

# Home–School Collaboration in Assessment, Placement, and Individual Education Plan Development for Children With Special Education Needs in Macao: The Views of Parents

*Ana Correia, Vitor Teixeira, and Chris Forlin*

## Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore home–school collaboration in the areas of assessment, placement, and Individual Education Plan (IEP) development for children identified with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) in Macao. Despite the noted benefits of parent–school partnerships from prior research, minimal research has been conducted from the perspective of parents of children with SEN to examine whether these partnerships materialize in the context of Macao. Participants included 115 parents of school-aged children diagnosed with SEN. They provided demographic information and completed a 36-item questionnaire derived from two validated instruments. The research identified a range of factors which hinder parental involvement in decision-making and in the inclusion of children with SEN in optimal ways in Macao schools. Parents indicated they were not receiving relevant information and assessment feedback from the teachers; they were minimally involved in the IEP process, and their children were not receiving one-to-one support, regardless of the type of placement. Parents also underlined issues related to the timing of assessment procedures. Parents of children attending special classes in regular schools voiced more satisfaction with support provision than parents of children following the full inclusion model. Recommendations about how services could be improved for greater parental involvement are discussed.

Key Words: parental involvement, school–family collaboration, inclusion, special educational needs, Macao, Individual Education Plans, IEP

## Introduction

Home–school collaboration has been extensively researched (Collier et al., 2020) and is reported to be mutually beneficial for students with and without disabilities, educators, and families (Collier et al., 2020). Improvement of academic outcomes, behavior, and positive attitudes towards school, higher graduation rates, better attendance, fewer grade retentions, and more accurate placements in classes are among the benefits associated with parents' involvement in their child's education (Lusse et al., 2019; National Council of Special Education, 2010).

Despite home–school relationships being widely recognized as a key factor in strengthening the links between schools and communities, research findings suggest that more often than not schools define *what* constitutes family involvement, *who* is involved, and *when* this involvement takes place, aligning with a narrow and unequal definition of home–school relationships (Liang et al., 2020; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). The notion of parent involvement is often restricted to inviting parents to attend school meetings, during parent–teacher conferences, or to collaborate in school-based social or cultural celebrations (Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). The inclusion of families in their children's education, however, should grant them the opportunity to be involved as active participants in school decisions that affect their child's learning, personal development, and integration in the community.

Parents of children with a disability or special educational needs (hereinafter referred to as SEN) and educators mutually benefit to a great extent from effective home–school involvement and partnerships. The former are in possession of critical information about their child's needs. Their participation and input during the process of assessment, school placement, and Individual Education Plans (IEP) development is key to the success of their child's education. In Macao, assessment involves decisions regarding what formal diagnosis is required to be provided by the parent. It also includes the degree to which parents, by providing information about their child, are involved in the assessment process by professionals. Placement involves decisions regarding the type of school where the child should be placed, determined as an outcome of the assessment, mainly an inclusive school or a special school. Parents of children with SEN should be involved in decision-making processes related to their child's education, namely support and services, in parity with school professionals. There is evidence, nevertheless, that often parents' experiences, concerns, and positions

are deemphasized and overtaken by unilateral decisions of schools (Kurth et al., 2019).

Inclusive education has been cautiously welcomed in Macao (Monteiro et al., 2018; Ng & Kwan, 2020; Tong et al., 2017). Private schools, which account for 87% of the school provision, are encouraged but not enforced to become inclusive settings; nearly all are subsidized by the government. A new regulation on special education, including the education of students with SEN in regular education schools, was published in July 2020, strengthening the involvement of families in decision-making processes regarding assessment, placement, and participation in the elaboration of the IEP. Research evidence, however, shows that many teachers, parents, and a number of school administrators in Macao are still hesitant to embrace inclusive education (Correia et al., 2019; Ng & Kwan, 2020; Teixeira et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2017).

Parents' attitudes toward inclusion are reserved. Correia and Tchiang (2019), in a qualitative study about school leaders' perspectives on inclusive education in Macao, reported that some parents of children without disabilities object to having their child participate in school celebrations with children with disabilities, fearful that their child might be mistaken for a child with a disability. The fear of social stigma is common in Confucian-inspired cultures; Tait et al. (2016), for instance, found that parents in Mainland China and Hong Kong find it difficult to address their concerns with strangers, including teachers. The shared culture of reservation toward inclusion (Correia et al., 2019; Ng & Kwan, 2020; Tong et al., 2017) might influence the perceptions of parents of children with SEN about best placement options and the quality of the educational provision offered by the regular schools to their child. Cheung and colleagues (Cheung et al., 2015) similarly found that parents of children with SEN in Hong Kong and Macao feared that their child may be rejected by peers and, thus, felt they would benefit from being placed in a least inclusive environment or special school where they are more protected from a potentially hostile environment while getting more support from experienced professionals. One of the features of Confucian heritage cultures, abundantly reported and apparently holding out against globalization of social values, is the respect for authority, in particular the authority of teachers and schools (Zigadlo, 2020).

Parents of children with SEN in Macao are found to generally accept the decisions conveyed by the school professionals without voicing resistance (Cheung et al., 2015; Correia et al., 2019). In Macao, a school recommendation for assessment of school-age children requires expressed approval from the parents. If the assessment results imply a school placement change, parents, nevertheless, may not be able to choose the school that best fits the needs of the

child and the family, as private schools, which constitute the bulk of education provision, are selective.

