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The landscape of disability-inclusive education in Nepal: A scoping review

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Research Article

Keywords: Inclusive education, disability-inclusion, scoping review, integration, barriers, Nepal

Posted Date: September 4th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10680449/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Inclusive education (IE) has gained momentum as a global educational agenda; however, its practical realities remain contested across different country contexts. Countries such as Nepal continue to face conceptual and implementation challenges in translating IE into everyday classroom practices. This review aims to examine the landscape of disability-inclusive education research in Nepal. A scoping review approach was employed. Four databases were systematically searched, and a citation chaining strategy was used to identify additional relevant studies. After screening based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 42 studies were included for analysis. Data were extracted and synthesized using the coding scheme aligned with five research questions. The review findings indicate that IE in Nepal is predominantly framed through policy discourse, mainly informed by rights-based approaches and the placement of students with disabilities into general classrooms. However, limited attention has been given to meaningful participation in learning activities. Policy and legislative support, along with peer support, appeared as important enablers of IE. In contrast, several structural barriers were identified, including inaccessible infrastructure, lack of adaptations and accommodations, insufficient teacher preparation, and inadequate support services, all of which intersect in multiple ways, thereby hindering the development of inclusive learning environments in schools. The review underscores the need to strengthen teacher preparation, pedagogical support, and curricular or activity adaptations to promote meaningful inclusion in practice.

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) has become a major global agenda in efforts to ensure equitable access to education for all learners. Despite its widespread adoption and prioritization in policy and practices, the concept remains contested and is understood in diverse ways across contexts. Scholars have described IE as an *international buzzword* since it is viewed differently depending on historical, political, cultural, and institutional contexts (Singal, 2005). Although the terms inclusive education and integrated education are sometimes used interchangeably, they differ conceptually (Haegele & Maher, 2023). While integrated education primarily emphasizes placing students with disabilities into the mainstream school setting, IE goes beyond mere physical placement and highlights students' meaningful participation, sense of belonging, feeling valued, and achievement through the broader transformation of the education system (Ainscow et al., 2006; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

The development of the IE concept is rooted in a rights-based perspective that emphasizes education as a fundamental right for every child regardless of disability, gender, socio-cultural background, race or other differences (UNESCO, 2025). Furthermore, disability-focused IE is viewed as a process of ensuring meaningful participation, achievement, and a sense of belonging for students with disabilities in mainstream schooling along with their peers without disabilities (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Grounded in this perspective, inclusion extends beyond physical placement of students with disabilities in school, and seeks to reduce exclusion from the culture, curriculum and community in schooling (Florian & Linklater, 2010). It involves restructuring educational settings to respond to the diverse needs of learners and create a supportive environment where all students can actively participate and benefit from learning opportunities without restrictions (Forlin et al., 2013; Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). In this backdrop, inclusion in education can be understood as a continuous process of identifying and removing barriers to participation and achievement rather than a fixed educational arrangement (Ainscow, 2020; Sebba & Ainscow, 1996).

The literature in this field consistently highlights IE as an unfinished agenda (Hausstätter, 2014), underscoring the need for continuous effort from all stakeholders. While theoretical understandings of IE focus on equality, participation, and social justice in the educational process, practices appear to vary across countries and schooling contexts. In some contexts, IE continues to focus on including students with disabilities in mainstream schools, whereas others adopt a broader notion that addresses issues of diversity and marginalization. In Global South contexts, for example, Ethiopia largely conceptualizes IE as integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms (Ginja & Chen, 2023). In contrast, South Africa adopts a broader understanding of inclusion by focusing not only on learners with disabilities but also on students marginalized by poverty, language, race, or social exclusion (Murungi, 2015). Similarly, many Asian countries theoretically view IE as a process of involving all learners within mainstream educational settings; however, in practice, they largely focus on disability inclusion through integrated schooling approaches (Faragher et al., 2021). In Europe, although inclusion is strongly promoted, educational practices continue to range from full participation in mainstream classrooms to placement in special schools or special units within regular schools (Buchner et al., 2021). These evidences suggest that the practice of IE is largely shaped by local cultural, political, structural, and economic realities, despite commitments to common international frameworks.

In the South Asian context, the discourses of IE have evolved unevenly depending on contextual realities. In India, for example, IE is historically rooted in emphasizing the education of students with disabilities, where ongoing debates concern the role of special schools and the feasibility of full inclusion (Singal, 2005). This scenario indicates a broader tension between right-based policy intentions and practical implementation within existing educational systems. Like other countries, Nepal also demonstrates a strong commitment to IE through national policies, legislative reforms and international commitments (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2021). International frameworks such as Salamanca Statement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and Sustainable Goals are major guiding frameworks for Nepal's IE agenda, and they are reflected in domestic policies, such as Constitution, National Education policy (UNICEF, 2021). These domestic policies primarily emphasize access, participation, and inclusion within mainstream schools. Yet, in practice, two types of schools: special and integrated, exist in the country to provide education for students with disabilities. Some integrated schools provide resource class facilities and are officially expected to be inclusive. However, the implementation of IE in Nepal remains challenging due to limited resources, structural constraints, insufficient teacher preparation, inaccessible infrastructure, and social stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

In recent years, research in IE in Nepal has gained momentum. Existing literature in Nepal has focused on exploring access to schooling, teacher attitudes, parental perspectives, student experiences, policy implementation, classroom practiced, and barriers to including students with disabilities in learning activities (Adhikari et al., 2025; Lamichhane, 2013; Thapaliya, 2018). However, the available literature appears to be fragmented across disability types,

educational levels, school types, geographical regions, and methodological approaches. Additionally, IE for students with disabilities in Nepal is inconsistently conceptualized across studies (Pokhrel, 2020).

In this context, as we know, there has been no scoping review that maps the extent, nature, scope, and synthesis of research on disability-focused IE in Nepal. A scoping review is particularly important in this context because it helps systematically identify and synthesize diverse forms of evidence, including empirical studies, policy documents, and institutional reports (Arksey & O'malley, 2005). Such a review is pertinent for clarifying how IE in Nepal is understood and operationalized, as well as for identifying methodological trends, dominant study focuses, and existing knowledge gaps (Colquhoun et al., 2014). Thus, this scoping review aims to examine the landscape of disability-IE in Nepal, along with following research questions

1. What is the extent, nature, and distribution of research on disability-IE in Nepal?
2. What is the aim of included studies?
3. How is education for students with disabilities conceptualized and theoretically framed in the Nepali context?
4. How have ethical considerations been maintained in the studies?
5. What are the reported enablers and barriers to disability-based IE in Nepal?

