



## Why are In-grade Retention Rates so High in Macao?

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This paper seeks to address why in-grade retention rates are so high in Macao by examining the operation of its education system. To this end, I shall draw on data from a qualitative research project on educational inequality in Macao, referring specifically to criteria for in-grade retention set by different schools, the related practices of schools and teachers, and the schooling experiences of students. This examination leads me to argue that in-grade retention rates of Macao are so high mainly because its education system is a system of private schools without effective state governance. This argument, then, urges us to rethink the belief that a privatized schooling system allows competition between schools and thus provides more parental choices; therefore it is efficient and effective in providing quality education. The case of Macao suggests that competition does not necessarily guarantee more school choices for parents or the provision of quality education.

*Keywords:* education system, in-grade retention, Macao, private schools, quality of education, school regulations

In-grade retention rates of Macao are one of the highest among Organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries: the percentages of repeaters at primary and secondary levels are 6% and 12% respectively for the year of 2009 (UNESCO, 2011). These figures echo Macao official statistics: Table 1 shows that over the last decade, in-grade retention rates at primary level have been consistently above 5%, ranging from the lowest 5.2% in 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 to the highest 7.3% in 1999-2000; in-grade retention rates at junior secondary level have been roughly around 15%, ranging from the lowest 13.8% in 2009-2010 to the highest 16.7% in 2001-2002; and, in-grade retention rates at senior secondary level are on average about 7%, ranging from the lowest 5.9% in 2003-2004 and 2009-2010 to the highest 8.2% in 2000-2001. The accumulative effects of such high in-grade retention rates at different levels are that over 40% of 15-year-olds in Macao participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 have been retained and about 15% of them have repeated more than once (OECD,

2010), and that about 76% of senior-secondary-form-three students (students doing the final year of three-year senior secondary education in Macao) of a local secondary school are found to have been retained (Yuen, 2012). In short, in-grade retention is a rather common experience for students in Macao. Then, why are in-grade retention rates so high in Macao? And, what can we learn from the case of Macao?

This paper seeks to address the issue of why in-grade retention rates are so high in Macao from a sociological perspective: situating this inquiry against a post-colonial period of Macao, I shall examine the operation of the education system in order to identify structural reasons for such high rates of in-grade retention. To this end, data of a qualitative research project will be used for illustration. In what follows, I shall first provide a brief account of the history of education in Macao so as to enable readers to have a better grasp of the context against which this inquiry is situated. I shall, then, discuss the design of the qualitative research project and some of its data used to address the

Table 1  
*In-Grade Retention Rates in Macao, 1999-2010 (%)*

Academic year	1999/ 2000	2000/ 2001	2001/ 2002	2002/ 2003	2003/ 2004	2004/ 2005	2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010
Primary level	7.3	6.9	7.0	5.9	5.7	5.5	5.5	5.6	5.9	5.2	5.2
Junior secondary level	15.6	16.3	16.7	15.7	14.7	14.9	15.3	15.6	15.4	13.9	13.8
Senior secondary level	7.6	8.2	8.1	7.4	5.9	6.5	7.0	7.3	7.1	6.6	5.9

Source: Chan (2010; Table 4.10, p. 230)

issue here. And I shall go on to discuss the operation of the Macao education system by referring to some specific data: the criteria for retention set by different schools, the relation between such criteria and the practices of teachers and schools, and the schooling experiences of students. I shall argue that in-grade retention rates are so high in Macao largely because its education system is a system of private schools without effective state governance. Against this context, schools and teachers are encouraged to retain students for non-academic reasons in general and for administrative reasons in particular; this thus boosts up in-grade retention rates in Macao. And finally, I shall conclude this paper by using the case of Macao to urge us educators to rethink the following belief: a privatized schooling system allows competition between schools and thus provides more choices for parents and their children; therefore, such system is efficient and effective in providing quality education.

**Education in Macao: Colonial Legacy**

Basically, the education system in Macao is a system of private schools. There are 75 schools in total in Macao; all except 11 are private schools and the share of students in private schools is over 95% (the website of Macao DSEJ). The fact that most students are studying in private schools could be seen as a colonial legacy: the colonial neglect of education for the local Chinese by the Portuguese. Macao was a Portuguese colony but was returned to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1999. True, during the colonial rule there were government schools in Macao; but, they were meant to provide education for the children of the Portuguese in Macao. At the time, the provision of basic education for the Chinese in Macao essentially fell on the shoulders of the civil society; private schools for Chinese students were funded and managed by a variety of organizations: individuals, religious institutions, trading associations, and civil organizations (such as neighborhood associations, lineage associations, or the Federation of Labour Union) (Clayton, 2009).

During the colonial period, basic education for the Chinese in Macao was not free or compulsory but was

provided by private schools, run by different organizations. Private schools had to rely on donation and school fees for survival. Because of their different missions and political orientations, two major types of schools could be distinguished: religious schools and non-religious schools. Religious schools were basically run by the Catholic Church, although there were one or two schools run by the Christian Church or the Buddhist organization; their missions were to spread a particular religious belief in Macao through education. Schools in the non-religious sector were basically organized by individuals, trading organizations, and various kinds of civil organizations. Before 1966, this sector of schools could be seen as a battleground for the PRC and the KuoMinTang (KMT) to compete for their political influence in Macao through education. After 1966, schools run by KMT-related organizations withdrew from Macao; from then on, schools of the non-religious sector were organized by so-called traditional organizations and they were basically pro-PRC. In addition to their different missions, the management of private schools and their quality of education varied tremendously. There was simply no coordination among different schools or educational institutions in Macao; the education system was rather chaotic.

As shown in Table 2, there were four educational models in Macao during the colonial period, each consisting of primary and secondary education with various differentiations of different numbers of years: a modified Portugal model (4+2+3+2+1), a modified PRC model (6+5), a modified Taiwanese model (6+3+3), and a modified Hong Kong model (6+5+1). As a consequence, schools of the education system did not follow any common standards nearly in every aspect, from administration – like school calendar (including school holidays), criteria for retention and its consequences, and policies of teacher hiring (e.g. the entrance requirement of teachers) and student recruitment – to educational practices – like educational model, curriculum, and assessment.

