea et al., 2015). To cater for their diverse learning needs, nursing students engaged in various strategies while in care home placements, such as simulation, collaborative learning, reflection, peer learning and self-directed learning (Olaussen et al., 2020; Suikkala et al., 2016; Moquin et al., 2018; Brynildsen et al., 2014). Participants who completed a four-week placement involving VERA (Validation, Emotion, Reassure, Activity) training, as described in a study by Smyth et al., (2022), reflected on their experiences, employing diverse techniques, including non-verbal methods and distractions to care for dementia residents in the care home.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Barriers to learning in care homes

The shortage of registered nurses (RNs) was noted in six studies and was found to negatively impact student's learning due to the insufficient number of RNs in care homes (Laugaland et al., 2021; Moquin et al., 2018; Gonella et al., 2019; Boscart et al., 2022; Rayner et al., 2023; Laugaland et al., 2021). Nursing students undertake clinical placements to meet certain learning needs and require the input of RNs to achieve these competences. Hence, they rely on RN mentors that can serve as role models, advocates, instructors and supervisors who respect their perspectives (Jack et al., 2019). In three papers the presence of inadequate numbers of RNs for supervision seems to have emerged as a significant obstacle to nursing students' learning (Moquin et al., 2018; Rayner et al., 2023; Laugaland et al., 2021). Nursing students reported limited interaction with RNs due to the latter's involvement in administrative tasks. This resulted in missed learning opportunities (Moquin et al., 2018). They described being mentored by unqualified staff and reported tasks delegations from non-registered personnel (Rayner et al., 2023; Laugaland et al., 2021). This shortage has been reported to negatively impact care homes' ability to effectively host nursing students and leads to variations in supervision practices and assessments.

A perceived lack of time for students and the high workload of RNs were identified as issues in five studies (Laugaland et al., 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Kulla & Slettebø 2023; Olausen et al., 2020; Stanescu-Yadav & Lillekroken, 2023). Many nursing students considered the heavy workload of their supervisors to have a detrimental effect on their learning experience. This workload led to reduced interaction between nursing students and their practice supervisors, causing them to spend more time with unqualified staff. This situation was felt to impact negatively, not only on students' experiences (Laugaland et al., 2021), but it also potentially exposed first-year students to vulnerability and improper practices which could influence their future nursing practice (Rayner et al., 2023; Laugaland et al., 2021).

Three studies identified a lack of financial investment as a significant barrier to learning (Jack et al., 2019; Laugaland et al., 2021; Suikkala et al., 2016). Ensuring that care homes have adequate resources may be essential for maintaining quality during clinical placements. Jack et al., (2019) suggest that investing in pre-registration nursing and the professional development of existing staff in care homes is crucial for enhancing the wellbeing of the workforce. Financial burdens in many care homes are adversely impacting the education of the current workforce.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Factors facilitating learning in care homes

A positive supervisory relationship is vital for nursing students as it directly impacts their learning, professional development, and overall success during placements. The importance of nurse mentors providing support and guidance during care home placements was outlined in several reviewed papers, which identified this support as essential for the learning and professional development of nursing students (Dalsmo et al., 2022; Stanescu-Yadav & Lillekroken, 2023; Eccleston et al., 2015; Carlson & Idvall, 2014). Effective

supervision enhances students' ability to manage the complexities of care in a care home, fostering a beneficial learning environment and promoting professional development (Dalsmo et al., 2022). The role of the nurse preceptor during placement is crucial in boosting nursing students' confidence and enhancing their sense of mastery. Nurse preceptors were identified as key facilitators of learning opportunities, stimulating critical thinking and decision-making skills (Stanescu-Yadav & Lillekroken, 2023). Despite variations in supervision styles, most students reported receiving high-quality supervision, which resulted in increased confidence during their placements (Boscart et al., 2022). Elements such as debriefing sessions, feedback, reflections (O'Connell et al., 2017), and the presence of attentive supervisors with strong communication skills were recognised as crucial in promoting a positive learning experience in care home settings.

