The Itinerant Teacher in Macau: Cultural Issues, Challenges, & Conflicts
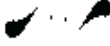
Chris FORLIN[1]

Monie Mei Chan CHEANG[2]

Abstract

Macau SAR is adopting an inclusive approach to education for learners with special needs. To support this approach, itinerant support services were first introduced by the Macau Government in the 2010/2011 academic year through the provision of itinerant teachers. From a small number of three teachers initially, the service now involves 30 teachers. Their expected role is to support inclusive education by assisting regular schoolteachers in adjusting their teaching for students with special needs. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was employed to examine the IT program in supporting the implementation of inclusive education in Macau. The findings present a comprehensive review of the service from the perspective of 93% of the itinerant teachers. Focus group interviews identified challenges, conflicts, and cultural issues they reportedly encounter in undertaking their role which need addressing if the service is to be sustainable and effective. These include school expectations, minimal understanding of and commitment to inclusive education, policy, and the need for greater flexibility, together with role conflict and adaptation to the diverse cultural situation. Discussion focuses on a range of recommendations and potential future directions for enhancing the itinerant teacher model in Macau.

Keywords: Macau SAR, education, inclusion, itinerant support teacher, special education needs, collaboration

[1] Prof. Dr, University of Notre Dame, Australia, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6438-9591
Correspondence: chrisforlin@outlook.com
[2] Researcher, University of Saint Joseph, Macao, Email: cmonie@gmail.com

Introduction

A key aspect of inclusive education is that the environment must be adjusted to meet the needs of all learners (Education by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2008). A wealth of research internationally has focused on the importance of inclusion and the expectation that all regions should assume an inclusive approach to education (e.g., Ainscow et al., 2019; Slee, 2019). Inclusion has become the guiding principle for countries to adopt and implement educational laws and policies (Florian, 2014).

Macau has inherited a somewhat distinctive education system relying heavily on private rather than Government schools (author, 2011). The aims of the Macau government promulgated in 1991 during the repeal of Law No. 11/91/M under Portuguese rule, were to provide special education programs that required the individual development of students. This was the first attempt to promote the development of students with special needs' learning ability and include them as a member of mainstream education in Macau. In 1996, Decree No. 33/96/M "Special Education Regime" began to promote inclusive education in government schools (Author et al., 2017).

In the 2019/2020 year, there were a total of 77 schools in Macau, including 10 public schools and 67 private schools (private schools include the free education school system and non-free education school system, and the night schools). A total of 42 schools provided inclusive education at various education levels, including nine public schools and 33 private schools (Statistical Profile of Non-Tertiary Education in Macao, 2020, p. 17). Of these schools, the medium of instruction in eight public schools was Chinese, two of them were using Portuguese, 23 were in Cantonese, and five schools were in English. Five schools had separate Chinese and English Departments. This research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the role of the ITs in supporting self-nominated inclusive schools in Macau.

Inclusive Education in Macau

After Macau returned to China, the Macau SAR government promulgated Law No. 9/2006 "Fundamental Law of Non-tertiary Education System". In this Law "Special education is to be carried out preferentially in regular schools in the form of inclusive education; or in special education institutions in other forms" (Chapter 3, Article 12, Paragraph 3). For the private schools, an inclusive education subsidy program was introduced for the 2006/2007 school year to support them.

A new law by the Macau government for Special Education (Regulation Law No. 29/2020) was implemented in the 2021-2022 school year, and self-designated inclusive schools and special schools must now follow this. This outlines the government's philosophy and implementation direction for developing inclusive education in Macau, including the requirements for the role of ITs who are employed to support inclusive schools. The requirements for inclusive schools are listed in "學校運作指南" "Guidelines for School Operation". In this document, students with special educational needs (SEN) are defined as those with gifted traits or physical and mental disabilities, and students who have special qualities and need special education. Schools must provide a suitable individual education plan (IEP) for students registered with SEN with the Macau government.

Although in 2021 there is still no mandatory implementation of inclusive education, the law emphasizes the need to comply with "… equal access to school opportunities", "… provide appropriate education for those who need education", and the need to cooperate in the implementation of educational placement (Article 3, Regulation No. 29/2020). Schools are expected to implement classroom intervention or adjustment, assessment adjustment, dropout or tutoring support, and other measures to directly solve or help students solve differences and overcome obstacles more effectively.

