

Navigating the Transition from Special to Inclusive Education: Institutional Readiness in Mizoram and Meghalaya under NEP 2020

Jacob Lalrinawma*
F.VL. Malsawmdawngliani**

* Dr. Jacob Lalrinawma: Guest Faculty, Department of Education, Mizoram University, Email: tlaujake@gmail.com

**F.VL. Malsawmdawngliani: Research Scholar, Department of Education, Mizoram University, Email: fvlmsdawngliani@gmail.com

Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 makes inclusion the organising principle of school education in India, yet no study has recorded what that mandate has produced for special schools at institutional level in any North-Eastern state. The present study examined the transition in Mizoram and Meghalaya, asking how far conversion has gone and how ready the survivors are to complete it. Of the 12 institutions still functioning as special schools, 11 schools granted permission for data collection; together they enrolled 569 children and employed 139 teachers. Evidence came from an institutional checklist, direct observation, documentary records and interviews with all 11 heads of institution.

The two states, i.e., Mizoram and Meghalaya, diverged sharply. Of Meghalaya's 9 recognised special schools, 5 (55.6%) had ceased to function as such by the time of data collection, whereas all 8 of Mizoram's remained unchanged. Readiness follows the same line. Meghalaya's survivors rate high on accessibility, programme capacity and financing; Mizoram's, sustained largely by donations, rate partial or low. In neither state, however, did the government appoint special school teachers (appointment was left to the private institutions), nor did recruitment extend beyond an interview. Since both states received an identical mandate simultaneously, the divergence appears to be associated with differences in financing and governance rather than with the national policy itself. A phased transition framework towards inclusion is proposed.

Keywords: inclusive education; NEP 2020; transition readiness; special schools; education policy implementation; Mizoram; Meghalaya

Background of the Study

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) reframed disability as a mismatch between the learner and an environment not designed to accommodate them, shifting the obligation to adapt from the child to the system. India has followed the same trajectory. The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 recognised seven categories of disability and guaranteed free education to the age of 18 (Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995), and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 extended the schedule to 21 categories while rendering inclusive education a statutory obligation.

NEP 2020 advances beyond both, according the highest priority to the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in the regular schooling system (Ministry of Education, 2020, paras. 6.10–6.12). It does not, however, abolish special schooling: in keeping with the RPwD Act, 2016, children with benchmark disabilities retain the choice of regular or special schooling, while resource centres working with special educators are to support learners with severe or multiple disabilities. That tension is the setting of this enquiry. A policy that places inclusion at the centre of schooling while leaving special schools in existence creates, for a period, two populations: schools that have converted and schools that have not. Which fall into which group, and why, bears directly on the children enrolled in them, and national datasets cannot supply the answer, recording enrolment rather than the institutional fate of the schools concerned.

The North-East Indian Context

Mizoram and Meghalaya form a closely comparable pair: hill states with substantial tribal populations and a long association with Christian missionary schooling, operating under the same centrally sponsored schemes, receiving the NEP 2020 mandate simultaneously, and both reporting high literacy.

Mizoram has approximately 1.10 million people and a literacy rate of 98.2%, the highest in the country, and was declared fully literate in 2025. Its 8 recognised special schools are all urban and enrol 219 children; registered societies manage 6 of them (75%) and 5 (62.5%) depend principally on donations. Meghalaya has approximately 2.97 million people, 79.93% of them rural, and a literacy rate of 94.2%. Its surviving special schools are fewer, older and larger: the 3 studied had operated for 30 to 39 years and enrolled 350 children, against 6 to 35 years and 219 children across Mizoram's.

The distinction that concerns this paper is trajectory rather than scale. Meghalaya's recognised system has contracted from 9 institutions to 4 since NEP 2020, whereas Mizoram's remains at 8.

Review of Related Literature

Ainscow and Miles (2008) hold that inclusion is not achieved by transferring children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms but demands transformation of the system as a whole; a policy altering placement while leaving curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and school culture untouched produces integration rather than inclusion. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) extend this to practice, arguing that inclusive pedagogy widens what is available to all learners rather than appending provision for a few. Reviewing international efforts to move from exclusion to inclusion, Ainscow et al. (2013) stressed carefully planned support, the engagement of staff and sustained professional development, and observed that special schools hold expertise and resources that can be used to support change in mainstream schools, so a conversion that merely closes them forfeits capacity the receiving system has yet to develop.