An essential strategy for improving the positive placement experience of nursing students in care homes was identified as the implementation of an effective orientation program (Laugaland et al., 2021; Brynildsen et al., 2014; Lea et al., 2014; Lea et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2018; Jacobsen et al., 2020). Creating a welcoming and supportive environment, along with having friendly and proficient staff who are well-versed in clinical nursing skills, is crucial for helping nursing students thrive in their learning and competence development (Lea et al., 2015; Rosenberg et al., 2019). A study conducted by Lea et al., (2014) revealed that first-year students were excited about the opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge in practice during the placement. They felt welcomed and accepted in the facility, particularly appreciating the educational workshops, which they found enlightening. Notably, many students (80%) reported that their supervisors were enthusiastic about their arrival, and the majority found their supervisors to be helpful (90%), friendly (93.3%), and supportive (96.6%) (Lea et al., 2014). However, factors such as information overload, long hours, and limited interaction with other students negatively impacted their orientation.

The significance of partnership and collaboration was identified in five of the reviewed papers, with the authors highlighting the partnership between care homes and universities as vital to enhancing placement experiences for nursing students (Carlson & Idvall, 2014; Jack et al., 2019; Gonella et al., 2019; Tveit et al., 2023; Bjørk et al., 2014). Prior to the commencement of placements, careful planning focused on learning opportunities, resource availability, and clinical supervision is recommended (Laugaland et al., 2021). In the final remarks of the questionnaire study by Gonella et al., (2019), the authors recommend that nursing faculties developing programs should collaborate with care homes to integrate supervision into the nursing role. To promote positive learning outcomes, workshops that bring together preceptors, nurse managers, and nurse teachers to address didactical and organizational challenges are beneficial, as highlighted by Carlson & Idvall, (2014). Collaborative efforts between faculty members and nurses within this clinical setting can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, enhancing the overall image of care homes and enabling students to integrate theory and practice effectively (Bjørk et al., 2014).

4. Discussion

We synthesised existing research on care homes as learning environments, and the challenges encountered by nursing students whilst on placements, using an innovative, systematic narrative hybrid review approach. The review identifies factors that, from the perspectives of nursing students, clinicians working in care homes, and nurse educators, either facilitate or inhibit student learning.

Our findings show that nursing students and educators recognise care homes as challenging learning environments which can also provide students with valuable placement experience. The care home environment provides opportunities for students to focus on and develop their clinical skills, contributing to a broader understanding of the importance of patient-centred care (Boscart et al., 2022). Specifically, students' knowledge and skills in essential nursing areas such as person-centred assessment, communication, dementia care, and palliative care are enhanced by their experience of the care home environment. Educators should promote the advantages of these learning environments to students.

Nursing students report a number of positive benefits to learning in a care home, including increased knowledge, enhanced skills and a sense of autonomy. However, while students recognise that care homes provide diverse learning opportunities, they also encounter challenges that impact on their learning and make them less popular placement areas (Carlson & Idvall, 2014; Lea et al., 2015).

Further research is required to identify and mitigate the specific factors that inhibit the nursing students' experience in the care home environment. Nurse educators need to recognise that dealing with mortality, people's mental and physical frailties and the close relationships inherent in care home nursing can be emotionally challenging for students (Eccleston et al., 2015; Dalsmo et al., 2022). These challenges, including caring for vulnerable individuals, can evoke a wide range of responses and students require enhanced support to help manage these experiences (Allan et al., 2020; Weurlander et al., 2018).

The emotional engagement for students, can be much more pronounced than in some other, more episodic nursing experiences, and is part of what is referred to as the 'emotional labour' of nursing (Smith, 2012), where nurses learn to manage their own emotions while caring for others. Nursing students' experiences in a care home illustrate the inherently self-reflective nature of the learning process (Ekstrom et al., 2020) which can challenge students in a way that previous placement experiences may not.

However, this review indicates that when students receive the right support from practice and academic assessors, emotionally challenging situations can become valuable learning opportunities. In turn, these experiences help build resilience, a key attribute in managing the transition from student to registered nurse (Delgado et al., 2017). Our evidence shows that care homes are challenging environments for students, but that with the right support

and supervision, these challenges provide excellent preparation for the inevitable demands placed on registered nurses.

