Accessibility aspects of Open Schooling

Key messages

⇨ **Removing physical, legal, cultural, linguistic and other barriers is key to successful open schooling programmes**

⇨ **Accessibility is a complex issue of legal and physical considerations should be the highest priority in open schooling**

Open schooling has to be accessible for all students, and thus needs to be implemented with inclusion at the heart of activities. It is only possible if legislation supports such activities. While there is legislation in most countries on accessibility for disabled students, there are barriers, especially due to regulations regarding the organisation of school activities outside of the school or activities within the school that involve external people.

Accessibility is a major factor in equitable education provisions. It is ensured by anticipating and mediating social/environmental barriers to enhance access for all learners. The most important element of accessibility is often financial provisions, and this is tackled in a separate PHERECLOS brief. Most education systems require schools to be barrier free for various special needs. This spirit and approach need to be maintained when designing and implementing open schooling initiatives. While courses, technology, and student services are often designed for the narrow range of characteristics of the „average" student, the practice of universal design in education (UDE) considers people with a wide range of characteristics for all educational products and environments. UDE goes beyond accessible design for people with disabilities to make all aspects of the educational experience more inclusive for students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders with a great variety of characteristics. These characteristics include those related to gender, race and ethnicity, age, stature, disability, and learning style. UDE can be promoted as a general approach to accessible, equitable education provisions, and open schooling programmes are especially suitable for providing for these diverse needs.

At the same time, accessibility needs to be in the heart of designing open schooling programmes, both in and outside the school building.

Inspiration #1 – AKIM Israel

AKIM Israel is the national organization for people with intellectual disabilities and their families, operating as a person-oriented organization that upholds human rights and freedoms. Since its founding in 1951 the association acted to realize the rights, promote better quality of living and improve the welfare of people who have IDD and their relatives, using legal and advocacy work. The organization nowadays represents some 34,500 people with IDD, and approximately 140,000 family members and legal guardians. AKIM works towards inclusion of people with IDD in the community, empowerment of people for self-advocacy and integration into society. Based on its vision, the association promotes integration of positive attitudes towards the people through AKIM's headquarters, 64 branches and activity centres deployed in 87 towns and communities in Israel, in both Jewish and Arab sectors, managed by parents and volunteers.

Part of their overall aim is to promote and support the collaboration between schools, museums and historic sites for accessible and inclusive education at these non-formal education sites. AKIM has initiated and leads a national programme to make museums and historic sites cognitively (as well as physically) accessible. They wish to make education more inclusive by offering new services to the intellectually disabled, support the social inclusion of these people by this and to help bring the level of education to the level of intellectually disabled people. The programme, first implemented in 4 sites was a pilot for legislation that is now in place. It has two main paths: one is training - of staff at the museums and sites, in initial teacher education, social workers to educate hundreds of trained education coordinators; the other is developing aids that the museums and sites can use in their daily education practice. As a pilot it resulted in new policy and legislation. Museums and historic sites all over the country are now using this methodology to become

accessible and inclusive, and thus making collaboration with local schools. It is a wide collaboration in which a specialized NGO brings knowledge and innovation to museums and historic sites that work together with inclusive schools in their respective local communities, teacher training to ensure the availability of experts on the long run, and it is embedded in a government commitment towards inclusion and rights. In many countries, schools are obliged to be inclusive but often lack tools to include all children. This initiative is inspiring as it shows how a non-formal provider can help adjust the level of education to the needs of children. It is a programme that caused a snowball effect by causing mindset change that means little to no funding is necessary for sustaining and widening the network. (More information)

One of the considerations, often related to age, is the accessibility of external education sites for all students. When designing open education programmes that require external participation, schools need to find a healthy balance between protecting access rights with safety. For policy, there is an important message to be conveyed: the spirit and letter of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child provides children of all ages the freedom of movement and ban any arbitrary restriction of liberty. Thus national regulations preventing children from leaving a place, such as a school without adult supervision or written consent of their parents and guardians can be challenged on the basis of the UNCRC. At the same time, schools and other open schooling partners are responsible for educational measures that ensure the safety of children as well as providing information about their whereabouts to their parents and guardians.

Safety and counter-terrorism concerns have also led to the introduction of measures that may prevent open schooling providers from entering school premises. As open schooling is an approach based on community needs and community provisions, it is necessary that school leaders enjoy a sufficient level of autonomy in making decisions regarding child and school safety in this respect. Legal restrictions that oblige school stakeholders to obtain external permissions for participating at school activities easily lead to major bias in access to best education provisions.

Inspiration #2 – Open School Doors

Open School Doors (OSD) is a programme developed in order to support suitable school and parent partnerships for open schooling. In an OSD school doors should be literally open. In an ideal case it means that parents and other stakeholders are welcome there at all times. Teachers receive training to be more aware of diversity, the needs and role of parents, and the role of family and community in education in general. They are also aware of specific needs of children and parents of migrant background, but they are also trained to consider individual needs rather than generalise. You can expect the school and its teachers to treat parents as an equal partner, to seek their knowledge and expertise in the school. Parents' personal experiences are important for them, and they encourage working together for the best learning and development of children as well as the interest of society and local communities. (More information)

Accessibility is also a consideration when engaging stakeholders, especially parents and the students themselves into open schooling activities. In this sense, potential linguistic and cultural barriers need to be assessed and tackled.

Sources: UDE, UNICEF, IPA

ABOUT PHERECLOS

PHERECLOS is aiming to establish "Local Education Clusters" (LECs) of different design as examples of open schooling. All LECs will bring together schools and other relevant actors in the education ecosystem in a particular pilot region, supported by a peer mentoring programme. The LECs will be incubators for enabling a dialogue between various parties and help to set up joint activities in formal and non-formal education. The LECs will also help to develop collaborative learning environments as experimental testbeds for schools, and in parallel, they aim to impact on the quality of science engagement opportunities available in these areas.

More information: www.phereclos.eu