Since the Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region Education and Youth Development Bureau (DSEDJ) launched this approach, author et al. (2016) reports that many teachers have expressed grave concern regarding the reality of implementing inclusive education within regular schools. Teachers propose that they are not fully prepared to teach students with special needs. They need more skills training in inclusive education to increase collaboration, classroom management, and how to differentiate the curriculum to accommodate students' diverse learning needs (Author 2 et al, 2018). In Macau private schools, teachers reportedly work within a limited scope with very little knowledge of inclusive education (Author et al., 2017). It is difficult for the class teachers to deal with

students with very diverse needs (Wong, 2014). Inclusion is further conflicted by century old Chinese values that expect all students to pass exams and be self-directed which does not support an inclusive approach to education (Morrison & Tang, 2002; Wang & Zheng, 2015; Zygadlo & Jiaotong, 2020).

The Itinerant Teacher Model

The itinerant service delivery model is often used to provide inclusive services to children with disabilities. The umbrella term "itinerant professional" can include occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, special education teachers, and psychologists (Chambers, 2015; Monfore et al., 2015). A variety of different models have been implemented internationally to provide specialist itinerant teacher support to inclusive schools (Sanna, 2015*)*. Approaches include turning special schools into resource centers (Hunt, 2020). In other countries, children with a special educational need are placed in special classes in regular schools with specialist teachers (Author, 2013). In the USA specialized educational services for young children who have a special need are provided by itinerant early childhood special educators. These visit children who are served in community-based early childhood programs (Dinnebeil et al., 2009). Inclusion coaches who have special education training, are employed in Canada. These have reported, that to start their support they needed to first build a trusting relationship with teachers, while identifying their individual needs (Gallagher et al., 2018).

According to the UN (2017), itinerant teachers should provide advice and resources and support teachers, children, and parents. Several suggestions have been proposed regarding establishing an effective role for the itinerant teacher. These include that they should be linked to school, family, and community, using either a direct service or consultative approach (Dinnebeil et al., 2009). The consultative approach should be seen as a coach, involving a process of observation, demonstration, and feedback. In a coaching role itinerant teachers can provide training and mentoring while communicating or giving advice to people at different levels (Monfore et al., 2015). Teachers should be the main target, but other personnel must also be given cooperation and advice.

The Itinerant Teacher Model In Macau

Since 2010, the DSEDJ has cooperated with private special schools to implement the itinerant teacher service. As there are a lack of special education teachers in Macau, it has been necessary to recruit from other regions. From 2011, Non-Government organizations (NGOs) have sourced and supplied the external hiring of foreign itinerant teachers. The government system is not able to directly hire foreign experts, therefore, the DSEDJ has funded NGOs to undertake this. The DSEDJ, however, assigns the ITs to individual self-nominated inclusive schools.

According to the Macau government guidelines, the ITs are to provide technical support to teachers, and to provide resource teachers and ordinary class teachers with suggestions on curriculum adjustment, teaching strategies, classroom management, homework, and assessment adjustment (Government of the Macao Special Administrative Region Education and Youth Development Bureau, 2019). The ITs are required to have the following qualifications: 1) bachelor's degree in special education and at least four years of work experience related to special education; or 2) bachelor's degree in general teaching and special education courses recognized by the Macau government, and at least eight years of work experience related to special education. This higher status is important for the ITs (Chiu, 2019). Since inception of the itinerant support program in Macau, the number of ITs has increased from three to 30 in the 2020/2021 school year.

Method

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was employed to examine the IT program in supporting the implementation of inclusive education in Macau. Referring to the work of van Manen (1990), this was chosen as a suitable methodology as it is oriented to the description and interpretation of the fundamental structures of the lived experiences of people. This approach was underpinned by an interpretivism people-centered theoretical perspective, used to explore the understandings of the ITs (Morrison, 2013). The evidence collected was qualitative in nature, offering a rich description of the environment of the itinerant teachers as a unique context. Qualitative data were collected through

semi-structured focus group interviews, in response to the following research questions.

