

# CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MACAO: A JOURNEY OF A THOUSAND MILES

Correia, Ana M.\* & Teixeira, Vitor S.\*\*

## Abstract

Since the establishment of St. Paul's College, the first Western-like University in East Asia, Catholic education has had an enduring presence in Macao's educational landscape. Filling the gap in educational provision during the period of Portuguese administration, Catholic schools still comprise 36.4% of the non-tertiary educational service delivery in the Macao Special Administrative Region. As in many other regions, these schools emerged in Macao out of a concern for the education of the poor and the most vulnerable. However, over time the educational projects of Catholic schools have evolved to adapt to a community which is by and far non-Catholic. At present time the local atmosphere of academic competition and social selectivity flows into Catholic schools, altering their identity and narrowing their educational mission. This paper discusses the state of Catholic schooling in Macao concerning one of the tenets of Catholicism: the inclusion of and service to those who are in poverty or marginalised due to their social, cultural, political or personal differences. The present empirical research aims in particular to understand how Catholic schools in Macao are meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Weaknesses concerning the gap between principles and practices are identified. Building on cross-national experiences, suggestions for best practices towards inclusive education are presented.

Keywords: Macao; Catholic schools; Catholic education; Inclusive schools; Inclusive education

## Introduction

The social history of Macao as a bridge connecting the Western and the Asian world can be studied through the lens of education. As far as it concerns the focus of this study, it is not possible to separate

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\* Associate Professor in the School of Education of the University of Saint Joseph.

\*\* Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Saint Joseph.

the state of Catholic schools in Macao from the city's colonial history under Portuguese administration. The settlement of the enclave in 1557 by Portugal steered the establishment of Jesuits on their way to China and the Asia Pacific region, together with other Catholic congregations such as the Dominicans, the Salesians, the Canossian sisters and the Augustinians. The foundation of St. Paul's College, the first Western-like University in East Asia, turned sixteenth century Macao into a major training centre for missionaries who would depart to different Asian countries to spread the Gospel. Catholicism has afterwards had an enduring presence in Macao, and its major sphere of activity has been in education.

Filling the gap in educational provision during the period of Portuguese administration, several Catholic schools, some of them founded more than a hundred years ago, developed into solid and reputable educational institutions with a unique identity and high prestige. As in many other regions, these schools emerged out of a concern for the education of the poor and the most vulnerable. However, over time they have evolved to adapt to a community which is predominantly non-Catholic. The widespread practice of selective admissions and the atmosphere of academic competition flows today into most of them, altering their identity and narrowing their educational endeavour.

Since the handover to China in 1999 the educational reform enforced significant standardised changes in the private sector of education, which have decreased the autonomy of the Catholic schools in domains which earlier were subject to variation from school to school. Since the 15 years of free schooling took over in 2007, all local private schools were given the option to adhere to the Local School Regimen and collect the respective annual subsidy to cover costs of educational services, equipment, school renovations and rebuilding. Conversely, those schools have to abide with government bylaws and regulations regarding curriculum organisation, teaching qualifications, policies concerning the school calendar, class size directives, teacher/student ratio, and others.

One of the current items in the agenda of policy-makers concerns the number of students diagnosed with learning difficulties and disabilities who are not offered a place in local schools. In respect to inclusivity, i.e. the offering of special education for students with special or exceptional needs in the regular classroom or school, each private school has its own indoor policy and practice. They are not required by law to accept and educate all students, and they may refuse entrance to any student; many schools indeed do so from kindergarten to the senior secondary level.

The fact that Catholic schools comprise 36.4 per cent of the non-tertiary educational service delivery in the Macao Special Administrative Region, and that of the existing 27 registered Catholic schools only some are currently truly responding to the government call for more inclusive services within the

school settings, raises the question of whether Catholic schools are fulfilling their true mission in Macao. The present paper discusses the state of Catholic schooling in Macao concerning one of the tenets of Catholicism: the inclusion of and service to those who are in poverty or marginalised due to their social, cultural, political or personal differences. The present research aims to understand how Catholic schools in Macao are meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and disabilities.