Method

This study employs a scoping review to map the literature and describe the knowledge base on disability-focused IE in Nepal. Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews allow for a broader scope of inquiry (Munn et al., 2018), which is better suited to this study as it encompasses generic research questions. This approach is also appropriate for mapping existing evidence where the phenomenon remains underexplored and conceptual clarification is needed. In this context, we used Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) to ensure transparency in the research process (Tricco et al., 2018). We conducted searches in July 2026.

Search strategy

We followed a two-step search strategy to identify relevant literature. In the first step, we searched four databases and journal platforms: ERIC, Web of Science, ProQuest, and NepJOL. Although NepJOL is not a bibliographic database in the conventional sense, it is an online platform that indexes and provides access to Nepal-based academic journals. Therefore, it was included to capture Nepal-specific and locally published studies, as the scope of this study is limited to the Nepali context, which is often underrepresented in international databases. The following search words were used in each database.

Search string 1	**"Inclusive education" OR "inclusive schooling" OR "education inclusion" OR "special needs education" OR "integrated education"**
Search string 2	Disab* OR "students with disabilities" OR "children with disabilities" OR impairment OR "visual impairment" OR "hearing impairment" OR "intellectual disability" OR "special needs"
String 3	Nepal OR "Nepali context* OR Nepalese context*
String 4	1 AND 2 AND 3

This initial search resulted in 146 studies. These studies were exported to Endnote21, where duplicates were checked and removed, yielding 125 studies (Fig. 1). These studies were further exported to Rayyan QCRI, a free web-based software tool for systematic reviews (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Duplicates were again removed in this tool, resulting in 116 studies. The first author and fourth author independently screened the titles and abstracts based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria mentioned below:

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria

- Studies including students/children with disabilities, and/or relevant stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, school leaders, government officials, policy makers, NGOs/INGOs).
- Studies focusing on disability-IE
- Studies conducted in Nepal or in Nepali educational settings
- Studies published in Nepali and English.
- Empirical and policy-related publications, including peer-reviewed articles, thesis/dissertations of PhD, NGOs/INGOs or government reports.

Exclusion criteria

- Studies not directly related to disability IE
- Studies conducted outside Nepal
- Studies focusing solely on medical aspects without educational relevance

- Opinion papers, editorials, news articles, and publications without accessible full text.

Inter-rater reliability was calculated at 92.8%. Studies with conflicts were then thoroughly discussed by the two authors based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria until 100% agreement was reached. Through title and abstract screening, 53 studies appeared relevant for full-text screening. After full-text screening, only 32 articles met the inclusion criteria.

In the second phase, we conducted citation chaining, and institutional repository searches to identify additional relevant studies. Citation chaining included backward searching (reviewing reference list of included studies) and forward searching (identifying studies that cited included articles). Similarly, we conducted searches of institutional depositories, including the websites of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, UNICEF, and UNESCO, to identify research reports related to this study area. Through these processes, additional 31 studies were identified as potentially relevant, of which 23 were excluded either due to duplication or failure to meet the inclusion criteria. As a result, a total of 42 studies were included in our scoping review analysis (see Fig. 1).

Coding frame

A coding scheme was used to transparently analyze the included studies (see Table 1). During the coding process, we first developed a table with categories, and then three authors independently coded the first eight studies. Subsequently, they compared their analysis to ensure that the process accurately reflected the intent of the study. The first author completed the initial coding for the remaining 32 studies, which were reviewed by the second and third authors. Finally, all authors discussed, refined and finalized the coding. This process allowed us to ensure the accuracy and rigor of data analysis.

Table 1
Summary of the studies

Author(s) year+ district+ publication place	School types + disability group	Purpose of the study	Study design and participants	Conceptualization of IE	Theory(s)/model(s) applied	Ethical consideration	Major findings
1. Adhikari et al. (2025). -NA -Domestic	-NA	To examine the legal frameworks governing disability rights and practical implementation of IE.	Review	Not specifically conceptualized, but focus on integration. International and national policy rhetoric.	Social-constructivism, but not specifically reflected in conceptualization and findings.	NA	There is a gap between policy and implementation. UDL and differentiated instruction is recommended.
2. Neupane (2026). -Gandaki -Domestic	-Integrated -VI	To draw the perspectives of multi-stakeholders on IE for students with VI.	Mixed method -*Survey*, -*FGDs* -Students, teachers, parents, government officials, NGOs' members (50)	Not specifically conceptualized, but placement focus. Policy description.	Not specific but deficit orientation	Ethical part is not stated, School's real name is mentioned.	Limited resources, lack of infrastructure, lack of teacher training were reported as barriers, and peer support as enabling factor.
3. Aryal et al. (2024). -NA -Domestic	-Special -Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Intellectual Disabilities (ID)	To develop a CSE resource booklet for children with ASD and ID.	Qualitative: *FGD, IDI*, *conventional review* Teachers and parents (17)	NA. Policies explained. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	Not specified but medical oriented.	Not articulated.	Highlights the value of guidance on sexual behavior, self-care, preventing sexual abuse, and menstrual hygiene management for students with ASD and ID. A booklet is recommended for teachers' use.
4. Dawadi and Bissaker (2020) -NA -International	-ECED, -Mixed groups	To examine the causes of lack of inclusion of children with disabilities in the ECED programs.	Qualitative: -*Interview, FGD, and document review* -Parents (10), staffs(6), teacher (5), government professional (5) and NGO professionals (5)	Access, acceptance, active participation, achievement.	NA	Anonymized all identifiable information.	Contextual factors, such as spirituality, caste, ethnicity, language, economic status and geographic location, and organizational factors, including policy, attitudes, teacher efficacy, resources, coordination and communication processes and parental engagement are identified as barriers to inclusion.
5 Shrestha et al. (2020) -Kathmandu valley -Domestic	-Special - Mixed group	To explore the issues of post-school transition for students with disabilities.	Qualitative - phenomenology: -*Interview* HT(3) and experts (5)	Access and outcome-oriented concept. Policies rhetoric. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	NA	Not mentioned ethical part, but anonymized participants' identity.	There is an absence of post-school transition planning in policy and school practices.
6. Kunwar (2023) -Bagmati and Lumbini -Domestic	-Integrated -Visual, hearing and intellectual disability	To examine the primary elements for implementing IE in schools.	Qualitative -*Interviews, FGDs* -Head teachers and resource teachers (18)	Not specifically defined but focus on access and participation in integrated classes.	Explained some models but not articulated which model informs this study.	Anonymized	Several elements, including infrastructure; curriculum, teaching strategies and assessment; inclusive school