India's difficulty has seldom lain in legislation but consistently in implementation. Sarkar and Kundu (2016) found North-Eastern elementary enrolment growing more slowly than the national average, with a 36.67% shortfall in barrier-free access, aids and appliances at 0.51%, and a national deficit of 204 resource teachers. Devi (2023) reports that provisions permitting enrolment have not yielded functional inclusion, mainstream schools having developed no culture capable of sustaining it. Thomas and Ramakrishna (2020) found government-supported institutions better resourced than privately managed ones, and Ntukidem et al. (2011) showed in Nigeria that provision in special schools varied with the resources available to each, suggesting the mechanism by which a difference in financing becomes a difference in capability.

Capacity for change appears cultivated rather than inherent. Kumar (2023) found structured professional development enhanced teacher effectiveness and adaptability, while Ajdinski (2007) described the consultation, co-teaching and materials adaptation a special educator undertakes in a mainstream setting, none of it covered by the entry qualification. Kaur and Salian (2025) found the obstacles Indian teachers identify concern training, support and materials rather than disposition. For the states examined here, Lianchhawni (2018) found special education in Mizoram held back by too few trained personnel and irregular provision, while Paul (2016) surveyed wider trends; neither could assess readiness for a transition not yet commenced.

Four gaps therefore emerge. No study has documented what NEP 2020 has produced at institutional level in any North-Eastern state, and no comparative analysis across states exists, so conditions accelerating or retarding conversion cannot be distinguished from national circumstances. The readiness of surviving institutions has not been assessed against the standard they must meet, and no transition framework has been formulated for resource-constrained hill states. The present study addresses all four while the institutions concerned still exist to be documented.

Statement of the Problem

The problem has been stated as *“Navigating the Transition from Special to Inclusive Education: Institutional Readiness in Mizoram and Meghalaya under NEP 2020”*.

Research Questions

1. To what extent have the recognised special schools of Mizoram and Meghalaya converted to inclusive provision since NEP 2020?
2. How ready for that conversion are the special schools that remain?
3. Which institutional factors are associated with the differing rates of conversion in the two states?
4. What transition framework does the evidence indicate for resource-constrained contexts?

Research Objectives

1. To document the extent to which the recognised special schools of Mizoram and Meghalaya have converted to inclusive provision under NEP 2020.
2. To assess the institutional readiness of the special schools that remain, against dimensions derived from the NEP 2020 and RPwD Act, 2016 mandates.
3. To identify the institutional factors associated with the differential rate of conversion between the two states.
4. To propose a phased transition framework and practicable recommendations for North-Eastern contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

The enquiry was framed as a descriptive comparative study, with survey as its principal method. The two states maintain a small and countable number of special schools, so sampling was dispensed with: the investigator approached every institution still functioning as a special school and studied each one that granted permission; the figures below are therefore counts rather than estimates. Conversion, counted as a recognised school ceasing to function as a special school, is examined at state-system level, readiness at the level of the individual surviving institution.

Population

Every recognised special school in the two states made up the population. Mizoram's 8 functioning institutions lay across 4 districts and Meghalaya's 4 across 2 districts. One of the 4 Meghalaya schools did not grant permission for data collection, so 3 were studied there. In all, 11 institutions were studied, enrolling 569 children and employing 139 teachers. The conversion denominators are the numbers each State Commissioner recognised as special schools: 8 in Mizoram, 9 in Meghalaya.

Research Instrument

The investigator constructed a checklist covering 9 domains: infrastructure, medium of instruction, learning aids, disabilities served, financial management, student and teacher details, years active, teacher profile and vocational provision. A panel drawn from education, psychology and special education validated it before use. A semi-structured interview schedule, validated by the same panel, elicited the heads' account of institutional functioning; here those interviews serve only to corroborate the documentary record of conversion status, and no interview material is presented as a finding. The Commissioners' returns supplied recognition figures, enrolment and teaching strength.

Data Collection and Method of Analysis

Fieldwork ran from January 2024 to March 2025. Departmental approval was obtained first, after which each State Commissioner authorised access; further clearance in Meghalaya came from Samagra

Shiksha and the Directorate of Social Welfare. Participation was voluntary and informed consent obtained, and the investigator inspected premises and equipment personally at every site. Conversion data were analysed as counts and percentages of each state's recognised system. Readiness was rated high, partial, low or none on each dimension against the provision recorded, these ratings being analytic judgements grounded in the evidence rather than scores from a weighted formula.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Objective 1: To document the extent to which the recognised special schools of Mizoram and Meghalaya have converted to inclusive provision under NEP 2020.