### **Schooling and Catholic education in Macao**

The approach of *laissez-faire* and non-interventionism regarding the education of Macao population under the colonial period is well documented (Bray & Koo, 2004; Chi-Hou, 2004; Lau, 2009; Morrison, 2003). The Portuguese administration was barely concerned with the schooling of the Portuguese speaking population, while the resident Chinese were basically left to their own devices. Macao has never had a centralised educational authority, thus a universal, compulsory educational system was not ever implemented. Education developed as a private initiative, with the government investment circumscribed to a very few official schools as from the mid twentieth century onwards, and whose Portuguese-based curriculum had little meaning for the local community. On the threshold of the new millennium, 6,4 per cent of the local students (N=92801) were attending 15 public schools, while the remaining 93,5% (N=92801) were enrolled in 74 private schools (Direção dos Serviços de Educação e Juventude, 2003).

As the official schools only catered for a tiny percentage of the population, a large number of private schools thrived through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often run by religious, charitable and political organizations, associations, cooperatives, and individuals. Most of those schools had a Catholic ethos, and were created with the clear goal of providing education for the poor and marginalised, following the true mission of Catholicism.

The first school recorded in history was a nursery school in 1848 run by the Santa Clara sisters, and later by the Canossian sisters, called Home of Santa Rosa de Lima (Lau, 2009). This school, educating mainly orphaned girls of Portuguese descent, was handed over in 1932 to the Franciscan sisters. In 1911 the first Catholic school catering for the Chinese population was created in Taipa – D. João Paulino – followed by several others, namely Kong Kao school, the Chinese section of St. Joseph College and the School of Fatima for girls in 1933. Canossa school was extended to open a Chinese section in 1935 “to meet the needs of local Chinese children and those coming to live in Macao as a result of the 9.18 (September 18<sup>th</sup>) Incident in the mainland [China]” (Lau, 2009, p.8). During the 1950s and 1960s the political turmoil in the mainland China brought thousands of immigrants to Macao, which led the Catholic church to open several schools in poor districts charging

no or small tuition fees (Lau, 2009, p. 22). Among the schools created during this period were the Santa Teresa's school, the São João de Brito's school, the Estrela do Mar school, the Matteo Ricci College, the Sacred Heart of Mary school, the St. Joseph Primary School in Ká Hó, and the Sta. Mazarello school.

The history of Catholic schools in Macau shows that at their roots these schools were focused on those left behind by the society – the poor, the girls, the working adults, and the refugees from the civil and international war conflicts. While the colonial administration remained indifferent to the lack of educational provision and illiteracy among the adult population - and refused to recognise the private schools run by the Chinese (Lau, 2009) – the Christian schools, and in particular the Catholic ones, made substantial efforts to provide access to education to the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

Following a drastic decline in birth-rate in the 1970s, and given the non-supportive approach of the Portuguese administration, private schools, and among them the Catholic ones, were faced with a fragile financial situation. Some of them merged with others, strengthening and expanding their facilities and thus becoming attractive in the eyes of the community. In the following decade, the more open policy in the mainland China brought a new wave of immigration into the city which in turn led to a shortage of school places. By the end of the 1980s it was common to count 60 or even 70 students in both primary and secondary classrooms. Near the handover (1999), the Portuguese administration, responding to the demand from non-governmental organisations (Lau, 2009, p. 28), gradually prepared the Education Law, leading to the implementation of the 10 year free education policy. Private schools were invited to join the public school support network. The majority of them chose to benefit from the scheme for free education, while some others preferred to avoid government scrutiny and thus protect their autonomy. According to the most recent published data (Direção dos Serviços de Educação e Juventude, 2015) 10 schools have not adhered to the free education system.

Private schools in Macao, both Catholic and non-Catholic, played a very important role in Macao's social and economic development in the past centuries, while facing long periods of scarcity. However, growing and operating under such disadvantageous conditions have had their costs, such as responding to conservative views of parents, accepting insufficiently prepared teachers, competing with other schools for students and for donations, etc. Long lasting tradition turned some of the private schools, in particular some Catholic schools, into highly prestigious institutions, operating for many decades as independent entities with their own mission, tradition, structure, rules and regulations.