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							leadership, trained teachers; attitude, financing influence the execution of IE.
7. Shrestha et al. (2023) -Kathmandu Valley -Domestic	-Integrated -NA	To investigate how IE policies are enacted in schools.	Qualitative *-Interviews* General teachers (10) resource teachers (10)	Policies rhetoric. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	NA	NA	Teachers demonstrated low self-awareness, lack of confidence in educating students with disabilities. The reason was lack of training, and support from school administration.
8. Niure and Shrestha (2023) -Bagmati and Koshi -Domestic	-Special and integrated - Intellectual disability	To investigate practical interventions needed to optimize the access of students with disabilities to general subject curriculum.	Qualitative: -I*nterview* Teachers (8), resource teachers (4), and experts (5)	Integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classes.	NA	Pseudonyms used.	Students with ID are placed in segregated settings. Multi-tire supports and peer assistance has been recommended.
9. Baraily et al. (2025). -Kathmandu Valley -Domestic	NA -Physical, VI, and HI	To explore the perceptions of students with disabilities on practice of IE in mainstream schools.	Qualitative *-In-depth interview* Students (4)	Collaborative learning between students with and without disabilities. Policy description. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	NA	Verbal consent, pseudonyms	Insufficient infrastructure, lack of technology used, land ack of teacher training are identified as major barriers to inclusion.
10. Niraula (2023) -NA -Domestic	-University level -VI	To dig out the constraints and opportunities faced by SWDs in higher education.	Qualitative -Case study *-In-depth interview, observation* -Student (1)	National and international policies explained.	NA	Highlighted ethical consideration	Main barriers identified include inadequate funding, shortage of trained specialists and fewer opportunities for professional progress. Targeted teacher training, allocation of fund, and collaboration of stakeholders are recommended.
11. Kunwar (2024) -Lumbini -Domestic	-Integrated -VI, HI, and ID	To assess parental involvement in schools to facilitate education for SWDs.	Qualitative *-Interview* Teachers (15), parents (3)	Placement of SWDs into mainstream classes. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	NA	NA	Although parents tend to support children's education, schools often do not involve them in activities such as planning, and decision-making processes.
12. Poudel and Subedi (2024). -Bagmati -International	-General schools -VI	To explore the practice insights for ensuring educational experiences of students with VI.	Qualitative: Narrative *-interview* -Teachers (4)	As a strategy of addressing individual differences through school set up, which welcome diversity	Social constructivism	NA	Highlighted the necessity of frequent communication between key stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders to assist children with limited eye sight in

Author(s) year+ district+ publication place	School types + disability group	Purpose of the study	Study design and participants	Conceptualization of IE	Theory(s)/model(s) applied	Ethical consideration	Major findings
							mainstream classes.
13. Acharya (2022a). -Bagmatic, Sudurpaschim, Lumbini -Domestic	-Integrated -Physical, VI, and HI	To examine prospect of PE for SWDs in the digitization age.	Qualitative *-Interview* *-FGDs* -Students (9), head teachers, (3), and teachers (6)	Access and participation approach.	Medical model	School' real name is mentioned	Use of digital technology led students with disabilities to physical inactivity. Careful attention should be paid by teachers and parents to encourage outdoor activities for such students.
14. Shiwakoti and Chaisir (2025). -NA -Domestic	University -Deaf blindness	To explore the lived experiences of students with deaf-blindness in education.	Qualitative: phenomenology *-Interview* Students (3)	Access-oriented and participation. Policies rhetoric	Deficit-focused	NA	Lack of accessible accommodated assessment appears to be a major problem among students with deaf-blindness in higher education.
15. Shah and Shrestha (2025). -Kathmandu valley -International	-Integrated -NA	To examine the impact of societal stigma on caregivers	Qualitative: Phenomenology *-Interview* Teachers (2) Parents (2)	Both internal (psychological) and external context shape inclusive experiences.	Traditional approach	Ethical approval taken from KU	Stigma undermines the wellbeing of caregivers, which lead to internalized shame and engaged less in support networks.
16. Banks et al. (2019). -Bagmati and Koshi -International	-Special and Integrated -VI, HI and ID	To explore the barriers and enablers to accessing education for SWDs.	Qualitative *-Interview* Students (15) Parents (20)	Enrolment, attainment, and quality of learning.	Not explicitly noted, but inclined to right-based approach.	Ethical approval taken.	Main barriers identified as attitudes towards education for SWDs and limited capacity of schools. Additionally, poor health and poverty appeared as push factor.
17. Dawadi (2019). -NA -Thesis	-ECED -Mixed groups	To develop an inclusive education framework needed to ECED programs for SWDs.	Qualitative: Case study -ECED staffs (6), parents (10), facilitators (6), government professionals (5), NGO professionals (5), and persons from disability organization (5)	Access oriented, right-based. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	Constructivism.	Obtained approval.	Contextual, such as caste, ethnicity, language, economic status, geographic location; and organizational factors, including policies, attitudes, resources, etc, are main barriers to IE in ECED.
18. Bhandary (2024). -Lumbini -Domestic	-Integrated -Physical, VI, HI, and ID	To explore the challenges faced by SWDs in school setting	Quantitative *-Questionnaire* -Students (69)	Placement of SWDs into mainstream schooling	Deficit-oriented approach	NA	There is an acute shortage of trained teachers and caretakers. Additionally, a lack of resources, such as learning materials, and physical infrastructure.
19. Niraula (2024). -NA	-University -VI	To explore the perception of students with VI about	Qualitative *-Interview* -Students (10)	Access focused. Refer to Salamanca statement,	NA	NA	Challenges, including inaccessible programs, unfavorable