Macao, where this study was conducted, is one of the Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of China, located on the western side of the Pearl River Delta and 64 kilometers (approximately 40 miles) away from Hong Kong SAR. The city of Macao, which has been featured as the most densely populated in the world, is distinguished by a mixture of Western and Eastern lifestyles and an overall prosperity associated with the gaming and hospitality industry. Chinese make up 95% of Macao's population, and the remaining 5% is composed by other ethnic groups. Among these are immigrants from the Philippines, Portugal, USA, Australia, Indonesia, and Myanmar.

The Portuguese government, prior to 1999, followed a rather liberal policy regarding the role of government intervention in education. This facilitated the establishment of many independent private schools but also hindered the development of a centralized education authority (Forlin, 2011). The Portuguese *laissez-faire* approach to education led to inter-school curricular, normative, and financial discrepancies within the private sector of education. Despite the government's intervention in the private sector over the last two decades, private schools still benefit from substantial autonomy, with some of them relying heavily on large classes and requiring students as young as three years old to sit quietly in rows. Class size is a long-standing problem in Macao private schools. In 2007–08 the government reduced the maximum number of students per class from 45 to 35, starting from the preschool level and subsequently expanding to cover more senior levels in the following academic years. This ceiling applies now to all stages of schooling within the formal education curriculum (DSEJ, 2018).

This study addresses the involvement of parents with children with SEN or disabilities in assessment, school placement, and IEP development in Macao schools. To the authors' knowledge, there are no published studies on this topic about Macao. The current research, therefore, investigates this hiatus in the literature by exploring parents' perceptions of their involvement in assessment, placement, and the IEP process related to their child. In the following two sections, the theoretical framework of the study—including models of parent/family, school, and community relationships—is discussed, as well as the relevance of the involvement of parents of children with SEN in education in Macao.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The benefits of parent and family involvement in education are widely accepted; however, the definition of involvement varies over time, place, and

culture (Liang et al., 2020; Wilder, 2014). Two conceptualizations of family–school relationships underpin the current study. Epstein’s (2001) typology of family–school–community involvement, including parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with community, has been widely used across countries. Epstein (2001) emphasizes the role of parents as collaborative partners and suggests that schools should encourage the creation of family–school partnerships to fully involve parents in different educational domains. Though the contribution of Epstein’s model to highlight the benefits of family–school–community collaboration to support children’s holistic development is indisputable, she has been criticized for prioritizing the expert knowledge of teachers and power of schools over parents’ voice (Mendel, 2020).

In the family–school–community systems model of family engagement proposed by Dearing et al. (2015), the authors highlight the mediating roles of social capital of families, educators, and the community to promote children’s learning. By addressing the ways in which cultural and sociohistorical contexts are relevant for understanding family engagement in education, Dearing and his colleagues brought the debate about the diversity encountered in family involvement in education to higher levels of breath and depth.

Combining Epstein’s typology of family–school–community involvement and Dearing et al.’s model, the relevance of family–school collaboration and partnerships to support children’s learning and whole development while valuing families’ diversity in expressing their involvement in the education of their children will be explored.

### **Involvement of Parents of Children With SEN in Education**

Extensive research has repeatedly established the beneficial effects of parental involvement in educational decision-making concerning children with SEN (Ališauskas et al., 2011; Barnhill, 2014; Lai & Gill, 2014; Love et al., 2017; Shepherd & Colby, 2016). Rodriguez et al. (2014) stated that inviting parents to participate in school activities and involving them in decision-making on a regular basis increases parents’ involvement, which in turn increases their self-efficacy and affects the extent of participation in their child’s education. For their part, listening to parents’ expertise on their children’s needs render teachers and other professionals more capable to implement educational strategies and improve the effectiveness of interventions that best support each child’s development (Wall, 2003).

Spann et al. (2003) associated parental involvement with “greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gains, greater continuity of intervention programs, higher level of parents’ satisfaction, and more effective strategies for

resolving problems” (p. 228). Through a meta-analysis of 448 independent studies, Barger et al. (2019) found that parental involvement was positively related to children’s social and emotional adjustment. Parental involvement was also perceived as having a positive effect on students’ mental health in a study based on 301,628 middle level school students in Georgia in the U.S. (Wang et al., 2019).

Parents of children with SEN are similar to and different from other parents in terms of involvement in education (Chu, 2018). Indeed, research results showing “a more complex relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement for special education students” (Flores de Apodaca et al., 2015, p. 35) suggest the importance of being attentive to its specificities. A study in the U.S. by Azad et al. (2018) put a focus on communication showing that one of the main characteristics of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in terms of their involvement is requiring more communication from the teachers. This is expected to include information on how to incorporate learning opportunities at home, about what their child is doing and with whom at school, about their progress in all areas, and to hear more about their strengths instead of weaknesses. Further, parents of children with ASD want teachers to be more receptive to their suggestions and to recognize that they are experts in what concerns their children (Azad et al., 2018).

In the same direction, according to Chu’s study undertaken in Taiwan, it is crucial that professionals value the knowledge and perspectives brought by families and that schools “seek their input and involvement throughout the collaborative process and involve them as partners in decision-making” (Chu, 2018, p. 368). Further, when teachers are willing to listen to the parents of their students with SEN, taking time to understand and appreciate the complexities of their home lives, parental participation increases and the teachers become more appreciative of family–school collaboration (Collier et al., 2015).

Chu (2018) highlighted three main indicators of successful parent–professional partnership for children with SEN: (1) positive, frequent, and two-way communication; (2) sharing resources; and (3) coordinating information. Flores de Apodaca and colleagues (2015) suggested a further dimension proposing that listening to and supporting “parental expectations” results in a positive association with academic performance of children in special education.

