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Invited Review

# Disclosing non-visible disabilities in educational workplaces: a scoping review

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**Introduction:** a sizable proportion of the working population has a disability that is not visible. Many choose not to disclose this at work, particularly in educational workplaces where disability is underrepresented. A better understanding of the barriers and facilitators to disclosure is needed.

**Sources of data:** this scoping review is based on studies published in scientific journals.

**Areas of agreement:** the reasons underpinning disclosure are complex and emotive-in-nature. Both individual and socio-environmental factors influence this decision and process. Stigma and perceived discrimination are key barriers to disclosure and, conversely, personal agency a key enabler.

**Areas of controversy:** there is a growing trend of non-visible disabilities within the workplace, largely because of the increasing prevalence of mental ill health. Understanding the barriers and facilitators to disability disclosure is key to the provision of appropriate workplace support.

**Growing points:** our review shows that both individual and socio-environmental factors influence choice and experience of disclosure of non-visible disabilities in educational workplaces. Ongoing stigma and ableism in the workplace, in particular, strongly influence disabled employees' decision to disclose (or not), to whom, how and when.

**Areas timely for developing research:** developing workplace interventions that can support employees with non-visible disabilities and key stakeholders during and beyond reasonable adjustments is imperative.

**Key words:** disability disclosure, education, workplaces

## Introduction

People with disabilities are one of the world's largest minority groups.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many continue to be overlooked, including in workplace settings.<sup>2</sup> In the UK, one in five working-age adults report a disability, chronic health condition or neurodivergence.<sup>3</sup> Over the last decade, an increasing proportion of working-age adults report having a long-term health condition or disability. This upward trend is understood to be driven by increasing rates of 'non-visible' disabilities (e.g. mental health conditions).<sup>3,4</sup> Non-visible disabilities refer to physical, mental or neurological conditions that pose challenges to an individual's movement, senses or activities, but may not be immediately or obviously observed.<sup>4</sup> Examples include mental health conditions, autism, sensory processing difficulties, cognitive impairment (e.g. dementia and traumatic brain injury), 'non-visible' physical health conditions (e.g. chronic pain, diabetes), hearing loss and low or restricted vision. Various terms have been used to describe this broad category of disabilities (including, hidden, invisible and non-visible disability). In the context of this study, we use the term non-visible disability in line with UK government guidance.<sup>5</sup>

Disabled people, including those with non-visible disability, continue to face significant and diverse barriers to full participation in employment and inclusion at work.<sup>4,6-8</sup> The disability employment gap (i.e. the difference in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people) is pervasive and exists globally.<sup>6</sup> In the UK, for example, 52.7% of disabled people were employed in 2021, compared with 81% of non-disabled people.<sup>3</sup> There exists a 'disability disclosure gap' in the workplace, which is also sizable and, for many, a significant barrier to the promotion of their health, inclusion at work

and quality of life.<sup>9</sup> A 2017 survey conducted in the USA observed that 30% of employees reported a disability, chronic health condition or neurodivergence, but only 3.2% disclosed this to their employer.<sup>10</sup> Research from the UK shows that around 40%<sup>11,12</sup> of disabled workers felt uncomfortable discussing their disability at work, reporting concerns regarding career progression and anticipated stigma.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally, much of the literature on employment and disability has not focused on the disclosure of non-visible disability to employers.<sup>13</sup> Particularly when employees are seeking workplace accommodations and adaptations.<sup>13</sup> However, growing evidence highlights the personal and emotive nature of disability disclosure in the workplace, and there is an increased understanding of the personal and system-level barriers and facilitators. This knowledge demonstrates the importance of employees' personal experience and impact of this on the disclosure process. Existing reviews have explored disclosure considerations, although this has typically been focused on specific conditions (e.g. mental ill health<sup>14</sup>) rather than across the wider category of non-visible disabilities. This approach misses shared experiences across non-visible disabilities and health conditions. The current review will help to address this gap in knowledge.

The education sector has been selected, as it is characterized by an underrepresentation of disabled employees as compared with other sectors. In the UK, 23% of working age people reported a disability.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, only 6.3% of academics and 8.5% of non-academics, in 2021/2022, declared having a disability.<sup>16</sup> The School Workforce Census in 2023 found that disability data were not obtained for over half of teachers (53%), with reporting rates found to be substantially lower than other protected

characteristics (e.g. gender and age).<sup>17</sup> Similar trends have been found internationally for education (e.g. Canada<sup>18</sup> and Australia<sup>19</sup>).

Therefore, we focus our review on educational workplaces to explore disabled employees' experiences, within an industry characterized by challenges surrounding inclusion and representation. Empirically, this review will contribute to our understanding of the barriers and facilitators to disability disclosure at work surrounding non-visible conditions uniquely and how these are experienced by disabled employees in educational workplaces.

### *Research questions/objectives*

The research question is 'What are the views and experiences of employees relating to non-visible disability disclosure in education workplaces?'. The study objectives are:

- To explore the approaches and rationales of disability disclosure decisions.
- To explore any perceived barriers and enablers of non-visible disability disclosure.
- To explore disabled employees' experiences during and following disclosure of a non-visible disability.

### *Methods*

A scoping review was undertaken to map the literature on staff disability disclosure in education workplaces. The review is guided by scoping review aims and methodology as described by Arskey and O'Malley.<sup>20</sup> Findings will identify any gaps in the literature and support the summary and dissemination of research to policymakers, employers and employees in education settings.