1. How do ITs describe the services they provid to support inclusive education in Macau?

2. What challenges and cultural issues do the ITs encounter in enacting their roles?

3. What are the expectations of the ITs regarding the future of their role? Since most of them are non-local personnel, information on the sustainability of the current employment model was sought.

Participants

A purposeful sampling approach using the strategy of criterion sampling was applied to recruit the participants (Patton, 2002). All ITs working in Macau in the 2020/2021 school year were invited through their NGOs to participate: with 28 out of 30 agreeing. This provided a response rate of 93% which indicated extremely high validity. These were employed through three NGOs, funded by the government to provide the itinerant service program. Two ITs were from NGO A, three from NGO B, and 25 from NGO C.

The 28 ITs were supporting 35 schools. Six of them worked in four or more schools, accounting for 22% of the participants. There were 39% in charge of three schools, and the remaining 39% in charge of two schools. Five of these schools were providing English, 23 Cantonese, and two schools were providing Portuguese. Five schools had separate Cantonese and English Departments. The ITs from Hong Kong could speak Cantonese, with one also speaking English. The 20 ITs from Taiwan all spoke Mandarin with three also speaking English.

Procedure

Focus group meetings were arranged through each NGO coordinator with approval from their respective directors. The interviews took place in the meeting room at each NGO office and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The arrangements were assisted by the NGOs. The university Code of Ethics was strictly followed, and ethics clearance obtained from each of the NGOs. Participants were provided with information letters about the research and signed a consent form prior to the interviews. Participation was voluntary and withdrawal at any stage was possible. Participants names were anonymized.

A total of eight focus group interviews were conducted, NGO A with two ITs, NGO B with two ITs, and NGO C divided into six groups ranging from three to five ITs. Interviews were undertaken in Mandarin and Cantonese, recorded, and transcribed into English. There were five male ITs and 23 females. Five were Macau local citizens, three came from Hong Kong, and 20 came from Taiwan (The People's Republic of China). Among the 28 interviewed, 17 had more than 20 years teaching experience.

Data Analysis

The study used an inductive approach (Helvi, 2020), in analysing the interview data to reveal the role of the ITs in supporting inclusive schools in Macau. Open codes were developed initially, which were then combined with other open codes that included similar content to form sub-categories. Finally, the sub-categories were combined to form categories that responded to the research questions. The identified categories served as the basis for reporting the content analysis results.

Results

Services provided by the ITs

Three main categories emerged from the data related to how the ITs perceived their roles in supporting inclusive schools in Macau. These included providing intervention, through interaction, and giving in-class support.

Intervention

The first aspect was regarding the intervention that they provided in schools. This included preparing individual education plans (IEPs), providing suggestions, and acting as a resource provider. The IEP meetings were considered the main responsibility in the itinerant teachers' work in the schools. This involved them in teaching the regular class teachers how to write an IEP, coordinate an IEP meeting, and provide feedback to parents. According to IT 12 "In addition to the newly joined inclusive schools, there are also some schools with high teacher turnover. The first job at the beginning of each academic year is to teach teachers to write IEP".

They were asked to provide suggestions and practical skills for teachers to use to support learners with special needs. They were also asked to give suggestions to the parents as IT 3 said "I provide suggestions, provide teaching aids and methods to the parents on how to face the children". In general, their role included a wide range of intervention as summed by ITS 5 "I provide ideas, to link connection between schools, teachers, and parents, provide skills and directions for schools and teachers, provide strategies and methods for students and parents".

As a resource provider they found minimal resources in the schools and were expected to identify government or community organizations where teachers could access assistive devices such as audiphones, or video magnifiers to assist the students. The ITs considered themselves to be the main supplier of resource information as indicated by IT 10 when stating "I will provide the tools to the teachers and the parents, teach them how to play with the students by making use of the tools, and present to the parents how to play with the children at home".

Interaction

The ITs said that they needed to support and collaborate with a range of different staff to establish effective work directions and connections within each school. This was done as an advisor or supervisor, and sometimes as a sharer of experiences. Support was needed not just for academic issues but also in helping the teachers overcome emotional needs when having learners with special needs in their classes. As explained by IT 7:

> Listening to the teachers and to make their emotions calmer, it can build up the trust relationship between itinerant teachers and the class teachers. And then give support and adjust attitude and knowledge of the teachers to accept the students with SEN. Some teachers think that they are forced to write IEPs and feel that the adjustment of test papers is unfair.