Author(s) year+ district+ publication place	School types + disability group	Purpose of the study	Study design and participants	Conceptualization of IE	Theory(s)/model(s) applied	Ethical consideration	Major findings
-International		tertiary education		UNCRPD, constitution.			physical and instructional environments, absence of curricular adaptation, and assessment criteria.
20. Baldev et al. (2025). -Far-western -Domestic	-Integrated -Physical disability	To explore the experiences (challenges) faced by teachers in including teaching students with physical disabilities.	Qualitative *Case-Study* -Teachers (3)	Access and participation	Medical perspectives	NA	Five challenges were identified: lack of assistive infrastructure, limited parental support, inadequate economic support, lack of teacher training and material constraints, personal limitations.
21. Niure (2021) -Kathmandu valley -Domestic	-Integrated -VI	To explore instructional approaches used to ensure access of students with VI to general curriculum.	Qualitative *-Interview* -Teachers (11)	Access to contents	NA	NA	Instructional techniques used: Use of Braille, peering with students without VI, ability-based grouping, Challenges: lack of trained teachers, insufficient instructional materials, large classs-size.
22. Sharma (ND) -Kathmandu Valley -Domestic	-Special -Autism	To assess the awareness of parents and caretakers on IE for autistic students.	-Mixed: *Survey com case-study* -Parents (30), caregivers (NA)	Access and placement.	Medical	NA	Parents and caretakers severely lack awareness about inclusion of autistic children in mainstream schooling, because of the lack of training.
23. G.C. (2024). -NA -Domestic	-Integrated -VI	To examine the practices of curriculum differentiation, in light of content, strategy, environment and assessment.	Qualitative *-Interview* -HT (1), teachers (3), students (10)	Access and placement.	Sociocultural theory	NA	Barriers: Lack of teacher training, poor culturally informed curriculum, traditional assessment system
24. Neupane et al. (2025). -NA -Domestic	-Review -Overall	To review historical and transformative perspective of education in IE in Nepal	Review	Access and placement.	Right-based orientation	NA	The findings indicate that the concept of IE in Nepal was emerged with the discourse of education opportunity of students with disabilities. The domestic policies of Nepal are highly influenced by international contexts.
25. Kiran (2020). -Kathmandu valley	-Special and Integrated -HI	To examine perceptions of teachers on teaching students with HI, and identify	Quantitative *-Survey* Teachers (181)	Access-focused.	Deficit-orientation.	NA	Challenges: large class size, not availability of adapted textbooks, lack of teacher training,

Author(s) year+ district+ publication place	School types + disability group	Purpose of the study	Study design and participants	Conceptualization of IE	Theory(s)/model(s) applied	Ethical consideration	Major findings
-International		the challenges faced by teachers.					limited number of teachers, rigid curricula, and no free-health checkup -friendly schools.
26. Sharma (2019). -Kathmandu valley -International	-Special and Integrated -NA	*To assess attitude of teachers towards IE*	Quantitative, Survey -Teachers (63)	Strengthening the capacity of the education system	NA		The overall attitude of teachers is 3.32. Young teachers found to be positive than older ones, and trained teachers seemed to be positive compared to untrained teachers.
27. Thapa (2012). -Kathmandu Valley -Thesis	-Integrated -VI, HI, Physical disability	*To explore the experiences of girl SWDs about schooling and how they cope with the challenges encountered in schooling process.*	Qualitative: Phenomenology *-Interview* -Students (23) -Teachers-resource and general (NA) -Parents (NA) -HT (NA) -Peers(NA)	Social, gender perspective, access and participation-focused.	Structure-agency theory.	Articulated.	Findings reflected that acceptance and positive attitudes of teachers. peers, community reduce girl SWDs' hesitation and inferiority, however, they severely experienced systemic exclusion. Suggestion: need to redefine the education policies
28. Pokhrel (2020). -Lumbini -Thesis	-NA -Mixed group	To explore the parents' experiences and professionals' perspectives about schooling of SWDs.	Qualitative: Narrative *-Interviews, and FGDs* -Parents (19), Professionals (23)	Full participation of every student.	Moral/cultural model	Obtained	Parents have invested for their children's education and caring. They want to be involved in working with teachers. However, they were confused as their traditional thoughts about disability often conflicts with modern scientific knowledge.
29. Shiwakoti et al. (2025). -Bagmati -Domestic	-General and integrated -Autistic down syndrome	To explore the lived experience of children with autistic spectrum and down syndrome in school education.	Qualitative *Case study* -Students (2)	Access-focused. Policy rhetoric. Refer to Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, constitution.	Deficit-oriented.	NA	Students with autism spectrum benefits from visual supports and sensory regulation strategies, where as students with down syndrome prefer for collaborative work with peers.
30. Regmi (2017). -Kathmandu, Lumbini and Gandaki -Thesis	-NA -HI	To dig out the existing situation of IE in Nepal.	Mixed: Convergence -Teachers (74) -Students (4)	Full participation, ensuring right to education, developing conducing environment, valuing disability, encouraging participation, and providing special support.	Human-right.	Obtained approval.	IE practice in Nepal is affected by several factors, including lack of effective teachers, poor inclusive culture, lack of coordination between community and schools, and

