

Integrated Outdoor Education in Malaysia: Reflections of Persons with and Without Disabilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine participants' perceptions of social acceptance in relation to persons with and without disabilities roles' in an integrated outdoor education program and their understanding and meanings of outdoor experiences in Malaysia. Participants, (N = 32) persons with disabilities (n = 19) and without disabilities (n = 13) who were involved in a two-day integrated outdoor education program completed an open-ended questionnaire. Three categories were identified: degrees of social acceptance (lack of acceptance and acceptance), construction of social acceptance (active and proactive), and outdoor education experiences (frequency of participation, friendship development, acceptance of differences, intentions for future participation, social satisfaction, and spiritual development). The categories were nested within the theme of equal opportunity in that participants (with or without disabilities), were given a chance to participate in integrated outdoor education program and try to construct social acceptance

Introduction

Persons with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. In Malaysia, there are over 170,455 registered disabled persons such as: developmental disabilities (including cerebral palsy, mental retardation, epilepsy, and autism), hearing impairments, learning disabilities, mobility impairments, and visual impairment, less than one percent of the population, each with their own unique circumstances and set of daily challenges (Department of Social Welfare Malaysia, 2006). These persons with disabilities have values, preferences, and a desire for happiness.

Although outdoor education has been in existence for many years, programming for persons who have disabilities is actually new in Malaysia. Lack of program and facility accessibility and information has prevented some students with disabilities from full participation in outdoor education. Students with disabilities are frequently excluded by their community and discouraged from participating in outdoor activities. By being restricted from this context, these children have fewer opportunities to enhance physical and social skills.

Historically, persons with disabilities were not provided with opportunities to participate in recreation programs and activities (Schleien & Ray, 1988). People always think that persons with disabilities do not participate in outdoor or adventure education because these activities are dangerous, risky and out of the realm of possibility for persons with disabilities (McAvoy, 2001). And, even if one would want to participate in these activities, the natural outdoor environment is too inaccessible to make participation possible (McAvoy, 2001). Since the early 1980s, it has become more likely that people with disabilities all over the world will seek and expect the same opportunities and lifestyles as people without disabilities (Foreman, 2001). The *International Year of Disabled Persons* (IYDP) in 1981 had stimulated the emergence of people with disabilities into the community (United Nations, 1981). IYDP emphasized the right of people with disabilities to exercise choices on such fundamental matters as where they live, where they work, and how they spent their leisure time.

McAvoy (2001) suggested a number of myths regarding outdoor recreation and persons with disabilities, including the ideas that persons with disabilities do not prefer the same kinds of outdoor environments, do not currently participate in outdoor recreation and adventure activities, and cannot attain a full range of benefits from outdoor recreation and adventure activities and programs. In contrast to these myths, previous study showed that people with disabilities tend to seek the same experiences and achieve the same benefits from outdoor activities as person without disabilities (Cordell & McKinney, 1999; McAvoy & Lais, 1999; McCormick, 2001). It is clear that people with disabilities seek opportunities to socialize with friends, try new and challenging activities. Study by Cordell and McKinney (1999) found that people with disabilities in the United States of America participate in a wide range of outdoor recreation activities including walking, family activities, sightseeing, picnicking, fishing, bird watching, camping, hiking, boating and hunting. Studies by Robb and Ewert (1987); McAvoy, Schatz, Stutz, Schleien and Lais (1989) show that people with disabilities seek risk, challenge and adventure in the outdoors, as do their contemporaries who do not have disabilities.

Approaches used to extend recreation services to all individuals and levels of acceptance have been labeled as segregated, integrated, and inclusive programming (Schleien, Green & Ray, 1997). Segregated programs serve only persons with disabilities where participants tend to be homogeneous with respect

to their needs and nature of desired programs. Integrated programs serve both persons with and without disabilities to participate side by side. To integrate is defined in the Oxford English dictionary as to 'be made up of part'. Integrated programming refers to the placement of persons with disabilities in regular settings. Integrated programs use instructors or leisure buddies, siblings, and volunteers to assist and support participants. The intention of integrated programs is to practice skills, promote adjustment, and facilitate the highest possible level of independent leisure functioning (Schleien, McAvoy, Lais & Rynders, 1993). The problem of integration understood in this way is that proximity itself cannot guarantee acceptance. People may be integrated but not necessarily included. In the inclusion approach, programs are planned from the onset to incorporate anyone who selects the experience (Sylvester, Voelkl & Ellis, 2001). According to the Oxford English dictionary to 'include' means to 'comprise or embrace, as part of a whole'. Inclusive programs mean all individuals are provided with the opportunity to participate in physical activity at the appropriate level and with the appropriate support. Inclusion also means that persons with disabilities are recognised as individuals with the right to make choices, to take risks, to be independent, to make mistakes and to reap the benefits of outdoor activities in the same way as any other person in the community. Inclusive leisure experiences provides an environment that promotes and fosters physical, social, and psychological inclusion of people with diverse experiences and skill levels (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Smith, Austin & Kennedy, 2005).

For the purpose of this study the term "integration" will be used to describe the observed practice in Malaysian outdoor education camps in which the attempt is made to accommodate participants with disabilities. The use of this term is not intended to make a distinction from "inclusive outdoor education", or to judge whether or not participants with disabilities are given equal opportunities. It is used because the distinction between integrate and inclusive outdoor education was not clear to most of the participants and because, in practice, the two institutions included in the study appeared to integrate, rather than include, the participants with disabilities.