For those ITs working in secondary schools, they also found that they needed to provide some direct counselling to students "In some schools, I met with students individually to discuss their career paths and give them some suggestions for further studies" (IT 15).

Most of the ITs considered that they were the relationship linker, the mediator and the bridge between the teachers and schools, between the parents and the teachers, between the class teachers and the resource teachers. Even though most schools had a designated resource teacher the ITs still reported that in many situations "Since the resource teacher is too fresh, I need to coordinate the student situation between the class teacher and the resource teacher". (IT 6). Some of the resource teachers had just completed a special education degree, others were younger teachers who had taken the resource teacher's course by the DSEDJ. As young teachers they did not have the right to speak in the school to senior teachers. Where there was only one resource teacher in the school, they were not respected. Their turnover rate was high, so they were frustrated and in need of emotional support from ITs.

As experienced educators the ITs were prepared to share their own experiences but only when they considered that teachers were *"... willing to accept the students with SEN, whether they are class teachers or resource teachers, as long as they have "heart" to willingly teach the students"* (IT 27). There were also some cultural issues regarding the ability of the ITs to provide effective collaborations. Some of the resource teachers had graduated from special education departments in

schools located in Taiwan in The People's Republic of China and were more willing to accept the advice from the ITs who also came from there. IT17 said:

> The resource teacher who I supported was graduated from the same department of the same university in The People's Republic of China as me. She once expressed it is easy to get familiar with me. Their school did a good job and set up a team to provide full support for inclusive students. I have given them opinions over the past few years, and they are very accepting and willing to follow. I feel that their team is now more mature. When I arrive at school, they will ask for my opinions and I feel the respect.

In class support

The third main aspect of their role was providing in-class support by providing demonstrations and undertaking observations in the classroom. Sometimes, this was in the role of a trainer or coach, so that the teachers could master more effective teaching skills. According to the government's instructions, they were advised that they could not teach the students directly, as this was the role for teachers. The ITs, therefore, would show or demonstrate skills to the teachers so that they can then directly help the students. As IT 2 shared, "I will demonstrate to the resource teachers in the pull-out classroom. Show them how to play some toys and suggest some tools for them". A slightly different model emerged in the kindergartens where the ITs said they did not only demonstrate to resource teachers, but they also demonstrated to the class teachers in the corners of the classroom. Observing students with SEN in the classroom was deemed to be another very important part of their role. As IT 21 explained:

> I need to enter the class to observe the student's situations to respond to the problems on the IEP that the teachers have written or the assessment report from the government. I need to observe the real situation of the students to give parents advice and training methods that are available at home in the IEP meeting.

The ITs also noted that there were some students who were suspected to have special needs, but the teachers were not sure whether they needed to apply to the government to have them formally diagnosed. In these cases, the schools would invite the ITs to observe the students so that the teachers could tell the parents and explain the children's situation with professional knowledge and advice. The ITs confirmed that "I don't do the assessment with them; I just give some suggestions to the teachers. If the student has obvious special needs, I suggest that the teachers ask the parents to apply for assessment. Some teachers even want us to convince the parents to apply for assessment" (IT 23).

The ITs found that resource teachers who had received some training in special education could be more easily guided by them. As shared by IT 25 who had participated in the service for few years shared: "I guide a group of resource teachers to deal with students' situations, such as in the tutor class or plug-in classrooms, and train them to arrange the courses, let them know how to communicate with parents and class teachers in terms of how to make them understand the situation of students".

Challenges encountered by ITs

From the data three categories emerged that related to practical or administrative challenges, role conflict, and cultural issues.

Practical or Administrative Challenges

Even though most of the resource teachers in the inclusive schools had completed the 36-hour inclusive education course or 100-hour resource teacher courses provided by the government, some schools did not have a dedicated resource teacher. In these schools the ITs had to directly support class or subject teachers. The ITs proposed that the local teachers did not understand the meaning of inclusive education. Together with their lack of skills and knowledge, their poor attitudes towards itinerant teachers, excessive workload/busy schedule, and the lack of resource teachers, this made providing support very difficult in these schools.