Collaboration is satisfying when both parties share responsibilities, resources, and bring strengths to the relationship, demonstrating commitment to meet the child’s needs. Cook et al. (2018), analyzing parent–teacher cooperation in the first year of school, pointed out the importance of building a cooperative relationship early in a child’s school career, ideally at school entry.

Despite the evidence supporting the benefits of family–school relationships over the years, difficulties in establishing effective collaboration and partnerships are reported in studies from Macao (Monteiro et al., 2018; Ng & Kwan, 2020; Tong et al., 2017), Hong Kong (Ng & Yuen, 2015; Tait et al., 2016) and other Asian and Western countries (Kurth et al., 2019; Yamamoto et al., 2016). The ideal of accepting parents as genuine partners does not always reflect the reality about family–school partnerships. In Hornby and Lafaele’s (2011) review of barriers to parental involvement in education, parents reported that schools expected them to accept whatever decisions were made regarding diagnosis, assessment, and placement of their child. Other authors reported that parents of children with SEN have been viewed as resources and as a means to lessen the effects of limited budgets, but conversely, also as challenging and problematic (Kurth et al., 2019; Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012).

### **Legal Frame of Parental Involvement of Children With SEN in Macao**

Inclusive education has been gaining momentum in Macao since the 2006 publication of the Fundamental Law of Non-Tertiary Education Systems (Government of Macao Special Administrative Region, 2006). The school system in this Chinese city of colonial ancestry is a mix of public, private-subsidized, and private-nonsubsidized schools. While public (government) schools are mandated to accept students with SEN, they comprise only 13% of the schools. To encourage private schools to accept students with SEN, the government grants subsidies according to the number of enrolled students. In the school year of 2017–18, 3% of the total number of students were identified with a disability and placed in inclusive settings, while 1% were placed in special education schools (Government of Macao Special Administrative Region, 2018). Teachers, upon authorization from parents, may redirect a student to the government referral services, which assess the student based on the following factors: IQ; adaptation to school, family, and societal environments; and physical and psychological characteristics. Based on the assessment results, families may be invited to look for a different school, as not all schools are inclusive settings.

The Fundamental Law (Government of Macao Special Administrative Region, 2006) states that school leaders should involve parents in the educational process. The Curriculum Framework for Formal Education of the Local Education System (Government of Macao Special Administrative Region, 2014) declares that parental involvement facilitates the well-being and development of students. The 2020 Administrative Regulation (Government of Macao Special Administrative Region, 2020) that enters into force in September 2021

introduces a set of changes concerning the education of students with SEN and the role of their parents in assessment, placement, and IEP development comparatively to the previous legislation. In the 2020 Regulation, decisions regarding the education of students with SEN are to be made in collaboration with families. A student referral requires explicit parental permission for further action to take place, and parents are granted the right to disagree with the results of the assessment or the recommendations concerning school placement resulting from the assessment. As 87% of the schools, however, belong to the private sector in which inclusive education is not compulsory, school choice for students with SEN is limited.

### **Parent Input in Individual Education Plans in Macao**

Central to the family–school collaboration is the design of IEPs. The IEPs are formal written plans devised usually by a team of educators, students, parents, and other school staff for students eligible for special education services and aimed to guide educators in meeting the particular needs of individual students. The importance of parental participation in the IEP process has been emphasized consistently in recent years, as parents are considered to “have a unique and extremely important perspective on their child’s strengths and needs” (Yell et al., 2020, p. 345).

In Macao, IEPs are mandatory for students with SEN both in regular and special schools in the public or private-subsidized sectors. After accepting a student identified with SEN, schools must prepare an IEP within 30 days. The IEP team is constituted by a team of educators and other professionals, such as psychologists, student counselors, speech therapists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists (Chan, 2019), who are fully responsible for the IEP preparation and implementation.

The 2020 regulation states that parents must be informed about the dates of the IEP meetings and invited to participate if they choose to do so. The new legislation encourages schools to share the IEP with parents and mandates them to provide a copy of the document upon request, but parent participation is voluntary. Despite the advocated increased role of parents in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the IEP in Macao, currently their involvement is restricted and almost dispensable. In some countries (Kurth et al., 2019), students’ IEP includes a section for parents’ input, in which their questions, comments, and concerns are recorded. Regarding the participation of students in the IEP development, and contrary to countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand, or Australia (Alkahtani & Kheirallah, 2016), there is no reference in the Macao legislation regarding the participation of students in any phase of the IEP process.



Over this period of legislative changes concerning parental involvement in education, understanding parents' perceptions about current approaches to involve them in assessment, placement, and IEP development is sought. This will assist in ensuring that schools are able to meet the new legislative requirements for genuine parental collaboration.

### Research Questions

This research investigates parents' perceptions of their participation in the areas of assessment, placement, and IEP development for their child with SEN and their overall satisfaction with school communication and collaboration regarding decision-making for their child's educational plan. The main research questions are:

1. To what extent are parents satisfied with their involvement in the assessment process for their child with SEN?
2. To what extent are parents satisfied with their child's placement?
3. To what extent are parents involved in collaborative IEP development regarding their child's Individual Education Plan?

### Method

This quantitative research employed a questionnaire with 28 items pertaining to parental levels of satisfaction with professional practices selected from the *National Survey of Parental Attitudes to and Experiences of Local and National Special Education Services* (National Council for Special Education, 2010) developed in Ireland. To ensure applicability for use in Macao, only items that related to the objectives of this study and were considered appropriate to the cultural reality of Macao were utilized. This was determined through a discussion including the research team and the staff from a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Child Development Association in Macao. Items used included one from Section 2: Access to School; four from Section 3: Assessment of Your Child's Needs; six items from Section 4: School Policy and Resources; and six and four items respectively about school culture and school contact from Section 5: The Relationship Between You, Your Child, and the School.