As Chi-Hou reported in 2004, Macau parents “tend to prefer religious schools. The better off upper- and middle-class families, in particular, wish to send their children to religious schools, because of their perceived image of better discipline and quality of education” (Chi-Hou, 2004, p. 558). As there are still no territory-wide open examinations, the families’ judgment about the schools is based on subjective impressions built on the school’s “good name”. The methods used by the schools, including some Catholic schools, to gain and sustain a positive image in the community, when assessed from a Catholic-based set of values are certainly not unquestionable. These methods may include selecting students as early as pre-school level (Chi-Hou, 2004), and in-grade retention at higher levels (OECD, 2012), adopting a strongly academic orientation, embracing a traditional teacher-centred approach, supposedly to maximize the in class delivery time, requiring students to complete daily extra-work at home, and expelling those children and adolescents considered weak in social, behavioural or cognitive skills (Morrison, 2003).

In recent years, the educational reform has enforced significant standardisation changes in the private sector of education, which have improved the schooling system (Lau, 2009; Chi-Hou, 2004). However, given the diversity and complexity of the contemporary state of education in Macao, there is still a long way to go.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, 69,516 students received non-tertiary education from kindergarten to senior secondary school. Together with the students enrolled in the same academic year in higher education, this is nearly a sixth of the Macao population. There are currently 74 school units in Macao, only 13 per cent of which (N=10) are public schools, with 3,5 per cent of the student population (N=2469). The private schools are 64 and comprise 87 per cent of the total number of schools, with 96,4 per cent of the total student population (N=67047). Catholic schools administer 36,4 per cent of the total school units (N=27) attended by 38,4 per cent of students (N=26706). Table 1 presents an overview of Macao’s educational landscape in terms of types of schools and enrolled students.

**Table 1 Students in schools in Macau, 2015<sup>1</sup>**

	Schools		Students					
	Total	Providing Inclusive Education	Infant K1-K3	Primary P1-P6	Junior Secondary	Senior Secondary	Special Education	Total Students
<b>All schools</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>14552</b>	<b>24252</b>	<b>14077</b>	<b>16011</b>	<b>624</b>	<b>69516</b>
Government schools	10	8	381	556	452	766	314	2469
Private schools providing free education	54	23	11453	19946	11250	12982	307	55938
Private schools not providing free education	10	7	2718	3750	2375	2263	3	11109
<b>Catholic schools</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5626</b>	<b>10294</b>	<b>5339</b>	<b>5393</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>26706</b>
<b>Inclusive Education</b>		<b>38</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>806</b>

Source: Compiled from data from the Macao Education and Youth Affairs Bureau (Direção-dos-Serviços-de-Educação-e-Juventude, 2015)

Although only 4,7 per cent of the Macao population professes Catholicism (Gabinete de Comunicação Social, 2015), Catholic schools serve a large proportion of the students, precisely 38,4 per cent. In a city where the majority of the population follows Confucianism and affirms its belief in Buddhism or Daoism, Catholic schools-stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, and school staff – have been a small minority ever since the schools were founded. As Chi-Hou mentions: “most of the students and teachers are of Chinese origin and not necessarily religious believers” (Chi-Hou, 2004, p. 558).

Catholic identity in schools that serve non-Catholic communities is expected to be slightly different from Catholic identity in schools immersed in Catholic communities. Some elements of school identity and culture might be compromised if the surrounding community is significantly different from the culture the school embraces (Clark & Smrekar, 2014). Clark and Smrekar refer to the exchange effect between the school and the community: “an effect that comes from training children in religious and social values may flow to the community, and the effect of cultural experiences including language, music, and social history may flow into the school” (2014, p. 188). Chi-Hou (2004) supports this dynamic of dialogue, stating that “most Chinese teachers find the Ten Commandments quite compatible with the ideals of Confucian ethics” (p. 558), emphasising primarily

<sup>1</sup> Out of the 74 schools registered at DSEJ, many are subdivided into three, four or five different branches across the city. Each branch has his/her own administrative team, staff, and facilities. Some schools are divided according to the language medium, Cantonese and English, and some are divided according to the level of instruction, infant, primary, junior secondary and senior secondary. Although officially the number of Catholic schools is 27, there are actually 35 Catholic schools, including branches. The total number of schools in Macao, including branches, is 135.