Table-1

Conversion of Recognised Special Schools Under NEP 2020

State	Recognised special schools*	Still functioning as special schools at data collection	No longer functioning as special schools	% converted
Mizoram	8	8	0	0.0
Meghalaya	9	4	5	55.6
Both states	17	12	5	29.4

*Recognition figures supplied by each state's Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities. A school is counted as converted when it no longer functions as a special school; the provision subsequently received by its children was not traced. Of Meghalaya's 4 functioning schools, 3 granted permission for data collection.

More than half of Meghalaya's recognised system (5 of 9 schools) had ceased to operate as special schools by the time of data collection, whereas Mizoram's did not move at all.

The direction of this finding warrants careful statement because it is readily inverted. The 3 Meghalaya institutions examined are not schools that have converted; they are the survivors, which remained specialised while the greater part of their state's system moved on. Readiness in Meghalaya is therefore assessed on the residue of a system already substantially transformed, and in Mizoram on a system yet to begin. Since both states received an identical mandate at the same moment, the national policy cannot by itself account for the difference, which appears to lie in how each state's institutions are financed and governed.

Objective 2: To assess the institutional readiness of the special schools that remain, against dimensions derived from the NEP 2020 and RPwD Act, 2016 mandates.

Six dimensions were derived from what NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act, 2016 require of an institution serving children with disabilities: a physically accessible environment; programme capacity across a range of disabilities; financing stable enough to sustain provision; adequate qualified staff; governance aligned with the education administration; and the extent of conversion achieved within the state's recognised system.

Table-2

Institutional Readiness Profile of the Special Schools studied

Readiness dimension	Mizoram (n = 8)	Meghalaya (n = 3)
Physical accessibility	Partial. Barrier-free access and gender-segregated sanitation incomplete; playgrounds at some sites	High. Both complete; playgrounds at most sites
Programme capacity	Low. Dedicated space at half the sites; narrow intake; specific learning disabilities unserved	High. Dedicated space at every site; broad intake across disability categories
Financial stability	Low. Philanthropic base; fees levied at some sites; departmental assistance at one	High. Departmental grant base, philanthropic income

Readiness dimension	Mizoram (n = 8)	Meghalaya (n = 3)
		supplementary; no fees
Human resource depth	Low. Small, very unevenly distributed establishments; advanced qualification and therapeutic staffing almost absent	Partial. Larger, evenly distributed; some advanced qualification; therapeutic staffing negligible
Governance alignment	Low. Predominantly society-managed, outside departmental authority; interview-only recruitment	Partial. Committee-managed within a financed framework; interview-only recruitment
Conversion achieved (state system)	None. All 8 retain special-school status	High. 5 of the state's 9 recognised schools already converted

* Ratings are analytic judgements against the mandate, grounded in provision recorded on the institutional checklist. Conversion achieved is rated for each state's recognised system as a whole rather than for the institutions studied.

Meghalaya rates high on four dimensions and partial on two; Mizoram rates partial on one, low on four and none on the sixth. The disparity is not one of buildings, since both states are at or near complete provision in permanent buildings, electricity, drinking water and basic sanitation. Mizoram's deficiencies lie in provision that recurs, namely materials, specialist staffing and dedicated programme space, and in the financing that would sustain them.

Governance, together with human resource depth, is a dimension on which neither state is ready, and it is the more fundamental of the two. In all 11 institutions the authority to appoint rests with a managing society or executive committee, never with a state department, and nowhere does selection extend beyond an interview. Since such a transition will be judged by the competence of the staff who carry it out, the deficiency is structural: the departments answerable for inclusive education possess no instrument for shaping who teaches in the institutions being converted. Therapeutic specialisation is correspondingly thin, such posts being funded by the managing body rather than sanctioned by the state.

Objective 3: To identify the institutional factors associated with the differential rate of conversion between the two states.

Four explanations are consistent with the evidence, and they are not independent of one another.

Financing: In Meghalaya the Social Welfare Department and Samagra Shiksha underwrite all 3 institutions, none of which charges families. In Mizoram the base is philanthropic: 5 of 8 schools rely on donations, 3 levy fees, 3 receive NGO support, and departmental assistance had reached 1 institution. Conversion is at once a capital and an organisational undertaking, requiring a planning horizon, a period in which established and new provision run concurrently, and confidence of a budget the following year. Donation-based financing furnishes none of these.