Integrated outdoor education programs can profoundly affect the lives of their participants, both with and without disabilities (Schleien et al., 1993). The integrated outdoor education program will provide recreational opportunities for persons with disabilities by providing support and necessary accommodations. These programs also provide opportunities for many people who never thought that they would have a chance to experience the outdoors. The programs can provide, to people with different ability levels, the opportunity to see and appreciate the outdoors and other people with different abilities. It captures the full acceptance of persons with disabilities into the recreation mainstream. It reflects free, equal access to recreation participation by persons with disabilities. The person who involves himself or herself in the integrated outdoor recreation

program can gain psychological, social and mental health benefits that are associated with participation. It also can enhance self concept and self esteem, personal growth, increase leisure skills, increase social adjustment; enhance body image and positive behavior changes (McAvoy et al., 1989; Robb & Ewert, 1987). Those studies reflect free, equal access to recreation participation by person with disabilities. It provides recreational opportunities for persons with both developmental disabilities and mental illnesses by providing support and necessary accommodations (Devine & Wilhite, 2000).

For the pioneers, the reality was that there was much more literature available on the benefits of integrated outdoor education than the implementation. The most useful studies in examining the effect of integrated outdoor programs on people with and without disabilities was conducted by Anderson, Schlieen, McAvoy and Seligmann (1997) in the United States of America. While this study was considered to be most useful, a Malaysian study on integrated outdoor education program was also seen as being needed because of the different social values between Malaysia and the United States. The United States has federal disability legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which promotes integration however, Malaysia does not have comparable legislation. Furthermore, an integrated outdoor education program is still a new area in Malaysia, and I hope, with this program, it would be an eye opener to the society in Malaysia, the importance of integration program to enhance the spirit and determination of the disability community in Malaysia and also it would be a platform for able-bodied people to participate and integrate with people with disabilities.

Why Malaysia?

There are several reasons for researching the effects of integrated outdoor education among Malaysians. One reason is the rapid population growth of the country. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2007), the population rose from 20.1 million in 1998 to 27.17 million in 2007. The growing of population indirectly will increase the demands for outdoor recreation and it will create an impact on the socioeconomic character of communities and the environment. The status of the Malaysian economy has had a significant impact on the participation of outdoor recreation activities to both persons with and without disabilities.

Malaysians are multiracial, comprising of Malays as the predominant group who make up about 57% of the population with Chinese, Indians, and other ethnic groups including Dayaks, Ibans, and Kadazans making up the rest. The national religion of Malaysia is Islam, to which Malays adhere, but other religions are practiced freely by other races. Most of the Chinese Malaysians believe in Buddhism and Taoism but others are Christians. Hinduism is mostly practiced by the Malaysian Indian population. Though Bahasa Melayu (Malay Language)

is the national language, various ethnic groups use their own languages and dialects in daily lives.

Geographically, Malaysia that is located in South-East Asia is as diverse as its culture. Malaysia, has 11 states in the Peninsular of Malaysia (West Malaysia) and another 2 states (Sarawak and Sabah) on the northern part of Borneo (East Malaysia).

About 58.2 percent of Malaysia is still covered with tropical forest and jungles, which provide many activities for outdoor activities. The area is suitable for outdoor recreation activities such as jungle tracking, hiking, camping, mountain biking, picnicking, kayaking, rafting, bird watching or just relaxing and enjoying natural surroundings. This has over the years, made outdoor recreational activities an enjoyable pastime for Malaysians.

For the purpose of this study, the focus was on the integrated outdoor education program conducted in the Malaysia Agriculture Park, Shah Alam Selangor. This park is one of the most popular and fully equipped sites for recreational activities in Malaysia, about 30 kilometres from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. As one of Malaysia's most popular parks, it has permanent recreational facilities, live demonstrations, cultural exhibits, accommodation, picnic areas, open-air amphitheaters, nature trails, lakes, public amenities and numerous educational opportunities. This place also is user-friendly and suitable for persons with disabilities. In particular, this study is aimed at examining participants' perceptions of social acceptance in relation to the persons with and without disabilities roles' in an integrated outdoor education program and their meanings of outdoor experiences. The major research questions posed for this study were delineated as below.

- What are the perceptions of social acceptance of persons with and without disabilities participating in an integrated outdoor education programs?
- What roles do persons with and without disabilities play regarding social acceptance in an integrated outdoor education program?
- How does social acceptance influence the integrated outdoor education experiences of persons with and without disabilities?

Participants

Participants for this study (N = 32) were students from the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, University Technology MARA (n = 13) and the Rehabilitation and Industrial Training Center, Bangi, Malaysia (n = 19) with an age range from 19 to 31 years, participated in the study. Participants with disabilities came from the Rehabilitation and Industrial Training Centre (PLPP) included males (n = 15) and females (n = 4) ages 19-31, who had physical impairment such as being wheelchair bound, amputees, and les autres

(locomotor conditions) that was visibly obvious to the researcher upon observation during the outdoor education programs, a technique used successfully in leisure programs by Devine and Dattilo (2000). Persons without disabilities were from the Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, University Technology MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia included males (n = 9) and females (n = 4), ages 22 - 23. Overall, the participants for this study were persons with disabilities (n = 19) and without disabilities (n = 13).

