

Autistic students run cafe

Pathlight School teaches employability skills to students, with help from Starbucks

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HE DOES not yet know what he wants to be in the future, but he is certainly picking up many important work habits and social skills for now.

Like many others afflicted with autism, Huang Kaisong, 14, displayed anti-social behaviour when he was growing up. But the mild-mannered teenager has become much more



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vocal and comfortable dealing with people ever since he started work at Pathlight Café – his school's four-month-old coffee bar.

"I get to punch in the numbers and also shout orders at other people!" he said, beaming.

The Secondary 3 schoolboy is one of eight students at Pathlight School chosen to work at the cafe, which was set up at the school premises with the help of Starbucks Coffee Singapore.

Pathlight School – a special-needs school for autistic children – started the project to better equip its students with necessary employability skills – like developing good work habits, customer service and the preparation of food and beverage.

Said Ms Denise Phua, Pathlight School's supervisor and president of the Autism Resource Centre: "We want to prepare our stu-

A SPECIAL MEAL: Autistic student Muhd Noh of Pathlight School serving a set meal to Ms Ho Ching, advisor to the school, while Mr Ng Teng Leong, chairman of the management committee, applauds.

dents so they will be ready for future employment. This way, they can really add value depend on pity to get a job. That's what we want for them, to have as normal a life as possible."

Apart from donating equipment, Starbucks provided assistance with the menu and training for the school's job coaches.

But the running of the 60-seater cafe – from cashiering to food preparation to bussing – falls on the young shoulders of the students, with supervision from volunteers and job coaches.

On average, each student works for three hours after school every week.

Mrs Ng Sock Kian, Kaisong's mother, is glad the school initiated the project.

"As parents of autistic kids, you worry about what your child is going to do after he leaves school. But with this cafe, I know my son is well taken care of and will be learning important new skills," she said.