We have shown that care homes may offer students greater independence and autonomy than other clinical settings, which contributes to the building of professional expertise (Gonella et al., 2019; Lea et al., 2015). Our review's findings align with other studies in which students reported an increased sense of autonomy after completing care home placements (Huls et al., 2015). However, although encouraging students to practice independently can enhance students' competence, it is crucial that they do so within the defined scope of their practice and under the guidance of qualified nurses (Ford et al., 2016). Clinical autonomy, a key aspect of professional practice in nursing, is closely related to positive, confident decision-making in patient care (Pursio et al., 2021). Even so, nursing students are not autonomous practitioners so, while it is important to promote their learning in clinical decision-making, and patient advocacy, this must be managed within an appropriate supervisory process by a registered nurse (Oshodi et al., 2019).

The development of autonomy and an understanding of professionalism are critical aspects of pre-registration nurse education programmes, but students need appropriate supervision to develop these areas of understanding. Investment in training and support for care home nursing staff is critical to ensure they are equipped to support students effectively. These positive learning outcomes of autonomy, independence and self-confidence should be more widely acknowledged in planning nurse educational opportunities, to encourage more student placements in care homes. Autonomy, independence and mental resilience in student learning should be recognised as core areas of strength to be drawn from care home placements. These attributes are not typically associated with other more reactive learning environments such as acute care settings. Learning in care homes encourages students to take more responsibility for their own learning. This should be more widely recognised to promote care homes for their range of values as a learning environment.

While autonomy and independence are recognised as positive attributes of the student experience, they can also be misunderstood or viewed negatively. High levels of student autonomy may be interpreted as risking insufficient supervision, particularly when there are limited numbers of registered nurses available to support student learning. We show that when there is a shortage of registered nurses, it has a negative impact on student learning (Laugaland et al., 2021) and that when there is a lack of registered staff to mentor students, this affects the perception of care homes as valuable for practice learning (Jack et al., 2019). Balancing staffing levels to ensure student support presents a challenge that reflects broader staffing shortfalls in the health and social care sector.

Our review indicates that when nursing students received a planned orientation and induction to their care home placement, they reported a more positive-learning experience, improved confidence and motivation for the clinical experience (Brynildsen et al., 2014). In addition, when students reported feeling safe and supported and noted the approachability

of staff, their learning experience was enhanced (House et al., 2015). Strategies that create a welcoming, secure and emotionally safe and supportive environment (Steven et al., 2022; Steven et al., 2014) are essential for successful student learning. However, staff shortages and high workloads which typically characterise care home nursing (Cousins et al., 2016; Black, 2015) can inhibit the ability of nursing staff to offer students the induction support they need. Therefore, nurse educators should prioritise collaboration and careful planning to ensure a successful start to students' care home experience (Tiplady et al., 2018).

As well as increasing nursing students' knowledge and autonomy, care home placements can dispel biases and negative perceptions about nursing older adults (Berntsen et al., 2017; House et al., 2015). Negative attitudes towards older people's care arise because it is perceived as demanding, time-consuming and burdensome (Rush et al., 2017), compounded by the view that care home nursing is a less attractive and lower status nursing career choice (Tiplady et al., 2018). Many participants in the reviewed papers began their placement with apprehensions about what care home nursing would be like, but these shifted to a more positive view after the placement. Similar findings have been reported by King et al., (2013) and others (Castellano-Rioja, et al., 2022; Husebø et al., 2018), indicating a positive trend in students' attitudes towards caring for older people after placements, despite initial concerns about the complexity associated with nursing older adults. Positive learning experiences had also been reported from medical, physiotherapy and paramedical students (Hunter et al., 2023; Annear et al., 2016; Lucas et al., 2013), highlighting the multi-professional value of care home learning. Promoting a positive view of nursing in care homes can help change students' attitudes towards caring for older adults. Since attitudes strongly influence career preferences, they play a key role in future recruitment into care for older people (Galzignato et al., 2021; Neville & Dickie, 2014). Therefore, it is important to further explore how care home placements shape attitudes and future career choices and use these experiences to improve perceptions of care home nursing.