In addition, seven items related to "What has been done in order to involve you in the assessment process of your child?" were taken from the *Parent's Views on Special Education Services in Macao*, a questionnaire developed by the NGO to be used with their clients to recognize the experiences that parents had when seeking identification of their child's SEN and access to resources. These were Likert-type scale questions with five levels for agreement (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree), satisfaction (1 = Not at all satisfied; 5 = Very satisfied), and frequency (1 = Never; 5 = Always). Demographic data were also collected.

## Procedure

Data were collected in January 2018 from parents supported by five local NGOs in centers subsidized by the government, providing services for children identified with SEN and their families. Questionnaires were given by the therapists (speech therapist, occupational therapists, psychologists) to parents of school-aged children, that is, those aged three years and above. After being informed of the goals of the research and their rights as participants, parents were asked to fill out the questionnaire while waiting for their child during intervention sessions. All participants filled out a consent form before answering the questionnaire. Their answers were stored in a closed envelope and later returned to the researchers. Families who had finished their services in 2017 were also contacted by phone and invited to complete either a hard copy or an e-version of the questionnaire (through Google Forms).

All questionnaires were available in English and Chinese to allow participants to use their first language while responding. Back translation from Chinese to English was performed by two bilingual colleagues to enhance the accuracy of the language translation. Ninety-two completed questionnaires were received from the centers and a further 23 were completed online, giving a total of 115 usable questionnaires. Due to the process of data collection whereby some therapists did not make a record of the questionnaires that were given to the parents, it is not possible to calculate accurately the response rate. Participants included 22 male and 89 female respondents. They provided information about collaborative home–school decision-making for 76 boys and 33 girls whose ages ranged from 3–10 years (some did not include gender details) who had been diagnosed with SEN. The total number of responses is not always equal to 115 due to missing data.

Almost half of the children had been diagnosed with ASD ( $n = 53$ ), 17 had AD/HD, 10 had dyspraxia, and 13 dyslexia (not all parents included the diagnosis). Three of the children had hearing problems and three had visual problems. Forty-two children had a speech or language delay. Of the children described, 31% attended a public school, 48% a private school with government subsidy, and 41% were in a private school without government subsidy. The highest percentage of children (38%) was in kindergarten (K1 to K3), 23% from Primary 1 to Primary 3, and 11 children (10%) were in Primary 4 to Primary 6. For 30% of children ( $n = 34$ ) no information was provided about school grade.

For the quantitative data analysis, Version 24 of the IBM SPSS® Statistics Software was used. Descriptive analysis was made calculating the frequencies and percentages of the responses to different variables. Crosstabs was used in order to understand the relationship in specific analysis between two nominal

variables. In this case the  $\chi^2$  was employed as it is considered to be an appropriate test to “determine statistically significant differences between frequencies of responses on discrete variables for two independent groups” (Kraska-Miller, 2014, p. 52). This was calculated assuming a level of significance of .05. For the scale variables, the mean and standard deviations were also calculated.

## Findings

The findings report parent data related to the three areas of research. These include responses to items in the questionnaire about their child’s assessment, placement options, and parental involvement in IEP development.

### Assessment

#### *Parental Involvement in Their Child’s Assessment Process*

Parents were asked about the assessment processes they went through to receive an identification for their child and their experiences of obtaining the supports or resources needed for their child. They were requested to rate their satisfaction with three aspects of assessment to identify their child’s needs. Parents tended to indicate average levels of satisfaction with most areas of the assessment process (see Table 1). When asked about their own involvement in the assessment process, 63% of parents reported that they were never, rarely, or only sometimes involved by the people assessing their child.

Table 1. Parental Satisfaction With the Assessment Process

How satisfied were you with:	Dissatisfied			Satisfied		M	SD
	Very	Quite	Neither	Quite	Very		
The assessment of your child’s needs?	1%	18%	69%	8%	3%	2.94	.64
The way in which you were told about the results?	2%	18%	67%	9%	1%	2.88	.61
The information you were given in the report?	0%	20%	64%	7%	2%	2.90	.59

*Note.* Range 1 = very dissatisfied to 5 = very satisfied

Further details about the types of involvement that parents had in the assessment process was sought. The main areas of parental contributions were providing information about their child and completing a questionnaire (see Table 2). Of the parents, 24% said that they were not convinced that enough information had been asked about their family’s needs and priorities, with a further 29% indicating that they had not even been asked about these. Whilst

two-thirds of the parents reported that the results of the assessment were explained to them, 17% said that their questions and doubts were not fully answered and a further 10% did not get any explanations.

Table 2. Parental Involvement in the Assessment Process

	Yes		Yes, w/ Reservations		No		Missing	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Asked me information about my child	88	77%	14	12%	4	4%	9	8%
Asked me to fill in questionnaire(s)	80	70%	11	7%	12	10%	12	10%
Asked me about our family's needs and priorities	16	50%	9	28.1	4	12%	10	9%
Came to visit my house	23	20%	10	8%	68	60%	14	12%
Explained the results of the assessment to me	73	64%	20	17%	11	10%	11	10%
Answered my questions and clarified my doubts	57	50%	34	30%	13	11%	11	10%
Asked me for suggestions	59	51%	28	24%	13	11%	15	13%

*Child's Age of Assessment*

The mean age of assessment was 40 months. A number of children were assessed prior to this (27%), with the remainder being assessed up to eight years. While 75% of children were assessed by the government agency or at the public hospital (42%), many parents reported multiple assessments. Similarly, while 48% of parents indicated that their child was assessed by a speech therapist or doctor (43%), multiple assessments were again reported, including 47% who indicated that their child's assessment was by a special education teacher.