Ironically, not until the preparation for the 1999

Table 2  
*Different Educational Models in Macao Before the 1999 Handover*

<b>Model</b>	<b>Description</b>
A modified Portugal model (with reference to the Portugal model in the 1980s)	4 years of primary education + 2 years of preparatory secondary education 3 years of junior education 2 years of senior education + 1 year of matriculation
A modified PRC model	6 years of primary education 5 years of secondary education
A modified Taiwanese model	6 years of primary education 3 years of junior education 3 years of senior education
A modified Hong Kong model	6 years of primary education 5 years of secondary education 1 year of matriculation

handover, the colonial Portuguese government did not make any effort to provide education for the Chinese. Basic education finally became freely available right before the 1999 handover: the act of seven-year free and compulsory education (Decree No. 29/95/M) and the act of ten-year free and compulsory education (Decree No. 34/97/M) became effective in 1995 and 1997 respectively. Since the 1999 handover, basic education has become more and more institutionalized in Macao. Since then, the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) government has invested a great deal of resources in education, such as giving subsidies, of various types, to private schools so as to provide school-aged students with a better basic education, and also has made attempts to govern and standardize the practices of private schools. At present every student in Macao is entitled to a fifteen-year free and compulsory basic education.

However, the Basic Laws guarantee private schools in Macao the freedom of running themselves in their own style; consequently, the attempts of the Macao SAR government to change the old practices or to standardize some diverse practices have been resisted against by schools in the name of defending such freedom. True, with some progress, instead of having a multi-track system of schools (e.g. Bray, 1992), as summarized in Table 2, the educational model of all schools in Macao has been standardized since 2006 to become a system of six-year primary education, three-year junior secondary education, and three-year senior secondary education (6+3+3). However, this move does not change the fact that the majority of schools in Macao are private schools and that their right to design their own curriculum and assessment is guaranteed by the Basic Laws. Up until now, there are still no standardized curriculum and common/public examinations in Macao. Schools in Macao could still follow a PRC or Taiwanese or Hong Kong curriculum using corresponding textbooks

and have students sit their own school examinations at the end of six-year secondary education. Put simply, despite investing a lot in education, the Macao SAR government still could not effectively monitor and/or assess the quality of education provided by different schools.

**Research Design and Data: a Qualitative Research Project**

In order to address the issue of why in-grade retention rates are so high in Macao, I shall draw on data from a qualitative research project on educational inequality in Macao that I have been conducting since 2009. In addition, I shall also supplement the data with some clippings from a major local newspaper and my personal communications with teachers (while teaching the courses ‘Sociology of Education’ and ‘Youth Culture’ of an educational program for in-service teachers in Macao) so as to provide readers with a view of opinions from different stakeholders on the issue.

The qualitative research project consists of three parts: school regulations, secondary-school students, and teachers. The first part is to collect school regulations and carry out content analysis so as to examine the qualities that schools intend to cultivate in students and investigate the roles of school regulations in the operation of the education system in Macao. School regulations of all 75 day schools in Macao are collected (consisting of 64 primary schools and 43 secondary schools and 9 evening schools). The number of schools is calculated by referring to the number of licenses for running school; even with one license, schools could run separate sections of primary and secondary education and also “recurrent education” (see below).

The second part of the qualitative research project is to recruit senior-secondary-form-three students and conduct interviews with them individually so as to examine school effects on their schooling experiences and investigate how they make choices for higher education.

Table 3  
Composition of the Student Sample of the Qualitative Research Project

School	Number of students
Top-ranking secondary school	19
Middle-ranking secondary school	13
Low-ranking secondary school	16
Evening school	18 (6 in junior secondary form three)
Total	66

In recruiting secondary-school students, I first selected three day schools (out of 43) according to their ranking – each from top-ranking, middle-ranking, and low-ranking schools – and an evening school (out of 9). In Macao, nearly all secondary schools are day schools that are designed for students of the relevant age group; in contrast, evening schools are designed to provide a basic education for students of any age who have missed an opportunity for education but would like to return to education – i.e. called “recurrent education” in Macao. After selecting the schools, using quota sampling, I aimed to recruit 15 senior-secondary-form-three students from each school.

Finally, 66 students in total were recruited (only 6 of them were junior-secondary-form-three students): 48 senior-secondary-form-three students from the three day schools (19 students from the top-ranking school, 13 from the middle-ranking one, and 16 from the low-ranking one), and 18 students from the evening school (12 of them from senior secondary form three and 6 from junior secondary form three), as summarized in Table 3. Interviews were conducted between July 2010 and December 2011. In each interview, the 66 students were asked to talk about their schooling experiences and relationships with classmates and teachers, their relationships with parents and parental support received, their educational aspirations and educational plans, and their views on the Macao education system and social competition in Macao.

The third part of the qualitative research project is to recruit teachers and conduct focus-group interviews with them so as to examine how they view the regulation of teachers and students by schools in general and school regulations related to in-grade retention in particular. Four types of schools are distinguished according to the similarity of school regulations, as summarized in Table 4. To repeat, schools run by traditional organizations (i.e. trading organizations and civil organizations) are pro-PRC; they make it explicit that the teaching of patriotism is their educational mission. Schools organized by the Catholic Church make it clear that their educational mission is to transmit the teaching of Catholicism. The educational mission of government schools could somehow be seen as colonial legacy: it is in line with the stance of the former Portuguese government. The educational missions of other schools (e.g. schools

organized by the Christian Church, 1 Buddhist school, and 1 international school) are set by their respective funding organizations.