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedure

The qualitative data collection method was used and involved a combination of field observation and completion of open-ended questionnaires (Patton, 2002). Field observation was used to record social phenomena as it occurred among the participants in an integrated outdoor recreational setting. To understand fully the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of phenomenon of interest was construed as the best research method (Patton, 1990). Through direct experience with and observation of program information which was obtained, that otherwise would not have become available. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also value field observation as a powerful tool in revealing the dynamic of human action. All the participants were observed during two full days at the camp with the participants in the integrated outdoor education program and observations were recorded in the form of detailed field notes.

The researcher's role was as a participant-observer. Being a participant-observer, allowed the researcher to become an active participant who observed from inside. In these circumstances, the researcher gained an opportunity to collect the different versions of events that were available. According to Shaughnessy et al. (2006) in participant-observation, observers play a dual role. They observe people's behavior and they participate actively in the situation they are observing. But Cozby (1985) pointed out a potential problem in participant observation is that the observer may lose the objectivity that is necessary in scientific investigation. However, this problem was circumvented as the researcher adhered to the aims of the study.

All the participants completed an open-ended questionnaire to evaluate the overall participants' perception and attitude toward integrated outdoor education program. Open-ended questionnaires allow the respondent to answer in his or her own words. These types of questions do not provide the respondent with a list of answers from which to choose. As Gillham (2000) suggested, the open-ended questionnaire is better for approaching a particular topic with specific ways of questions to dig down more depth than the closed questionnaire. The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions was to permit the evaluator to understand and capture the perspective of program participants without predetermining their perspective through prior selection of questionnaire

categories (Patton, 1987). Open-ended responses permit an understanding of the world as seen by the respondent.

The construction of the questions list for the open-ended questionnaire was framed based on the findings of previous studies (Devine & Dattilo, 2000; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Wilhite, Devine & Goldenberg, 1999). The questionnaire addressed facets of outdoor education experience such as:

- Participants' previous experience in an integrated outdoor education program
- barriers to participate in an outdoor education program
- benefits for participating from an integrated outdoor education program
- motives to participate in an integrated outdoor education program
- thoughts/feelings/understandings about other participants acceptance
- future implications from the program
- changes on participant's feelings about themselves

Data Analysis

Qualitative data in the present study comprised of field observation and open-ended questionnaire data. After the camping ended, the data was collected from the questionnaire and field-observations data that was written in field notes.

All the collected data and information from the program were coded. The phenomena under study was identified, classified, and compared across categories. Then, categories and themes were generated while analyzing the transcripts. Next, data which was similar in nature and related to a specific research question was grouped into general categories. Categories were organized into a central theme which was of greater generality and could reflect common notions across all categories. All identified categories were judged according to their similarity in order to ensure that the units in a particular category are similar to each other, and distinct from those of other categories (Patton, 1990). These collective and polished results can be found in the results chapter of this report.

Results

The results were analyzed in synchrony with the research questions posed for the study.

Research Question 1

What are the perceptions of social acceptance of persons with and without disabilities participating in integrated outdoor education program?

Overall, the participants believed that the integrated outdoor education programs has positively influenced their perceptions of social acceptance ranging from perceiving other participants as not accepting them to accepting them as an equal participant in the program. Figure 1 shows the perceptions of social acceptance among participants.

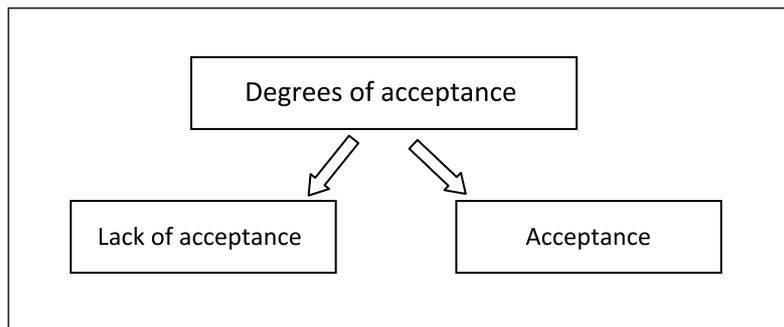


Figure 1: Perceptions of Social Acceptance

Lack of Social Acceptance

When asked [in the questionnaire] to discuss their perceptions of whether other participants accepted them in the program, 8 participants with disabilities and 5 participants without disabilities indicated that they did not feel accepted by others. Most of these participants wrote that acceptance seemed to focus more on their physical abilities to perform outdoor skills in the same way that other participants did.

Sam, a 21-year old male with physical impairments who used a wheelchair, wrote his perception of a lack of acceptance when he had to physically do the activities. He felt that he would have been better accepted by participants without disabilities if he could walk instead of using a wheelchair. He wrote:

The only reason that I felt I was not accepted in this program is because I had to use my wheelchair to move and I can't contribute much. Another thing, I needed more help than other participants with disabilities.

Mariam, a 19-year old female with locomotor disabilities wrote her feelings of rejection in this program. She resisted certain outdoor activities because she felt she could not participate successfully:

I'm physically and mentally weak. So I think my fellow friends will not accept me as an individual because they have to be patient and wait for me. I am also reluctant to seek assistance because I have a fear of burdening others.

