

LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

# Labour of love

Taarana seeks to help children with special needs realise their full potential, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**D**ATIN Sri Umayal Eswaran sits on an asymmetric, custom-made purple chair in her plush office. There is an air of charm, joy and peace about her but a sense of sadness fills the room when she recounts stories of some of the children she had met when they first came to Taarana, a school for children with special needs ([www.taarana.org.my](http://www.taarana.org.my)).

A 6-year-old girl refused to walk and crawled everywhere instead. A little boy wouldn't speak because he learnt that no one understood him anyway. Another boy just screamed to get what he wanted.

Parents of such children are worried and say things like, "What will my child do when he grows up?" or "He can't read or write. Who will look after him when we're gone?"

Taarana is Umayal's brainchild and a project under Vijayaratham Foundation, a philanthropic organisation. The 43-year-old is the chairperson of the foundation, described as "a labour of love, fuelled by a passion to serve". It is a school that caters to special needs children and helps them realise their full potential. It hopes to provide them with the ability to lead an independent life.

When I ask why, her immediate answer is "do I really have to have a reason?"

However, upon closer analysis,



is it possible that this accomplished bharatanatyam dancer with a degree in computer science, may wish for other children to have the kind of happy childhood she had in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where she was born?

"My memories of the school I went to, the Holy Family Convent, were all very happy," she says. "We were kids being kids and the island was peaceful then. The difference, I suppose, for us was that all the Tamils were in one class and all the Sinhalese were in another. I like what we have here in Malaysia, where you can find children of all races together in one class."

"When I was in school, we didn't know what the word dyslexia meant. I mean, if we couldn't do maths or any subject, we were just stupid or lazy. No one understood that a child might be having trouble. Now, it's different.

Now, you look at a child and you know that he's special in some way. Parents stop and think that maybe, this child needs help. I was in Mauritius and my friend had a child who was autistic. I watched how the parents treated her like a normal child and now she has blossomed into a lovely young woman."

Shaking her head, Umayal continues: "Whether or not we like it, there is a growing number of such children. With some schools charging fees of up to RM10,000 a month, there is a need for a school that the middle class can afford."

#### THE SOLUTION

Once she set her mind to find a solution, coupled with a work ethic that she encapsulates in three words — work is worship — she set about to create the school.

She says: "None of us knew what we were getting into. My team and I went to Singapore and South Australia



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Datin Sri Umayal Eswaran

and looked at schools there."

In 2011, Taarana (a Sanskrit word that means "awakening of the mind") opened its doors as a private school for special needs children registered with the Ministry of Education.

The operational aspects of the school are no different from any other but what is different is the approach taken to teach these children. For instance, its children-parent ratio is currently seven children to one teacher and assistant. The classes are also divided into academic, sensory and vocational instead of Standards 1, 2 and 3. Intake is not by age, but by assessment.

#### THE CHALLENGES

"Initially the response was not great," says Umayal. "Another challenge we faced was that some parents found it very hard to accept that their children needed help. So, we visited paediatricians and left our brochures there as well as asked them to refer

such children to us."

Taarana is very fortunate to have a highly qualified principal — Mrs Bala Swaminathan who has a Masters in Psychology and is trained in specialised fields like autism, independent sign language and applied behavioural analysis. She has enormous knowledge and experience in managing and teaching children with special needs. In spite of this, the biggest challenge remains the scarcity of teachers who specialise in this field. The school currently has only 17 and is certainly looking to increase this number.

All said and done, Taarana has been a huge success. In just three short years, there is already a waiting list of 40 children seeking admission. No doubt this is an encouraging factor.

However, a more fulfilling measure of success and source of immense pride for Umayal comes from what a parent recently told her: "I am so grateful you started this school. I don't know what I would do if Taarana is not here."

Details at [www.taarana.org.my](http://www.taarana.org.my).



Taarana hopes to provide children with special needs with the ability to lead an independent life.