*Accessing Support*

When asked about the process for applying for support or resources for their child once they were assessed, 51 parents considered that this was very or quite difficult, with the remaining 32 parents who responded to this item recording neither/nor. Only two parents found this to be an easy process. Regarding whether parents received any communication by support providers about their child's progress and whether ways were suggested that they could support their child's learning at home, there were some clear differences (see Table 3). Just over one-half of the parents were receiving support by a special needs or resource teacher, with less than 20% having contact with a learning support teacher. Most noticeably, few children were receiving support from

paraprofessionals such as physiotherapy or counselling, and when they were receiving this support, many parents were not getting effective feedback from them. Speech and language and occupational therapists were the groups who communicated most with parents. Significant differences were also found from respondents dependent upon the placement that their child received. Special needs/resource teachers in regular schools were found to communicate more with parents than those in special schools. Speech and language therapists and physiotherapists communicated more with parents when their child was attending a special class in a regular school. No other significant differences regarding communication between professionals and parents were evident with the other professionals.

## **Placement**

### *Parents Satisfaction With Their Child's Placement*

Parents were asked to provide details of the schooling that their child was offered and their views about the suitability of the placement. When parents were asked about their experience of finding a school placement for their child, very few reported that this was an easy process. Of 115 parents, only 11 said that the process was easy or quite easy. The majority of 47% of parents said that it was either very difficult or quite difficult, with a further 42% suggesting that it was neither/nor. Of the children described, 42 were spending most of their time in a regular classroom, 20 were in a special class in a regular school, and 47 were attending a special school.

Parents were also asked whether they thought that the school their child was currently attending was the right type of school for the child's needs and to suggest which school they considered to be the best placement for their child. Crosstabs were used to obtain these data. Of the 47 parents who indicated that their child was attending a special school, 70% proposed that this was the best placement for them, with 30% preferring a special class in a regular school with or without some time in a regular classroom. Of the 42 children who were placed in a regular classroom, 52% considered this to be the best placement for their child, with 14% preferring a special class within the regular school and 33% a mix of both options. Only 20 children were placed in a special class in a regular school. Of these, almost half of parents considered this to be the best option, with 42% proposing some time in the regular classroom as well, and a further two parents suggesting a special school for best placement.

Table 3. Communication by Support Providers on a Child’s Progress or Ways to Help at Home

		Yes		Yes, w/ Res- ervations		No		Missing/ NA	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Special needs/ Resource Tch ( $\chi^2=18.5$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.004$ )	Total Attending	48	44	15	13	12	11	34	31.2
	Regular Classroom	14	33.3	2	4.8	7	16.7	19	45.2
	Special Class in Regular School	9	45	7	35	0	0	4	20
	Special School	25	53.2	6	12.8	5	10.6	11	23.4
Speech/language Therapy ( $\chi^2=12.8$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.046$ )	Total Attending	51	46.8	18	16	10	9.2	30	27.5
	Regular Classroom	18	42.9	4	9.5	3	7.1	17	40.5
	Special Class in Regular School	13	65	5	25	0	0	2	10
	Special School	20	42.6	9	19.1	7	14.9	11	23.4
Occupational Therapy ( $\chi^2=8.46$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.206$ )	Total Attending	53	48.6	13	11.9	12	11	31	28.4
	Regular Classroom	22	52.4	3	7.1	2	4.8	15	35.7
	Special Class in Regular School	10	50	4	20	1	5.0	5	25.0
	Special School	21	44.7	6	12.8	9	19.1	11	23.4
Physiotherapy ( $\chi^2=12.83$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.046$ )	Total Attending	30	27.5	8	7.3	17	15.6	54	49.5
	Regular Classroom	8	19	1	2.4	4	9.5	29	69
	Special Class in Regular School	7	35	1	5	3	15	9	45
	Special School	15	31.9	6	12.8	10	21.3	16	34
Counsellor / Psychologist ( $\chi^2=3.016$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.807$ )	Total Attending	18	16.5	10	9.2	26	23.9	55	50.5
	Regular Classroom	7	16.7	4	9.5	7	16.7	24	57.1
	Special Class in Regular School	4	20	1	5	5	25	10	50
	Special School	7	14.9	5	10.6	14	29.6	21	44.7
Learning Support Tch ( $\chi^2=2.182$ ; $df=6$ ; $sig.=.902$ )	Total Attending	19	17.4	8	7.3	27	24.8	55	49
	Regular Classroom	6	14.3	3	7.1	9	21.4	24	57.1
	Special Class in Regular School	4	20	2	10	4	20	10	50
	Special School	9	19.1	3	6.4	14	29.8	21	44.7

*Support Provision*

When asked their opinion about whether their child required one-on-one support, this increased as expected according to the type of school attended. While this figure was 91% for students in special schools and 80% for those in

a special class, 66% of parents of children in the regular classroom also believed that their child needed this level of support. Regardless of parents' beliefs, only approximately 20% of all these children were receiving one-on-one support in any school attended.

## **Individual Education Plan Development**

### *Parents' Satisfaction With Their Involvement in IEP Development*

Parents responded to a range of questions pertaining to their satisfaction with the ways in which they were invited to be involved in the IEP development process at the school for their child. There were a wide range of responses from the parents.