It is certainly important to investigate how the respective educational missions of the four types of schools influence the design of school regulations but this is not the main focus of this paper; the point here is that the school regulations of the same type of schools are similar in many aspects. Using quota sampling, I sought to recruit 5 teachers from each type of school for focus-group interviews. However, given the small number of government schools, as shown in Table 4, it was very difficult to recruit teachers teaching in government schools. In the end, only 13 teachers were recruited but none of them were from government schools: Table 4 reports that 5 teachers are from schools run by traditional organizations, 4 from schools organized by the Catholic Church, and 4 from other schools. Two taped focus-group interviews were arranged for teachers from schools of the same type so that they could share and discuss their views on in-grade retention and their practices related to retention at school. In total, six focus-group interviews with teachers from the three types of schools were conducted between March and June 2013.

This qualitative research project is designed to examine a number of issues related to processes underlying educational inequality in Macao rather than investigating the issue of in-grade retention only. For the present purposes, I shall focus on examining criteria for in-grade retention set by different schools, and refer to the relevant practices of schools and teachers and the related schooling experiences of students to substantiate my argument. Before moving on to our discussion, I shall first take a brief look at how in-grade retention is generally viewed in Macao.

#### **In-grade Retention in Macao**

The issue of high in-grade retention rates has been hotly discussed in Macao: while some local teachers sought to defend the practice of in-grade retention, others attempted to criticize it (e.g. several clippings from Macao Daily, 2009-2012). But, serious examinations or debates over the issue are rare in Macao. Nevertheless, two viewpoints could be derived from such general discussion. First, in-grade retention is viewed as a common practice of some use. The logic behind is rather circular: in-grade retention has been practiced for a long

Table 4  
*Four Types of Schools in Macao and Composition of the Teacher Sample of the Qualitative Research Project*

School type	Number of primary schools	Number of secondary schools	Number of teachers recruited
Schools organized by traditional organizations	23	15	5
Schools organized by the Catholic Church	23	16	4
Government schools	5	3	0
Other schools	13	9	4
Total	64	43	13

time, so it must be of some use; otherwise it would not have been practiced for so long. Second, in-grade retention is viewed as a useful practice that allows students to repeat a grade they have not adequately mastered and thus helps them to strengthen their academic foundation. The reason is that with a weak academic foundation, students will find it hard to keep up later on even if they get promoted to the following grade; so, it is better to retain them sooner than later. In short, the practice of in-grade retention is seen as a means for quality assurance of education. In fact, many teachers and students of this qualitative research project also share these two viewpoints; the following quotations are two examples.

In-grade retention is practiced for students' benefits; this practice makes sure that students are up to the standards. Otherwise, Macao would have been like Hong Kong, where all students automatically get promoted grade by grade. (male teacher)

We've practiced retention in Macao for a very long time. There must be some uses; otherwise, it wouldn't have been practiced for so long. ... I think, this practice is good for students. For example, if students fail to live up to the standards of secondary form one, why should they get promoted to secondary form two when their foundation is so weak? Can they handle it even if they get promoted? So, we're doing this in students' interests. (female teacher)

In short, the general public in Macao, especially many local teachers, as will be further discussed below, do not question but support the practice of in-grade retention; many even believe that the practice is synonymous with quality assurance of education. But, academically speaking, do Macao students really perform much better than their counterparts in other regions/countries? Their performances at the PISA do not seem to support this view. True, as summarized in Table 5, the average scores of 15-year-olds at the PISA-Macao in Mathematics and Science in 2003, 2006, and 2009 are all slightly higher than the international averages. But

they do not seem to perform exceptionally well; besides, their average score in Reading at the PISA 2009 is only 487, even lower than the international average. In other words, with the practice of in-grade retention, Macao students do not seem to be doing extraordinarily well. Regardless of students' academic performances, such prevalent positive attitude towards in-grade retention is, however, not sufficient for explaining such high rates of in-grade retention in Macao. Let us now turn to the operation of the Macao education system.

**A System of Private Schools**

To repeat, even after the 1999 handover, when basic education has become free and compulsory, the education system in Macao remains a system of private schools without much centralized state governance. What this means is that despite getting subsidies from the government, schools could still set their own criteria for retention. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, although there are only 75 schools in total in Macao, more than 100 systems of retention could be distinguished (Opinions of parents in Macao, 2011), meaning that criteria for retention differ not only between schools but also between different sections – primary education, secondary education, and “recurrent education” – of the same school. Table 6 provides several examples of some major criteria for retention adopted by 43 secondary schools. In deciding whether to retain a student, secondary schools differ in at least three aspects: first, whether to take into account students' conduct grade; second, setting their own academic standards (including setting different passing marks and deciding whether to differentiate core and periphery subjects or give extra weightings to the core subjects); and third, having their own specific concerns (such as setting the maximum number of subjects or weighting units students could fail without being retained and the maximum number of retention allowed). Let us discuss in turn how each of these three criteria could play a role in contributing to such high rates of in-grade retention.

**Conduct**

To reiterate, the practice of in-grade retention is generally supported because it is believed to strengthen students' academic foundation. Despite such concern, some criteria for retention set by 10 (out of 43) secondary

Table 5  
Performances of 15-year-olds at PISA-Macao

Subject	PISA 2003		PISA 2006		PISA 2009	
	Average score of Macao	Inter-national average score	Average score of Macao	Inter-national average score	Average score of Macao	Inter-national average score
Reading	498	494	492	492	487	493
Mathematics	527	500	525	498	525	496
Science	525	500	511	500	511	501

Source: Chan (2010; Table 4.13, p. 232)

Table 6  
Examples of Criteria for In-grade Retention used by 43 Secondary Schools

Criterion for in-grade retention	Remarks
Conduct	Poor conduct (e.g. below grade B or C) could lead to in-grade retention in 10 schools.
Academic standards 1. Passing marks  2. Weighting	Schools set different passing marks, ranging from 40 to 60 out of 100 marks.  All except 8 schools differentiate core subjects from the others or give more weighting to core subjects (e.g. core subjects are usually weighed with a greater number of units). Chinese, English, Mathematics are usually three core subjects or subjects with double weightings.
Specific concerns 1. The maximum number of units/subjects students could fail without being retained  2. Maximum number of retention allowed	This number ranges from one unit of a core subject to six peripheral subjects. 7 schools require students to repeat a grade if they fail the same subject in two consecutive years.  All except 7 schools do not set the maximum number of retention. 6 schools allow students to get retained only once; when asked to be retained for the second time (not necessarily in the following year), students should quit the school. About half of the schools ask students to quit the school when the students are to repeat the same grade again in a consecutive year.