In general, the ITs found that in almost all schools the teachers did not have sufficient knowledge to support all the students with special needs or to recognize the students' symptoms. They just put the "troublesome" student's seat at the front of the classroom or edge near to the teacher to prevent them from interfering with the class and were often ignored. The ITs reported that some teachers have a negative attitude towards students with SEN. Making a breakthrough with these teachers was very challenging. Sometimes it took a practical approach to overcome the concern they felt and to let the IT help them. One example of this was explained by IT 2 who reflected:

> I really want to show some skills to the teacher, it is actually very easy to deal with the children's "problems", but the teacher has no methods and skills. Finally, I taught a student how to use the ruler to draw a straight line following the dots. The teacher was surprised, thinking that I was holding the child's hand to complete the class work. Later, I told her the methods and skills, and now this teacher hopes that I can give more advice. And she finds me actively and frequently now.

The ITs understood that resource teachers were very busy with ongoing schoolwork. They needed to respond to all the inclusive students in the school, but still needed to teach their own classes as was required by the school's policy. This meant that the ITs had "… limited time in the school, it is difficult to discuss the inclusive students with the teacher in depth, usually they just report the situation of the students to me. However, I can just simply be by myself in the classroom or observe the students during the break time" (IT 15). The itinerant teachers needed to be flexible in facing different schools. The class teachers' schedules were very tight, yet they needed to provide different advice and support due to the different cultures and teaching management of each school.

Role Conflict

There were many situations noted by the ITs regarding the intricacy and need for greater clarity of their role. IT 13 stated that, "We have many roles in schools. We are the facilitators of inclusive education. We are the bridge between schools, students, teachers, counsellors, and parents, so that all parts of it can be handled more smoothly to help the students with inclusion" (IT 13). Due to the complex nature of their work and limited time in any given school, they reported that they had no sense of belonging in their schools.

Role conflict was most noticeable in schools where there were no resource teachers. The ITs reported that the class teachers thought that they needed to supervise their work, rather than supporting them. The ITs suggested that the government needed to affirm their major role in schools. The itinerant teachers believed they were neither the staff of schools nor the staff of the government. Some of the policies they found in the schools did not seem to support the development of inclusive education.

The lack of time for the ITs to undertake the extensive roles expected of them by the schools was a major issue for them. As summed by IT 17 "I only have half a day in each school a week. I need to assist with everything, which is a big challenge for me". This IT added further:

> When I have emergencies, the students are most often with emotional and behavioural problems. When I am in school, the teachers or the administrative staff will think that I can deal with them or settle them down immediately.

This was compounded by the number of different schools each IT had to support. As indicated by IT 15:

> I need to serve four schools and follow up with about 35 students. Before the IEP meeting, I need to read some information about the student in advance. Based on the personal privacy protection law, I must read the official assessment report in the school. I can't copy it or take photos of my mobile phone, otherwise, it is illegal to do so. All I can do is to mark notes. In addition, I need time to observe the actual situation of the child in the classroom. This is very difficult; it will be better if I have served in the same school for two years or more.

The ITs agreed that there are different kinds of suggestions and interventions applied in different schools to fit the distinctive styles and administrative systems. Often the ITs reported that they had no control over their expected role within a school and they proposed this lack of personal flexibility of real concern. For example, IT 8 expressed that, "My affairs in the school are arranged by administrative staff. In some schools, I can only observe designated classrooms. After several years of work, I have established a different way to interact with each school".

While the ITs considered that student observation was an important part of their role some teachers were very reluctant to allow them to do this. In some instances, the teachers thought that the ITs were the person from the Government and would, therefore, record their deficiencies in their classroom. IT 1 said, "It does not allow me to observe the inclusive students in the classroom. I can only observe the situation of inclusive students who were in the pull-out classroom, and it was arranged by the resource teacher".

From a personal perspective the ITs were most concerned about the different role they were expected to perform in Macau compared to their previous roles in which they had expertise and extensive knowledge. Although the government of Macau approves the qualifications of all ITs confirming they have experience in special education, this is not necessarily in inclusive schools. Many of them only have experience of teaching students with SEN directly, as IT 27 stated, "I was a director in a special school before. I taught in the special classroom for ten years. But now, the government requires the ITs to focus on supporting the teachers instead of teaching the students". This was also raised by IT 15 who said "When I was working as a special teacher before, I was directly teaching students, but now I mainly face teachers".