The IEP spells out a child's learning needs, the services a school will provide, and how progress will be measured. Parents were asked about their knowledge of the IEP and their involvement in developing this. From the data, it was evident that only 60% of the children in this cohort had an IEP. Of these children's parents, the majority indicated that they did not really understand the IEP and their role in the process of developing it (see Table 4). Approximately 60% of parents said they attended planning meetings, with 54% finding them useful in being shown what they needed to do to support their child at home. Just over one-half of the parents said that their child's teacher communicated with them about their child's progress.

Although the highest levels of satisfaction were reported regarding the contact parents had with their child's teacher (Mean = 3.56, sd = .85) and the way the views of a parent are sought and welcomed by the school (Mean = 3.38, sd = .86), all overall responses were within the central neither/nor category. Subsequently, responses were recoded according to whether parents were more or less satisfied, using the median point as the central split. These two categories were then considered in light of where the child spent most of their school day. Of the 109 parents who responded to this section, 60 indicated they felt less satisfied with their child's schooling (Mean = 2.89, sd = .41), while 49 indicated being more satisfied (Mean = 4.08, sd = .44). Concerning where children spent most of their school day (see Table 5), parents of the children attending the regular classroom were less satisfied (58%) than parents of children attending the other two placement options, that is, attending a special class within the regular school or a special school. In the latter two cases, parents indicated high levels of satisfaction.

Table 4. Parents' Understanding About Their Child's IEP

		<i>N</i>	%
Does your child have an IEP?	Yes	69	60
	No	34	30
Do you feel that the school has explained what an IEP is, how the IEP process works and what your role in the IEP process is?	Yes	26	23
	Some but not enough	49	43
	No	19	18
Is the IEP updated and reviewed regularly?	Yes	56	49
	No	39	34
How often is the IEP updated or reviewed?	Once a month	7	6
	Every 3 months	10	9
	Every six months	37	32
	Other	17	15
Do you attend the meetings for planning and modifying your child's IEP?	Yes	66	57
	No	27	26
If you do attend IEP meetings, are you shown what you need to be doing with your child at home?	Yes	62	54
	No	28	24
Does your child's teacher communicate with you about your child's progress and suggest ways you can support your child's learning at home?	Yes	65	57
	No	38	33

*Note.* Not all parents responded to each question

Table 5. Satisfaction Levels Depending Upon School Type.

Satisfaction	Where does your child spend most of his/her time at school?			Chi <sup>2</sup>
	Attending regular classroom	Attending a special class in regular school	Attending a special school	
Less Satisfied	23 (57.5%)	13 (15%)	21 (21%)	1.84, <i>p</i> = .39
More Satisfied	17 (42.5%)	7 (85%)	23 (79%)	

*Modifications or Differentiations to the Curriculum*

Parents were further asked about whether they believed that the school their child was attending had made any modifications or adaptations to the classroom environment or teaching strategies to better suit their child's need. Overall, 44% of parents said that modifications had been made, while 16% said that none were made. Many (40%) did not respond to this item, potentially indicating that they may not know. The majority of the nonresponses



occurred from parents of children in a special class ( $n = 15/17$ ) or special school ( $n = 29/37$ ), although parents of the 26 of the 34 children in regular classes who responded to this item indicated that modifications or changes to teaching strategies had occurred.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore family–school collaboration in the three crucial areas of assessment, placement, and IEP development for children identified with SEN in Macao. Three key findings emerged from the study: (1) parents do not question the outcome of the assessment process—however, they identify several problems before and during the assessment, namely lack of involvement in the process, limited communication from the assessors, lack of information, and poor timing; (2) parents with children attending less inclusive environments show satisfaction with the school placement, while parents with children identified with SEN and attending regular classroom settings are less satisfied with the school placement; and (3) parents state that there are limited opportunities to be involved in the construction of the IEP and in the school’s decision-making processes.

### Assessment Process

The assessment process in Macao is quite structured, with parents or a school (or kindergarten) to initiating this. Parents identified the existence of long delays in their children being assessed, a problem that has been reported in previous studies (Oswald et al., 2017; Sansosti et al., 2012). This process could take up to six months, but in many countries, parents are able to use formal channels to appeal if the timeframe for assessment is not observed. In Macao, though, such an appeal process is not available.

The parents were neither positive nor negative regarding the outcome of the assessment process. Parent–school services, communication channels, and the time delays in terms of getting their child’s assessment were the most negative. A lack of communication between school professionals, assessment services, and parents seemed to exist, with a majority of parents stating that they were not involved in the assessment process and in many instances were not asked to provide any details about the child at home. According to Crawford and Simonoff (2003), at the age range from 3–10 years, the focus of the assessment and intervention should be on the family rather than on the child. In order to support the development of the child, teachers should communicate with the child’s parents and, if possible, other family members. Collier et al. (2015), however, suggested that listening to parents and trying to understand

the difficulties of their home lives should have a positive impact on parents' involvement. Just half of the parents in this study, though, said that they were required to provide information about the family characteristics, functions, needs, and preferences to the assessors or the school.

With a third of participants stating that they did not receive adequate feedback from the assessment services, it is possible that parents are receiving insufficient practical, informational, and emotional support to cope with their child's difficulties. Considering that parents can make a vital contribution in identifying problems and finding solutions (Yell et al., 2020), it seems well reasoned to involve them throughout the assessment process. Keeping parents uninvolved further primes feelings of unsupportiveness and isolation and decreases their satisfaction with the school professionals, as well as their disposition to share their concerns. Parents who do not get support from the educational system are less likely to cope well with their child's overall education (Crawford & Simonoff, 2003).