In summary, key findings from the review indicate that care homes provide valuable learning opportunities for nursing students. They offer a wide range of learning experiences and allow nursing students to develop important transferable skills when given appropriate supervision. Learning in a care home is emotionally demanding, but with proper guidance, students build resilience for their future career. A key challenge in care home placements is ensuring that students receive sufficient supervision and support from registered nurses to maximise their learning and professional development. This means investing in care home staff to ensure they have the necessary training to guide students. One approach is for educational institutions to appoint dedicated care home practice placement facilitators. Research indicates that positive learning experiences, along with appropriate supervision and support in care homes, can impact students' future career choices and reduce misconceptions about the value of a nursing career in these settings.

This review provides fresh insights into the limited research on care homes as a learning environment for nursing students. It updates, builds on and extends previous reviews (Husebø et al., 2018; Keeping-Burke et al., 2020) which had narrower focuses and scopes.

4.1 Strengths and limitations

A strength of the novel systematic narrative hybrid approach used in this review (Turnbull et al., 2023; Rusli et al., 2024) is that it combines the strengths of both conventional systematic and traditional narrative reviews. For broad topics such as care homes as learning environments for nursing students, this type of review facilitates descriptive and interpretive synthesis of information rather than summation alone. Employing systematic methods for literature searching and selection and using narrative techniques for synthesising, interpreting and presenting the findings, this approach enables a comprehensive and concise review and has been successfully used across several disciplines (Rikala et al., 2024; Ronsivalle et al., 2023; Thompson et al., 2024; Turnbull et al., 2023). However, the review has several limitations. Primary research articles published before January 2014 and after October 2023 were not included, potentially leading to the omission of relevant research. Although selected papers exhibit geographical diversity, it is important to highlight the absence of papers from Asia and Africa. This gap in research may potentially reflect cultural differences in care provision for older adults (Ebimgbo and Okoye, 2021) and, or differences in research and publishing. The review solely focuses on literature published in English, potentially excluding relevant studies not available as a translation or written in English. This review concentrates on nursing students' experiences within the care home settings and does not consider the perspectives of other healthcare students (e.g. medical, occupational therapy or physiotherapy students). This omission may result in a gap in the evidence of what supports effective student learning in care homes.

5. Conclusion

This systematic narrative review of care homes as learning environments for nursing students adds valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge, updating and expanding previous studies. The review underscores the potential significance of care homes as offering a range of valuable learning opportunities, with the added potential of altering biases and perceptions. However, the learning environment in these settings faces challenges that can adversely affect students' experiences. Investment, incentives, and partnership working are needed across relevant stakeholders, educators, and policymakers to provide optimal learning conditions, enhance the sense of value felt by existing staff, and go some way to changing the current image of care home nursing. Given the continued shortage of registered nurses in care homes and the persistent challenge of recruitment and retention in the sector, alongside the increasing older population, it seems vital that the potential impact of care home placement experiences is harnessed - perhaps such placements should become the norm rather than the exception.

6. Relevance to clinical practice

Adapting to the unique learning requirements of culturally diverse students could enhance educational achievements and strengthen the recruitment and retention of future nursing workforce in care homes. With the current ageing population, understanding the learning needs of nursing students in this sector is crucial for implementing interventions aimed at improving their competencies in the care of older adults. This could lead to a positive shift in nursing students' perceptions of ageing, thus reinforcing caring and compassionate behaviour, both of which are fundamental to the nursing profession. Previous studies have forecasted an increase in the ageing population in the UK, particularly individuals with complex care needs such as dementia, comorbidity, and disability (Kingston et al., 2018; Guzman-Castillo et al., 2017), indicating a rise in the number of people receiving care in care homes. Hence, efforts are needed to adapt to the complex care needs of the ageing population, by equipping future practitioners with the skills required for these specialised areas of nursing. Consequently, undergraduate nurse education should incorporate placement learning within the care home sector. However, as demonstrated in this study, students need support and encouragement to enable them to maximise their learning in care homes.

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