Cultural Issues

Except for five locally hired ITs, the majority were non-local teachers employed from Hong Kong and Taiwan in The People's Republic of China. In the universities and colleges of Macau, there are no special education majors, so there is a lack of local professionals in this area. The government can only recruit the rich experience special teachers from other places. These foreign ITs said that they needed some time to understand what was happening in Macau. According to IT 11, "I am not a local, I will not know the operation of the government or educational system. I need to adapt the information, resources, assessment procedures, school environment, and different backgrounds and cultures".

The foreign ITs mainly spoke Mandarin, and they agreed that this was an issue between them and the people within Macau, as the language in some schools was Cantonese or Portuguese. As considered, by IT 17:

> Language is a barrier for me. When I came to Macau and had a first IEP meeting in the school, I could not understand Cantonese. The conversation between parents and teachers was hard to me, I misunderstood his meaning and responded incorrectly, and I needed someone to do the translation. Sometimes, the teachers helped me to translate some outlines. I still could not respond to the parents immediately, however, I had no choice but to respond and make some suggestions at the end. Unfortunately, I can't ask everyone to use Mandarin for meetings. To solve the problem, I went to take a Cantonese course and learned some local proverbs. I could understand a little bit at IEP meetings now.

It was explained by the ITs that different schools have different models of support and standards, underpinned by different historical and religious backgrounds. Without knowing the cultural background of schools in Macau, they were worried about making mistakes when "… the content of service, goals, and administrative requirements vary" (IT 26).

There were also cultural issues when working with families. Students' main caregiver was often not their parents, but other family members, such as grandparents, maids, etc… Teachers reported that there were many complex family issues affecting the growth of the children. Sometimes, parents do not give them medicine that that the doctors suggested. This leads to "The

children's behaviors affecting the classroom without adequate treatment, and it is difficult for teachers to handle, which in turn imposes a lot of pressure on the teachers" (IT 13).

The ITs considered that part of their role should be to promote inclusive education. This was, however, considered difficult as many of the schools only focussed on the government requirement to prepare an IEP form and they did not really pay attention to the needs of students or a whole school approach to inclusion. They also identified the school's attitude towards inclusive education as being less than positive. IT 18 expressed that, "It is hard to promote in some traditional schools with the concept of inclusive education, it only has the IEP meetings and discussions that the DSEJ requires, and I fail to achieve other connections". This was further explained by IT16 who said:

> Even if a school accepts inclusive students, there will be academic requirements in some stages. No adjustments will be made. If the requirements are not met, the student will be asked to leave the school. All these make the teacher' attitude become negative because the school administration policy does not allow adjustments. I think if teachers and schools are passive, the role and the work of itinerant teacher is limited.

It was acknowledged that a school's culture was critical to enabling this. The ITs stated that the culture and system of the school, nevertheless, are difficult to change. Some class teachers had reflected that they had wanted to adjust some test papers or homework, but the administration disapproved. IT 19 concluded that, "Schools have great autonomy, and it is difficult for us to give guidance or advice to the administration". If the school's administration staffs support inclusive education, it was deemed much easier to give suggestions to the teachers. IT 6 shared:

> The cultural differences of each school, the single form of assessment and the unique school system all make it take a long time for me to adapt. It is hard to change and give suggestions to the teacher. It's like I am only occupying a seat in the office, but no teacher come to ask me anything.

Expectations of ITs regarding their future role

Two key areas arose from the data related to participants' expectations of the future role of the ITs in Macau. These were associated with the urgent need to build a stable and local well trained professional team to ensure sustainability of the role, and how the role could be enhanced to better meet the need of the diverse school populations.

Building a stable and local professional team

Of the current ITs 17 had retired from their previous work and were using their new roles to share their rich experience and knowledge to help the development of inclusive education in Macau and to support local teachers and students, while increasing their personal satisfaction. Their expectation was that they were acting in a transitional position which should be eventually localised by suitable teachers in Macau undertaking this role. Although some indicated that they were willing to remain for a few more years, due to the new Covid-19 virus pandemic, they did not know about their long-term future; or even if they were going to be allowed to stay for the new academic year. Sustainability of the role given the current climate was deemed problematic. The lack of flexibility in their roles was also of concern.