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							inadequate financing.
31. Aryal (2017). -Bagmati and Lumbini -Thesis	-General and Special -NA	To asses the attitude and perception of teachers on inclusion of SWDs in mainstream classes.	Quantitative: Teachers (160)	Not only physical placement but also participation and achievement	Positioning theory	Obtained approval	Both general and special teachers appeared to be positive towards inclusion of SWDs.
32. Jung and Shiwakoti (2017). -NA -International	-NA	To analyze special education policy through four policy dimensions lens.	Policy review	Special education and rights to education	Policy theory	NA	Special education policies in Nepal highly emphasizes in technical, normative and structural dimensions.
33. Acharya (2022b). -Kathmandu valley -Domestic	-Integrated -Physical, HI, VI	To assess the role of PE in dealing with challenges posed by technology for CWD.	Qualitative -*Interview* -Students (5) -Teacher (1) -Professional(1)	Participation in activities.	NA	NA	Students spent considerable time using digital devices, and less engaged in PA.
34. Thapaliya (2018). -Bagmati and Koshi -Thesis	-NA -Mixed	To explore how IE is understood, experienced and enacted in public schools.	Qualitative -Interview -Teachers(14) -Students (14) -Administrators (2) -Gov. Officers (4)	Meaningful participation in learning.	Pedagogical discourse.	Obtained approval.	Several factors identified as barriers, including lack of trained teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, limited economic support.
35. Lamichhane (2013). -Kathmandu valley -International	NA -Physical, VI, and HI	To discuss the barriers faced by SWDs in obtaining a school education	Mixed -Professionals (409)	Participation-oriented	Right-based	Obtained approval	Physical impairments faced access related problem in particular. Common barriers among participants were, lack of finance, lack of support system, social stigma, and negative attitudes.
36. Acharya et al. (2025). -Kathmandu Valley and Lumbini -International	-Integrated -VI	To explore the experiences of students with VI in PE setting.	Qualitative- -*IDI, FGDs* -Students (22)	Participation, belonging, and value.	Social relational model.	Approved.	Students with VI felt excluded from PE practical activities, leading to feeling inadequate and exclusion fatigue.
37. Acharya (2023). -Kathmandu valley Lumbini Domestic	Integrated -Physical VI, and HI	To explore how engagement with modern technology contribute to sedentary behavior among SWDs.	Qualitative -*Interviews* -Students, HT, teachers, professional (22)	Access and participation.	Deficit approach.	NA	Use of digital technology was identified as one of the major reasons of physical inactivity among SWDs.
38. Acharya, Garrels and Vasques (2026).	-Integrated -VI	To explore the parents' perceptions and experiences of	Qualitative -*Interviews* -Parents (9)	Meaningful engagement of students in learning process	Critical disability theory	Obtained	Parents' perceptions were found to be influenced by ableist

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-Kathmandu valley Lumbini -International		PE in integrated schools.					assumptions, and further shaped by structural constraints. Parents often accept exclusion, and remain satisfied with physical placement.
39 Acharya, Garrels and Kafle (2026). -Kathmandu valley Lumbini -International	-Integrated -VI	To explore how teacher agency is exercised in integrated PE setting.	Qualitative -*Interviews* Teachers (8)	Meaningful engagement of students in learning process	Teacher agency theory	Obtained	Teacher agency was constrained in including students with VI in PE. Teachers' past experiences, future expectations and present conditions shaped teachers' decision about inclusion or exclusion of students.
40. UNICEF (2021). -Across country -Report	-NA -Mixed	To provide a snapshot of the major policies, practices, and strategies employed in Nepal.	Review	Conceptualized through four domains, including enabling environment, demand, service delivery, and measuring and monitoring quality.	Right-based	NA	Children with disabilities continue to face exclusion due to inaccessible schools, limited teacher preparation, weak support systems, and social stigma. It recommends improving teacher training, accessibility, disability data systems, and coordinated support to ensure meaningful inclusion in education.
41. Ministry of Education Science and Technology (2021). -NA -Report	-NA -Mixed	To analyze the existing situation of IE.	Review	Access, participation and learning achievement	Right-based	NA	Children with disability in Nepal have least access to, and participation in, education, and least learning outcomes compared to non-disability. Nepal is in good position to develop policies, however, their implementation in practices remains challenging.
42. Human Rights Watch (2018). -NA -Report	-NA -Mixed	To examine the existing IE practices in Nepal.	-Mixed -NA	Participation and getting quality education	Right-based	Obtained approval	Challenges: Lack of physical accessibility, lack of reasonable accommodations, lack of reasonable accommodations for assignment, lack of trained teachers. Suggestions: avoid segregation,

Author(s) year+ district+ publication place	School types + disability group	Purpose of the study	Study design and participants	Conceptualization of IE	Theory(s)/model(s) applied	Ethical consideration	Major findings
							maximize accommodations, make assignment flexible, ensure accessible infrastructure.

Note: NA= Not Applicable, VI= visual impairment, HI = hearing impairment, ID= intellectual development, HT=head teacher, FGD= focused group discussion, IDI=in-depth interview.

The first research question was addressed through descriptive analysis. In doing so, the included studies were mapped based on publication year, geographical setting, disability category, school types and methodological characteristics to identify the patterns and trends across the literature. We employed qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to answer the second, third, and fourth research questions. In this process, the aims of the included studies, conceptualizations and theoretical framings of education for students with disabilities, and reported ethical considerations were extracted, coded, and organized into broader analytical categories through iterative comparison and discussion among authors.

Finally, to address the fifth research question, we used thematic synthesis, particularly considering the reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2019). In this process, we initially coded major findings, grouping them into practices, barriers, facilitators, and research gaps, identified across the included studies. Subsequently, codes were reviewed and refined through iterative discussion and constant comparison, and overarching themes were constructed representing recurring patterns and central concerns within the literature.

Results

RQ1 Extent, nature, and distribution of research

Out of the 42 studies included, the majority (27) were published between 2020 and 2026, while 14 were published between 2010 and 2020. One study did not report its publication date, and no studies conducted before 2010 were identified. Most studies (21) were published in domestic journals, whereas 12 appeared in international journals. In terms of publication type, 33 studies were peer-reviewed articles, six were PhD thesis, and three were institutional reports.

Regarding geographical coverage, a considerable number of studies (11) were conducted exclusively in the Kathmandu valley. Three studies were carried out in Lumbini, two in Bagmati province (excluding the Kathmandu valley), one in Gandaki, and one in the Far-western province. In addition, six studies covered both Bagmati and Lumbini, while three focused on Bagmati and Koshi. One study included Bagmati, Far-western, and Lumbini, and another covered the Kathmandu valley, Lumbini, and Gandaki. Thirteen studies did not specify any geographical region, as they either represented the country as a whole or were review-based studies.

In terms of disability category coverage, eight studies focused exclusively on students with VI, while three addressed HI, one examined physical disabilities, and five included intellectual disabilities. Additionally, seven studies covered mixed disability groups, six included visual, hearing and physical disability, and three encompassed visual, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. Nine studies did not specify disability type, as they either addressed all disability groups collectively or were review-based studies.