#### **Search strategy**

Searches were conducted in seven health and education databases including: MEDLINE, ERIC, PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles Full Text, Scopus, Embase and Educational Administration Abstracts. Google Scholar was also searched for any additional articles that may not have been listed in the selected databases. Research terms and strategies were

established by the study team and refined with support from a university information specialist. Included articles were published between 2003 and 2023. The search language was limited to English. Further details and searching hits can be found in Appendix 1.

#### **Study selection**

The studies were selected based on inclusion and exclusion criteria determined a priori. Relevant articles were focused on the disclosure of non-visible disabilities as defined by the UK Parliament,<sup>4</sup> where disclosure was the focus of the paper. Papers that included both visible and non-visible disabilities were excluded unless they separately reported on non-visible disability disclosure. Qualitative and quantitative studies were included. Study populations were employees aged 18 years or older and working in any department or job role within education employment settings. Education workplaces are defined as nursery/pre-school, children aged 4–18 (primary and secondary), college and further education, higher education, adult education, special educational settings. Non-visible disabilities are defined as a physical, mental or neurological condition(s) that are not visible, or are not immediately observable or apparent, and can limit or pose challenges to an individual's movements, senses or activities.<sup>4</sup> Disclosure is defined as 'formally or informally telling colleagues, human resources, line manager, or organisation'. Although there is no strict delineation between visible/non-visible disabilities and individuals may experience a combination of both, to address our specific aims and objectives we excluded studies that did not have a central focus on non-visible health conditions. Reviews and grey literature were also excluded.

#### **Charting the data**

A data charting tool was created by following a guideline for scoping reviews developed by Pollock *et al.*<sup>21</sup> MY established the data charting tool based on the research objectives, and J.H. and H.B. revised it. The tool included the following information:

author, publication date and place, title, aim, study design, population, sample size, settings, types of disability, disclosure experiences and disclosure related outcomes.

### Collating, summarizing and reporting results

Scoping reviews establish a thematic construction from the extant literature in a narrative and descriptive manner.<sup>22</sup> A narrative review was conducted for knowledge synthesis. This approach enables the opportunity to explore relationships in the data and compare findings using different methodologies. The scoping review objectives guided the analysis of the included papers, focusing on several key aspects related to invisible disability disclosure. These aspects included formal and informal methods of disclosing non-visible disabilities, examining both positive and negative experiences associated with disability disclosure, identifying facilitators and barriers influencing the disclosure process and understanding the reasons behind individuals' decisions to either disclose or not disclose their disabilities.

## Results

### Study inclusion

The initial search yielded a total of 2531 records from various databases, and an additional 106 records were identified through Google Scholar and reference lists, bringing the combined total to 2637 records. After removing duplicates, 1899 unique records remained for further assessment.

The title and abstract review were conducted on all 1899 records, and 1816 were excluded during this stage with reasons specified. The primary reasons for exclusion were non-relevant content with disability disclosure (1494 records), studies focusing on the student population (162 records) and studies not related to education workplaces (148 records). Additionally, 12 studies were excluded as it focused on individuals with visible disabilities.

Following the title and abstract review, 83 records were selected for full-text review. During this phase,

66 records were excluded based on predetermined criteria. The main reasons for exclusion at this stage were studies not related to education workplaces (28 records), studies focusing on the student population (17 records), studies focusing on the prevalence,<sup>7</sup> studies not related to disability disclosure.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, seven studies one review focused on visible disabilities were excluded.

Ultimately, 17 studies met the inclusion criteria and included in the scoping review. [Figure 1](#) represents the flow of screening process.

### Characteristics of included studies

The included studies were conducted across five countries: eight studies were from the USA,<sup>13,23–29</sup> four from the UK,<sup>30–33</sup> three from Canada,<sup>34–36</sup> one from New Zealand<sup>37</sup> and one from Germany.<sup>38</sup> The publication years of the studies ranged from 2009 to 2023. Detailed characteristics of each study can be found in [Table 1](#).

The study designs employed in these included studies were diverse, and included five qualitative interviews,<sup>26,29,31,35,38</sup> four surveys,<sup>13,23,30,32</sup> three case studies,<sup>24,28,37</sup> three autoethnography,<sup>25,34,36</sup> an autobiography<sup>27</sup> and a mixed-method.<sup>33</sup> Sample sizes varied significantly, ranging from 1 to 549 participants. These studies explored education settings such as universities and colleges,<sup>13,25–27,32–34,36–38</sup> public schools<sup>28–31</sup> and academic libraries (i.e. in higher education settings).<sup>23,24,35</sup> The occupational groups examined included university or college members<sup>13</sup> including professors,<sup>25,27,28,34,36,37</sup> academics,<sup>26,38</sup> lecturers,<sup>32</sup> librarians,<sup>23,24,35</sup> teachers<sup>28,29,33</sup> and school staff.<sup>30,31</sup> The studies focused on various non-visible disabilities, including mental health conditions,<sup>13,23–27,31,32,34,35,38</sup> learning disabilities and differences<sup>28,29,33,36</sup>, Autism<sup>30</sup> and Asperger's syndrome.<sup>37</sup>

### Approaches and rationales of non-visible disability disclosure

Across the 17 studies, 12 explored the approaches used by employees in educational workplaces to