There are 4 participants who wrote about a lack of social acceptance unrelated to physical skills but related it to social interaction. Din, a 22-year old male with physical impairments stated:

I'm too shy and I couldn't talk about the same thing that they [participants without disabilities] did. I'm also not confident enough to talk in front of other people.

Sue a female 22-year old UiTM student without disabilities also feel the same.

I felt I was not accepted in this program because I'm a quiet person and don't know how to start a conversation.

Karim a 28-year old male with a physical impairment wrote:

I feel other people hate me because I like to ask questions. Sometimes they said don't ask silly questions. It makes me feel not accepted in this program.

While we were walking to the morning session activity on the second day of the program, one of the participants with disabilities told me that some of the normal participants did not understand persons with disabilities' feelings and abilities very well. Sometimes they [participants without disabilities] started to do jokes that can hurt our [persons with disabilities] feelings. (Field observation, Day 2)

Through the researcher's reflective journal, it was noted that Najib, a dwarf participant did not feel accepted because the organizer did not provide him with an appropriate-sized lifejacket for the water-based activities. At first he did not want to participate in the water confidence session because the lifejacket was too big and he did not feel confident with the lifejacket. He only participated in the activity after the instructor persuaded him. (Field observation, Day 1)

A perceived lack of acceptance by persons with disabilities, especially in physically active leisure activities, is consistent with previous studies on social acceptance and meanings of disability. Devine and Wilhite (2000) found that negative meanings of disability were particularly prevalent in environments that required physically active leisure skills. The negative meanings of disability emerged in their study on inclusive leisure services as discussed by youth with and without disabilities when the participant's abilities were not at the same standards and interaction was casual.

Devine and Lashua (2002) reported individuals with a physical disability in their study on inclusive leisure environments who perceived lack of acceptance can anticipated this level of acceptance prior to their participation. Devine and Lashua found that previous non-leisure inclusive experiences among individuals with a physical disability as the basis for this preconceived notion.

Acceptance

Acceptance in this study was conceptualised by how the level of acceptance in a certain environment or situation influenced the person, and how the person influenced the level of acceptance in that environment or situation. A majority of participants with and without disabilities perceived themselves to be physically, socially and psychologically accepted by others in the integrated outdoor education program. The participants who perceived positive social acceptance from other participants characterised it as “being included” and “have no difference”.

Ali, a 23-year old male with a locomotor disability wrote:

I felt happy and I enjoyed myself. I just get them [participants without disabilities] to laugh and then they see I'm just like them.

Nineteen year old Zam, a male with physical impairments stated:

I feel accepted in the groups because we always help each other during activities especially during water confidence sessions where most of the persons with disabilities are not confident while in the pool. I think this is the opportunity to show them [persons without disabilities] that we can do it.

This view was strongly supported by Razak, a 24-year old male participant with amputations. He believed that most of the participants can accept him as an individual.

I feel accepted in this program because other participants can accept my suggestions during the activities and we all acted as a team in solving any problems that occur during the program.

Dewi, a 29-year old female participant with an amputation disability felt accepted and described the positive outcomes of integrated outdoor education program.

I feel accepted in this program. I feel more confident after participating in this program. My group mates always feel free to help me in doing most of the challenging activities.

Previous studies on inclusive leisure have reported a high level of acceptance when participants knew each other and their leisure abilities are similar (Devine & Wilhite, 2000).

Research Question 2

What roles do persons with and without disabilities play regarding social acceptance in an integrated outdoor education program?

Construction of acceptance is an interactive process between individuals. The focus of this investigation was the role played by persons with and without

disabilities in constructing social acceptance in an integrated outdoor education program. It is better to understand how participants with and without disabilities approach and experience an integrated outdoor education program in understanding their perceptions of social acceptance and roles they played to construct or rectify acceptance.

Figure 2 shows the roles participants with and without disabilities play during an integrated outdoor education program.

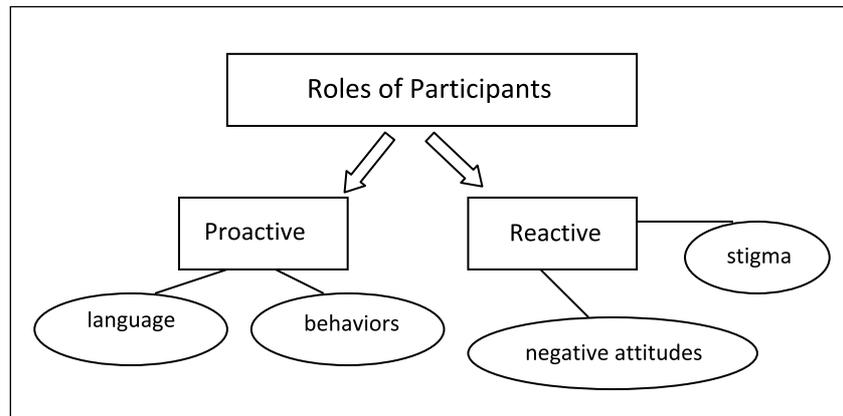


Figure 2: Roles of Participants Regarding Social Acceptance

Proactive Social Acceptance Construction

Participants with and without disabilities in this study relayed taking proactive roles in constructing social acceptance. Participants who perceived acceptance were more likely to be proactive in constructing acceptance. In this study, social acceptance among participants with and without disabilities was proactively constructed through the participants' use of language and behaviors.

