

EXPLORING INCLUSIVE CULTURE AND PRACTICE: THE PERSPECTIVES OF MACAO TEACHERS IN INFORMING INCLUSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Elisa Monteiro, & Kiiko Ikegami

School of Education, University of Saint Joseph (Macao)

Abstract

The inclusion of children with diverse learning needs and/or disabilities in regular classrooms has been identified as crucial to the provision of educational equity and quality for all students. In this, teachers play an essential role, as they strongly impact student educational attainment. Whilst the adoption of inclusive practice is increasing, with potential benefits for the teaching profession, there is also a rise in the level of its challenges in Macao as many more students with learning disabilities are now being included in general education classes. Consequently, there has been a significant focus on teacher professional development to ensure that teachers are adequately prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms that give access to diverse students. Major changes in teacher education will need to include more inclusive education content and equip teachers with the necessary skills in the area of inclusive practice. This paper draws on data from in-depth interviews with 20 teachers that explored teachers' views of support, challenges, and barriers to inclusive practices at the school and classroom levels. Thematic analysis was utilised to determine significant themes within the data set. Several themes emerged and served to illustrate the identified barriers and the potential value of effective teacher education. Suggestions for increased professional development opportunities for inclusive education specific to higher education institutions are presented, and the implications for practice and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, inclusive practice, teacher education, higher education, Macao.*

1. Introduction

In response to movements towards creating more equitable education systems, many schools in Macao have assumed the practice of inclusive education based on the recommendations from the new Administrative Regulation (No.29/2020). The revised regulations stipulate that regular schools should support equal access to all learners and provide provision for learners with special education needs, including gifted students and those with physical and mental disabilities, adequate service and support (Education and Youth Development Bureau, 2022). The Macao Education Bureau's framework for action in inclusive education recognises the need to increase financial aid, resources, and collaboration between stakeholders and parents, and to strengthen the professional development of teachers.

Many schools in Macao now place a strong emphasis on including students with diverse needs and disabilities and require that teachers use inclusive pedagogies or strategies that accommodate different learning for students and understand the policies governing inclusion to support the participation and learning of all students. In addition, teachers are required to participate in ongoing professional development in inclusive education. Although there continues to remain diversified schooling approaches, inclusive education is now a predominant approach to teaching and student learning in Macao. Among the 75 schools in Macao (67 private and 8 public), 56 schools now offer inclusive education.

The new administrative regulation has implications on teacher development and initial teacher training and calls for restructuring teacher education and professional development courses. Since teachers are expected to play a crucial role in implementing inclusive education, they will need to adapt or change their educational practices to meet the needs of diverse students. Teachers will need to modify curricula, use differentiated instructional strategies and classroom management techniques, alternate assessment, and collaborate with other teachers, paraprofessionals and parents.

Teacher preparation for inclusive education is essential to ensure that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to support the learning and development of all students, including students with special educational needs (SEN) and diverse backgrounds. A number of studies (e.g., Agbenyega, Ikegami, & Rivalland, 2021; Finkelstein, Sharma, & Furlonger, 2021; Kurth, Allcock,

Walker, Olson, & Taub, 2021; Rowan, Kline, & Mayer, 2017) have emphasised the importance of providing teachers with adequate training and support in inclusive education, incorporating diversity and social justice concepts in teacher education curricula, essential requisite skills and dispositions, encouraging cooperation and teamwork among teachers, and measuring of teacher's practice in the classroom. By providing teachers with the information and skills needed to support inclusion, schools could foster social integration, equity, and equal opportunities to facilitate a full range of learners.

Teacher preparation for inclusive education in Macao is currently offered either as part of an initial teacher education curriculum offered by four higher education institutions or as ongoing professional development. The Macao Education Bureau offer 30-hour and 100-hour courses for teachers in inclusive education. In the 30-hour course, teachers are introduced to teaching and learning strategies to support differentiated instruction. The 100-hour course offers training in thematic topics on children with specific types of needs and more severe learning disabilities. Many principals encourage all teachers to complete the 30-hour course but it is generally not a requirement for all teachers, whilst only those that work directly with students with SEN are required to complete the 100-hour course so that they can support the participation and learning of students with disabilities and register as resource teachers.

Despite the provisions in the administrative regulations on inclusive education, many schools in Macao still face difficulties in achieving inclusion. Among these challenges are attitudes and beliefs toward diversity, school leadership, inflexible curricula, teacher support, home-school collaboration, and lack of skills of how to teach students with disabilities (Correia, Teixeira, & Forlin, 2021; Monteiro & Forlin, 2021). One of the most significant barriers includes teachers' and other professionals' appropriate knowledge and training. While most teacher education programmes in Macao have changed in recent years to integrate content about inclusion, many newly qualified teachers and in-service teachers still feel unprepared to teach in inclusive schools (Monteiro, Kuok, Correia, Forlin, & Teixeira, 2019).

