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**Written Submission**  
**to**  
**HKSAR Legislative Council's Subcommittee on the**  
**Rights of Ethnic Minorities**  
**in advance of a meeting**  
**on 27 February 2018**  
**regarding**  
**Education of Children of Ethnic Minorities**

Submitted on  
26 February 2018

## 1. Introduction

PathFinders Limited is an approved charitable institution incorporated in Hong Kong. It receives no government funding.

PathFinders' mission is to ensure that the most vulnerable children in Hong Kong, and their migrant mothers, are respected and protected. We believe that every child deserves a fair start in life.

Our beneficiaries are typically ethnic minority (**EM**) women and children, living below the poverty line and struggling to access to basic public services such as housing, health care, schooling and identity documentation.

We will use the phrase 'EM' for the purposes of this paper. More generally, however, we believe that this term is neither correct or conducive to progress or social harmony. The children we are discussing here are linguistic minorities and should not be treated any differently for education or indeed other purposes based on their race or ethnicity.

According to Hong Kong SAR Government's (**HKSARG**) '*Poverty Situation Report on Ethnic Minorities 2016*<sup>1</sup>, 8.1% of Hong Kong's population comprised EMs, being some 575,400 people, including 320,700 Foreign Domestic Workers. That figure is expected to increase in the coming years because the EM population historically has grown at around 5.8% - which is the average growth rate seen between 2011 and 2016. That growth rate is higher than the 0.5% population growth rate in Hong Kong as a whole.

The '*Status of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong*'<sup>2</sup> report also highlighted the growing EM population, particularly those under the age of 15. That report found that relative to non-EM peers, these children underperformed at every level of our education system and that only a shockingly low number made it to university. It is essential to Hong Kong's future that proper measures and policies are in place to ensure a fair education system for these children. In particular, Chinese language teaching should be overhauled to give EMs the opportunity to learn the Chinese language to as high a standard as local children to improve their and Hong Kong's future prospects.

## 2. Issues observed and faced by EMs in the education system

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<https://www.povertyrelief.gov.hk/pdf/Hong%20Kong%20Poverty%20Situation%20Report%20on%20Ethnic%20Minorities%202016.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Status of Ethnic Minorities In Hong Kong 1997 – 2014. Puja Kapai, Associate Professor, Director, Centre for Comparative and Public Law Faculty of Law, The University of Hong Kong  
<http://www.law.hku.hk/ccpl/pub/EMreport.html>

## 2.1 Kindergarten

Kindergarten schooling is the foundation for all child to learn and develop.

Despite the introduction of policies aimed at integrating EM children into Hong Kong's public schooling system, segregation is still a reality with EM children relegated to non-mainstream and specialised EM kindergartens.

The logic for this extraordinary approach is unclear and is at odds with global education and integration practices and norms. It is unfair that that an ethnically Chinese child arriving to live in Hong Kong is able to access the mainstream kindergarten system, even though their language skills may be the same or even worse than an EM child.

In other public education systems, all children (bar exceptional cases such as special needs) are mainstreamed educationally and simply given extra language and homework support to help them catch up and to cope.

In the education system as it is currently designed:

2.1.1 EM children will naturally drift towards English as a medium of instruction (**EMI**) primary schools because there is little to no Chinese language support for children and parents in applying for kindergarten places, dealing with interviews in Chinese or language support once the child is enrolled;

2.1.2 Even if the child understands Chinese, he/she will have grown up in a non-Chinese speaking environment and will start at a disadvantage;

2.1.3 Parents struggle to help with the child's Chinese-medium homework and, given that they themselves are often a product of the existing segregated education structure, are more likely themselves to be in poorly paid, low skill jobs and unable to afford private tutors and advice<sup>3</sup>; and

2.1.4 Chinese as a medium of instruction (**CMI**) public kindergartens are currently lawfully able to refuse accept EM children if their language skills fall below par - and this despite public education being intended to serve the whole population.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the 2016 Population By-census EM poverty rates increased from 15.8% in 2011 to 19.4% in 2016 and that EMs tend to be among the poorest in Hong Kong.  
<https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/en/bc-index.html>

Beyond Kindergarten, an EM child who has attended an EMI Kindergarten is then very unlikely to be given a place at a mainstream CMI primary school. And thus labelling and disadvantage occurs from the beginning, persists throughout education and into future career pathways and is then further compounded generation-upon-generation.

As for Hong Kong as a whole, the exclusion of certain cohorts of children from the mainstream based on their ethnicity, prevents and precludes social harmony and understanding across society since there is no contact or opportunity to develop mutual understanding and friendships. Children are not born choosing friends based on ethnicity - this is a situational and learned trait that the current education system exacerbates.