**Table 1** Characteristics of the included studies

| Author Date Country                        | Title  | Aim  | Study designs                        | Population  | Sample size | Settings   | Disability type                       | Disclosure type     | Disclosure experience  | Key outcomes   |
|--|--|--|--------------------------------------|---|-------------|--|---------------------------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Price <i>et al.</i> 2017 USA <sup>13</sup> | Disclosure of Mental Disability by College and University Faculty: The Negotiation of Accommodations, Supports, and Barriers | To address the lack of research and understanding of the experiences of faculty members with mental disabilities in higher education, education  | Survey                               | College and university members across USA                         | 267         | College or University  | Mental disabilities                   | Formal and informal | <p>Reasons for disclosing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To request accommodations</li> <li>• To seek support</li> <li>• To reduce stigma and build trust</li> </ul> <p>Reasons for not disclosing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of negative consequences</li> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Difficulty finding supportive colleagues or supervisors</li> <li>• Lack of awareness about mental health issues</li> </ul> <p>Various positive and negative experiences reported in the disclosing process.</p> | Whilst most faculty with mental disabilities disclosed to colleagues, many lacked awareness of available accommodations and feared negative consequences. Disclosure experiences ranged from positive support to harmful bias, highlighting the need for better institutional support and inclusive workplaces.  |
| Burns and Green 2019 USA <sup>23</sup>     | Academic Librarians' Experiences and Perceptions on Mental Illness Stigma and the Workplace                                  | To understand the stigma and address a gap in the literature about how academic librarians, many of whom are faculty on a tenure track, may experience mental illness stigma in their professional environments. | Survey including free text questions | Academic librarians including 311 diagnosed with a mental illness | 549         | The survey was distributed amongst American Library Association Listservs. | Mental health problems                | Informal            | <p>Stigma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• expected to 'work harder'.</li> <li>• seen as suspicious and 'taking advantage of the system'.</li> <li>• Fear of isolation</li> </ul>  | Training and workshops can reduce stigma.  |
| Pionke 2019 USA <sup>24</sup>              | The Impact of Disbelief: On Being a Library Employee with a Disability   | To explore the accommodation process, its impact on the employee and the politics and psychology of disbelief and suspicion surrounding disability accommodation.  | Case study                           | A librarian   | 1           | N/A  | Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) | Formal              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Long procedure for accommodation</li> <li>Ableism</li> </ul>  | Accommodation, from whichever angle you approach it, is not an easy thing. Done right, it leads to happier and more dedicated employees who work more efficiently. Done wrong, accommodations create resentment, a sense of betrayal and a devaluing of the self for the person who is asking for them. Whilst the law is clear that accommodations must be offered to people who ask for them, the law does not stipulate that employers have to understand, educate or embrace the person with a disability and that is the crux of the issue. |

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued

| Author Date Country                        | Title  | Aim  | Study designs           | Population                             | Sample size | Settings                                   | Disability type          | Disclosure type     | Disclosure experience  | Key outcomes   |
|--|--|--|-------------------------|--|-------------|--|--------------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Cepeda M 2021 USA <sup>25</sup>            | Thrice Unseen, Forever on Borrowed Time: Latina Feminist Reflections on Mental Disability and the Neoliberal Academy | To explore the experiences of multiply marginalized faculty members with mental disabilities in the neoliberal academy through a Latina feminist and the Neoliberal testimonial approach   | Autoethnography         | Professor                              | 1           | Williams College                           | Bipolar and PTSD         | Bipolar and Formal  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclose for securing reasonable workplace accommodation and provide support for other colleagues with non-visible disabilities</li> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Fear of losing job</li> <li>• Pressure to prove herself and value at work.</li> </ul>  | The study advocates for a more inclusive and supportive environment for faculty with non-visible disabilities, emphasizing the need for collective recognition and systemic change within academia to accommodate the diverse experiences of academics with mental health conditions and challenges. She urges for a shift in the discourse surrounding disability in higher education and calls for a more holistic approach to support the needs of faculty members with non-visible disabilities. |
| Green <i>et al.</i> 2020 USA <sup>26</sup> | Teaching and Researching with a Mental Health Diagnosis: Practices and Perspectives on Academic Ableism              | To examine the experiences of academics with mental health diagnoses in the teaching and research process  | Interviews              | Academics with mental health diagnoses | 9           | University settings                        | Mental health conditions | Formal and informal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasons for disclosing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating open dialogue and reducing stigma</li> <li>• Obtaining accommodations</li> <li>• Building trust and empathy</li> <li>• Reasons for not disclosing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of discrimination and stereotyping</li> <li>• Maintaining personal privacy</li> <li>• Varied positive and negative experiences, including challenges in navigating stigma, accessing accommodations and maintaining academic productivity. Positive experiences include support and understanding by colleagues and students, personal empowerment and raising awareness.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> | Emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and supportive environment for academics with mental health diagnoses in the academy.   |
| England 2016 USA <sup>27</sup>             | Being open in academia: A personal narrative of mental illness and disclosure  | To present an autobiographical reflection on the decision to be open about the authors' mental health status during all stages of her career, from diagnosis as a graduate student through the tenure process to her present state of working to attain full professor | Narrative autobiography | A professor in Geography               | 1           | Department of Geography, Miami University. | Bipolar                  | Formal              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prefer to disclose because of support from friends and colleagues (safety)</li> <li>• A belief mental illness should be destigmatised. (stigma)</li> </ul>  | Chronic mental illness is a challenge to disclose in academia. But, universities are becoming more aware of mental health issues and are providing counselling services and programmes to students and staff.  |