Use of Language

Ali, a 23-year old male with locomotors' disability revealed information about his disability as an effort to generate understanding and acceptance:

I fully utilised the first session [icebreaking activity] to introduce myself to all the participants. I told them about my disability. From that I think all of us can interact well.

Amin, a 22-year old male participant without disabilities supported Ali's ideas. In addition, he highlighted the importance of sharing other participants' backgrounds:

We can interact well and know other participants background. Participants with disabilities also were not shy to tell us their backgrounds. By knowing their backgrounds, I can actively help them in doing all the physical activities.

Use of Behaviors

Both participants with and without disabilities in this study also wrote behaviors they used in the integrated outdoor education to demonstrate similarities between them. They would initiate conversation, making jokes, and share their experience and help each other in making the program more successful. A 24-year old male participant with amputations, Razak, expressed that when he participated in the activities, he often initiated conversations with participants without disabilities. He wrote:

I often initiated conversations with persons without disabilities. We discussed and shared ideas about a variety of topics during the program.

Nor, a 21-year old participant without a disability tries to get close with participants with disabilities by using her own ways. She wrote,

I tried to minimize the gap between persons with and without disabilities. We can work together as a group of people and share ideas.

According to Smart (2000) persons with disabilities who have some sort of ability that is highly valued by society will experience greater acceptance than someone else who does not have a socially valued role or capability but has the same disability. Previous studies (Bedini, 2000; Devine & Lashua, 2002; West, 1984; Wilhite et al., 1999) have found that mostly participants with disabilities rather than participants without disabilities are likely to do things that can gain social acceptance from participants without disabilities in leisure environments.

Reactive Social Acceptance Construction

In this study, participants expressed taking reactive roles in constructing social acceptance. Some participants who perceived it as a lack of social acceptance were more likely to be more reactive in constructing acceptance. Reactively, construction social acceptance was a process by which the participants try to compromise with other participants in the program regarding acceptance and integration. The participants in this study expressed their reactive role as a frequent role rather than an occasional role that they play in an integrated environment. Most of the participants identified negative attitudes and stigma or fear of unknown as barriers to social acceptance in this integrated outdoor education program.

Negative Attitudes

Negative attitudes among participants with and without disabilities were identified by participants of this program as barriers to social acceptance. It emerged that when negative attitudes arose, the person would work to construct his or her acceptance and integration.

Badrul, a 22-year old participant without disabilities found that the integrated outdoor education to be a time for him to change his attitudes and perceptions towards persons with disabilities. He wrote:

At the early stage of the program, I keep wondering whether my group mates with disabilities can do the physical activities. After we together completed the first activities, I'm surprised and found that they [participants with disabilities] can do the activities that we normal people did. Most of the participants with disabilities are keen and have the spirit to participate in the activities.

Karim a 28-year old male with a physical impairment described how he felt it was his role to reflect on negative attitudes when it occurs. He wrote:

I would use jokes to counter the effects of negative attitudes and I try to be an open-minded person.

According to Schleien, Green and Ray (1997), negative attitudes is one of the most powerful obstacles that persons with disabilities have to face in order to be included in the community recreation programs. These negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities may negatively influence attitudes toward fully integrating persons with disabilities in outdoor education experiences. Persons without disabilities must begin to adopt positive attitudes toward integrated outdoor education in order for persons with disabilities to truly be included in outdoor education programs.

Stigma or Fear of Unknown

Abu, a 22-year old participant without a disability wrote that he was concerned about the safety of the participants with disabilities, he wrote,

Extra safety precautions should be put into consideration by the organizers to make sure participants with disabilities are safe. Organizers should consider the activities that are suitable to them, and not put too adventurous activities

Zila, a 20-year old female participant with physical disabilities found fear about her disabilities were barriers to being socially accepted.

Some of my group mates without disabilities seemed concern about my safety. They [participants without disabilities] acted like I was too weak to do all the physical activities.

According to West (1984), people with disabilities were less likely to participate in community recreation programs if stigmatizing attitudes by people without disabilities were present. But the result of my study shows that participants with disabilities experience the least amount of stigma because most of them were with physical disabilities. Smart (2000) suggests that individuals with physical disabilities experience the least degree of stigma, probably because these types of disabilities are the easiest to understand.

Research Question 3

How does social acceptance influence the integrated outdoor education experiences of persons with and without disabilities?

Of interest to this study was if and how the participants' perceptions of the roles they played influenced their outdoor activities and education experiences. In this study, outdoor education experiences were conceptualized as those which individuals connected participation in integrated outdoor education environments to social acceptance. This category informed a relationship between social acceptance by persons with and without disabilities and outdoor frequency, friendship development, acceptance of differences, intentions, social interaction, and spirituality for participation in other integrated outdoor education programs. Figure 3 below shows how social acceptance influence the integrated outdoor education experiences of persons with and without disabilities.

