



Eco - Access

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**PRESENTATION DEAT LIMPOPO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION
23 JULY 2008**

**THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN
ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES**

1. INTRODUCTION:

Ideally, this topic requires a 4 day workshop and so this presentation can merely provide an overview. It is really up to you to take your learning further. The real learning will, however, be as you get to know and meet people with disabilities.

Including people with disabilities into any kind of programme or facility is really about investing in ourselves. We are all TABS, "Temporarily Abled Bodied" and it is important to know that disability can happen to anyone at anytime – a car accident, as you get older and your senses become affected and even temporary "disabilities" such as a broken leg or a mother using a pram.

The very first part of including people with disabilities into your programmes and activities is losing your fear and learning to interact with people who are different to you. It is also about creating physical access. As a result, this is where we have focused our talk today. Including people with disabilities into your environmental education programmes will be made a lot easier through an understanding of the general issues surrounding people with disabilities and disability issues.

2. DEFINITIONS: Who are people living with disabilities?

Disability is a huge field and ranges from unseen disabilities to very visible ones to ones that impact significantly on how a person carries out their daily life functions to those that have a relatively small impact on a person's life. For this presentation, we will focus on people who are physically disabled, people who are blind or partially sighted, people who are Deaf or hard of hearing and those who have intellectual disabilities.



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3. DISABILITY MODELS

Historically, disability has been viewed in different ways or different paradigms. The paradigm in which society views disability and disability issues determines how society as a whole treats and includes or excludes people with disabilities. Fortunately, we are currently moving from what is known as the MEDICAL model into what is termed the SOCIAL model.

The Medical Model: People with disabilities are seen as patients who need care and who need to live in institutions. They are not able to work or operate independently.

The Social Model: People with disabilities are fully included members of society and communities and are free to participate in any activity they choose to, such as employment, recreation, education, transport, etc. The environment allows them to participate.

All current legislation and policy supports the social model and moves away from the medical model. It's society's fears and ignorance which hinders this process and results in the ongoing discrimination of people with disabilities and excludes them from participating fully in society.

4. TERMINOLOGY

A person with a disability is a person first. His / her disability comes in second. Hence it is important to carry this fact through by the terminology we use when talking to or about people with disabilities. Using the correct terminology is a matter of respect and inclusion. Some of the points to consider regarding terminology related to people with disabilities include:

Remember that the person is more important than his / her disability. People first, disability is secondary. So, it is important to focus on the person and their talents, skills and personality. As a result, terminology starting with "People who are ..." is best practice. So, for example, it is correct to say, "People who are blind" or "People who use wheelchairs" or "A person who has a head injury" etc.

Don't generalize by using terms such as "The disabled" or "The mentally challenged". One exception to this rule is with 'the Deaf' because the Deaf community considers themselves as a unique cultural group. So, just as you would say the Sotho's or the English using a capital letter, so you would say the Deaf with a capital letter.

One should never use the term 'Deaf and dumb'. That is old fashioned and we know these days that Deaf people are not dumb. Deaf people may be mute, but they are not dumb!



People with a learning disability are not morons. They are, as with all of us, special and may be referred to as having a learning disability, having an 'intellectual challenge' or being 'intellectually impaired'.

Using the term "handicapped" is not "PC" these days. Horses and golfers have handicaps, not people in everyday life! 'Challenged' was a fairly common term a few years ago, but is not widely used these days. So, for example, we wouldn't talk about a 'physically handicapped person' or a 'physically challenged person', but rather a 'person with a physical disability'. 'Crippled' is not "PC" and neither is the term 'retarded'.

There are no real rules and terminology does tend to change from time to time. Two important things though is to remember to always use the word person or people and secondly to know that the word 'disability' is generally understood and accepted.

When referring to people, who are blind, use the words 'blind' or 'partially sighted'. Visually impaired is also acceptable. There does seem to be a resurgence of the word impaired when referring to various disabilities.

The terminology referring to people who don't have a disability isn't quite as clear. According to one source, 'non-disabled people' is current. However, 'able-bodied people' is also acceptable.

Please use the correct terminology. It does show respect for the person and an acknowledgement that the person is far more important than his / her disability.

5. CURRENT LEGISLATION

There are many pieces of legislation and policy related to the inclusion of people with disabilities into our environment and society. SA has some of the best and most progressive legislation relating to people with disabilities but enforcement is problematic. Legislation and policy has, however, ensured that the issue is being taken more seriously – if there weren't these guidelines and laws, virtually nothing would be happening and society's fears and attitudes would not be challenged.

Some of the current legislation that affects the inclusion of people with disabilities into environmental education programmes includes the following:

The SA Constitution, White Paper 6 on Inclusion, Integrated National Disability Strategy and the Revised National Curriculum Statement.

There are many other pieces of inclusive legislation relating to people with disabilities such as the Employment Equity Act, Basic conditions of Service etc.



There is also the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" which is an international treaty. South Africa is a signatory to the Convention.