(Continued)



**Table 1** Continued

| Author<br>Date<br>Country                          | Title  | Aim  | Study<br>designs                         | Population   | Sample<br>size | Settings  | Disability<br>type                                   | Disclosure<br>type | Disclosure experience  | Key outcomes  |
|--|--|--|--|--|----------------|---|--|--------------------|--|---|
| Clayton<br>2009<br>USA <sup>28</sup>               | Teacher with a Learning Disability   | To explore disability experiences of a teacher who discloses a learning disability to her Principal  | Case study                               | A teacher  | 1              | The Northern City Public School                       | Learning disability                                  | Formal             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of losing job</li> <li>• Low performance is not because of lack of preparation teachers can continue the job.</li> </ul>   | It is important to disclose the disability. But there are many views on how disable teachers can continue the job.  |
| Valle <i>et al.</i><br>2010<br>USA <sup>29</sup>   | The Disability Closer: Teachers with Learning Disabilities Evaluate the Risks and Benefits of ‘Coming Out’ | To investigate the factors that influence whether teachers with learning disabilities (LD) choose to disclose their disability status within public school settings                            | Interview                                | K-12 special education teacher and student teacher | 4              | N/A   | Learning disability                                  | Informal           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Fear of losing status as an authority</li> <li>• Some disclosed to only students and their families. (to help others gain a deeper, more positive understanding of LD)</li> </ul> | The act of disclosing LD is not an event, but a highly personal process, subject to a multitude of ongoing factors and always without finalization. The research reveals persistent misperceptions about LD amongst educators, leaving some teachers with LD to feel vulnerable and thus remain undisclosed.                        |
| Wood and Happe<br>2023<br>UK <sup>30</sup>         | What are the views and experiences of autistic teachers? Findings from an online survey in the UK          | To discover views and experiences of autistic people working in an education role in the school sector in the UK   | Survey (analysis of free text questions) | School staff                                       | 149            | UK  | Autism   | N/A                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of losing job</li> <li>• Some lost their job</li> <li>• Ableism (prejudice)</li> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Positive and supportive experience</li> </ul>   | The present findings suggest that autistic staff working in an education role in schools in the UK experience several impediments to their effective and successful employment in the sector. Some participants have positive experiences after disclosing their autism diagnosis, becoming valued members of the school community. |
| Marshall <i>et al.</i><br>2020<br>UK <sup>31</sup> | “What should I say to my employer... if anything?”: My disability disclosure dilemma                       | To explore the key issues surrounding teacher/staff disability disclosures in the UK’s further education (FE) sector   | Semi-structured interviews               | Staff  | 15             | Further Education setting in the Southeast of England | Non-visible disabilities including mental conditions | N/A                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disclosing is anxious, distressing.</li> <li>• Seen as incompetence.</li> <li>• Seen as deficit</li> </ul>  | Fear of stigma and negative consequences leads most FE teachers to not disclose disabilities. Teachers with disabilities fear discrimination, lack of promotion or job loss if they disclose.   |
| Horton and Tucker<br>2014<br>UK <sup>32</sup>      | Disabilities in academic workplaces: experiences of human and physical geographers                         | To explore how diverse disabilities intersect with academic careers, lifestyles and workplaces, focusing on some common disciplinary and institutional spaces of human and physical geography. | Survey with free text questions          | Academic staff                                     | 75             | Respondents from different countries                  | Mental health conditions                             | Informal           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Competitive working environment</li> <li>• Having clout helps to disclose disabilities</li> <li>• Fear of job lost</li> </ul>   | There is a need to support those with mental health conditions in academic workplaces. They mostly encountered issues including isolation, lack of support, distress, pressure, low self-esteem, fear of appearing ‘weak’—overlapped with the often-undisclosed experiences of many ‘non-disabled’ colleagues.                      |

(Continued)