Regarding school-type coverage, a considerable number of studies (16) were conducted in integrated schools, while three focused on special schools. Four studies included both integrated and special schools. Additionally, two studies examined ECED settings; one was conducted in a general school, one included both general and integrated schools, and another covered both general and special schools. Three studies focused on the university level, whereas eleven studies did not report the type of school involved.

Most studies (28) exclusively adopted a qualitative research approach, while only four employed quantitative methods. Five studies used a mixed-methods approach, and another five were review-based studies. Interviews were the most commonly used data collection method, employed in 25 studies, followed by surveys in five studies, FGDs in seven studies, and observation in only one study. In terms of qualitative research design, four studies reported using phenomenology, four employed case study design, and two adopted a narrative approach, while the remaining studies did not specify their design.

Most studies (13) focused exclusively on teachers as participants, while eight studies included students, and three involved parents. Five studies used mixed participant groups. Three studies included teachers and parents, four focused on both students and teachers, four involved professionals, and one included both parents and students. In addition, three studies included head teachers as participants, while one study involved caregivers. Across all studies, the sample size ranged from n = 1 to n = 409, with a total of 1465 participants.

RQ2 Aim of the studies

Most of the included studies (15) aimed to explore the perspectives of multiple stakeholders on IE for students with disabilities. Eight studies specifically highlighted the perspectives and experiences of students with disabilities within educational settings, including special, integrated and general schools. Eleven studies examined the teachers' perspectives and practices related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in the learning process, primarily within integrated settings. Four studies focused on parental perspectives, particularly their involvement in and support for the education of their children with disabilities. Additionally, five studies aimed to examine the policies and legal frameworks related to IE, specifically for students with disabilities.

RQ3 Conceptualization and theoretical frame

In conceptualizing IE, most studies reiterated the definitions of Salamanca statement, UNCRPD, emphasizing that students with disabilities should receive education alongside their peers without disabilities, with appropriate support provisions. These studies also referred the constitutional provisions and, national education policies related to IE, highlighting the rights of students with disabilities to receive education without any discrimination. However, only few studies (e.g., Acharya et al., 2025; Pokhrel, 2020) explicitly contextualized IE in relation to the specific phenomenon under investigation. Majority of studies (29) reflected a placement understanding of IE, primarily focusing on the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. Some studies extended this understanding by emphasizing students' participation in learning activities (e.g., Dawadi, 2019; Lamichhane, 2013), while a few highlighted their academic achievement within general educational settings (e.g., Aryal, 2017; Regmi, 2017). Only a limited number of studies moved beyond physical placement to explore the subjective experiences of students with disabilities who were physical included in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Acharya et al., 2025; Acharya, Garrels, & Kafle, 2026).

The reviewed studies demonstrate inconsistency in theoretical grounding. Many studies did not explicitly state any theory or model used to inform the research.

Although, some studies were implicitly grounded in medical or deficit models of disability, they largely reflected a focus on disability as individual limitation (e.g., Acharya, 2022b; Baldev et al., 2025; Shiwakoti & Chaisir, 2025). A few studies (1) drew on traditional/cultural model (Pokhrel, 2020), while other reported being informed by general constructivist perspectives without clear articulation (Dawadi, 2019). Additionally, some studies reported the use of more contemporary theories, including social constructivism (Adhikari et al., 2025; Poudel & Subedi, 2024), sociocultural theory (G.C., 2024), social relational model (Acharya et al., 2025), positioning theory (Aryal, 2017), structure-agency theory (Thapa, 2012), critical disability theory (Acharya, Garrels, & Vasques, 2026), pedagogical discourse (Thapaliya, 2018), teacher agency theory (Acharya, Garrels, & Kafle, 2026), and rights-based perspectives (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2018; Lamichhane, 2013). However, in these cases, the theories were often not clearly integrated into the conceptualization, analysis, or discussion of the study.

RQ4 Ethical procedure in the studies

The analysis of ethical considerations across the included studies reflects inconsistency in the reporting and application of ethical procedures. Most studies (23) did not report any ethical considerations, as indicated by repeated "NA" entries. In contrast, all the articles published in international journals (e.g., Acharya et al., 2025; Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020; Pokhrel, 2020) provided detailed accounts of ethical procedures (ethics approval, informed consent and confidentiality measures). However, among the studies published in national journals (e.g., Baraily et al., 2025; Kunwar, 2023; Niure & Shrestha, 2023) that addressed ethics, common practices included securing participants' consent, anonymizing identifiable information, and using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. A few studies also mentioned the researcher's reflexivity, and protection from potential risks (c.f. Acharya et al., 2025; Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020; Pokhrel, 2020). However, some studies demonstrated limited attention to confidentiality, as they reported the real names of schools (e.g., Acharya, 2022a; Neupane, 2026).

RQ5 Major enablers and barriers to IE in Nepal

Enablers and Facilitators of IE

This theme presents the factors that support inclusive experiences of students with disabilities in educational settings. Under this theme, the following two sub-themes have been constructed.

Policy and legislation support. Studies included in this review indicate that Nepal has adopted several policies and legal frameworks to support IE (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). The country's commitment to IE is reflected in its participation and endorsement in international conventions and its national constitutional provisions (Adhikari et al., 2025; Jung & Shiwakoti, 2017; Neupane et al., 2025). These policies emphasize educational access, participation, achievements, and rights of students with disabilities, thereby providing a foundational basis for the implementation of IE.

Peer support. Peer assistance emerged as a prominent enabling factor in facilitating the learning and participation of students with disabilities, particularly those with visual, physical, and hearing impairments (Acharya et al., 2025; Lamichhane, 2013). In addition, parental prioritization of education for their children was found to support to school attendance and improve access to schooling (Kunwar, 2024; Pokhrel, 2020).

Barriers and Challenges to IE

Studies in this review highlighted several barriers and challenges to IE, which are synthesized in the following sub-themes.