The only reason for mentioning the laws and policies in this presentation is to create an awareness that our country is serious about including people with disabilities into all aspects of life. You should be as well.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:

What does inclusion practically mean?

Like the environment, inclusion covers all areas of life. One doesn't just look after our planet at work, but we also look after our planet at home, in the car, etc. Similarly, the inclusion of people with disabilities is everywhere and not just at institutions. This includes medical facilities, shops, schools, environmental facilities, programmes etc. Inclusion re environmental education programmes means all areas as well – right from the time of arriving at a facility until the time of leaving. This means that absolutely everything that is built should have accessibility considered and designed into it. It is not always feasible to include access into wilderness areas, however, access must be part of all buildings (bathrooms, kiosks, parking bays, visitor centres, viewing points, etc) as well as part of all education programmes and activities. Inclusion MUST be part of everybody's mind-set!

Interacting with people with disabilities

Again, remember that the person is more important than their disability. Here are some of the salient points when interacting with a person who has a disability:

- Always talk to the person with the disability when addressing him / her. Don't speak to an assistant or friend.
- Always ask first. Don't assume what and if the person needs assistance. Once you've asked, listen to the answer and respect it.
- Don't be scared. People with disabilities don't usually bite even if their answer or reaction isn't what we expect.
- Don't touch or lean on any assistive device - such as the person's wheelchair, white cane, guide dog etc without the disabled person's permission. These devices are part of the person's personal space.
- Use the correct terminology.

We'll look at some more examples of how to interact with people with specific disabilities in the next section.



Including people with disabilities into environmental education programmes, facilities and activities

Good environmental education programmes include and accommodate a wide range of people and use all the senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste). So, it is possible that if your programmes and activities do not already include people with disabilities, they're not as good as they could be!

It is vital to set the aims and outcomes you are wanting to achieve through any programme and then assess how you can make it accessible. So, one would look at why a programme exists and then adapt it accordingly e.g. if your aim is to teach learners about soil erosion, you would take your current soil erosion programme and then adapt it, using appropriate concepts, to ensure that a blind or a Deaf learner would also understand soil erosion at the end of your programme.

What is extremely important is to think and plan ahead of time. "Winging it" is not an effective way to include people with disabilities into environmental education programmes, facilities and activities. Planning and preparation allow one to take all a person's special needs into account, include those needs appropriately and not segregate the person / people from the mainstream. Making "special" programmes can be exclusive and not inclusive. So, you wouldn't want a "special" programme for blind participants and another programme for sighted participants. The ideal is to have everyone doing the same programme where possible – there are exceptions.

Obviously, if you're working at a Special Needs School, this will be different because all the learners will be disabled. Do be aware that many mainstream schools these days do have individuals who have a disability.

A practical example of how to be inclusive with a programme is one of Eco-Access's staff members who developed Braille Treasure Hunts that could be played by mixed groups of blind and sighted youngsters. It is an environmental education game.

6.3.1. People with physical disabilities:

People using crutches, wheelchairs and who have mobility difficulties require physical access. They can only go where their mobility devices can go and where their hands can reach. So, accessible parking, toilets, entrance gates, auditoriums and every facility must be physically accessible. Programmes need to consider access as a main priority and often need to be adapted. Some practical examples include elevated gardens, e.g. use tyres to elevate gardens for youngsters who find it difficult getting out of a wheelchair. When running programmes, it is vital not to disadvantage the person.

Some points to remember when interacting with a person with a physical disability include: Remember that the wheelchair or crutches are part of the person's personal space so don't touch them without permission; Don't pat the person on the head or use condescending



actions because the person is at a lower height than you; Do try and address the person at his / her eye level – especially if they are sitting in a wheelchair.

Some practical lessons we've learned: Most wheelchairs can get punctures so be careful where you go; Unless the vehicles transporting people with physical disabilities have been specifically adapted, it often takes much longer for them to embark and disembark from the vehicles; Programmes often take a lot longer and hence planning and timing are vital; Accessible ablution facilities have to be available; If there is someone who is part of a group using a wheelchair, ensure they can see i.e. they are not blocked off by the group.

6.3.2. People who are blind or partially sighted:

Communication needs to be accessible, whether it is receiving information via a clear voice or large print for those with partial sight. Braille can be used but only a small percentage of blind people read Braille. Lots of tactile information is required such as creatures to feel, touching damp soil (and smelling it)! Do remember that blind people are gentle with their hands. Hearing is such an important sense for people who are blind and partially sighted, so take advantage of sounds such as bird calls, running water, rustling leaves, etc. If working with a group of blind people, remember that each blind person will need to experience what is being discussed, say for example, a seed. Again, this increases the time needed per programme. If visuals such as posters, slides and videos are used, exceptionally good commentary describing them must be given – or don't use them. When working with a mixed group, a lovely way to ensure that you do not discriminate against people who are blind is to blindfold the entire group. In this way you relate to everyone equally. Use as many of the senses as possible.

