



SWABODHINI
SCHOOL FOR SPECIAL CHILDREN



Some children are special and so are their needs. It takes time, patience and a lot of empathy to understand their needs and create an institution which is so special in its own way. Swabodhini is one such place started by a big hearted and committed lady, Radha Ganesan.

Radha Ganesan, a Kindergarten teacher started Swabodhini in 1989 when she realised that some of her students needed special help that they were not getting at their current school. Located in Valmikinagar in Thiruvannamiyur, the school started with four students. Today more than 60 differently abled students study at Swabodhini. Recently they opened a centre at Guru Nanak College campus in Velachery.

To know more about Swabodhini and how they serve the autistic community in Chennai we spoke to honorary trustee, Anuradha Mahesh. Anuradha's association with Swabodhini started 12 years ago, when she brought her son in for some Occupational Therapy. Anuradha who is a Chartered Accountant by profession had just returned from the Middle East and was very happy with the quality of staff and service at Swabodhini. She, how-ever, realised that the center needed to upgrade its infrastructure. She started out by bringing their accounting system into the 21st century by phasing out handwritten cash books and moving to MS Excel and then Tally.

When she was asked to join the Board of the School, she jumped at the opportunity



to help the school by raising funds. A lot still needed to be done. From finding qualified, well trained teachers to building a corpus that would see them through lean years, she had an uphill road ahead of her. Her first five years at Swabodhini, she focussed on measuring improvement in each child. This involved defining the parameters of success and charting a path for the future of each child.

When a child first comes to Swabodhini, an assessment report is prepared. This report details where the child stands and what

he/she needs in terms of IQ, Occupational Therapy, Special Needs and Speech Therapy. Based on that, assessment goals are set, and teachers and therapists work towards improving the skills of the child. The centre works with parents to set expectations and counsels them on how best to help their child.

The centre has four divisions - pre-primary for children aged 4 to 7, primary for children aged 7 to 14, pre-vocational - for students aged 14 to 18 and vocational training centre for students aged 18 and above. At the vocational training centre they train



students in four streams - culinary, retail, computer and office administration, and cup making. To help students get hands on retail training they started Swayam Shoppe, a grocery store. Here students from the retail stream work to gain experience in stock taking, billing, sorting, packing etc.

The journey from training the students to job placement is a pretty long one. It starts with experiential learning - visiting cafes, super markets, offices. Next comes task-analysis - breaking down each task into sub-tasks. The teachers then introduce each sub-task to the student, training them in that till they have mastered it before moving to the next sub-task. Take for instance teaching the student the job of photo-copying - the students are taught the difference between A3 and A4 paper, how to load them, how to change toner, how to take multiple copies, what each button does. While some students learn the job within six months for some others it can take upto a year and a half. Each student is taught at his own pace. The next step is finding an internship position. This is where the marketing wing of Swabodhini comes in - it is their task to interface with corporates and convince them to give a special student a chance to be an intern at their facility. The intern is accompanied by a job coach from Swabodhini whose job it is to explain the work, culture and help him interact and work with his new colleagues. Every two months, a sensitization seminar is conducted at the work place to help other employees understand and accept the special student



in their midst. The whole process is considered a success if the internship translates into a job placement and the student continues for a set period of time. Anuradha says, "I strongly believe that every child is capable of an internship and a placement in the open environment today. We just need to figure out the what, when, where and how and that is what we are doing here at Swabodhini. We want every person on the spectrum to have the opportunity to live a purposeful life with dignity."

Apart from academics, Swabodhini also provides a lot of other classes to children with special needs. Satyananda Yoga centre works with Swabodhini to train the students

in various stretches and breathing techniques. This has helped calm students and they are able to focus better through the day. They also have a fitness coach who works with the kids to help them become fitter,

stronger and more agile. Swabodhini has also tied up with the Hitham Trust to impart music lessons to the students. Experts believe that non-verbal children have the ability to understand and enjoy music

and sometimes even hum it before they can start talking.

Swabodhini is recognised by the state government, which, partly supports the school. Its vocational training institute is also recognised by the state government. Swabodhini also gets project based funding from corporates. Its multimedia centre, the culinary wing, Swayam Shoppe etc. are supported by various corporates. Some individual donors also support the education of under privileged students. In such cases donors and parents are closely involved in tracking the progress of the student. Donors are involved at every stage so that they understand that it is a long drawn process.

According to Anuradha the biggest challenges faced by Swabodhini is finding and retaining, qualified well-trained special educators. The attrition rate is a challenge, so is training replacement staff and ensuring continuity. The biggest challenge, however, is raising enough funds to ensure they can compensate the staff on par with industry standards.

She hopes that down the road Swabodhini will become the place for children with autism to find quality education and care. She also hopes that eventually all students will go on to find internship placements and be able to earn a living independently and live together in a safe community when their caregivers are not around any more.

The world is a better place when people with all kinds of abilities can find their purpose and some friends along the way.

Swabodhini means empowering self learning. And true to its name they have touched the lives of more than 500 students on the spectrum. Here's wishing another Champion of Chennai the very best in the years to come.