A further negative response by the parents was the perception of a lack of communication and information sharing across services, causing them to have to take their child to multiple assessments performed by different services that do not link with each other. It is important to integrate all the relevant information, regardless of being collected by a government or private agency, so as to reduce the strain on parents and children caused by successive appointments with different professionals. Authors such as Crawford and Simonoff (2003) suggest the introduction of a coordinator or link worker for children with SEN, working with parents, teachers, and paraprofessionals. This is an appealing model and justifies future consideration for application in Macao.

### **Satisfaction With Placements**

Parents in this study considered finding a school for their child challenging. In Macao, 86% of the schools are private-subsidized (Correia et al., 2019). These schools are not forced to accept students with SEN, and the school principals may ask parents to look for a more appropriate school for their child after the assessment has been concluded. Lack of resources, unwelcoming school cultures, and a highly competitive environment are among the explanations previously identified in Macao (Correia et al., 2019; Teixeira et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2017) for this common practice of rejecting students with SEN.

While accepting the placements offered, the results show that the parents in this study whose children were placed in special classes in regular schools or special education schools considered this to be the most appropriate placement for their child compared to those whose children were experiencing full inclusion. A similar finding was noted in Germany by Paseka and Schwab

(2020), who found that parents perceived a better understanding of their child by teachers and that they were provided more suitable support when their child was placed in a specialist class in a regular school rather than in a general class.

Of the 42 children who were placed in a regular classroom, 52% considered this to be the best placement for their child with 14% preferring a special class within the regular school and 33% a mix of both options. Only 20 children were placed in a special class in a regular school. Of these, almost half of parents considered this to be the best option, with 42% proposing some time in the regular classroom as well, and a further two parents suggesting a special school for best placement. Approximately two-thirds of the parents of children with SEN attending special education schools agreed that this was an appropriate setting to educate their child. They seem to be open to other possibilities, though, with one-third expressing preference for placing their child in a special class within a regular school in which the child is in contact with their nonexceptional same-age peers. For those placed in a class of students with and without SEN, only half of the parents considered this to be the best placement option, with the remainder preferring either a special class within a regular school or a mix of both. None of these parents proposed a special school for their child. Regardless of the type of placement, nevertheless, and the high belief that their child required one-to-one support, individual support was very limited across all schools, which maybe a key factor for measuring parents' satisfaction.

The new 2020 Administrative Regulation does not introduce significant changes regarding the placement of students after being assessed with SEN. Placement decisions require consultation with families but, as in Hornby and Lafaele's research (2011), parents reported that schools expect them to accept the school's decisions regarding the placement offered for their child. The 2020 Administrative Regulation states that general education schools "...should adapt to the policies related to special education" (Chapter I, Art. 4), namely regarding the admission of students with SEN. This will need to be monitored closely as the law evolves to ensure compliance.

### **Involvement in the Child's Individual Education Plan and in General Decision-Making**

The findings of this study suggest that meetings with parents are mainly focused on compliance with the law rather than providing opportunities for school professionals and parents to engage collaboratively in developing the IEP. These findings are consistent with results of other studies identifying gaps between policy and implementation of IEPs (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Studies conducted by Ju et al. (2018) and Cavendish and Connor (2018) proposed that several aspects can impact the process of involving parents in the IEP

implementation, such as the use of professional jargon, technical terminology without explicit explanations to parents, communication styles at meetings, language barriers, and time constraints due to parents' work schedules. In this study, most of these issues were also present; thus it is vital that school professionals address them and find ways to overcome any possible obstacles that inhibit full partnerships with parents.

The data revealed several aspects in need of improvement regarding the use of an IEP: (1) although the Macao legislation stipulates that all students with SEN are entitled to an IEP, they are not a generalized practice in Macao schools; (2) parents do not understand the IEP purpose and their role in it; and (3) schools are not inviting parents to collaborate in its preparation or to support their child's learning at home.

Out of 103 responses, only 69 parents reported that their child had an IEP, and 26 considered that the school had explained what an IEP is, how the IEP process works, and what their role was in the process. While the IEP has been an integral part of SEN provision in most countries, in some regions there is now a growing tendency to move away from the sole use of IEPs towards overarching personalized learning support plans developed through positive partnerships (Bhargava, 2016). In Macao, though, the IEP is an important and key aspect of the development of inclusion, as teachers are still learning how to accommodate children with and without SEN in the classroom.

Communication with parents should surpass the formality of passing on the assessment report, and school professionals should treat them as collaborators. It is of vital importance that schools initiate the process of developing conditions for constructive collaboration with parents and families. Parents, teachers, and other support staff should be given opportunities to engage in a joint discussion using models of teamwork and collaboration in the assessment and intervention processes (Liang et al., 2020; Love et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2014). Professionals should advocate the centrality of the families in the process of assessment and intervention rather than addressing parents as peripheral partners.

For instance, to facilitate the active participation of parents in the IEP meeting, Cavendish and Connor (2018) suggest that schools could provide a pre-IEP meeting document as part of the protocol in IEP development. This document with information about the purposes and structure of the meeting and space for suggestions and recommendations could be emailed to parents in parallel with telephone explanations. In so doing, schools would provide parents with a sharper understanding of the purpose of the meeting and their role in it. Parents would have time to digest the information and discuss their participation within the family as a preparation for the meeting. Listening to parents'

suggestions on appropriate environmental and teaching modifications also gives professionals the opportunity to engage in more focused and constructive discussions with parents, which will contribute to further the collaboration between parties. Encouraging parents to participate in the development and implementation of the IEP enables them to understand how important their role is and how skillful they are in contributing to their children's success. As noted by Azad and colleagues (2018), parents of children with SEN expect that their suggestions and recommendations are valued and implemented.