schools are, however, irrelevant to academic performance but are about students' conduct. For example, Table 6 shows that in 10 secondary schools, students will be retained if their conduct grade is below grade B or C. There are no elaborations on how students' conduct is evaluated and thus graded, and there are also no descriptions about what each conduct grade represents. What is puzzling is how in-grade retention could improve a student's conduct. Regardless, what is at issue is what constitutes a so-called well-behaved student from the

perspective of schools and teachers. We could probably get some ideas about this issue by taking a brief look at school regulations concerning students' behavior in classroom. To repeat, four types of schools are distinguished according to the similarity of their school regulations. Table 7 lists a sample of school regulations from the four types of schools.

It is not my intention here to analyze the qualities of students that are to be cultivated by dissimilar regulations designed by the four types of schools.

*Why are In-grade Retention Rates so High in Macao?*

Table 7  
*Examples of School Regulations from Four Types of Schools in Macao*

School type	School regulations about students' behaviour in classroom
Government schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Respect and obey teachers</li> <li>- Be attentive and obey classroom rules in classes and submit assignments on time</li> <li>- Keep the same seat after being assigned by the form teacher</li> </ul>
Schools run by traditional organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be quiet in classes, respect teachers, work hard</li> <li>- Get into classroom immediately after the recess and wait quietly for the next class</li> <li>- Queue up quickly, quietly, and orderly to get off school</li> </ul>
Schools organized by the Catholic Church	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Respect and obey Sisters and teaching staff</li> <li>- No sleeping and talking in classes</li> <li>- Be attentive, polite, self-discipline, and cooperative in classes</li> </ul>
Other schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Be cooperative in classes</li> <li>- Should not read other books or assignments in classes</li> <li>- Should not disturb the class</li> </ul>

Table 8  
*Responses to Questions on Lessons: 'How often do these things happen in your [test language] lessons?' PISA 2009 – A Comparison of Macao and OECD Average*

Question	Response	Macao (%)	OECD Average (%)
There is noise and disorder.	Never or hardly ever	24.23	20.48
	Some lessons	61.09	47.25
	Most lessons	11.66	22.23
	All lessons	2.53	8.97
	Missing	0.49	1.06
The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down.	Never or hardly ever	26.93	28.53
	Some lessons	56.34	42.58
	Most lessons	13.01	19.68
	All lessons	3.2	8.02
	Missing	0.52	1.19
Students do not start working for a long time after the lesson begins.	Never or hardly ever	23.51	32.53
	Some lessons	55.61	41.38
	Most lessons	16.12	17.62
	All lessons	4.24	7.52
	Missing	0.52	1.13

Nevertheless, Table 7 seems to suggest that what qualities constitute a well-behaved student in most schools in Macao are compliance and obedience, which are seen as crucial to making a disciplined classroom. Indeed, many teachers of this qualitative research project also expressed that they made a lot of effort to exert strong control over their classrooms. This finding is actually consistent with what is reported for Macao in PISA (2009) concerning students' perception of classroom after such strong control is exerted over students. Table 8 reports a comparison of the percentages of students in Macao selecting each of the four responses to questions concerning their classroom with the corresponding

averages of the valid percentages of students in OECD countries participated in PISA. Compared with other OECD countries, greater proportions of Macao students choose the options of 'never or hardly ever' and 'some lessons' to such questions as 'There is noise and disorder,' 'The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down,' and 'Students do not start working for a long time after the lesson begins.' Such responses indicate that classroom seems more controlled and disciplined in Macao than in many OECD countries.

Regardless of the genuine intention behind cultivating such qualities in students, how to define compliance and obedience could be rather subjective, if

Table 9

Responses to Questions on Teachers: ‘How much do you disagree or agree with each of the following statements about teachers at your school?’ PISA (2009) – A Comparison of Macao and OECD Average

Question	Response	Macao (%)	OECD Average (%)
I get along well with most teachers.	Strongly disagree	2.45	3.71
	Disagree	14.11	11.49
	Agree	69.43	59.55
	Strongly agree	13.78	24.38
	Missing	0.22	0.87
Most teachers are interested in my well-being.	Strongly disagree	4.28	6.83
	Disagree	31.61	26.30
	Agree	56.46	54.12
	Strongly agree	7.34	11.49
	Missing	0.30	1.27
Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say.	Strongly disagree	7.93	6.20
	Disagree	38.39	26.28
	Agree	48.21	55.51
	Strongly agree	4.96	10.79
	Missing	0.52	1.22
Most of my teachers treat me fairly.	Strongly disagree	7.58	5.12
	Disagree	21.48	15.87
	Agree	61.74	61.35
	Strongly agree	8.85	16.39
	Missing	0.36	1.27

not downright arbitrary. Yet, despite such ambiguity in defining compliance and obedience, operationally speaking, by compliance and obedience many schools actually mean that students should not challenge the authority of teachers. As such, this could leave room for teachers’ abuse in enforcing such subjective or arbitrary school regulations (e.g. Willis, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). Indeed, the schooling experiences and observations of some students of this qualitative research project confirmed that this was the case; as were implied in the following quotations, teachers had absolute power to decide which students were misbehaved and thus should be graded poorly in conduct.