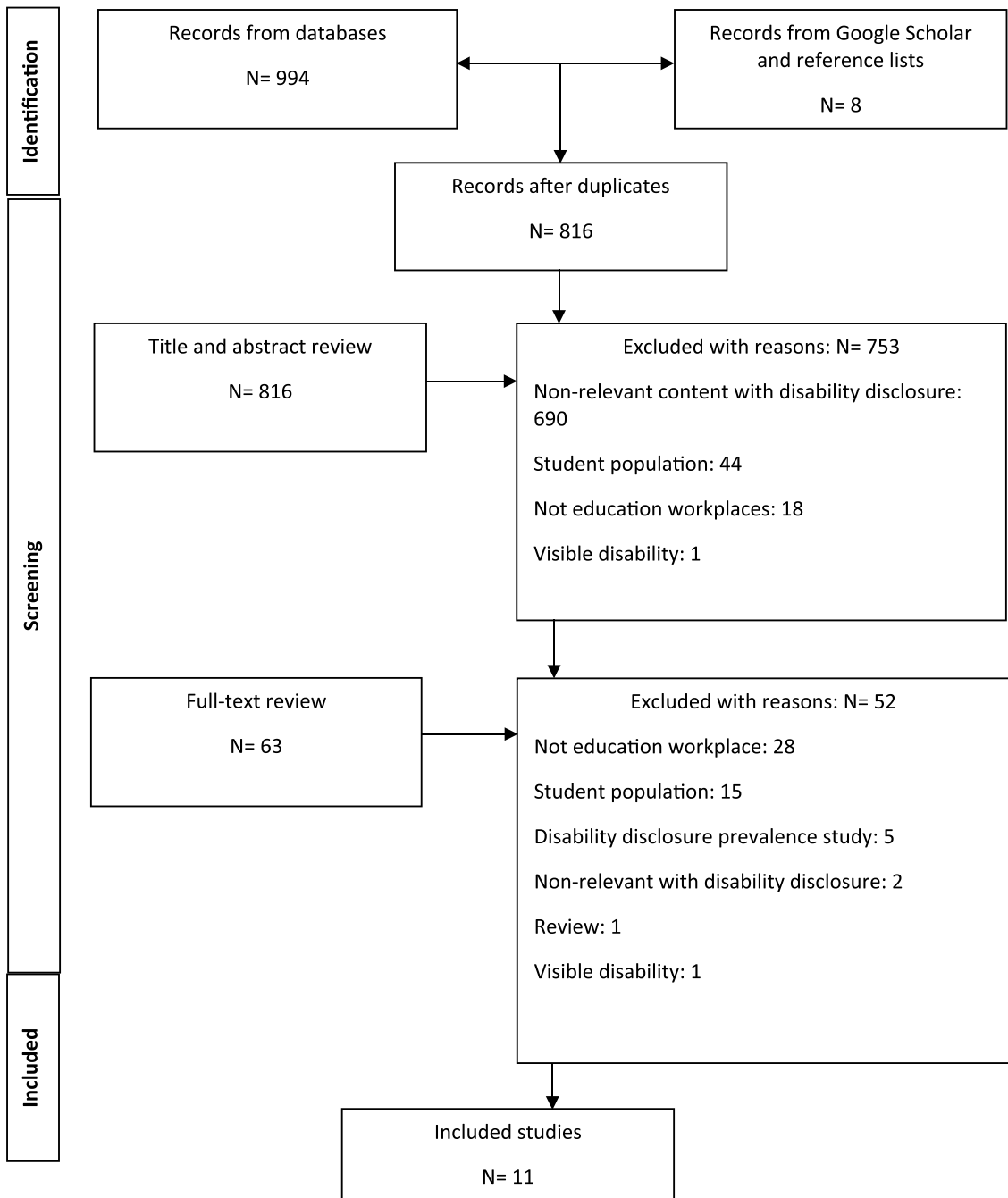
Table 1 Continued

| Author Date Country                     | Title   | Aim   | Study designs                               | Population   | Sample size | Settings                      | Disability type                                      | Disclosure type     | Disclosure experience  | Key outcomes  |
|---|---|---|---|--|-------------|-------------------------------|--|---------------------|--|---|
| Hiscock and Leigh 2020 UK <sup>33</sup> | Exploring perceptions of and supporting dyslexia in teachers in education in STEM                                     | To explore the dyslexia and the experiences of teachers with dyslexia in higher education in STEM   | Mixed methods, online survey and interviews | Teachers in higher education                                 | 115         | Higher education institutions | Dyslexia   | Informal            | Disclosing dyslexia to assess students and colleagues' perceptions.<br>Positives:<br>• Student acceptance<br>• More inclusive and supportive learning environment<br>• Normalizing disability<br>• Encouraging others<br>Negatives:<br>• Stigma<br>• Fear of judgement or negative consequences<br>• Stigma<br>• Fear<br>• Shame   | Teachers with dyslexia find acceptance from students and colleagues when being open about their diagnosis. Openness and inclusive practices foster trust and understanding, making higher education more equitable for academics with dyslexia.                                 |
| Skogen 2012 Canada <sup>34</sup>        | 'Coming into Presence' as Mentally Ill in Academia: A New Logic of Emancipation                                       | To discuss the impact of stigma on a professor's decision to either disclose or conceal her illness.  | Autoethnography                             | Professor  | 1           | University of Alberta         | Bipolar  | Informal            | Disclosing a severe mental health issue is a challenging process because of fear, stigma and shame.  |   |
| Oud 2019 Canada <sup>35</sup>           | Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Disabilities   | To explore the experiences of librarians with disabilities working in university libraries in Canada  | Interviews                                  | Librarians   | 10          | Canadian university libraries | Non-visible disabilities including mental conditions | Formal and informal | • Disclose as a coping strategy or increasing awareness of disability.<br>• Not disclose because of stigma fear of job or promotion lost.<br>• Mixed positive and negative experiences on legal work accommodations<br>• Disclosing to promote a positive shift in the disclosure of disabilities<br>• The extensive and complex nature of the verification process<br>• The fear of being split into an 'otherwise qualified'                           | The main barriers reported in the study were related to a lack of awareness or ill-informed view of disability, including an assumption that everyone in the workplace is nondisabled and negative stereotypes of people with disabilities as lazy and less productive at work. |
| Morrison 2019 Canada <sup>36</sup>      | (Un)Reasonable, (Un)Necessary and (In)Appropriate: Biographic Mediation of Neurodivergence in Academic Accommodations | To critically examine the institutional demands for personal disclosure and the bureaucratic processes involved in securing workplace accommodations for disabled faculty members in higher education | Autoethnography                             | Associate Professor in English at the University of Waterloo | 1           | University                    | ADHD   | Informal            | The study explores the challenges faced by disabled faculty in higher education, focusing on the difficulties of disclosure and accommodation. It emphasizes the dehumanizing verification process, bureaucratic emphasis on essential duties and conflicts between institutions and individuals in securing accommodations. The study advocates for a more holistic approach to rebuilding higher education to support access for disabled individuals. |   |

