

# Shadow teachers help kids with special needs

Parents of children with special education needs say the support in mainstream schools is inadequate, prompting them to hire shadow teachers. NURUL ASYIKIN YUSOFF (asyikiny@sph.com.sg) learns about the role of a shadow teacher

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Jul 25, 2016 6:00am

Her job requires her to observe, collect data and write reports.

But she is neither a researcher nor a scientist.

Mrs Veena Jayanth, 49, is a shadow teacher.

She provides support to a student with special education needs (SEN) in a mainstream school setting - kindergartens and primary, secondary and international schools.

A shadow teacher can provide a wide range of support for the students, from helping them focus in class to coaching them on how to socialise with their peers. Some even help to toilet train younger children.

Mrs Jayanth has 19 years of experience teaching and working with children with SEN.

She joined Inclusion Therapy, a company offering help and shadow support for children with SEN, three years ago. She works with children with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD).

There is no time frame for how long shadow support lasts. Mrs Jayanth's longest assignment lasted two years and three months.

She told The New Paper: "It depends on what the team working with the child feels. If it is thought a child has been functioning successfully in the classroom, shadows would gradually reduce and end their support."

Mr Chandra Thanabalan, 36, director of Inclusion Therapy, said teamwork is needed to provide a child with the right support.

"In addition to parents, our shadow teachers and learning support consultants, we also work closely with teachers and therapists working with the student. We make the decision together on whether to continue the child's support."

## **SUPPORT**

Mr Johnny Fok, local director of Intervention Services for Autism and Developmental Delay, said: "The aim of a shadow teacher should be to fade away the support."

Children who need shadow support can be as young as three years old and as old as 16. Their disabilities also vary.

"We try to focus on the specific area of needs and strengths of the child, and keep our interventions in the classroom as smooth as possible," said Mrs Jayanth.

Another Inclusion Therapy teacher William Chua, 29, tries to help the child get used to the classroom teacher's routines and rules.

"We work based on what the classroom is like as our approach has to be discrete and non-disruptive to the classroom as a whole."

The cost of hiring a shadow teacher depends on the level of support needed, from \$400 a month for minimal support to a few thousand dollars for intensive support.

Mr Chandra said: "A child with severe learning or behaviour challenges could start off with intensive support and the support is eventually reduced to a few days a week."

There are no records of the number of shadow teachers in mainstream schools.

Total Communication's shadow support coordinator Brenda Low said: "Not all mainstream schools are okay with shadow teachers.

"Some schools prefer to depend on their Allied Educators (AED) instead."

All primary and secondary schools under the Ministry of Education have at least one AED to help students with mild SEN.

### **Support provided is child-specific**

The type of support a shadow teacher can provide for a child with special education needs (SEN) depends on the child and the challenges faced in school, said Ms Manjula Gunawardena, a specialist educator from Total Communication, a special needs therapy centre.

"The support needed is usually child-specific and never diagnosis-specific," she said.

As a result, the cost of hiring a shadow teacher varies, depending on the individual case. At Total Communication, shadow teachers can cost between \$40 and \$65 an hour, depending on the level of support a child needs.

Hiring a shadow teacher from Intervention Services for Autism and Developmental Delay would cost between \$35 and \$55 an hour, said its director Johnny Fok.

But some learning or therapy centres for children with SEN offer a fixed rate for their shadow support services, regardless of the severity of a child's condition.

Triumphant Kids, a learning centre mainly for children with autism spectrum disorder, charges a flat rate of \$35 an hour.

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