Research has shown that teachers face many difficulties and barriers when adopting inclusive education in their classrooms (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2021; Qu, 2022; Sharma, 2020; Zagona, Kurth, & MacFarland, 2017). Research by Sharma et al. (2019) highlighted common barriers that teachers identified, including a lack of understanding of the concept of inclusion, inadequate teaching skills, and a lack of resources to fully implement inclusive practices as significant obstacles to adopting inclusive education. Indeed, Ryndak, Jackson, and White (2013) advocate that the best way to support students with SEN is to ensure they have greater access to the general curriculum and to improve the capacity of teacher preparation programmes to ensure teachers have the expertise to implement effective practices in inclusive classrooms. Other studies have shown that teacher education has the potential to contribute strongly to inclusive practices and the training of teachers strengthens the quality of learning experiences of all students (Main, Chambers, & Sarah, 2016). Thus, professional development and training have been seen as one of the most essential factors in promoting access and learning for students with diverse needs.

There is still a need to provide robust curricula for the professional development of teachers to fulfil the need for all teachers to possess a mastery of inclusive practices to support a range of diverse learners. Thus, this study aims to aid the identification of gaps between teacher preparation and inclusive practice and offer suggestions for better educational practices and improved learning results for students with SEN and disabilities. The purposes of this study were to: (1) examine and review current inclusive cultures and practices in Macao inclusive schools; (2) identify emerging challenges and barriers to quality inclusive education; and (3) use the identified challenges to develop recommendations to support teacher professional learning to enhance the efficacy of inclusive practice and to feed the findings into university course development to improve inclusive teacher graduate outcomes.

2. Research method and design

The study employed a qualitative research approach with semi-structured and in-depth interviews to understand teachers' perspectives of their schools' inclusive culture, practice, challenges, and barriers towards inclusive education. The interviews were conducted by research assistants in either Cantonese, English or Portuguese according to the participant's preference. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was audio recorded. The audio files in Chinese or Portuguese were all transcribed and translated into English by the research assistants and cross-checked by the authors. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and interpret interview data patterns. It involved a systematic data coding process in developing thematic categories and emergent themes. The participants were 20 in-service teachers working in 20 different private inclusive schools. Purposive sampling was used to obtain rich and detailed information from the respondents. Ethics approval was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Saint Joseph before the commencement of the study and prior to the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

3. Results

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified four major recurring categories, namely: inclusive cultures, inclusive practice, challenges, and barriers, with each category depicting several emergent themes. Table 1 demonstrates the four main categories and 18 key emergent themes.

Table 1. Emergent Themes from the Interview Data.

Categories	Emergent Themes
Inclusive culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education for all ▪ Respect for diversity ▪ Bullying
Inclusive practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Types of student assessment ▪ Test accommodations ▪ Inclusive education pedagogy ▪ Differentiation
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Emotional and behavioural problems ▪ Parent expectations ▪ Different attitudes toward inclusion ▪ Long IEP process
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of specialists and human resources ▪ Lack of adequate teacher training ▪ Lack of teacher collaboration ▪ Insufficient time ▪ Lack of teaching materials and resources ▪ Insufficient practical knowledge ▪ Lack of teacher standards

3.1. Inclusive culture

Overall, the teachers expressed positive views on how their schools generally promote a secure, accepting, and collaborative community where all students are valued and accepted into the schools. Most of the teachers felt that the schools shared inclusive values that were conveyed to staff, students and parents. These are reflected in comments received from the teachers; for example, one teacher remarked, "Our school provides support for all students with learning difficulties and disabilities and also provides the infrastructure to support students with physical disabilities. Materials and facilities are provided to accommodate students" (T2). According to several teachers, students in their schools appreciated one another regardless of their abilities and cultural background. This is reflected by one teacher's comment: "Our school is quite inclusive because the students respect diversity. Our school has many students that come from other countries and that have different cultural backgrounds. Students learn to be sympathetic to one another despite their differences" (T4). One teacher also reported that bullying was less likely to occur in school as students often look out for one another, and the likelihood of marginalising specific students was uncommon in their school.

3.2. Inclusive practice

Many teachers acknowledged that they were not fully trained and prepared to teach mixed-ability classrooms and reported needing more training in inclusive education. Some teachers expressed the need for more knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to help students with SEN improve their learning. Two teachers (T11 and T15) indicated that they spent much time preparing extra worksheets for students with SEN so that they could catch up with the rest of the class. This indicates that teaching is still mostly didactic and that expertise in differentiated instruction is still limited. Many teachers indicated that the main form of assessment was summative and that tests were commonly used to assess students learning. Several teachers also remarked that they adjusted test papers for students with SEN.

3.3. Challenges

One prominent theme that emerged throughout the interviews for challenges was dealing with emotional and behavioural problems. One teacher indicated that behavioural problems were challenging to manage, especially when all attempts failed, and the student could not control his or her behaviour. One teacher remarked, "Behavioural problems can be challenging, especially when a student suddenly becomes unhappy or is in a bad mood, fails a test or suddenly begins to throw things. I cannot always stop my teaching to assist them. Therefore, I find this aspect difficult to handle" (T2). Another teacher remarked, "I once had a student who was anxious and agitated for a long period and I was unable to help him. I feel I do not have sufficient experience and skills to deal with situations like this" (T7).