Institutional maturity and scale: Meghalaya's institutions have been active 30 to 39 years and employ a mean of 27 teachers each; Mizoram's range from 6 to 35 years and employ a mean of 7.3. A substantial establishment can second personnel to a new function while continuing to teach; an institution staffed by 1 teacher for 36 children cannot. Ainscow et al. (2013) linked successful change to carefully planned and sustained support, both presupposing an organisation large enough to plan.

Government responsiveness: Meghalaya's institutions are administered by executive committees within a government-financed framework, which affords the state both a channel of communication and a lever. Mizoram's are administered predominantly by independent registered societies drawing little financial support from the state and under no obligation to observe its timetable. A mandate reaches a society-managed institution as advice; it reaches a government-financed committee as an instruction.

Programme breadth: The typical Meghalaya institution works with approximately 8 of the Act's 21 categories against approximately 3 in Mizoram. Breadth of intake constitutes, in effect, partial inclusion already accomplished.

These factors reinforce one another: government financing permits scale, scale permits planning capacity, financial dependence confers governance leverage, and breadth of intake shortens the distance to be covered. Mizoram is weak on all four. What the evidence does not establish should be stated explicitly: two states were observed rather than a sample, so the association between financing model and rate of conversion, though consistent and plausible, cannot be treated as demonstrated causation.

Moreover, these characteristics were observed in the institutions that remain rather than in those that ceased to function as special schools, whose characteristics could not be recorded.

Objective 4: To propose a phased transition framework and practicable recommendations for North-Eastern contexts.

A uniform national timetable is unworkable; holding both states to one schedule would either delay Meghalaya or compel conversion in Mizoram before the receiving institutions can absorb the children. The recommendations are therefore arranged as a four-phase framework that sequences capacity ahead of conversion and treats special schools as assets to be repurposed rather than closed, the position for which Ainscow et al. (2013) argue.

Phase 1: Stabilise financing: Place every remaining special school upon a recurrent government grant sufficient to end fee-levying and donation dependence and to fund replacement and maintenance of assistive equipment. Nothing in the later phases is achievable by an institution unable to predict next year's budget.

Phase 2: Equip and staff: Complete barrier-free access and gender-segregated sanitation, provide dedicated programme space, widen the range of disability categories each institution can serve, and recruit therapeutic specialists. Extend recruitment beyond the interview, and render advanced qualification attainable for teachers already in post.

Phase 3: Reconstitute as resource centres: Establish the special school as a resource institution retaining its specialist staff and equipment and extending them to neighbouring mainstream schools through consultation, co-teaching, assessment support and materials adaptation. This is the role Ajdinski (2007) describes, and it preserves the expertise Ainscow et al. (2013) warn is otherwise forfeited.

Phase 4: Integrate and extend: Place children in neighbourhood schools supported by the resource centre, and extend provision beyond the urban footprint, which a conversion inheriting it would otherwise reproduce as continued rural exclusion.

Governance alignment must run through all four phases. Because the authority to appoint lies outside government in every institution, the departments concerned must work through the managing societies and committees rather than around them, conditioning grants upon recruitment and qualification standards.

Major Findings

1. Meghalaya's recognised special-school system contracted from 9 institutions to 4 by the time of data collection: 5 of the 9 (55.6%) had ceased to function as special schools. One of the 4 remaining schools did not grant permission for data collection, so 3 were studied.
2. All 8 of Mizoram's recognised special schools retained special-school status throughout, a conversion rate of 0.0%. Across both states, 5 of 17 institutions, or 29.4%, had converted at data collection.
3. The 3 Meghalaya institutions examined are the residue of a system already substantially transformed; they are not themselves schools that converted.
4. Meghalaya's remaining institutions rated high on physical accessibility, programme capacity, financial stability and conversion achieved (at state-system level), and partial on human resource depth and governance alignment. Mizoram's rated partial on physical accessibility, low on the next four dimensions, and none on conversion achieved.
5. Governance alignment, together with human resource depth, was a dimension on which neither state was ready. In all 11 institutions the authority to appoint rested with a managing society or executive committee and never with a state department, and recruitment nowhere extended beyond an interview. Therapeutic staffing was negligible in both states.
6. Physical infrastructure was not the binding constraint in either state, both being at or near complete provision in permanent buildings, electricity, drinking water and basic sanitation. Every one of the 11 institutions was urban, and neither state operated a special school in a rural area.
7. All 3 Meghalaya institutions were underwritten by the Social Welfare Department and Samagra Shiksha and levied no fees, whereas in Mizoram 5 of 8 relied upon donations, 3 levied fees, 3 received NGO support, and departmental assistance had reached a single institution.
8. Meghalaya's institutions had been active 30 to 39 years with a mean of 27 teachers each, against 6 to 35 years and a mean of 7.3 in Mizoram, and served approximately 8 of the 21 scheduled disability categories against approximately 3. No Mizoram institution served children with

specific learning disabilities, whereas all 3 Meghalaya institutions did. These factors appeared mutually reinforcing, and Mizoram was weak on all of them.