(Continued)

**Table 1 Continued**

| Author and Date Country                           | Title   | Aim  | Study designs          | Population   | Sample size | Settings               | Disability type                                      | Disclosure type     | Disclosure experience  | Key outcomes   |
|---|---|--|------------------------|--|-------------|------------------------|--|---------------------|--|--|
| Wright and Kaupins 2018 New Zealand <sup>37</sup> | ‘What About Us?’ Exploring What It Means to Be a Management Educator With Asperger’s Syndrome       | To explore Asperger’s Syndrome impact on teaching and learning from the instructor’s perspective   | Case study - Interview | Professor  | 1           | Boise State University | Asperger’s syndrome (AS)                             | Prefer not disclose | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No disclosure but fight with that</li> </ul>  | AS need not be seen as a disability or deficiency in the management classroom.<br>Using cognitive and behavioural techniques, individuals with AS can effectively manage their symptoms, leading to enhanced teaching delivery and assessment methods.   |
| Sanchez 2023 Germany <sup>38</sup>                | Decisions, practices and experiences of disclosure by invisible disabilities at German universities | To examine the decisions, practices and experiences of disclosure amongst academics with non-visible disabilities at German universities | Interviews             | Academics with non-visible disabilities at German universities | 16          | University settings    | Non-visible disabilities including mental conditions | N/A                 | <p>Prefer not to disclose because of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fear of stigma and discrimination</li> <li>Concerns about professional competence</li> <li>Maintaining personal privacy and boundaries</li> </ul> | Academics with non-visible disabilities often feel pressured to present themselves as academically capable and competent individuals, selectively sharing and controlling disability information as an anti-stigma strategy within the able-normative academia. Emphasizes the need for a supportive and inclusive environment for academics with non-visible disabilities in German universities. |



**Fig. 1** Search results and study selection.

disclose their disability.<sup>13,23–29,32,33,35,36</sup> Observed across the studies, the employed approaches used for disability disclosure were diverse, included a

variety of stakeholders (line managers, co-workers, students and their parents) and did not always include interacting with established human resource



and appreciation from the school community and families, leading to a more autism-friendly and accommodating work environment. In England's<sup>27</sup> (2002) autobiographical study, a professor reported positive experiences following formal disclosure because of support obtained from colleagues, and the instrumental support from a professional mentor in obtaining requested reasonable adjustments and gaining emotional support. Price *et al.* conducted a survey of college and university staff with a mental health condition across the USA. They found participants reported varied levels of support from their managers and colleagues with a generally positive reception of their disclosure.<sup>13</sup> A higher number of people reported positive experiences with colleagues and chairs, whereas a lower number reported positive experiences with HRs.<sup>13</sup> Hiscock and Leigh<sup>33</sup> found support after dyslexia disclosure encompassed positive colleagues and student feedback including their understanding and perceptions towards teaching with dyslexia. This positive feedback led to an inclusive and supportive working environment. These positive experiences amongst disabled employees in educational workplace settings appear to be shaped by two key considerations. First, the importance of workplace accommodations and reasonable adjustments tailored to the unique needs and expressed wishes of the disabled employee, which are enacted upon by the organization in a purposeful, timely and responsive manner. Second, the importance of also considering what job resources (e.g. mentoring and coaching) and forms of social support (e.g. peer support network, sensitive and informed line managers) can support the disabled employee—during and following—their disability disclosure.

Many of the reviewed studies explored negative experiences<sup>24,30,32,34,35</sup> for disabled employees during and beyond disability disclosure. These negative experiences were characterized by challenges in accessing and obtaining requested reasonable adjustments.<sup>24,35</sup> In particular, some of the key challenges highlighted included a perceived reluctance of supervisors or management to provide requested workplace accommodations (particularly changes

in working patterns and hours<sup>35</sup>), with lengthy waits for adjustments that were not necessarily aligned with what had been agreed.<sup>24</sup> In Pionke's<sup>24</sup> case study the employee felt the wider context of the implemented workplace accommodation (e.g. access to an enclosed office) was not considered. Whilst they were provided with an enclosed office, it was physically located away from her department, resulting in decreased access to social and professional networks and, in turn, increased feelings of social isolation. In this same case, the disabled employee felt disenfranchised and 'othered' by management concealing her disability without her consent following her disclosure. A common experience observed across reviewed studies for disabled employees in educational workplace settings was encountering stigma and perceived discrimination following their disclosure from both colleagues<sup>34</sup> and managers.<sup>30,32</sup> Often leading to feelings of invalidation<sup>30,32</sup> and 'othering',<sup>24</sup> feeling insecure or replaceable in their professional roles<sup>30,32</sup> or being fearful or risk to their career or reputation by disclosing.<sup>34</sup>