Policy-practices gaps. The analysis indicates that Nepal demonstrates strong commitment to IE through its policies; however, implementation in everyday practice remains limited (Adhikari et al., 2025; UNICEF, 2021). Studies consistently reported inadequate monitoring by government bodies (Niraula, 2024) and weak coordination among key stakeholders (Dawadi & Bissaker, 2020; Regmi, 2017). Several studies also highlighted insufficient funding (Niraula, 2023) and a lack of transition planning (Shrestha et al., 2020), which further constrain the effective implementation of IE policies. In addition, some studies noted that while policies are largely normative in nature, they lack practical execution, resulting in clear gap between constitutional provisions and school-level realities (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Jung & Shiwakoti, 2017).

Structural and systemic barriers. The findings consistently identify structural and systemic barrier as one of the most prominent challenges to IE. Many studies reported that schools in Nepal, both general and integrated lack accessible infrastructures, particularly for students with disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Lamichhane, 2013; UNICEF, 2021). Inadequate teacher training specifically for general education who teach students transitioning from resource classes, was identified as a significant barrier (Acharya, Garrels, & Kafle, 2026; Baraily et al., 2025; G.C., 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2018; Neupane, 2026; Niraula, 2023). Similarly, the lack of assistive technologies (Baldev et al., 2025), large class-sizes (Kiran, 2020), and insufficient instructional materials (Bhandary, 2024; Niure, 2021) were found to hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, studies noted a scarcity of curriculum accommodations, activity adaptations, and assessment accommodations to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Acharya et al., 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2018).

Socio-cultural and attitudinal barriers. Studies in this review persistently reported that stigma, negative attitude, and negligence among key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and government official remains pervasive, and contribute to the exclusion of students with disabilities from meaningful participation in learning activities (Acharya et al., 2025; Acharya, Garrels, & Vasques, 2026; Lamichhane, 2013; Shah & Shrestha, 2025). Some studies highlighted that traditional beliefs about disability often intersect with modern understandings, creating confusion regarding the proper understanding of disability (Pokhrel, 2020). In addition, many studies noted that school leaders frequently fail to recognize and address the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Acharya, 2022b; Kunwar, 2023; Shrestha et al., 2020).

Discussion

This scoping review primarily assesses the extent, nature, development, and challenges of IE in Nepal. The findings indicate that IE has become a prominent policy issue and an important research agenda in recent years; however, its translation into practical implementation and theoretical consolidation remains limited. The evidence base in this field reflects fragmentation, conceptual ambiguity, and persistent structural and socio-cultural constraints. This review developed four interrelated arguments as discussed below.

Inclusive education as symbolic policy alignment rather than educational transformation

A key argument derived from this review is that IE in Nepal is primarily limited to symbolic policy alignment, i.e., discourse at the political or policy formulation level, rather than substantive educational transformation. A considerable number of studies included in this review consistently reproduce international and national policy frameworks, ranging from Salamanca Statement to UNCRPD, alongside from constitutional provisions to national curriculum framework, to conceptualize inclusion. However, these frameworks are rarely operationalized or critically interrogated to contextually understand IE within the realities of resource-constrained and diverse Nepali classrooms; instead, they remain largely limited to the reiteration of ideal principles of inclusion. This suggests that IE in Nepal primarily emphasizes "normative legitimacy" (Slee, 2009), whereby policies are adopted to demonstrate commitment to global inclusion agendas, while comparatively less attention is given to institutional transformation necessary for realizing these policies in classroom practices. The gap between strong policy articulation at the political level and weak implementation at the school level indicates that IE is often enacted as a discourse of rights and access rather than a lived reality in educational practices. This evidence reflects a system in which policies are frequently borrowed from international contexts under global policy influence and subsequently reinterpreted or diluted within institutional settings, rather than being fully realized in practice (UNESCO, 2020). Similar tensions between policy adoption and poor implementation have been widely observed in IE research globally, particularly in the Global South, where policy legitimacy does not necessarily lead to attitudinal, pedagogical and institutional transformation (González-Afonso et al., 2026).

Current schooling systems reinforce exclusion

A second central argument is that barriers to IE in Nepal reflect structural constraints embedded within the schooling system rather than merely operational-level deficiencies. Studies included in this review consistently highlighted the lack of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, adequate learning material, and appropriately trained teachers. These challenges are further compounded by rigid curricula (Kiran, 2020), inflexible assessment systems (Niraula, 2024), and large class sizes (Niure, 2021). Such barriers reflect not only resource limitations within schools, but also broader challenges within a schooling system historically designed for homogeneous learners without adequately considering diversity (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). The integrated schools are principally expected to promote inclusion through adaptation, and accommodations (Acharya et al., 2025); however, in practice, this schooling model often attempts inclusion within an unchanged institutional architecture that severely lacks curricular adaptation, differentiated instruction, and assessment flexibility (Acharya et al., 2025; Shiwakoti & Chaisir, 2025). This suggests that the present schooling reinforces the expectation that students should adapt to schools, rather than schools adapting to students with diverse needs. As a result, IE is implemented as an additive reform rather than a systemic redesign. This raises critical questions about how schools can adequately respond to learner diversity without sufficient systemic support services. Viewing this scenario from the broader IE lens, this contradicts fundamental principles that emphasize restructuring school systems to support learner diversity in terms of presence, participation and achievement (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). Studies from other context also align with the present findings that they highlight that schooling systems often reproduce exclusion when they are designed around normative assumptions of the "typical learner,"

rather than diversity (Slee, 2011). In this context, exclusion in Nepali school settings is not accidental; rather, it is structurally produced and reproduced through schooling designs primarily oriented towards merely general education rather than diversity.

Inclusion as placement rather than participation

Another important argument in this review is the dominant understanding of IE revolves around the physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms rather than their meaningful participation in learning activities. Although, most studies included in this review, are grounded, by definition, in global policy frameworks, their interpretation of IE primarily relies on the integration of students with disabilities into general classrooms. This reflects what can be conceptualized as a 'placement logic' (Haegele & Maher, 2023) of inclusion, where physical presence is viewed as equivalent to educational inclusion. While this conceptualization emphasizes access to education within mainstream settings, it places less emphasis on the pedagogical, relational, and experiential dimensions of inclusion (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). In this context, the studies indicate that students with disabilities are generally positioned as recipients of supports rather than active participants in learning processes. Additionally, the limited use of theoretical frameworks and their weak alignment with the interpretation of evidence further reinforce fragmented and narrow understanding of inclusion. This understanding is compounded by the dominance of implicit medical perspectives, which position disability as an individual limitation rather than a socially produced or reproduced phenomenon (Goodley, 2013). Within this framing, solutions are primarily sought at the individual level, while social and structural barriers receive comparatively less attention. However, contemporary IE scholars strongly critique such placement-oriented approaches and focuses on participation, belonging, and being valued within the learning communities (Haegele et al., 2023; Stainback & Stainback, 1996).