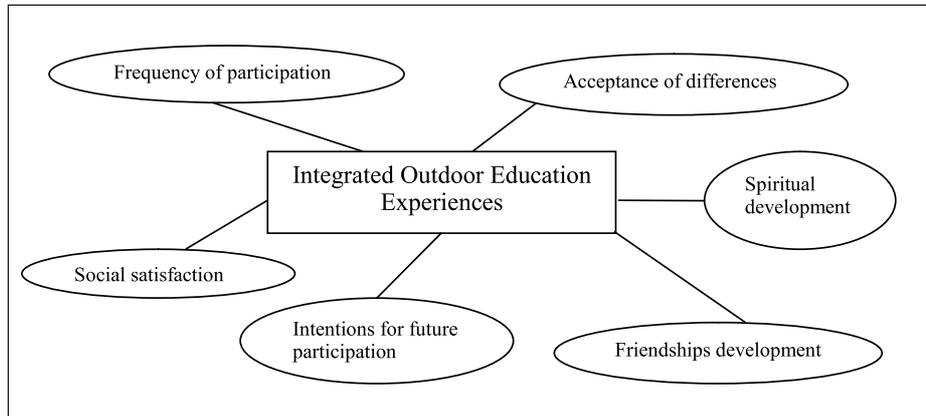


Figure 3: Influence of Social Acceptance on Integrated Outdoor Education Experiences

Frequency of Participation

The majority of participants linked frequency of participation in integrated outdoor education programs with constructed social acceptance by other participants. Saiful, a 21-year-old male with physical disabilities provided an example of how his perceptions of social acceptance led him to participate in integrated outdoor education programs more frequently. He wrote:

Before this I didn't get the opportunities to participate in these kind of activities because of my disabilities. At least after participating in this program I can proof to myself and people around me that I also can do all the activities. The important thing is that I showed the participants without disabilities that I'm just like them and they seems to act like they can accept me so that makes me really like it.

Persons without disabilities also gave their opinion that they also would like to participate frequently in this kind of programs. Sarah, a 22-year old female without disabilities participant stated:

I want to do the activity more often because it gives me more time to devote to the person with disabilities. I don't want them to feel isolated or neglected. What I want is that they feel we are equal.

Sarah's statement support Schwartz (1988) that explained social acceptance of persons with disabilities as the relationships between persons with and without disabilities in which all individuals are perceived as having equal dignity.

In a study on social acceptance and leisure lifestyles of persons without disabilities, Devine and Dattilo (2000) found that the level of social acceptance experienced by persons with disabilities during inclusive leisure participation was positively correlated with frequency of participation. Devine and Dattilo highlighted when comparing to those who perceived they were not socially accepted, persons with disabilities who perceived they were socially accepted by other participants without disabilities had a greater frequency of leisure participation in inclusive leisure contexts.

Friendship Development

In this study, it was found that social acceptance also had a connection to friendship development when participating in integrated outdoor education programs. Specifically, the greater their sense of social acceptance the more the development of friendships occurred in the integrated outdoor education programs. It also shows participants' ability to gain social acceptance and participate in positive interactions with other participants during the activities. Enjoying the activities with friends and developing new friendships would be considered a high level of social acceptance.

As expected, persons with and without disabilities in this program have similar needs and desires to develop and maintain friendships. Overall, participants felt that the quality of the integrated outdoor education experience was dependent on being able to develop friendships with and social support from other participants. Sam, a 21-year old male with physical impairments who used a manual wheelchair valued the support and encouragement that he received from other participants. He stated:

I feel accepted in the group. First, I was thinking of quitting from the program because of my physical condition. After I get a moral and physical support from my group mates in doing most of the challenging activities, I felt very happy and started to enjoy the program. If I don't have that support I think I will not.

Nor, a 21-year old University Technology MARA student who likes the outdoor activities, had no disability. She told of the surprise she felt at the capabilities of the participants with disabilities. In her assessment after the program she wrote,

I now understand people with disabilities better. Disabled people are no different than others, except for their disability. I learned not to be afraid of them. I am not to be afraid to approach disabled people. I don't pity them because I know they can do a lot of things. The most important thing here, I developed new friendships.

Even though recreation seems to be the best medium for meeting people and making friends, it also can be an environment that reinforces social isolation. Schleien, Green and Stone (1999) have reminded recreation programmers that the program that include participants with and without disabilities is incomplete until all participants in that recreation programs and the activities are welcoming, accommodating, and conducive to develop friendships and sharing experiences. According to Devine and Lashua (2002), satisfaction in participants with disabilities' leisure experiences was linked to the receptiveness of their peers without disabilities to initiatives of friendships. Friendships provide emotional support, reassurance of personal worth, and opportunities to gain a sense of social identity or belonging (Schleien & Heyne, 1997).

Acceptance of Differences

In this investigation a link appeared between construction social acceptance and acceptance of differences in the way in which outdoor education skills were carried out. When the participants without disabilities were accepting of adapted outdoor skills and programmatic accommodations, the participants with disabilities perceived they were socially accepted. This situation emerged when those participants without disabilities viewed adaptations as just another way to engage in the activities, and revealed a high level of social acceptance. Both groups

positively viewed their integrated experiences, while participants without disabilities had increased respect and awareness for participants with disabilities. For instance, Zack, an able-bodied participant, found that the integrated outdoor education to be a time for reexamination of his attitudes and perceptions. He wrote:

I'm quite worried at the early stage of the program. I keep wondering whether participants with disabilities can do the outdoor activities. After we completed the first activities [water confident activities], I found that they also can do the activities that normal participants can do. Now I have changed my perception on them. Also, I learned to rely on individuals I hadn't considered capable before.

Another female participant without disabilities, Sarah noted:

The more I get to know them [participants with disabilities] the better my attitude has become, I feel I treat them like I want to be treated. I think they [participants with disabilities] are the same. They are also human beings and they do everything that they want to do. They were just like normal persons to me.

