



A Day in the Life of a Special Education Teacher

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Volume Thermometer



An eye-catching and boldly-coloured volume thermometer poster proclaiming “Loudest = Shouting” through “Softest = Whispering”. A chart that indicates different parts of the lesson in specific clarity: “1 - Go through the textbook. 2 - Go to the garden to look at plants. 3 - Get into groups for independent work. 4 - Pack up, and get ready for recess.”

While these details may appear excessive in an upper primary school classroom, they are must-have items in Pathlight School, the only special education (SPED) school in Singapore that teaches the mainstream curriculum to students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Ms Loy uses a poster displaying this thermometer to help guide her students' behaviour.

“Our teaching strategies are a little different as we need to create a learning environment that best caters to our students' different needs,” says Vice-Principal (Academic) Ms Loy Sheau Mei.

Ms Loy was one of four recipients of the inaugural [SPED Teachers Awards in 2007](#). As she explains, “Unlike other schools, our students are not as homogenous, so we need to provide for their differentiated learning abilities, and actively engage them.”

People with ASD tend to have underdeveloped social skills - for example, they do not make eye contact, and in a classroom situation, they will not ask questions or approach the teacher for help; they have narrow focus, and are highly anxious. But because they are strong in visual communication, the use of clear visual cues will help reduce their anxiety and temper their expectations, says Ms Loy.

Typically, when she enters a class, she will help the students settle down. Then she puts up the lesson schedule - “showing the students the start-to-finish schedule reduces their anxiety,” she explains. “I also refer them to the volume thermometer when necessary, to remind them of how

they should behave.” She also uses the 1-2-3 strategy - where “1” means keep quiet, “2” means sit upright, and “3” means get ready.



Ms Loy Sheau Mei - one of the four recipients of the SPED Teachers Awards.

Exactly as planned, she begins with 15 minutes of direct teaching before bringing her charges to the garden to look at the plants they saw in the textbook. On returning to the classroom, the students go to their pre-assigned, ability-based groups to work on their worksheets, supervised by both Ms Loy and her buddy teacher. A few minutes before the recess bell rings, she tells them to pack their things and get ready for the break.

“With the schedule, they can keep track of which part of the lesson they are at. They get very excited when I remove the sections that we’ve completed, because it means they are closer to recess!” she laughs.

But teaching isn’t Ms Loy’s only responsibility. After a hurried lunch at the end of the school day, she meets her colleagues for the once-a-week track meeting. This is a group sharing session among the primary track teachers to contribute ideas, discuss challenges and exchange strategies.

Besides being Vice-Principal (Academic), Ms Loy is also Head of Track (Primary) and plays a coaching/supervisory role. At 3 p.m., she meets with a teacher to provide her feedback on a lesson she observed a week ago. It’s only at 4 p.m. that she finally gets down to her own lesson preparations, and catches up on administrative and other work. And at 6 p.m., she heads for home with a sheaf of papers - her homework for the day.

Reflecting on the approach to education at Pathlight School, Ms Loy says, “Cognitively, our students are able to access the mainstream curriculum, and they have the ability to do very well. In fact, about 90% of them will go on to sit for the PSLE and GCE ‘O’ levels, and their results are comparable to students from other schools. We just need to ensure that the relevant strategies are in place to help them learn.”