Socio-cultural reproduction of exclusion within educational settings

The review highlights that the implementation of IE in practice is significantly affected by deeply rooted socio-cultural and attitudinal forces. These include stigma, negative perceptions, and limited awareness among teachers, parents and school leaders, all of which contribute to the reproduction of exclusion within everyday school practices (Goodley, 2013). With the expansion of schooling opportunities and technological facilities, modern educational discourses have increasingly emerged among key stakeholders; however, these often intersect with traditional belief about disability, leading ambiguity and inconsistency in practice (Pokhrel, 2020). Additionally, in many cases, school leaders are not sufficiently receptive to recognizing learner diversity (Thapa, 2012), thereby reinforcing exclusionary practices even in contexts where policies are expected to promote inclusion through systemic support services. This reflects that inclusion in education is not a technical or structural challenge, but also an attitudinal and cultural one, requiring reforms that address the underlying socio-cultural construction of disability (Goodley, 2014).

Conclusion

This scoping review examined the landscape of disability-IE in Nepal. The findings reveal that IE in Nepal has gained momentum in terms of policy development and research in recent years; however, its practical implementation and conceptual development remain limited. The review highlights that IE in Nepal is predominantly framed through policy discourse, theoretically informed mainly by rights-based approaches and placement of students with disabilities into general classrooms. However, comparatively less attention has been paid to their meaningful participation in learning activities. Policy and legislative support along with peer support, appeared as important enablers of IE. Contrary, the review identifies several structural constraints, including inaccessible infrastructure, lack of adaptations and accommodations, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate support services, all of which continue to impede the creation of inclusive learning environment in schools. Additionally, entrenched socio-cultural attitudes and deficit-oriented understandings of disability maintain to reproduce exclusion in schooling practices. The review underscores the need for a shift from policy commitment toward practical implementation through strengthened teacher training, pedagogical support, and curricular adaptation to achieve meaningful inclusion.

Limitations

This review has two main limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it included only studies accessible through selected databases, institutional depositories, and online sources; therefore, some relevant studies published only in printed journals may not have been captured. Second, the review did not assess the quality of the included studies, and the studies demonstrated a notable variation in methodological rigor, theoretical grounding, reporting practices, and overall quality, which may have affected the depth and consistency of the synthesis.

Authors' contribution

YA conceptualized the study. YA and CKP searched the databases, and screened the articles. BDK and RS and SPK reviewed and edited the manuscript with critical inputs. All the authors provided consent to submit and publish the paper.

Data availability

The data used in this study are available from the first author upon request.

Ethics and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study is a scoring review of previously published and publicly available literature and did not involve human participants. Thus, approval from institutional review board or ethics committee and informed consent to participate were not required.

Consent to publish

Not applicable.

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Declarations

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

Author Contribution

YA conceptualized the study. YA and CKP searched the databases, and screened the articles. BDK and RS and SPK reviewed and edited the manuscript with critical inputs. All the authors provided consent to submit and publish the paper.

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Figures

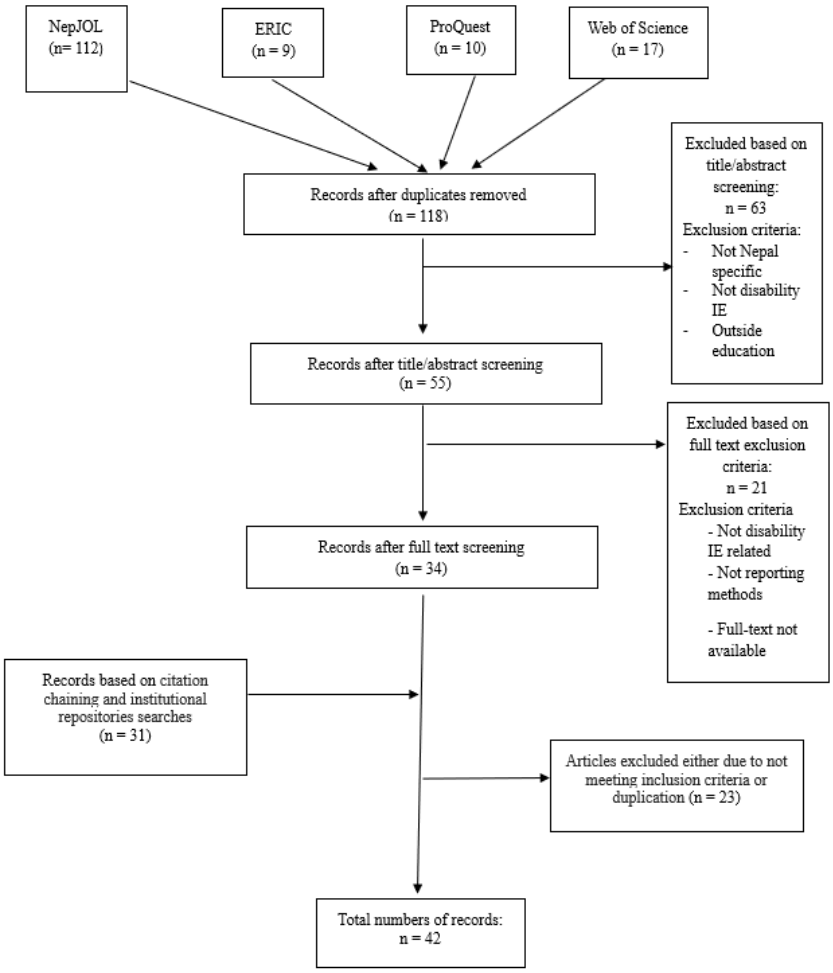


Figure 1

study selection process