## **2.2 Primary and Secondary Education**

Turning then to the Chinese curriculum in EMI schools, it is not sufficiently structured, integrated or supported to ensure that every child in Hong Kong has a fair start in life here. The current approach of treating Chinese language as just another curriculum subject rather than integrating it, creates a fundamental opportunity gap with far-reaching and life-long negative consequences.

As a result, many EM children have no option but to go straight from school into low paid, low-skilled jobs or face unemployment. This cycle continues through generations.

Although after-school homework classes are available in a few some schools, these resources given are unstructured and skant - and so many families resort to NGOs and religious communities for support. As a result, EM students are sometimes unable to finish their homework and do not have anyone at home who can help them with it - because their parents are often also a product of the current system bearing with the socio-economic impact that brings in terms of their time-poverty outside earning a living.

Simply put, Chinese language teaching in EMI primary and secondary schools must achieve similar levels as in CMI schools. Hong Kong's Kiangsu & Chekiang School and the ISF Academy achieve this with Mandarin and there is no reason why this cannot, with some curriculum adjustments and investment, also be done with Cantonese. There should also be intensive, ideally full-immersion, state-subsidised programmes available during the summer to help nurture and prepare children's Chinese language skills.

At present there is a two tier system of assessment of the level of attainment in Chinese language ability for students leaving school (HKDSE in CMI schools and GCSE/AS and A Level in EMI schools) and no transparency as to how these relate to each other.

Further, it is unclear as to why some university courses are only open to Chinese speakers (CMI) or how Chinese language ability is assessed for entry onto these courses.

### 3. Recommendations

First, please change the nomenclature from 'Ethnic Minority Children to 'Linguistic Minority Children' and/or 'Chinese as a Second Language Children' (or similar) to end the segregation of children in education based on ethnicity. The current usage is divisive and anachronistic.

#### 3.1 Restructuring of the Chinese Language Curriculum

The syllabus for Chinese language teaching needs to be radically restructured and schools given the resources to ensure students achieve their full potential. Students should be taught according to their ability in Chinese, regardless of ethnicity. Effective overseas education systems for integrating linguistic minorities should be reviewed for best practices with a view to revising the education policy to create a more integrated and fair society;

**3.2 Pre-kindergarten Support** it is essential that EM children are given support at an early stage to improve their Chinese language and interview skills. One excellent example are the free playgroups run by an NGO called 'Changing Young Lives Foundation'. Catering for children from the age of one to six, the playgroups prepare pupils for interviews at kindergarten and primary schools, as well as providing reference letters. Similar initiatives should be started by the government, allowing more EM children to have a better foundation in the Chinese language before they go for kindergarten or primary schools' admission;

**3.3 Support for Kindergartens to take EM Children** Measures should be introduced to improve kindergarten access for EMs. These include:

- Free translation services to improve communication between the school, teachers, parents and children;
- Additional in-class Chinese language support for EM children;
- Support for EM children to access homework tutorials; and
- Using technology to assist in translation, sending of e-notices, and accessing online group tutorial sessions;

**3.4 Standardized Chinese Language Assessment System** Similar to the Putonghua Proficiency Test, a similar standard assessment system for Cantonese (Cantonese Proficiency Test) should be introduced to measure both the schools' and the students' levels of achievement and progress in Cantonese learning and teaching efficiency. A certificate would then be available indicating the student's proficiency to assist when applying for further education, vocational training and employment;

**3.5 Language Scaffolding and Immersion During Holidays** There should be intensive, ideally full-immersion, state-subsidised programmes available during the summer and other holidays to help nurture and prepare children's Chinese language skills. See Camp

Taiwan<sup>4</sup> for a fun way of learning Mandarin and English and which also manages to make language learning both experiential and fun; and

**3.6 Clarify Language Assessment** At present there is a two tier system of assessment Chinese language ability: the HKDSE in CMI schools and GCSE/AS/A Levels/IB in EMI schools) and no transparency as to how these relate to each other. The preference and impact need to be clarified so parents and children make informed choices as to which to learn since it is so critical to the child's future success both for university and at work.

Thank you for considering PathFinders' submission and recommendations. We welcome further consultation and discussion.



Kay McArdle  
CEO, PathFinders Limited

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### About PathFinders Limited

PathFinders is a Hong Kong-based tax-exempt charitable organization in Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2017. We work to ensure that the most vulnerable children in Hong Kong, and their migrant mothers, are respected and protected. We believe that every child deserves a fair start in life.

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<sup>4</sup> Camp Taiwan: <https://camptaiwan.com.tw/>