the influence of Confucianism over Catholicism: “In a sense it is fair to say that Catholicism in Macau has become acculturated, to the extent that Christian values have been absorbed into the core values of the Confucian life of the Chinese people, rather the other way around” (idem). According to Chi-Hou, this is due to the path of tolerance and openness to the Chinese culture displayed by the first Jesuit missionaries who entered China in the sixteenth century, which has continued ever since. The religious dialogue between Catholics and non-Catholics in Macao has been reported widely by historians and scholars (Cheng, 2003; Lau, 2009; Robertis & Morrison, 2009; Teixeira, 1982). Cheng (2001), for instance, describes the city as a “bricolage of religious faiths [that not only indicates its] syncretic cultural matrices and religious compromise among one another’s belief systems, but also testifies to a negotiated accommodation of East-West religious praxis” (p. 325). The toleration of the diverse beliefs that have been central to the religious life of the city, has become inherent to the ethos of local Catholic schools.

### **Inclusive education – restructuring cultures, policies and practices**

The movement towards full inclusion of children with disabilities or other exceptionalities in regular classroom settings began in countries such as Canada, United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia during the 1990s. In many Asian countries, however, it is still at the initial stages of implementation (Cheung, Wu, & Hui, 2015; Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Guang-xue, 2013). According to (Kritzer, 2011; Kritzer, 2012) special education in mainland China resembles that of the United States in 1975. Inclusion calls for the need to create equitable educational opportunities for all children in mainstream schools, regardless of their physical, mental, social or psychological disabilities or exceptionalities. Although more and more countries are inclined to contemplate inclusive education in their political agendas, different interpretations of the concept are often presented. Mitchell (2003) expressed concern that these different interpretations may hinder the value of the concept at the classroom level – with some countries defining it more loosely as *integration* – and ultimately restrict the amount of contact hours between the students with SEN and their peers.

The underlying philosophy driving inclusion – the “process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8-9) – follows the United Nations Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights’ statement declaring that all human beings have the right to an education regardless of their potential, and that education is a fundamental precondition to human development and a basis for human dignity (UNESCO, 1966, p. 66).

This humanist and social justice based approach to human diversity is not as controversial in principle as the *where, when, how, and for whom* it is to be applied. As regards the development of inclusive schools, the challenges and obstacles are multiple and have been widely reported (Sharma et al., 2013). The inclusion philosophy tends to contrast with the competitive and academic emphasis of the mainstream schools in our globalised world – Hong Kong and Macao included. In addition, the stress placed worldwide on attaining high academic standards and accountability is perhaps even more accentuated in Hong Kong and Macao SAR, due to the particular cultural features and contemporary social developmental trends in the two cities. Salili, Chiu and Lai (2001) in a study comparing goal orientations of Canadian and Hong Kong students, concluded that competition was more intense in HK schools, where “a harsh education system is particularly damaging for students with low ability or special needs” (p. 15). Intensively competitive examinations are considered the benchmark of school quality, and parents not only accept it as a price children need to pay to succeed, but also complain if teachers do not give ‘enough’ homework. In Macao there are countless private after-school learning centres, where the children are sent by their parents because it is widely believed that *only whose who work hard can be high achievers*. According to Phillipson (2007), parents from the Confucian-heritage classroom place a greater emphasis than in the West on the training of their children, and have higher expectations for their children compared with parents from the West. Against this cultural background, those who do not achieve in the areas of mathematics, science and languages become vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. They are not only hindered in their individual prospects for a bright future, but are also considered to be jeopardizing their families’ hopes and expectations. Since the individuals path is not separated from the family’s, a child’s failure in school, for whatever reason, might be seen as having a negative effect on the whole family. Parents of children with disabilities or exceptionalities tend even more so to confine their difficulties to the private sphere, and usually do not exercise their right to demand an equitable education for their children.