The ITs felt they were passive rather than being able to be proactive as the number of schools and students they serve were all arranged by the government. They also noted that if their performance did not suit a school's expectation, the school would ask the government to designate another itinerant teacher.

Enhancing the role of ITs in Macau

The ITs considered there were already some resource teachers in Macau with the potential to advance and become the itinerant teachers, although, they concluded that their knowledge and skills needed to be strengthened. Regarding enhancing inclusive education in schools, the ITs suggested that the government should clearly define and strengthen the publicity of their role and the concept of inclusive education among all schools. The present attitude in the schools was summed by IT 16 who shared that:

The requirements listed in the government's document; most schools can achieve. However, when encountering students who don't settle down in the environment, the schools just suggest to changing to another school. The government should promote zero rejection.

The ITs concurred that in their opinion the inclusive education training so far provided by the DSEJ for teachers is insufficient, and more IEP training or workshops about special education knowledge, and classroom strategies are needed.

To build up a stable professional team to support schools, it was judged essential that the Government must work quickly towards upskilling local teachers to take over the roles of the foreign ITs. There was also a need to increase the number of ITs. Although there were increasing number of students annually identified through DSEDJ with SEN, there was no comparable increase in the number of ITs. This led to the ITs concluding that "… since there are many schools we need to support, we don't have much time to stay in a school. It is not enough time to communicate with the school staffs, so that the school staffs will not regard us as colleagues, because the meeting time is limited" (IT 1). This further resulted in a feeling of not belonging within any schools.

Discussion and Recommendations

As countries have adopted an inclusive approach to the education of students with special needs, they have endeavoured to establish a range of pertinent structures and implement new roles for teachers to support schools. A widespread approach has been the introduction of an itinerant support model. In this model itinerant teachers provide advice and resources and support teachers, children, and parents (UN, 2017). They can act in a direct style or a supervisory role (Sanna, 2015), including special schools becoming resource centers, (Author et al., 2010; Hunt, 2020), or working in community-based programs (Dinnebeil et al., 2009). Service delivery can be provided by a range of professionals (Chambers, 2015), however, in Macau the service is provided by mostly experienced foreign and retired special education teachers employing a consultative approach, whereby ITs are allocated to support between two and five self-nominated private inclusive schools. Their role involves providing intervention, interaction, in class support, and promoting inclusive education in Macau. This model has not been without its distinctive challenges and role conflict, together with many cultural issues emerging from the use of foreign ITs.

The appointment of ITs in Macau has been unique. The employment of foreign ITs has led to challenges with cultural and language differences as the schools they are placed in can have different mediums of instruction ranging from Mandarin, Cantonese, Portuguese, English, or a combination. While the ITs all had extensive backgrounds in special education and rich experiences to share, they found the inclusive model in Macau contrary to their previous experiences in special education schools. This was compounded by the language difficulties they experienced. When the ITs arrived from Hong Kong or Taiwan in The People's Republic of China, they knew little about the environment and culture of Macau and, therefore, needed time to adapt. Due to the challenges of organizing employment visas etc. they, nevertheless, rarely arrived prior to commencing their roles in schools.

Build a trusting relationship with teachers, while identifying their individual needs (Gallagher et al., 2018), has, similarly, been problematic for the ITs in Macau due to a range of issues, including the limited time they must spend in each school and the enormity of and confusion over the role they must undertake. Even with the new government special education regulations in 2020, there is no clear or consistent introduction regarding their role. The DSEDJ guidelines propose that itinerant teachers should formulate IEPs and offer teaching activities for inclusive students. They should also provide curriculum adjustments and teaching strategies for resource teachers and regular class teachers, classroom management ideas, homework, and assessment adjustments. The main intervention that was sought by the schools, however, was for the ITs to write IEPs and participate in these meetings, offering suggestions, and acting as a resource provider. Within the classroom they acted as a trainer or coach by demonstrating or observing students to provide ideas on useful strategies for the teacher to use.

Their schedules were very tight, and they needed to provide different types of advice and support due to the various cultures and teaching management style of each school. In the 2020/2021 school year, there were a total of 30 itinerant teachers supporting 47 inclusive schools across Macau with about 1,795 inclusive students. On average, one itinerant teacher needed to give suggestions and have IEP meetings for 60-70 inclusive students. The ITs reported that time spent with discussing support for each child was very minimal.