I don’t understand what’s wrong with boys having long hair? Actually my hair wasn’t long; my hair just touched the collar of my shirt. But a teacher insisted that I didn’t look like a decent boy, and threatened to give me a demerit if I didn’t have my hair cut. ... When I asked the teacher to explain why I had violated school regulations, she didn’t explain; she just said that I shouldn’t have talked back. ... And that was why I got retained for the first time – because of my poor conduct. (male evening-school student)

I’m so scared of teachers. ... You just don’t know when they’d give you a hard time. ... I

remember an instance: a student was warned by a teacher that his hair was too long and should have it cut; otherwise the student would get a demerit. ... The following day, that student had all his hair cut – a skin-head like style. But he still got a demerit. The teacher said that although he didn’t violate the school regulation concerning hair length, his action itself was a challenge to teacher’s authority. ... So, you see, teachers are the law – they decide what should be punished even if there is no such regulation in black and white. (female middle-ranking day-school student)

That is, some students of this qualitative research project consider that some teachers are coercive imposing their subjective judgments on them and some even do not treat them fairly. Such views of teachers are consistent with some findings of PISA (2009) for Macao with regard to students’ perception of teachers. Table 9 reports that when compared with their counterparts in other OECD countries, a higher percentage of students in Macao strongly disagree or disagree that ‘I get along well with most teachers’ (16.56% vs OECD 15.20%), that ‘Most teachers are interested in my well-being’ (35.89% vs OECD 33.13%), that ‘Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say’ (46.32% vs OECD 32.48%), and that ‘Most of my teachers treat me fairly’ (29.06% vs OECD 20.99%). The discrepancy between Macao and OECD average is particularly great with regard to the proportion



of students consider that their teachers are not really listening to them and that their teachers are not fair in treating them. In other words, students in Macao seem less likely than their counterparts in many OECD countries to see their teachers as someone who cares about them and are therefore more distanced to their teachers.

In short, it is unclear why some schools take conduct into account when considering whether to retain a student; and, it is also unclear how in-grade retention could improve a student's conduct. But, in the existing education system in Macao, without effective state governance, schools are not required to provide rationales for such practice. What is crystal clear is that such criterion for retention is a punitive threat that puts students' future at the mercy of teachers; this, then, leaves much room for teachers' coercive control of students (Raby, 2012). This finding also lends support to the view that schools are an oppressive institution (Holt, 1969; Giroux, 1981). I argue that taking conduct into account in deciding whether to retain a student could leave much room for teachers' discretion, thus manipulation, in grading students' conduct, and hence would somehow contribute to high rates of in-grade retention in Macao.

#### **Academic Standards**

To reiterate, the practice of in-grade retention is widely seen as a synonym of the quality assurance of education in Macao (Leung, 2011). But, when there is no commonly agreed academic reference, it is unclear what academic standards that schools in Macao seek to uphold through the practice of in-grade retention. Given the colonial legacy and the freedom of schools to run themselves with their own style guaranteed by the Basic Laws, curriculum and assessment of different schools in Macao are not standardized. Besides, there are no common examinations or standardized assessments in evaluating and thus comparing the level of academic standards of students across schools. Rather, each school arranges their own graduation examination for their senior-secondary-form-three students at the end of a six-year secondary education. In addition, as summarized in Table 6 above, each school sets their own passing mark and decides whether to differentiate between core and peripheral subjects giving more weighting to the former. Furthermore, in many schools in Macao usually the same teacher teaches the same subject to students of the same grade (personal communications with some local teachers), meaning that this teacher not only sets but also grades all assignments, tests, and examinations of students of the same grade. And, in operation, oftentimes the academic standards of the assessments, of all kinds, set by this teacher and the quality of this teacher's grading are not subject to any professional review or evaluation. Given all these practices, the academic performances of students are simply not comparable across schools.

Under the Macao education system, it is rather difficult to make sense of the meanings attached to even the same passing mark set by different schools. A sense of arbitrariness is involved. Needless to mention, it is next to impossible to compare the academic standards represented by different passing marks. In addition, some schools would retain students who fail even only one unit of a core subject (e.g. in some schools there are several units of the English language, including writing, reading, listening, and speaking), although it is not clear why students should demonstrate that they are equally capable of handling all aspects of the subject in order to get promoted to the next grade. And, the validity and reliability of assessments of each subject that are done by the same teacher without being subject to professional review are in serious doubt (Lam, 2011). Besides, the practice of having the same teacher teach the subject for all students of the same grade without being subject to professional review implies that teachers could grade students unprofessionally but would not necessarily be noticed. It is not unheard of that some teachers could abuse such practices so as to retain students they do not like, as a student recalls:

You never know how teachers grade us. ... For example, my classmate sitting next to me and I got the same answer in a test; but he got 3 marks and I got zero. And there is no way you can argue with teachers why this is the case. ... I'm so scared about being picked on by teachers; so, I keep a record of all tests and examinations to check if the final scores are accurately calculated. ... I remember, a classmate of mine was quite sure that she passed a subject (60 marks or above) but the final score in her report card was 59.4; and she had to be retained. This kind of thing indeed happens. (female middle-ranking day-school student)

Put simply, without effective mechanisms for assuring academic standards within each school, and without any common standards serving as a professional reference to evaluate all schools in Macao, we cannot be sure of what sort of academic standards each school seeks to uphold; there are simply no objective standards, however defined, in deciding whether students are not up to the academic standards and deserve retention in Macao. Consequently, although many local teachers consider in-grade retention to be a necessary mechanism for upholding decent academic standards, what actually constitutes such academic standards could involve a measure of arbitrariness: a student is judged to deserve retention in one school could well have got promoted in another school. I argue that this measure of arbitrariness would leave room for teachers to judge students' academic performances unprofessionally and could

somehow contribute to such high rates of in-grade retention in Macao.

Apart from the possibility of teachers' abuse of some leeway in the education system to treat students unprofessionally, in-grade retention could also leave room for schools' manipulation for administrative purposes. True, since the 1999 handover, the Macao SAR government has invested a lot in education, particularly giving a considerable amount of resources to schools in the form of subsidies, of various kinds. However, to repeat, this move does not change the very fact that most schools in Macao remain private schools and their survival depends very much on student enrolments. Schools are still required to compete for students, or more accurately their parents. Academic reputation of schools is of utmost importance in such competition. But, without any common standardized examinations that could be used as a professional yardstick, on what basis could schools claim that their academic standards are higher and thus make themselves attractive to students and their parents? In-grade retention rates are then viewed as an important indicator of the academic standards of schools to students and their parents.