Badrul [participant without disabilities] supported Sarah's ideas. In addition he highlighted the importance of sharing experiences:

My aims of participating in this program are to make friends with persons with disabilities and share my experience in the outdoors with other participants especially participants with disabilities and let them enjoy. I also want to let them know that we as normal persons can threat them well.

Amin, a 22-year old male participant without disabilities, wrote that he went out of his way to discuss matters with his group mate with disabilities. He wrote:

This program is beneficial for us because I can learn from the persons with disabilities, we can learn from each other. I was really nervous at first because I never interacted or worked with anyone with disabilities, but now I love it.

One participant with disabilities remarked that he felt accepted and was appreciated in this program for some reason. He noted:

I felt accepted and being appreciated because all the participants gave me the opportunity to be an assistant leader in this program, even though I don't have enough experience in the outdoors.

During a sharing activity in the small group, all participants had to tell the participants on their right what they appreciated about him or her as a person. The participant who was sitting to her [participant without disability] right had a disability. She said this person [participant with disability] adds to the group because she now understands more about people who are "different". (Field observation Day 2).

These results support the sociological studies on the contact situations theory by Smart (2000) that clearly stated that in order to create positive changes in perception of persons with disabilities and to decrease prejudice by persons without disabilities it must include four conditions: (a) equal social status relationships are compulsory between person with and without disabilities; (b) the contact must occur under natural and voluntary conditions; (c) the contact should facilitate viewing the persons with disabilities as an individual, rather than as a member of a group; and (d) both persons with and without disabilities must have the same goal, and it is best if the goal cannot be achieved without active cooperation among both individuals.

Intentions for Future Participation

Social acceptance also had a link to intentions to participate in future integrated outdoor education programs. Perceiving social acceptance emerged to play a part in their intentions to participate again in other integrated outdoor education programs. Precisely, the greater their sense of social acceptance the greater their intention to participate in future integrated outdoor education programs. When the participants were asked [in the questionnaires] whether they intended to participate in other integrated outdoor education programs, based on the acceptance they felt in the current program, most of the participants agreed they would participate in future programs like this. According to one of female participants with disabilities:

I really like outdoor activities especially the water confidence session. It feels good to set my mind to it and be able to do it. And it is fun to be able to do something that people didn't think I could do. Knowing I can do this makes me feel like I can do other things too. I will absolutely participate in other outdoor activities in the future.

Sam [who used wheelchair] supported Mariam's ideas. He wrote:

For sure I will participate if there is any other program like this. I enjoyed so much doing all the activities with the support from my group mates.

Social Satisfaction

In this study a relationship appeared between construction social acceptance and social satisfaction of persons with and without disabilities. Social satisfaction with integrated outdoor education program participation may result in an increased sense of belonging, increased sense of enjoyment, increased sense of personal confidence, lowered level of stress, and decreased social isolation. Particularly, this finding showed more participants with and without disabilities

perceived they were socially accepted the more satisfied they were with the program. For example, Sue a 20-year old participant with disability wrote:

I'm a quiet person and don't know how to start a conversation. When it comes to the activity that need my help. I feel very happy being needed by the persons with disabilities in helping them to get confident in the water based activities.

Another female participant without disabilities, Zizah stated:

I'm very happy because I get better understanding about persons with disabilities and helping them in doing outdoor activities.

Sarah [participant without disabilities] supported Zizah's ideas. In addition she produces with one example:

I mostly like the water-based and abseiling activity. I gain experience in persuading one of my group mates with disabilities who has no confidence in doing water-based activities and is scared of heights while doing abseiling. I successfully persuade her until she has confidence to participate in both activities.

Devine and Dattilo (2000) examined the relationship between social acceptance and the leisure lifestyle of people with disabilities and reported that a meaningful and statistically significant relationship between perceived social acceptance and social satisfaction of females with disabilities and people with mobility impairments.

Spiritual Development

In this study, it was observed that social acceptance also had a connection to spiritual development when participating in integrated outdoor education programs. Specifically, the more development of spiritual the greater their acceptance of others occurred in the integrated outdoor education programs.

Sarah wrote:

I gained a new experience that is very valuable. I would express thankfulness to God with all the healthy body that I have. I feel lucky because I get opportunities to participate in this program. As we all know this kind of program is very difficult to find in our country.

Another participant wrote:

I learn to be more patient. I know patience is a virtue. I feel virtuous at helping participants with disabilities participating in outdoor activities. From now on I gain more respect on them [participants with disabilities] and accept them in my life.

Most of the participants in this program were Muslims and during the program, participants with and without disabilities performed their five times daily prayers¹ in congregation at the prayers room. It means that both participants

can accept each other through praying together without any problems. (Field observation, Days 1 & 2).

Stringer and McAvoy (1992) explored the spiritual dimension in eight or ten days of wilderness adventure experiences among persons with and without disabilities and found the unusual closeness that developed within the group, and their reports on spiritual development were focused more on the interconnections [connection included a component of service, either given or received, that helped strengthen the bond] between participants.

Theme

People who have never participated in the outdoor education programs may lack self-confidence, skills, and motivation to get involved. On the other hand, it has not entered their minds that opportunities for them to participate in integrated outdoor education programs exist in the Malaysian community.