Discussion

Two states of comparable terrain, history, literacy and policy exposure have converted their special-school systems at rates of 55.6% and zero. Since both received the same national mandate, the unevenness is unlikely to stem from the policy itself.

The obvious reading, that Meghalaya is advanced and Mizoram lagging, conceals two matters. Conversion is not of itself an educational good: a special school closing without a resource centre to succeed it has removed provision rather than rendered it inclusive, and this study cannot establish what the children in converted institutions received afterwards. That is the distinction Ainscow and Miles (2008) draw between systemic transformation and the mere relocation of children. Moreover, Meghalaya's 3 surviving institutions are the best-resourced in the study, and those which converted may have been the weaker ones, which should temper any inference that the model is transferable.

Where financing is concerned, the operative mechanism appears to be time horizon rather than quantum. Conversion obliges an institution to maintain two forms of provision concurrently, release staff for retraining, and commit to a plan whose costs precede its benefits. Donation-financed institutions cannot undertake commitments of that shape, not because donors give too little but because donations cannot be forecast, and where the state does not pay the shortfall passes to families of children with disabilities. Yet financing does not purchase everything: Meghalaya's institutions rest upon a government base and still exhibit no government appointment of teachers, no written selection test and few therapeutic specialists. An inclusive system inherits its workforce from the special schools preceding it, and a transition leaving recruitment untouched will reproduce within inclusive schools the staffing pattern the special schools already had.

Conversion also inherits geography. All 11 institutions stand in district towns, while 79.93% of Meghalaya's population and 47.89% of Mizoram's is rural. Where a special school becomes a resource centre in the town it already occupies, the rural child who could not reach the one will not reach the other. Sarkar and Kundu (2016) documented deficits in provision across the North-East; the present enumeration shows not a shortage of rural special schools but their complete absence, so rural extension must be a designed phase rather than an anticipated by-product.

Devi (2023) observed that provisions permitting enrolment have not produced functional inclusion. These findings suggest why. Where financing is stable, establishments substantial and governance aligned, a mandate becomes a programme; where financing is donated and governance independent, it becomes an aspiration recorded in a file.

Limitations

The study enumerates two states rather than sampling many, so its conversion figures are exact for Mizoram and Meghalaya but support no inference about any other state. Meghalaya's conversion figure rests upon 9 institutions, so a single school shifts it by 11.1 percentage points, and its readiness profile rests upon only 3, because 1 of its 4 remaining special schools did not grant permission for data collection. The converted institutions were not followed, so the study cannot report what provision the children enrolled in them now receive. Finally, the association between financing model and conversion rate rests upon two systems and is offered as the most plausible reading rather than as demonstrated causation.

Conclusion

The two systems moved in opposite directions. Of Meghalaya's 9 recognised special schools, 5 had ceased to operate as such by the time of data collection, whereas none of Mizoram's 8 did so. Readiness follows the same division: Meghalaya's remaining institutions rate high on physical accessibility, programme capacity, financial stability and conversion achieved (at state-system level), while Mizoram's rate low on financing, programme capacity, human resource depth and governance. On governance neither state is ready, since in neither does a government department appoint the teachers of a special school or employ a written selection test.

Because both states received an identical mandate at the same moment, the divergence is unlikely to reflect policy exposure. It is associated with financing, institutional scale, governance responsiveness and breadth of intake, four mutually reinforcing factors on all of which Mizoram is weak. A uniform national timetable is therefore unworkable, and a phased framework that stabilises financing, closes the readiness deficiencies, reconstitutes special schools as resource centres and only thereafter integrates is better matched to the evidence. The transition must also extend beyond the urban footprint, since converting an urban institution generates no rural coverage. As inclusion becomes the organising

principle of school education, whatever succeeds the special school will inherit its buildings, its staff and its geography, and unless deliberately designed otherwise, its exclusions.

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