In the Asia-Pacific region, countries such as Vietnam, India, China, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, and South Korea have been debating inclusive education since the 1990s. The existing wide-ranging policies across countries in the region (Cheung & Hui, 2007) mirrored the particular obstacles faced by each society to create less restrictive environments for children with SEN. In Hong Kong SAR, for instance, inclusive education has been mostly interpreted as integration, a concept that encourages mainstream schools to admit as far as possible children who require special needs education as much as possible, but excludes some types of disabilities from the authorised integration scheme. Referring to the Hong Kong policy on inclusive education, Don-il Kim (2003) wrote that mainstream schools were not prepared to admit students with SEN, especially those with more severe disabilities, and many parents also preferred to have their children in special schools or segregated settings, to avoid issues of prejudice and discrimination. In China the Special Education schools target



students with specific categories of special education needs, and provide support for the regular schools providing inclusive settings (Kritzer, 2011).

Macao SAR legislation regarding special education is currently undergoing a process of change. The current legislation dates back to 2006 (Lei n° 9/2006, article 12), and states that special education is “developed, preferably, integrated in regular schools, but can also take place in institutions of special education, in different forms”. The 2006 bylaw does not mention inclusive education, and follows a segregated model with two parallel paths: regular schools and “special education institutions”. In March 2015, the government launched a Consultation Document (Região Administrativa Especial de Macau, 2015) and invited the population to participate in a public debate about special education. The Consultation Document proposed to place the children with special education needs in inclusive settings according to three distinct categories:

1. students with special education needs being fully included in the regular classrooms
2. students with special education needs being educated in the “small class of special education”
3. students with special education needs being educated in “special education classes”

While the first category refers to the full inclusion of students in regular classrooms, the second points out to the placement of special education needs students in regular schools with a common curriculum but different classes, thus restricting contact between regular students and special education needs students. The third category refers to the placement of special education needs’ students in segregated classes and separate curriculum, which is contrary to the inclusive philosophy of education. The “special education class” envisages a curricular adjustment, and aims to develop students’ self-reliance, autonomy and communication skills rather than subject knowledge.

Currently, inclusion “in Macau does not necessarily mean placing students with special needs in the same classes as regular students, but to have them study in regular schools with other students” (Cheung et al., 2015, p, 3). It is apparent that inclusive education is one of the possible types of special education in Macao SAR, and the two systems, of inclusive education and special/segregated education, will likely be retained in the near future.

A report on the status of inclusive education commissioned by the Youth and Education Bureau and produced by the Special Learning Needs and Inclusive Education Centre of the Hong Kong Institute of Education concludes that most of the teachers in Macao do not agree with the core values of inclusive education (HKIE, 2012). The report points out that parents of special education needs’

children favour inclusion, while parents of regular children are against mainstreaming children with disabilities (Hooja, 2009).

The reaction of regular children to the presence of exceptional classmates is one of the main concerns expressed by the parents of children with disabilities (Hooja, 2009). The above mentioned report (HKIE, 2012) identified discrimination and bullying by peers as salient problems in Macau inclusive schools.

Other barriers to developing inclusive practices are related to the school structure and culture. Many schools still work with large classes, follow predominantly teacher-centred pedagogies, avoid active participation of students and collaborative work, and place a heavy weight on academic outcomes. The lack of teachers' preparation is also a barrier to create more inclusive practices, because teachers may not feel comfortable with teamwork (Scanlan, 2009).

### **Catholic social teaching and inclusivity**

The Pope Paul VI's Declaration on Christian Education (1965) states that "all men of every race, condition and age, since they enjoy the dignity of a human being, have an inalienable right to an education" (PaulVI, 1965), and highlights the necessity "of extending the needs of a suitable education and training to everyone in all parts of the world" (idem, p. 2). Indeed the term Catholic, as Scanlan (2013, p. 196) states, comes from *kata holos*, literally "welcoming everyone", including the poor and the marginalised by society for their gender, ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, individual exceptionalities and other differences. In its ecclesial dimension Catholic schools are open for all children, especially those who are weakest, and socially or individually disadvantaged.