### *Perceived barriers and enablers of invisible disability disclosure*

'Enablers' of disability disclosure varied amongst employees with non-visible disabilities. The reasons for disclosure were often influenced by their perceived work environment, support systems and personal goals. Some disabled employees in the reviewed studies chose to disclose to raise awareness about disability issues and to advocate for better conditions for individuals with disabilities in the workplace.<sup>13,26,27,34,35</sup> Believing that visibility and openness regarding non-visible disabilities may help to generate a more inclusive and supportive workplace culture. Disabled employees who felt supported, respected and secure in their jobs were more likely to disclose.<sup>13,23,26,30,32,35,36</sup> A positive and inclusive work environment encouraged employees to feel comfortable sharing information about their disabilities.<sup>13,23,30,32</sup> Some participants selectively disclosed their disabilities to a few co-workers they

trusted and felt safe with.<sup>35</sup> Selective disclosure allowed them to seek support and assistance without exposing themselves to potential risks that were perceived to be associated with broader or formal forms of disclosure. For some, disclosing their disability was a coping strategy to ensure that colleagues would understand their needs and potential challenges better, reducing misunderstandings or negative judgements.<sup>13,23,26,32,33,35,37,38</sup> In several studies, participants felt sharing their diagnosis or health-related experiences with colleagues, students and parents would provide positive role models for others.<sup>30,34</sup> They hoped to break stereotypes about non-visible disabilities and show that success and disability are not mutually exclusive. In a few studies,<sup>25,26</sup> participants also believed that disclosing their disability helped reduce stigma related to their disability and build trust and empathy with institution,<sup>25,26</sup> HRs.<sup>26</sup> Price's<sup>13</sup> study suggested that certain and clear disability disclosure processes may encourage faculty members to share their mental health disabilities with, particularly, HRs and managers. In certain cases, participants chose to disclose their disabilities, particularly their neurodiversity (e.g. autism) and specific learning differences (e.g. dyslexia), only to students and their families rather than their employer.<sup>29,30</sup> This disclosure was driven by a desire to promote a deeper, more positive understanding of neurodiversity and specific learning differences, with the intention that this would assist others in similar situations. Job status also impacted on disability disclosure, since those with greater status and seniority felt more secure about their job and, therefore, more confident to disclose a disability.<sup>32</sup>

'Barriers' to disability disclosure were prevalent and, broadly, influenced by individuals' want to keep their disabilities hidden because of fear of stigma, discrimination and ableism. One of the primary barriers to disability disclosure was the fear of negative consequences to career or professional reputation because of anticipated stigma and discrimination.<sup>13,25,26,35,36,38</sup> Across the reviewed studies disabled employees reported being fearful of losing their job or being passed over for promotion<sup>25,28,30,32,35</sup> or

fear of losing status and authority<sup>29</sup> as key barriers to disclosing. For example, Horton and Tucker<sup>32</sup> found that early career academics and researchers expressed insecurity and feelings of replaceability within their departments and institutions.

Fear of isolation in the working environment was also another reason to be reluctant to disclose, which may result from poorly implemented reasonable adjustments<sup>3</sup> or socially by feeling 'othered' through or by this declaration process.<sup>24,36</sup> In several studies, the complexity, length and cumbersome nature of access reasonable adjustments and workplace accommodations were a key barrier to disability disclosure.<sup>23,24,31,32,35,36,38</sup> In one study amongst librarians, many were reluctant—in particular—that gaining access to accommodation requests was contingent on the individual manager, with some reluctant to implement any discussed adjustments.<sup>35</sup> Previous negative experiences with disability disclosure<sup>29,31,35</sup>, competitive working environments,<sup>32</sup> the fear of being seen to be taking advantage of system<sup>23</sup> and the fear of being viewed as incompetent<sup>25,31,35,36,38</sup> were other reasons for not disclosing disabilities in education workplaces. In a case study,<sup>37</sup> the participant did not see a pressing need to disclose his disability. They felt that their condition was not debilitating enough to warrant mentioning and preferred to manage their condition privately without seeking workplace accommodations. Maintaining personal privacy and boundaries was reported as reasons for not disclosing.<sup>26,38</sup> Several studies<sup>13,31,38</sup> found that employees in education settings found it easier to disclose and discuss a physical disability that was visually apparent, as opposed to disabilities that were not visible to others.

## Discussion and conclusion

The reasons underpinning disclosure are complex and emotive-in-nature. In educational workplace settings, there exists a disability disclosure gap.<sup>16</sup> As non-visible disabilities can often be concealed by employees, the process of declaring and discussing this individual experience or health condition is highly sensitive<sup>39</sup> and, in turn, poses unique

### Actions for healthcare professionals

- To consider the impact of disability on work capacity as part of clinical consultations with individuals who have non-visible disabilities or health conditions that may be accessing healthcare services.
- To signpost individuals to evidence-based information on disability and their legal rights and accessing reasonable workplace adjustments and accommodations.
- To be aware of the sensitivity and emotional impact on many disabled employees during or following disclosure at work, and either signpost to, or provide where appropriate, psychological support.
- To make evidence-based resources available to employers (and other stakeholders) that can be used to educate and raise awareness about non-visible disabilities.

### Actions for employers / managers

- Create a psychologically safe work environment to reduce stigma related to disability disclosure and empower disabled people to seek support when it is needed.
- Ensure that disabled staff have an active voice in how occupational health and human resource systems and policies are designed and enacted (e.g., through stakeholder consultation, or disabled staff networks).
- Implement an equality, diversity and inclusion strategy that seeks to raise awareness and sensitivity to disabilities (including non-visible disabilities) within the workplace.