Cultural contexts have a strong influence on parents' approaches to education for their children (Epstein, 2001; Ratliffe & Ponte, 2018). Considering that parents stated that finding a school for their child was challenging, it might be possible that the actual placement was not their first choice. In some countries such as Germany, parents are guaranteed a right to have their child attend an inclusive school, but they cannot choose the school itself (Paseka & Schwab, 2020). In Macao, the converse is applied, as once the child has been determined suitable for a regular or special school, parents need to find their own school that is willing to accept their child. As the results show parents' conformity with the placement, this may be due in part to the challenges they experienced in endeavoring to locate a school to accept their child. Accepting placement offers might also be a sign of respect for educators' authority in a culture inspired by Confucian values (Park & Chesla, 2007; Roche et al., 2018). In China, Hong Kong, and Macao, researchers have encountered attitudes of hesitation and reservation towards people with disabilities from school leaders, teachers, students, and parents (Kuok et al., 2020; Monteiro et al., 2018; Tait et al., 2016). Due to the stigma against people with disabilities in these regions (Tait et al., 2014) parents might consider that their children are more protected from rejection experiences in a more safeguarded environment. Hooja (2009) also found parents in India to be hesitant and somewhat skeptical if faced with the prospect of inclusive education for their child. Parents' preferences may also result from insufficient knowledge about other placement options and alternative educational provision, services, and resources as reported by previous research (Ju et al., 2018), as well as their reluctance to challenge authority.

Finally, class size might further be an important factor for parents' placement preferences in Macao, as in regular settings, large class sizes impede teachers from offering enough time to assist individual students according to their needs. This might also be a strong justification for parents' acceptance of special education schools or integrated environments rather than inclusive settings, as the findings pointed out that only approximately half of the children of surveyed parents attending regular settings have an IEP. Future research is needed to better understand the reasons why parents are not distinctively preferring full inclusion.

## Conclusion

The authors acknowledge that the generalization potential of the findings and conclusions are limited. The unique cultural background found in Macao, together with the extremely high percentage of private versus government schools, may not exist in many regions. Follow-up research which is contextualized for a specific country and region is essential for education systems to identify how they might best support both schools and families given their own distinctive context. In Macao, considerable further research will be needed to investigate the changing involvement of parents and families as the new law evolves to ensure that it is being enacted as expected.

At this stage, prior to implementation of the new law, the findings of this research in Macao revealed that, out of the high numbers of parents who considered that their child required one-on-one support, only approximately one fifth were receiving this, regardless of their child's current school placement. In addition, less than half of the parents indicated that the school had made any modifications or adaptations to the classroom environment or teaching strategies to better suit their child's needs. The lack of collaborative involvement parents reported in their child's education and IEP development was also a major concern for parents who did not feel that their contribution was welcomed or allowed. Finding a school placement for their child was also difficult for half the parents, with only four parents reporting this process to be easy. All of these concerns will need to be addressed if the new law is to be implemented as intended.

A word of caution would seem pertinent regarding the amount of choice given to parents about school placement options for their child with SEN within the 2020 Administrative Regulation. A truly inclusive schooling system would require that all neighborhood schools provide sufficient support to cater to the needs of local children enrolling in them. According to an evaluation of the increased parent freedom of choice now being offered in many countries including Finland, though, Lempinen and Niemi (2018) concluded that it "seems that the more choice parents have, the more the system is likely to encourage the social segregation of children with different kinds of educational needs" (p. 114). They also found that the more intensive support parents felt their child needed, the more importance they placed on alternative special education placements rather than placement in the regular local school.

Given the challenges experienced by these parents in Macao of finding an appropriate school that provides support and resources with effective modifications, and a lack of opportunity to be involved in genuine decision-making for their child, this may encourage them to seek alternative school placements

rather than an inclusive approach. Such a shift might see the new law—designed to improve collaboration for greater inclusion—have the potential to result in increased placement of students with SEN in special schools. When governments promote family–school collaborations, as is being done in the new law, it is critical to also develop resources and strategies to support these requirements. Implementation of the new law in Macao will need scrutiny and enhanced support structures to ensure that it achieves its aim for improved parent–school collaboration and inclusive practices.

Furthermore, schools need to reflect on their values, beliefs, and practices if they are to become inclusionary environments. A review of the current use of the IEP rather than the development of personalized learning support plans (that include four plans related to the individual education plans, transition plans, risk management plans, and individual behavior support plans) may be timely to ensure the best approach to developing inclusive schools. As the predominant culture of respect and acceptance for educators’ authority in Asian cultures such as Macao might avert parents from advocating for their child’s right to be educated with equity and quality, it is the responsibility of schools to foster home–school partnerships and welcome parents to fully participate in the education of their child and the development of support plans. Changing the culture to invite greater parental collaboration might be a crucial step in making Macao schools more responsive to the educational needs of diverse learners according to the intent of the new law.

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Ana Correia is an associate professor at the University of Saint Joseph, Macao. Her research interests include inclusive education, intercultural responsiveness, gender studies, and teacher education. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Ana Correia via email at [ana.correia@usj.edu.mo](mailto:ana.correia@usj.edu.mo)

Vitor Teixeira is an associate professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Saint Joseph (USJ), Macao. His research interests include children's time use, children's development, and inclusive education.

Chris Forlin is an international consultant on inclusive education. She has extensive experience working with governments, educational systems, and schools to foster effective inclusive practices.