Pope Francis' speech at the International Congress *Educating today and tomorrow: a passion renewed*, under the sponsorship of the Congregation for Catholic Education (Francis, 2015) called for an education with open horizons, because "closeness is not ever beneficial". In his speech Pope Francis disapproved of the general positivist trend within education that privileges the inculcation of concepts, while leaving other human expressions behind. Schools cannot merely teach students to reason well. They also need to teach lifelong values and habits. By the same token, schools cannot merely target those who were born within the walls of an elitist culture, a culture that protects the insiders and excludes the outsiders. Nobody can be excluded from the right to being educated, said Pope Francis, especially those who carry a "wounded humanity", because "our salvation comes from a man wounded on the cross" (Francis, 2015). Embracing those who have wounded hearts or

wounded bodies, such as children with cognitive, emotional, social or physical disabilities, is not just an act of mercy, it is an act of social justice.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST), the body of papal documents published on a range of social issues going back to the nineteenth century, calls for putting the poor and vulnerable first. We will rely on CST to consider that Catholic schools, in principle, due to their Catholic values and ecclesial mission, should not just accept students with disabilities but also commit themselves to being pioneers in this area, raising their voice to advocate for effective inclusive policies and practices in Macao. Promoting the universal value and dignity of every human life and dignity is especially important in cultures where inclusive practices are not accepted unconditionally by the society.

The three core ideas of Catholic Social Teaching with regards to inclusive education are (a) human dignity; (b) the common good; and (c) a preferential option for the marginalised (Scanlan & Tichy, 2014). The right to life is the first and fundamental principle of human rights, and can not be dissociated from the right to a life with dignity. Every person must be respected and protected regardless of his or her mental or physical condition. Human dignity does not depend on how well each human being performs or achieves – it is inherent to the person we are (John-Paul-II, 1991). Arising from the principle of human dignity is the common good. The dignity of a person will not be realised in isolation from the other human beings. The common good is a good that connects each individual to society and requires society to be responsive for each of its members. Pope Benedictus XVI unfolds the concept: “To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically, and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or “city”” (Benedict-XVI, 2009). Each person belongs to a community that must act according to the principles of equity and social justice in all its aspects, including the right to education in the sense of integral human and social development. The third dimension of CST refers to the obligation to protect, instruct and serve those who suffer from abandonment, violence or marginalisation within society due to various reasons such as discriminatory political, economic, or religious systems, or cultural bias. Undoubtedly, the principles of CST are in line with Scanlan’s statement advocating that “fostering effective and inclusive service delivery systems to meet students’ special needs is a fundamental obligation of Catholic elementary and secondary schools” (2009, p. 536). Long and Schuttloffel (2006) also considered that “it is the obligation of all members of the Christian community to develop a deeper understanding of those with disabilities and to work to integrate them into society. This obligation includes integrating students with special needs into Catholic schools and parish education programs” (p. 450).

### **The state of inclusive education in Macao Catholic schools**

The percentage of students diagnosed with special education needs in Macao is extremely low in comparison with other countries. For instance, in the UK, 17.9 per cent of students in 2014 had special education needs (Department for Education, 2014), whereas in the USA the National Center for Education Statistics refers to 13 per cent of children with disabilities enrolled in public schools in the school year of 2012-2013 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). In Macao, the most recent data published by DSEJ (2015) indicates that only 2 per cent of students (or 806 students attending integrated schools and 624 students in special education schools) in non-tertiary education in the school year of 2014-2015 had special education needs. Of those, 1 per cent of students were in integrated settings, and the remaining 1 per cent were placed in special education schools.

There were 38 out of 74 schools taking on the challenge of accepting students with special education needs, 8 of them from the public sector and 30 from the private sector. Among the 27 Catholic schools, accounting for 58 per cent of the private education sector, 11 schools expressed the intention to provide an environment and the necessary conditions to receive and educate those who experience special education needs. Out of the 11 mentioned schools, 2 of them accommodate more than 1000 students, and the majority (N=8) are small units with up to 500 students, and most of them located outside the city centre. The largest and most traditional and prestigious Catholic schools, who enjoy the highest prestige amongst the population, are not addressing the needs of SEN children, with a few exemplary exceptions.