Many parents in Macao, as well as the majority of students and teachers of this qualitative research project, believe that schools with high in-grade retention rates are upholding higher academic standards and are thus more competitive and desirable for their children (Opinions of parents in Macao, 2009). For instance, a male student of this qualitative research project, as with the female teacher quoted above, has a similar view on in-grade retention.

I think in-grade retention is good for us. It makes sure that every student who gets promoted is up to the standards. ... This practice could differentiate the capable and the industrious from the incapable and the lazy. (male middle-ranking day-school student)

What is also suggested by this male student is that in-grade retention is viewed as a device for social selection: differentiating the capable from the incapable. Such view is confirmed by the following male teacher: he makes it crystal clear that when there are no standardized examinations, some school principals actually use in-grade retention as a means of social selection and a device for boosting up the market reputation and visibility of their schools and thus for increasing student enrolments.

Most schools are private schools here and their survival depends on student enrolments. Then, how could schools attract students, actually their parents? No one wants to admit it, but it's an open secret that many school principals use in-grade retention as a device to get rid of so-called poor students. ... Some years ago, when a principal increased drastically the retention rate retaining a great number of students who

would've been promoted in many other schools, the principal was severely criticized for sacrificing students' futures for the sake of building up the school reputation. Just a few years' time, this school has become one of the top schools in Macao that many parents desperately want to send their children there; now, who else still remember those severe criticisms? ... Many schools actually follow suit in the hope that they could boost up their school reputations. (male teacher)

In addition, currently, nearly all schools join the so-called school-net whereby schools could get class subsidies from the Macao SAR government (Decree No. 21/2010); the amount of the subsidies depends on class size: at present, the amounts of annual subsidies for every class of 35-45 students in junior secondary forms and in senior secondary forms are 730,000MOP and 840,000MOP (1US=8MOP) respectively. It is not unheard of that some school-net schools would retain students purely because of their administrative concern about having at least 35 students in every class so as to get the class subsidies (personal communications with some local teachers, the following quotation is an example).

In order to get the class subsidies, the principal has to make sure that there are at least 35 students in each class. But, such thing won't happen naturally. Sometimes, manipulation is required. ... For example, when there are only 34 students in secondary form two in the coming year, the principal would manipulate the marks of the student who is ranked the last in existing secondary form two so that the student has to repeat a grade staying in secondary form two in the following year. (male teacher)

Without effective state governance on setting common academic standards as a professional reference, schools in Macao could decide their own academic standards. And, it is apparent that many schools in Macao do not rely on any reliable and valid yardsticks to assess the academic standards of students and decide whether they deserve to get retained. Rather, in the name of upholding academic standards, some teachers could treat students unprofessionally and cover it up with the practice of in-grade retention, and some schools could manipulate in-grade retention for the sake of boosting their school reputation or getting subsidies from the government. Either teachers or schools are using the practice of in-grade retention for their own purposes but at the expense of the students' interests. I argue that without effective state governance, the practice of in-grade retention in Macao is actually not meant for assuring the quality of education, and that the ways in which the practice of in-grade retention is implemented in Macao could leave

much room for teachers' unprofessional acts or schools' manipulation; and, such unprofessional acts and manipulation would boost up in-grade retention rates.

### **Specific Concerns**

Even if we accept that in-grade retention is practiced for the sake of upholding academic standards, what remain puzzling are why some specific criteria for retention listed in Table 6 above are set. Some schools require students to be retained if the students fail the same subject in two consecutive years, and/or to quit school if they are to be retained for the second time. What schools in Macao owe the public is an explanation for such practices (Opinions of parents in Macao, 2011).

Such practices are actually defended. With regard to the practice of making students repeat a grade when they fail the same subject in two consecutive years, some teachers somehow believe that this practice could strengthen the academic foundation of students as to mastering that particular subject (personal communications with some local teachers). However, no one ever elaborates on why failing the same subject in two consecutive years deserves retention and how in-grade retention could help students to do better in that subject. Put simply, it is unclear what academic purpose could be served by doing so. But what is clear is that such criterion for retention makes it easier for students to get retained and thus could boost up the rates of in-grade retention.

With regard to the practice of making students quit the school when they are to be retained for the second time, some local teachers assert that when students do not do well, a change of environment may help students to do better (Opinions of parents in Macao, 2009). The reasoning of such teachers is this: students who have been retained do not do well because they cannot change their bad learning habits in a familiar learning environment (i.e. their familiarity with the practices of their teachers and classmates); a totally new learning environment may alert students to the fact that they have to turn a new leaf. And, given that schools in Macao are so diverse in terms of academic standards, it is believed that students should go to a school with an academic standard compatible with that of the students. Therefore, some teachers believe that this practice is actually designed in students' interests providing them with additional assistance.

However, there are no examinations of how effective are such two specific practices related to retention in terms of improving students' subsequent academic performances. Nevertheless, from what has been reported for the West, in-grade retention could hamper students' subsequent academic performances and damage their self-esteem (e.g. Weis et al., 1989; Eccles, 1990; Beru et al., 2007). Indeed, as reported in Table 10, the PISA (2009) for Macao shows that the mean achievement scores of students who have been retained are much lower than those of students who have never

been retained, and that the more often students get retained the lower their scores.

For example, let us take a look at students' score in Reading shown in Table 10: students who have been retained once would score about 52 marks lower than those who have not; students who have been retained twice would score about 95 marks lower than those who have not; and, students who have been retained thrice would score about 122 marks lower than those who have not. Such dramatic drop in score is statistically significant. Similar stories could be seen for their scores in Mathematics and Science. I suspect that the academic setback of being asked to quit the school may have a similarly negative effect on students' self-esteem and subsequent academic performance. True, whether hampered performance and damaged self-esteem would lead to further retention should be open to further empirical scrutiny; but, it is doubtful if the practices of asking students who fail the same subject in two consecutive years to repeat a grade and of asking students who are required to be retained for the second time to quit the school could really be seen as additional assistance for students.