Collaboration was also difficult either with the resource teacher (when appointed) or with the class teachers. Teachers in schools in Macau, as elsewhere across much of Asia, have very high workloads with demanding teaching schedules and expectations for ensuring all children pass their annual exams (Cheng, & Chang, 2014; Author et al., 2019). With expectations for the ITs being vague, role conflict emerged between schools and the ITs. They are expected to take on different roles within each school they serve and that can also vary with each visit, based on the immediate needs of the school as determined by the administration. The ITs proposed that further role clarification is essential to enable them to administer what they believed they were employed to do.

The need for more local training of administrators and teachers about inclusive education with emphasis on practical approaches for meeting the needs of students with SEN was also considered vital if the itinerant model was to be more effective. The ITs encountered very negative responses from schools with a tendency to reject students who were unable to meet examination requirements. They reported little evidence of whole school inclusive practices as the focus was on writing IEPs which was the main government expectation. Even though approximately 153 teachers had completed the 100-hour resource teacher training provided by the Government, this needed to be supplemented by opportunities to share experiences, observe effective inclusive classrooms, and the provision of formative feedback (Coflan et al., 2018; Tong, 2015). To enable genuine inclusive education, commitment by school administration and leaders was deemed critical as where this occurred the ITs reported significantly better outcomes for the students with special needs. Given an opportunity for a change in the role of the ITs they could be ideally placed to facilitate this and to provide supportive feedback.

The ITs strongly suggested that to ensure the sustainability of the itinerant support model, Macau needs to establish a local well trained professional and stable team to support learners with SEN in each school. Currently, there is a lack of local special teachers who can achieve the requirements of the government in Macau to become an IT. In addition to further improve the university study opportunity, Tong et al., (2017) advocated organizing good practice sharing workshops so that teachers can have the opportunity to learn from each other.

Recommendations for improving the role of the itinerant teacher in Macau

Based on the rich data obtained from the interviews with almost all the ITs in Macau, the following recommendations are proffered:

1.   It is essential for the ITs to have time on arrival in Macau to gain localised special education professional knowledge so they can be more credible when supporting regular and resource teachers in inclusive schools.

2.   It is important to establish a team of staff in every school, with at least one dedicated resource teacher to better support students with SEN and work more collaboratively with the ITs.

3.   Plans must be made for the development of local teachers with special education knowledge in Macau to take over the role of the foreign ITs. Special education teachers' degree courses could be added to university courses or required special education knowledge courses and related internships could be included at pre-service level. For the resource teachers who have already taken the government's 100-hour teacher course, ongoing training and case studies through workshops need to be provided so they can work towards upskilling to become local ITs.

4.   Macau's schools have diverse backgrounds and cultures, and administrative independence, as they develop from different society and religious groups. A stronger emphasis needs to be placed on the philosophy of inclusive education and how this can be implemented in both government and private schools in Macau.

Conclusion

Through the in-depth interviews with 28 of the 30 itinerant teachers in Macau, a clear picture emerged of their daily work and roles. It was evident that their experiences and knowledge could help schoolteachers in supporting students with special needs in their classes. Several challenges and issues of role conflict and cultural differences arose within the current model, impinging on their ability to perform support as effectively as possible.

It has been well established internationally that inclusive education requires the commitment and cooperation of all stakeholders, including school administrators and leaders, teachers, parents, government, and the community (Ainscow et al., 2019; Chambers, 2015; Chiu, 2019; Author et al., 2017; Author 2 et al, 2018). It was evident from the interviews with the ITs in Macau that together with greater clarity of their responsibility, the establishment of a support team in every school is critically needed to assist the students with SEN and to support their role. Through this approach the ITs will have stronger collaboration and enhance the opportunities for embedding the concept of inclusive education in the schools they support. To ensure this is sustainable, effort must be made to upskill local teachers so they can gradually take over the role of the foreign ITs. The itinerant support service if localised, contextualised, and implemented more effectively with a stronger collaborative ethic and commitment by schools, has the potential to provide a further positive move towards greater inclusive education in Macau.

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