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ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD Manfred Pang used to shrug his shoulders whenever he came across new words.

Now, the pupil at Minds Fernvale Gardens School for the intellectually disabled enjoys flipping through magazines and does not shy away from trying to pronounce unfamiliar words.

Manfred, who suffers from developmental delay, is among more than 4,700 students here attending special schools. They have benefited from new programmes designed to help them learn better, and to reward them when they do.

There are 20 government-funded special schools in Singapore which take in students with disabilities ranging from intellectual disabilities and multiple handicaps to autism and sensory impairment.

In the last three years, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has devoted more resources to them. One of these efforts is to train teachers to teach better.

Manfred's school in Sengkang is one of eight pilot ones in which teachers attend a five-day MOE course that helps them to be more effective in teaching literacy skills.

His teacher, Ms Nurhuda Mohd Nor, 31, said: "I was sceptical at first because I thought it was very rigid and would affect my usual teaching style."

But she said her students, including Manfred, have shown steady improvement since starting on the school's direct instructional reading programme in 2009. It advocates a clear and explicit teaching approach in which reading skills are taught in a step-by-step manner. Students first learn the sounds of letters, and how to blend the sounds to read words.

Textbooks feature sentences underlined using red lines that start with a filled circle and end with an arrowhead.

"The red circles at the start of the line work as a focus point so students know this is when the sentence starts. The arrowhead gives the direction in which the child is supposed to read," she said.

The children then move on to reading longer stories with smaller words. At times, pictures are shown so they can understand the story better.

Key instructional phrases, such as "say it fast" to get students to repeat the word or sentence at a quicker pace, or "show ready" which means the children are to settle down and prepare to read, are also used repeatedly.

To test comprehension, simple ques-

More MOE support for special schools

Students learn better, get rewarded under new schemes



Minds Fernvale Gardens School teacher Nurhuda Mohd Nor teaching Manfred Pang, 11, and Dionnie Low, 13, reading skills. The school is one of eight pilot ones in which teachers attend an MOE course that helps them to be more effective in teaching literacy skills. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

tions are asked.

Ms Nurhuda said: "The programme is very structured and the group is homogeneous, meaning the children are of the same reading ability. Repetition is crucial because they need to do it over and over again."

To her, the benefits are obvious.

"In the past, I used another programme which uses very short isolated sentences. My kids just memorised the sentences and forgot them after that.

"This programme has sparked their reading interest. Now when I take them out for a ride on the MRT train, they try to pronounce the names of the stations."

An MOE spokesman said the programme has been extended to eight more special schools from this year.

The ministry also launched a grant last year to encourage children with special needs to perform well.

Schools are given a lump sum to establish school-based awards for students.

The amount for each award ranges from \$100 to \$600. Last year, \$279,000 was disbursed to the 20 special schools for this purpose.

One such school was the Canossian School, for the hearing impaired. The school received \$9,300 last year. It gave out scholarships for those with excellent all-round performance, and bursaries for needy students, those who made good progress and those who displayed leadership qualities.

The principal, Ms Terry Theseira, who is in her 40s, said: "These awards affirm the students' good work and spur them to do better. They also become role models."

Other teachers in special schools said they are looking forward to more support for the sector.

For instance, Ms Fauziah Ahmad, 46, the principal of Rainbow Centre at Margaret Drive, for children with autism or multiple disabilities, said she was excited about the new High Needs grant.

In March, MOE announced that up to \$2.3 million a year would be set aside to enable special schools to hire teacher aides for high-needs students, who display challenging behaviour.

Ms Fauziah said: "Some of our classes really need a ratio of one teacher to one student either because of their challenging behaviour or their medical condition - some have very frequent epilepsy fits."

The school's current teaching ratio is an average of one teacher or teaching aide to three students.

Ms Denise Phua, 51, an MP for Moulmein-Kallang GRC and supervisor of autism school Pathlight in Ang Mo Kio, said she appreciated the ministry being more actively involved in special education in the last five years.

She cited several significant changes made: locating special schools next to mainstream schools for more integration, increased funding for school infrastructure and more support for the use of information technology in teaching.

She added, however, that more can be done.

For one thing, MOE could work "better and faster" with special schools in addressing specific concerns.

She would like all special-needs students to be able to stay in school until the age of 21. Currently, only those who are eligible for certificate courses can stay on until that age.

Her views are echoed by Manfred's mother, Mrs Yvonne Lai, 40.

The sales executive said: "I can see that MOE is doing more. My son has improved by leaps and bounds. When I see him reading more, from words, to sentences, to paragraphs, I am overjoyed."

"But much more can still be done. Special-education teachers should be recognised for their hard work. More facilities should be set up to ensure that these children are taken care of even after they leave school."

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