Despite the finding reported for the West that in-grade retention would hamper students' subsequent academic performances, many teachers in Macao believe that in-grade retention could strengthen students' academic foundation. Some teachers and students of this qualitative research project even assert that in-grade retention has become necessary for motivating students to study hard, as articulated in the following quotations:

Somehow I think free and compulsory education isn't good for students. You know, not every student values the opportunity for education. ... When students don't work hard, retention would do them good. (female high-ranking day-school student)

Nowadays every student is entitled to a free and compulsory basic education. These days students just don't cherish the opportunity for education any more. They don't work hard for they don't need to pay for education. No matter what, they could stay on at school for 15 years. I take in-grade retention as a trump card that could make students work hard. (male teacher)

Again, it becomes apparent that in-grade retention is practiced not for the sake of upholding valid and reliable academic standards. Rather, some teachers take in-grade retention as their trump card to make so-called lazy students study; and many students, including those having been retained, buy this idea very much. This confirms further my view that the practice of in-grade retention could leave room for teachers' unprofessional acts, including an abuse of power coercing students to yield to teachers' authority. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear that students who have been retained would be labelled or picked on by teachers in classes; the schooling experiences of some evening-school students of this

Table 10

The Mean Achievement Scores of Students Who Have Been Retained and Those Who Have Not in the PISA (2009) for Macao

Experience of retention	Mean achievement score		
	Reading	Mathematics	Science
Students who have never repeated	516.66*** (1.28)	558.75*** (1.31)	539.43*** (1.25)
Students who have been retained once	-52.28*** (2.11)	-58.39*** (2.37)	-50.03*** (2.31)
Students who have been retained twice	-95.16*** (2.84)	-106.57*** (3.20)	-88.65*** (2.91)
Students who have been retained thrice	-122.76*** (7.48)	-133.90*** (8.33)	-117.14*** (7.22)

Standard errors in parentheses; \*\*\* p<0.001

qualitative research project illustrate how that happens.

Life at day school is stressful. ... I'm seen as a lazy bone. ... (T)eachers ... would pick on me for no reasons. ... For example, I got the same answer as my neighboring classmate in a test; but, the classmate got a mark deducted and I got three marks deducted. ... So, I asked the teacher about that; he said that was how he graded. ... This kind of thing happened to me nearly in every test and examination for two years. Then, I didn't argue with teachers anymore. ... I felt that however hard I tried, I wouldn't succeed. ... In the end, I was required to repeat another year for I failed English – I needed 1.5 more marks to get a pass. (male evening-school student)

I have repeated four times. ... I repeated for the first time in primary form four. That was because of my poor conduct. I was too naughty as a boy. ... Then, in primary form five, I repeated because of my poor academic performance. ... And then I was seen as incapable. ... In junior secondary form one, I found schoolwork very difficult and I couldn't cope; so, I repeated another year. ... One year after, I was promoted to junior secondary form two, but many teachers already saw me as hopeless and always assigned me to sit at the corner of the classroom. ... Teachers just ignored me and I wouldn't get any academic help. ... Finally, I didn't do well and had to repeat again. (male evening-school student)

In brief, it is unclear what academic purposes, if at all, could be served by the two abovementioned specific criteria for retention. And, without effective state governance, schools in Macao again are not obliged to

provide rationales for such practices. But, it is clear that such specific criteria make it easier for students to get retained and leave room for teachers to treat students unprofessionally. The schooling experiences of these students, together with those quoted above, are consistent with what is discussed in the literature concerning student-teacher interaction in relation to the labelling effects and self-fulfilling prophecy operating within the classroom in two ways (e.g. Sharp & Green, 1984; Jackson, 1990; Metz, 2000; Rothstein, 2004). The first is labelling leads to retention and self-fulfilling prophecy. Initially, students deviated from the teachers' expectations of what a well-behaved student should be like; and therefore, teachers saw them as not merely in-compliant or disobedient, but also incapable. After being labelled as such, the students were then evaluated (actually graded) as such in their examinations and in the end got retained and/or fulfilled their teachers' prophecy.

The second is retention leads to labelling and self-fulfilling prophecy. After being retained, students were then seen as incapable or hopeless; and graded as such in subsequent examinations and may get retained and/or fulfil teachers' prophecy again. Given the possibilities for teachers' unprofessional treatment of students, I argue that teacher-student interaction of such kinds somehow plays a role in explaining the high rates of in-grade retention in Macao.

**The Future of Retained Students?**

Then, what are the educational outcomes of retained students vis-à-vis those who have never been retained? Although data about the final educational outcomes of retained students are not available, the experiences of the evening-school students of this qualitative research project could somehow shed lights into this query. All eighteen except three evening-school students are actually students who fail to stay in a day school (i.e. they were retained and finally got kicked out

of day school) and resort to studying in evening school. This observation suggests that 'recurrent education' actually serves as the last resort for those retained students being pushed out of day schools. This speculation is consistent with the following official statistics that over the last five years the majority of evening-school students are actually not mature students but students of the relevant age group (the website of Macao DSEJ): from 2007 to 2010, over 60% of evening-school students are aged between 15 and 24 (two categories: 15-19 and 20-24); and from 2010 onwards, because of different age categories used, nearly half of evening-school students are aged between 15 and 20. And, it is generally observed that evening-school students are more likely not to make it to the completion of a senior secondary education and thus to fail to obtain a high-school diploma (personal communications with a number of teachers teaching in evening schools). What these speculation and observation seem to suggest is that not only are retained students likely to score lower at PISA, as already shown in Table 10 above, but some of them are also likely to be retained again and finally get pushed out of day school first and the system of formal education altogether.

