

Judith Anne McKenzie

(South Africa)

Winner of the UNESCO/Emir Jaber al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah Prize To Promote Quality Education for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities 2009



Mrs. McKenzie has worked in the field of disability since 1980, when she graduated from the University of Cape Town with a degree in speech and hearing therapy. After completing a Masters degree in Linguistics, she was employed at a rural hospital in South Africa, Tintswalo Hospital, to establish a speech and hearing therapy department in a multidisciplinary rehabilitation unit. She engaged in community based initiatives and interdisciplinary efforts to address disability, exclusion and poverty in the Bushbuckridge area of Mpumalanga. She participated in the development of a community rehabilitation worker programme, especially in modules on developmental delay and intellectual disability from 1991-1994.

In 1993, Mrs. McKenzie was employed at Wits Rural Facility (WRF) as a researcher in early childhood development (ECD), which included the inclusion of disabled children into ECD programmes. While employed at WRF, she gave birth to her youngest child who has Down Syndrome. This made her far more active in the field of intellectual disability and led to her making links with Down Syndrome South Africa. In 1995, she was selected as a fellow of the Kellogg International Leadership Programme, and she benefited from an international experience. Through this programme, she visited inclusive education programmes for intellectually disabled children in Ireland, Canada, USA, UK and Zimbabwe. This enabled her to participate in the early policy debates on inclusive education that occurred in South Africa's transition to democracy.

In 1995, she moved to East London and worked as an inclusive education coordinator at a non-governmental organisation, Community and Child Development Centre. She developed curricula for early childhood educators and participated in policy development. Also, she was a founding member of the Down Syndrome Association: Border-Kei and acted as chairperson for 5 years. She remains an active committee member in this vibrant branch of the national network of parent support and advocacy network.

In 1998, she started teaching undergraduate and in-service teachers at Rhodes University and the University of Fort Hare. She also coordinated the teacher development component of the DANIDA sponsored pilot programme for inclusive education for the Department of Education from 2001 to 2003. Then, she worked as a consultant on various projects in the disability sector, one of which was an Inclusion International study on the quality of life of persons with intellectual disability.

During this period, she also acted as the provincial coordinator of the Sisonke Consortium, a service provider contracted to conduct a human resource development project for the Department of Education for inclusive education. In September 2009, she submitted her doctoral thesis for examination and she will be employed as a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Stellenbosch starting from January 2010. Her research will examine the issues of sexuality education, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS amongst persons with intellectual disabilities. Her son will also be starting at a new school in Cape Town next year, which she and her husband have selected because of its inclusive ethos.