Yet, among the 11 Catholic schools committed to enrol SEN students, the question remains whether or not this is more than a mere declaration of intent. To accept students with disabilities, the schools need to develop a truly viable plan of action, which includes a critical assessment of the selection procedures at the entry points. Presently, it is common practice to select applicants from primary one to secondary education by means of a mathematics, English and Chinese written exams, followed by an interview with the candidate. The selection of 3 year-old children for entrance into kindergarten usually includes a session to observe the child, followed by an interview; but some schools also include a written test as part of the selection. The higher we climb to the more prestigious and sought-after schools, the more discriminating the selection mechanisms become (Robertis & Morrison, 2009). Entering into a high status private school in Macao has been a painful process for families and children in recent years.

By contrast, some Catholic schools “are deliberately inclusive, accepting students who have been excluded from other schools” (Robertis & Morrison, 2009, p. 156). The deregulation of Macao

education under the Portuguese administration forced private schools to adapt to the social environment and culture. To survive, as Lau (2009) points out, “they managed to avoid being knocked out of competitions and abided by the rules of the market economy” (p. 40). At present, Catholic schools are facing difficulties to convert themselves into more inclusive, flexible, accessible, and responsive settings. It is quite natural that, due to the hardships of the past, leaders fear losing students and hindering their reputation of excellence if they loosen their strict requirements for admission. However, the current selection procedures adopted by some of the largest and more famous Catholic schools will result, in the long term, in the exclusion of those children who have learning difficulties or SEN. In so doing, Catholic schools are removing one of their distinguishing characteristics, which is to be a school for all.

Due to their involvement in the Church’s mission, Catholic schools are expected to have a pioneering attitude towards the inclusion of SEN children. In the past, Catholic schools frequently faced a lack of funds, resources and professionals in the area of special education, and this fact acted as a justification to reject SEN children. It is undeniable that schools need support in terms of breadth and depth to grow a commitment to inclusivity. However, at present, the most relevant dimensions related to the development of inclusive settings are being addressed by the relevant government bureaus. More time will be needed to design and complete the by-laws and to approve further supportive by-laws. The current policy may not be satisfactory, and may not be the best possible one. Yet, the present education reform has demonstrated commitment to tackle educational marginalisation of SEN children by providing financial support, resources and professional training to allow all schools in Macao, including the Catholic ones, to develop a more socially responsible environment. This move will demonstrate Catholic schools’ concern for the inherent dignity of all human beings, which is paramount to their mission.

The first institution in Macao to offer placement to children from 0 to 15 years of age with severe disabilities was founded in 1968 by the Salesian fathers (Forlin, 2011, p. 3), several decades before special education needs was promoted by the government in all local schools. The Catholic schools should continue their pioneering efforts to work together and with the government to break down the intangible but very real walls that separate SEN children from a more dignified life and education.

## **Conclusion**

Catholic schools in Macao have a longstanding presence and a key role in the domain of education, serving families of various cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs and social levels. Operating 35 school units (including branches) from kindergarten to senior secondary levels, in both Chinese and

English mediums of instruction, Catholic schools embody the hope of a more welcoming, inclusive and flourishing place for every upcoming generation.

The implementation of inclusive education is a responsibility of all – school principals, local government, associations, social and civic movements, and all of the community (Latas, 2012) – not just the Catholic schools. The design and implementation of more inclusive settings in mainstream schools is only possible by introducing deep structural and cultural changes, in terms of embraced values, mentalities and practices at all levels of the education system. Leaders will face pressure from the school teachers, staff, parents and communities. In face of multiple barriers, some of them may consider that public schools should provide education for the SEN children, and the government should allow the private sector to be selective and achievement oriented. However, Macao's Catholic schools, as enduring and authoritative social institutions in the city, should not be exclusionary, because, as Scanlan (2009) states, this is incompatible with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. On the contrary, Catholic schools should take a leading role in promoting “civil progress and human development without discrimination of any kind”(Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997).

The underlying principles of CST earlier discussed, namely the dignity of all human beings, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalised, implicit also in the speech of Pope Francis in November 2015, go hand-in-hand with the fundamental tenets of inclusive education as they have been defined at international forums such as the Salamanca Conference (UNESCO, 1994), and in the policy guidelines on inclusion in education defined by UNESCO (2009). It is the duty of the Catholic educators to understand, in the light of the Catholic values, and in collaboration with the civil society, what needs to be transformed and what inequalities and injustices must be addressed and overcome in order to provide a truly inclusive education in Macao.

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