If the practice of in-grade retention is intended to strengthen students' academic foundation and thus provide additional academic assistance for them, then retained students would be somehow directed to an educational success of some kind. But, what seems happening is that retention does not lead students to an educational success but the following educational path, as pointed out by some teachers of this qualitative research project: retention in a day school is likely to lead to further retention in the same school, then to studying in another day school of a lower ranking (if lucky) and then probably having retention there, and eventually to studying in an evening school, and finally to an incompleteness of a secondary education. It certainly requires more empirical work and data to demonstrate how statistically representative of this educational path to retained students in Macao. But the observation of this educational path for some retained students suggests that contrary to the view that the practice of in-grade retention helps students academically, retention could be seen as a device of screening off students leading them towards an educational failure.

### **Conclusion**

In-grade retention is generally accepted and commonly believed to be synonymous with quality assurance of education in Macao. But such prevalent attitude towards in-grade retention alone cannot fully explain why the rates of in-grade retention are so high in Macao. In this paper, I seek to argue that the main reason is that given colonial legacy the education system in Macao is a system of private schools without effective state governance, albeit with lots of government

subsidies. As private schools operating in such a context where their freedom of running the school in their own style is guaranteed, schools could decide their own criteria for retention and are not required to provide the public with any rationales for the criteria they set. This setup also leaves much room for teachers to treat students unprofessionally without being caught. In order to survive in such a context, private schools are required to compete for students so as to get class subsidies from the government. Academic reputation is thus of utmost importance to private schools. But there are no common academic standards serving as a professional reference to assess students from different schools. In-grade retention rates are then treated as one significant indicator of the academic standards of schools. In order to increase their market reputation and visibility to students and their parents, many schools would actually manipulate in-grade retention rates. And, in adjusting the class size in order to get class subsidies from the government, many schools would also manipulate the operation of in-grade retention.

Put simply, against this setup, with these purposes irrelevant to the quality assurance of education, many schools could and would set up their own criteria for retention, however arbitrary or unreasonable they seem, in the name of upholding decent academic standards. Meanwhile such criteria for retention could somehow leave room for subjective interpretations in enforcement, and thus room for teachers' unprofessional treatment of students. In sum, this setup of a system of private schools without effective state governance allows schools' manipulation and teachers' unprofessionalism; this plays an important role in explaining why in-grade retention rates in Macao are so high.

The case of Macao could actually provide an opportunity for us to reflect on the neoliberal discourse currently dominant in education. It is believed that a national schooling system is inefficient and ineffective and should be replaced with a cost-effective privatized schooling system. The keywords for such advocacy are market, competition, parental choice, and the quality of education. Under a national schooling system, the practices of all school are governed by the state and thus standardized; all schools are by and large the same, meaning that there is not much choice for parents and their children; and without competition, the quality of teaching of schools would not be improved. In brief, with much state governance and standardization, such system of school is neither efficient nor effective in the provision of education; the quality of education is simply not guaranteed.

By contrast, in a privatized schooling system without much state governance and standardization, schools could have much room for innovation and individuality in materializing their different missions, in that they could design their own curriculum and assessment that they consider work well to meet the needs

of their targeted student bodies. The room for innovation and individuality makes it possible for private schools to run themselves in their own styles. Consequently, schools with their different styles could compete freely and openly for students and their parents with different needs in the market of education. Given such a variety of schools, students and their parents could have many choices and ultimately could choose a school that fits them best. Besides, competition between schools is believed to be conducive to boosting the overall quality of education. Put simply, in a privatized schooling system, schools offering a high-quality education would win out attracting more students and schools failing to do so would be forced to leave the market of education. Ultimately, not only do students and their parents benefit individually from competition between quality schools and poor schools, but the society as a whole would in a long run benefit from an increasing quality of education resulting from such competition.

However, the case of Macao urges us to rethink the potential benefits of a privatized schooling system where education is seen as a market and students and their parents are viewed as customers. Contrary to what neoliberal discourse would have us believe, in order to increase their market visibility and reputation so as to attract more students, schools and teachers do not necessarily make effort to be more innovative in teaching or to develop their niches to meet different needs of students. Rather, different schools and their teachers could still be doing the same thing: they could and would resort to manipulations of various kinds wherever and whenever necessary to promote students' academic achievements and to boost their academic reputation so as to make them look attractive to students and their parents. To this end, it is the in-grade retention rates that are manipulated in the Macao case; such manipulations and related practices are not necessarily beneficial to individual students or conducive to improving the overall quality of education. On one hand, when all schools are doing similar things to promote students' academic achievements so as to boost up their academic reputation, schools do not seem to cater different needs of parents and their children and therefore parents do not seem to have much school choice; and on the other hand, given schools' manipulations regarding their in-grade retention rates, it is difficult for parents to make an informed decision of school choice for their children.

In sum, the case of Macao suggests that in a privatized schooling system the practices of schools and their teachers could actually cause damages to students and such practices per se could be the very reason for a low quality of education. I do not mean to say that a privatized schooling system is all wrong or to defend that a national schooling system is the only way out. Rather, my point is that letting the practices of schools be regulated by the market of education rather than the state

and emphasizing competition between schools do not necessarily guarantee more choices and efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of education, let alone the provision of quality education.

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Yi-Lee Wong is a sociologist with research interests in social inequality, social stratification and mobility, education, and the youth. Over the last few years, I have been doing research projects on educational inequality in contemporary Hong Kong and Macao. The project in Hong Kong is about the institution of community college and its students. Referring to in-depth interview accounts of community-college students in Hong Kong on how they make educational decisions in order to stay on in higher education and how they evaluate their educational careers and achievements, I seek to examine the roles of emotions in the reproduction of educational inequality and the roles of self-evaluations in the legitimation of a system of educational inequality. There are various concerns of the projects in Macao; for example, one is about school regulations and regulations related to in-grade retention, another is about how high-school students make educational choices, another is about the narratives of evening-school students and dilemma facing them, and another is about the schooling experiences of school-dropouts. This paper is a piece based on the data of those projects in Macao. I have been using such rich data to address a number of issues against the context of post-colonial Macao.



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