Teachers also mentioned they occasionally encounter parents who refused to have their child assessed even after their child had been suggested for assessment. For instance, one teacher reported, "It may take a long time for some parents to agree to do the assessment. Sometimes parents feel that their child has problems but think there is inadequate evidence. Parents generally take a long time to make a decision about the assessment" (T6). Teachers also indicated that they usually involve parents in discussions of their child's learning difficulties but some parents feel that it is the school's responsibility to handle all academic issues.

Some teachers also identified issues with preparing the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for students with SEN. They felt that it was a long process that involved many steps and many groups of people. The process was also seen as problematic due to different attitudes toward inclusive education.

3.4. Barriers

The teachers indicated several barriers, such as lack of time to prepare for differentiation, more work responsibilities, lack of specialists and human resources, inadequate teacher training, insufficient practical knowledge, lack of teacher collaboration, lack of teaching materials and resources, and lack of teacher standards. These are reflected in the comments received from the teachers:

It would be better if teacher training is held in schools. I find it helpful when specialists in inclusive education share their experiences. I can develop knowledge in the area and learn how to handle different situations we encounter in inclusive classrooms. Our working hours in school are long, which makes it difficult to allocate time to attend training outside of school. (T2)

Some teacher training courses only teach theoretical concepts. As a resource teacher with more than ten years of experience, these general concepts are not useful for me. I would like to learn more about real cases in real classroom settings. (T3)

The teacher professional development courses on inclusive education generally focus too much on theory and very little on practical knowledge and practice. (T20)

One barrier is the difference in ideologies of inclusive education since teachers have different knowledge and experience. They will have their own standard and views towards inclusive education. Teachers may have different ideas about one student and this may cause some conflict between them. (T6)

When the number of students with SEN increases, the resources available to each student will decrease. In the past, there were constraints on the number of students with SEN the school could accept and the class sizes were relatively small but now there are many fewer resources available to students because of the increased number of students in class. We sometimes have ten students with SEN in a class, making it challenging for us to support them and other students. (T7)

Several teachers also expressed the importance of working together with other staff members and paraprofessionals whose contributions were regarded as essential to the creation of individualised planning for students with SEN and disabilities. In promoting inclusive culture and practice, the teachers also stressed the need for, and value of ongoing professional development and more specialists, in particular, peripatetic staff and speech therapists.

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that many schools in Macao are embracing inclusion and diversity and have taken several steps to foster cohesive school cultures that support inclusive beliefs and ideologies. Schools are working to improve learning opportunities for students and teachers and are taking measures to provide education for all. Like previous studies (e.g., Sharma, 2020; Zagona et al., 2017), this study shows that teachers face many challenges in implementing inclusive education in their classrooms, including the lack of resources, time constraints, inadequate training, lack of collaboration, and different attitudes towards inclusive education. The results of this study support earlier findings that many teachers need more training to implement inclusive practice (Rowan et al., 2017). There is a need to provide ongoing quality professional development opportunities for teachers to increase their knowledge and skills around inclusive education. This calls for higher education institutions to provide relevant, up-to-date and practical teacher education programmes and professional development to better prepare teachers to work in diverse classroom environments. Based on the data, the following four recommendations are made to support professional development in higher education institutions to aid future development of inclusive schools and reduce barriers to inclusion:

- 1. Provide practical knowledge and skills.** University coursework should translate into practical knowledge and skills that teachers can use in their teaching, especially how to translate theory and research findings into developing teaching, learning, assessment, and student support.
- 2. Build strong models of teacher education.** University-based teacher education programmes can develop curricula that help teachers develop the dispositions to continue to seek solutions to challenging issues they encounter in a variety of classroom environments by offering essential knowledge and skills that teachers can use to inform their teaching practice as well as to learn from their practice.
- 3. Incorporate graduate attributes.** Programmes should include graduate attributes that are engrossed in inclusive values and practice. For students to graduate, universities could demand that they achieve the fundamental competency standards for inclusive practices.

4. **Embed inclusive concepts and values.** Universities can align initial teacher education programmes with inclusive policies, and include current research and inclusive values in all courses within a programme and not only in stand-alone inclusive education courses.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that teachers play an integral role in the effectiveness of inclusive education. Inclusive education in Macao is developing, and there is clear evidence that inclusive cultures and practices are already taking root in many schools. Bringing the process to scale in every school for every student is the main challenge. This challenge could be addressed through targeted professional development, adequate resources, and effective ongoing collaboration with stakeholders towards inclusive education to ensure all students irrespective of their developmental profile receive equitable and quality education. Careful attention must be paid to the relationships between universities, schools and families to support schools that offer inclusive education. These partnerships are essential in equipping teachers with relevant knowledge and skills to teach in diverse classroom settings.

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