Figure 4 shows the categories observed were nested within the theme of equal opportunity in that participants were given a chance to participate in integrated outdoor education program and try to construct social acceptance. This dominant theme shows the link between and within categories, and makes it easier for me to understand the influence of social acceptance on integrated outdoor education experience. Equal opportunity means that participants with and without disabilities were given a chance to participate in the integrated outdoor education program and trying to overcome all the barriers that can stop them from involvement in this program. This theme also translates into achievement of accessibility, the provision of benefits, services and aids that are effective for persons with and without disabilities, and programs and activities that are otherwise free from any discrimination based on persons with disabilities.

Limited opportunities and other barriers, therefore, resulted in context specific friendships that made it difficult for the participants with disabilities to socialize with participants without disabilities across different environments. Talking about limited opportunities to participate in integrated outdoor programs, one participant with physical impairments wrote:

If I can just get the opportunity to be included, I think I can show them [participants without disabilities] that I can do it.

Zam [participant with disabilities] supported Karim's ideas. In addition he highlighted the importance of sharing experience:

I feel accepted in the groups because we always help each other during activities especially during water confidence session where most of the persons with disabilities are not confident while in the pool. I think this is the opportunity to show them [persons without disabilities] that we can do it.

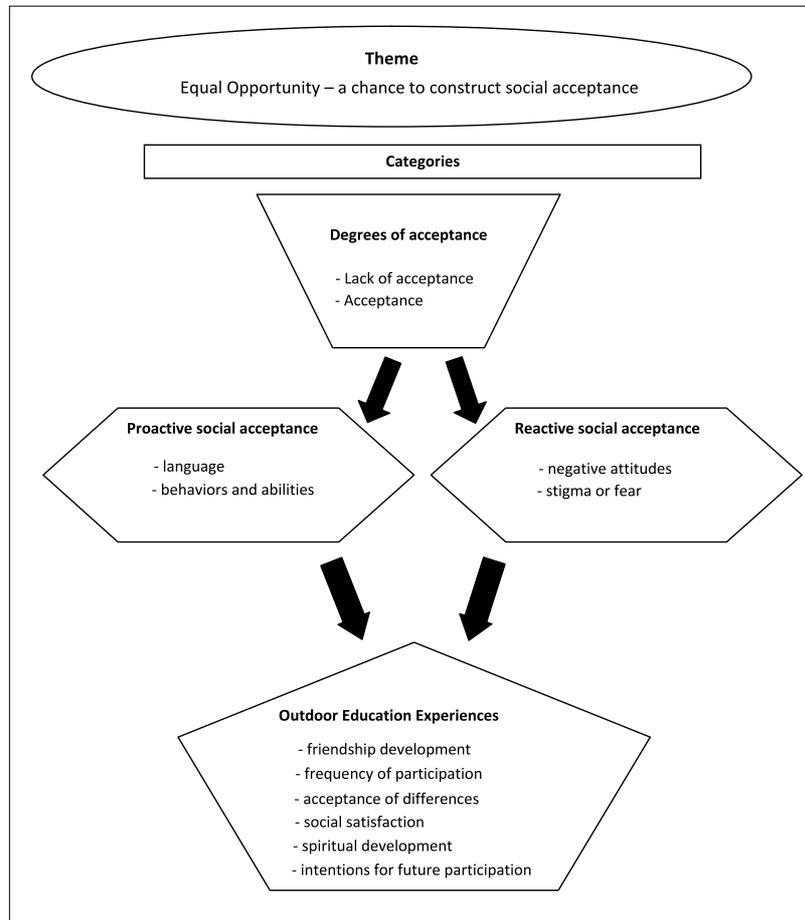


Figure 4: The Roles of Persons with and without Disabilities to Construct Social Acceptance in Integrated Outdoor Education Program

Discussion and Conclusion

The history of the twentieth century for persons with disabilities has been one of exclusion in Malaysia. The twenty-first century will see the struggle of persons with disabilities for integration goes from strength to strength. In such struggle, special, segregated outdoor education program has no role to play. The role of integrated outdoor education experiences with advocacy and support can allow persons with and without disabilities the opportunity to participate in socially integrative experiences. Support and commitment to integration through outdoor education can make it possible for these experiences to be positive for all participants involved and to be the basis for important attitude changes.

Through the integrated outdoor education program people can develop a sense of openness, acceptance, and cooperation. Participants in the integrated outdoor education program become more accepting of individual differences and more supportive of each other. The nature and structure of outdoor education experiences that emphasises on cooperation and shared experiences encourages people with and without disabilities with a variety of skill levels to participate together. Efforts by outdoor educators and recreation professionals to promote the integrated outdoor education programs could further ensure active participation in community life and decrease social isolation experienced by many persons with disabilities.

In the conclusion, this study expands an understanding of the relationship between social acceptance and outdoor education experiences of people with and without disabilities in Malaysia. Findings provide insight into integrated outdoor education experiences of people with and without disabilities in Malaysia by focusing on their role in constructing social components of their participation.

Note

- ¹ The prayer is offered directly to God Almighty without any intermediary and Muslims all over the world face towards The Ka'ba, which is in the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Prayer is to be offered five times a day (at the break of dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, at sunset and at dusk after dark). Prayer is considered the most important act of worship in Islam and its importance is such that under very few circumstances can it be omitted.

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