Some points to remember when interacting with someone who is blind or partially sighted: Don't shout; Let the person know who you are; Use words like look, watch and see; Don't be afraid to mention colours; Give simple and clear descriptions of items that may not have been seen before e.g. a tree or creature; If an item or object has not been experienced before, relate its size to something in common daily usage e.g. it's about the size of a soccer ball

Some practical lessons we've learned: Don't assume anything e.g. a young blind girl on a programme thought a feather was a wing and another blind person thought an elephant was very big ... about the size of a large dog; As everyone needs to be practically involved, programmes often take much longer

6.3.3. People who are Deaf:

A Sign language interpreter is most appropriate. Leave plenty of additional time for interpretation.



Points to consider when interacting with Deaf people (assuming you can't speak Sign language): Face the light; Night programmes will need light; Talk to the person or group and not to the interpreter; Don't obscure your mouth with hand movements; Clear signage is important; Writing can work e.g. by using a white board.

Some practical lessons we've learned: Whistles can be very useful. Each Deaf participant gets a whistle to blow in case of emergency such as getting lost on a hike; Plan carefully with night programmes; Light, light, light!

6.3.4. People with Intellectual Disabilities:

The main rule which applies is KISS – Keep it Straight and Simple. In fact this rule applies to everyone, disabled or not! Remember that even with literate people; aim your programme at a 9 year old.

Their interactions can often be very physical with lots of hugging and touching. Don't be distracted by this.

People with intellectual disabilities can be very enthusiastic and emphatic about a project. So, for example, if you can win their respect, they can develop the most sincere and focused recycling programme or vegetable gardens.

7. The Eco-Access Twinning Model

"What we do not know we fear and what we fear, we disregard". Twinning, for us, is breaking down fear and teaching respect by bringing groups of disabled and non-disabled people together on environmental programmes.

People with disabilities have an equal right to get involved with and take responsibility for our planet. It is imperative that we, as environmentally focused organizations, provide relevant opportunities for everyone to participate in our programmes.

When bringing people with disabilities and mainstream learners together on any programme, it is important to remember to treat people with disabilities as equal partners. It is extremely important not to patronize or disadvantage the disabled twin. The aim is to empower the person with the disability and if necessary, over and above the mainstream participant.

Twinning is NOT about throwing a mixed group of people together and hoping the programme works. We do not want to enforce the current societal paradigm that people with disabilities are dependent! So, we attempt to create independence on all Eco-Access programmes.

The environment doesn't judge and is thus an ideal backdrop to our programmes.

Never assume that a person with a disability cannot do something. Adaptations may need to be made but virtually everything is possible.



8. CONCLUSION

As environmental educators, we have the responsibility, morally and legally, to include all people into our programmes, activities and facilities. It is our responsibility to ensure that people with disabilities can access our environment, can learn from the programmes we offer and can, in their turn, enjoy and participate in looking after our planet.

Our challenge to you is to overcome the fears you may have and to interact with those who have disabilities. Interact within the context of respect, empowerment and to avoid the current social paradigm that people who have disabilities need to be dependent.

As a closing point, remember that people with disabilities are ordinary people. They, like anyone, have different likes and dislikes, different skills and talents, different strengths and weaknesses. Some will like your programmes and some not, some will choose to get involved and some not. Our challenge, as environmental educators, is to provide the opportunities for disabled visitors like we would for any non-disabled visitor.

Do take some time to go onto the internet and read up about activities that are suitable for people with different disabilities – you will not be disappointed. Do take the time to get to know people with disabilities and do take some time to think about and plan how you will include them into your programmes and facilities.

Eco-Access is an organisation which seeks to expose children with disabilities to the bush, teach them about ecology and about themselves and at the same time "twin" them with non-disabled children in an endeavour to break down the myths and barriers of disability.

Eco-Access is a registered Non Profit and Public Benefit Organisation with exemption from section 18(A) of the Income Tax Act. It was established in 1994 by Rob and Julie Filmer who recognized the need to provide opportunities for disabled and non-disabled children to become friends and for the disabled youngsters to become actively involved in environmental programmes, something historically denied to them.

The opportunity for disabled and non-disabled youngsters to meet and to become involved in their environment should be the right of any human being. Yet, children still attend separate schools and environmental facilities mostly don't cater for individuals with disabilities. Environmental education practitioners rarely know how to adapt outdoor programmes for children who are blind or partially sighted, Deaf or hard of hearing, use wheelchairs or crutches or who have intellectual disabilities. Without interventions like Eco-Access programmes, children with disabilities become more and more isolated from their own communities and from South Africa's spectacular natural heritage.

We currently run five integrated programmes with the following aims:



1. To bring disabled and non disabled children together on specially designed outdoor programmes
2. To enhance the inclusion of disabled individuals into mainstream society
3. To adapt environmental education programmes so that youngsters with disabilities can become involved in these programmes
4. to teach disabled children, their teachers, parents and the general school communities to build pride and develop skills through environmental programmes at special needs schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Should you wish to know more about the work of Eco-Access, please contact us at any of the following:

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