Provide training for line managers on how to have conversations about disabilities, how to identify staff needs (continuously through the employees' journey), and how to implement reasonable workplace adjustments in a timely manner.

**Fig. 2** Recommendations for practice.

challenges to organizational leadership.<sup>9</sup> For example, this impacts on how employing organizations support open discussions surrounding inclusion, which, in turn, impairs opportunities to providing practical support regarding reasonable adjustments tailored to individual wants and needs.<sup>9</sup> There is a growing trend of non-visible disabilities within the workplace. It is imperative, therefore, to understand the barriers and facilitators to disability disclosure within workplace settings. Particularly, in industries where disability is under-represented.

This scoping review highlights the complex nature of disclosure of a non-visible disability within educational workplace settings. This complex and multifaceted decision-making process is not unique to educational workplace settings but appears to be uniquely experienced across the community of employees with non-visible disabilities.<sup>40–43</sup> Our review observes both individual and socio-environmental factors appear to influence this decision and process. Ongoing stigma and ableism in the workplace strongly underpin disabled





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## Appendix 1

### Searching strategy

OVID including Embase, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles Full Text

| #  | Query  | Results from<br>November 8, 2023 |
|----|--|----------------------------------|
| 1  | ((invisible or hidden or undisclosed or non-apparent or unseen or concealed or non-evident or mental) adj5 (disability)).mp. [mp = ti, ab, hw, tn, ot, dm, mf, dv, kf, fx, dq, bt, nm, ox, px, rx, an, ui, sy, ux, mx, tc, id, tm, tx, sh, ct]   | 1206                             |
| 2  | exp disability/  | 187 750                          |
| 3  | 1 or 2   | 188 841                          |
| 4  | workplace.mp. [mp = ti, ab, hw, tn, ot, dm, mf, dv, kf, fx, dq, bt, nm, ox, px, rx, an, ui, sy, ux, mx, tc, id, tm, tx, sh, ct]  | 210 266                          |
| 5  | ('education workplace' or 'academic institution' or 'university' or 'college' or 'higher education' 'faculty' or 'academic setting' or 'educational environment').mp. [mp = ti, ab, hw, tn, ot, dm, mf, dv, kf, fx, dq, bt, nm, ox, px, rx, an, ui, sy, ux, mx, tc, id, tm, tx, sh, ct]    | 2 351 067                        |
| 6  | 4 or 5   | 2 539 710                        |
| 7  | ('employee perspectives' or 'worker experiences' or 'faculty views' or 'staff attitudes' or 'academic perceptions' or 'professional experiences' or 'teacher views').mp. [mp = ti, ab, hw, tn, ot, dm, mf, dv, kf, fx, dq, bt, nm, ox, px, rx, an, ui, sy, ux, mx, tc, id, tm, tx, sh, ct] | 7385                             |
| 8  | ('barriers' or 'facilitators' or 'experiences' or 'views' or 'difficulties' or 'challenges' 'ableism').mp. [mp = ti, ab, hw, tn, ot, dm, mf, dv, kf, fx, dq, bt, nm, ox, px, rx, an, ui, sy, ux, mx, tc, id, tm, tx, sh, ct]   | 3 274 558                        |
| 9  | 7 or 8   | 3 277 011                        |
| 10 | 3 and 6 and 9  | 1633                             |

EBSCOhost including ERIC and Educational Administration Abstracts

| # | Query   | Results from<br>EBSCOhost on<br>November 8, 2023 |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | Disability  | 166 569  |
| 2 | disclosure or revealing or reporting or declare or sharing  | 89 828   |
| 3 | education or academic or university or college or 'higher education' or teacher or lecturer or professor or staff | 2 979 838  |
| 4 | barrier or facilitator or experience or view or difficulty or challenge or accommodation or ableism               | 869 139  |
| 5 | invisible or mental or unseen or hidden or undisclosed or concealed or non-apparent or non-evident                | 162 033  |
| 6 | 1 and 2 and 3 and 4 and 5   | 308  |

## Scopus

| # | Query   | Results from Scopus on November 8, 2023 |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 'Disability disclosure' OR 'disability revealing' OR 'disability reporting' OR 'disability declare' OR 'disability sharing' | 832                                     |
| 2 | (education OR academic OR university OR college OR 'higher education' OR teacher OR lecturer OR professor OR staff)         | 57 577 642                              |
| 3 | (barrier OR facilitator OR experience OR view OR difficulty OR challenge OR accommodation OR ableism)                       | 22 938 932                              |
| 4 | (invisible OR mental OR unseen OR hidden OR undisclosed OR concealed OR non-apparent OR non-evident)                        | 4 620 914                               |
| 5 | 1 and 2 and 3 and 4   | 590                                     |

## Google Scholar (screened the first 100 articles), searched through a tool (Publish or Perish 8)

| # | Query  | Results from Google Scholar on November 8, 2023 |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | 'disability disclosure' OR 'disclosure experiences' OR 'barriers to disability disclosure' OR 'facilitators to disability disclosure' AND 'invisible disabilities' OR 'mental disabilities' AND 'education workplaces' OR 'higher education' AND 'staff' OR 'academic staff' | 100   |