

Teacher education for inclusion in Iceland¹

1 Introduction

Inclusion can be realized when teachers see themselves as agents of change, with the values, knowledge and attitudes that allow every learner to succeed (UNESCO, 2020). The way teachers are prepared for this role reflects the standards and qualifications in each country context, but a common theme is that education systems are moving away from focusing on the learner as a problem and toward “identifying barriers to learning and participation and providing anticipatory responses, planning for all learners up front” (European Agency, 2015, pp. 14–15).

The idea of inclusion has been implicit in Icelandic law since 1995, although it was first in 2008 that the Icelandic act for compulsory schooling explicitly declared that learners should be educated in inclusive schools (Lög um grunnskóla, 91/2008). The Compulsory School Act from 2008 states that school practice should be in accordance with learners’ needs and attainment, supporting their development, well-being, and education. Learners’ educational needs are to be met in their neighbourhood schools without exclusion or regard to their physical or mental abilities (Lög um grunnskóla, 2008; see Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir in this volume for further discussion).

Promoting inclusion through and within teacher education programs remains a persistent challenge and a necessary imperative for the twenty-first century (Ball & Tyson, 2011). According to UNICEF (2013), courses on inclusion in initial teacher education (ITE) are not always integrated but may be listed as optional or run by special education institutes or training organisations. Such single-unit courses tend to emphasize the ‘difference’ of learners and therefore limit teachers’ knowledge and skills on inclusive practice (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Adding courses on inclusion to the general curriculum of ITE institutions is insufficient and inadequate and a reform is recommended of the whole ITE structure to sufficiently prepare teachers for inclusive practice (Echeita, 2014).

It is well known that special education and general education are most often organised from different perspectives and draw on different disciplinary traditions to inform their work (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). The general teacher educators tend to work from a sociocultural theory of learning, constructivist learning theory, social justice perspective, sociology, cultural psychology and their subject perspectives while many of the special education educators generally ground their theoretical framework in behavioural psychology, medicine, and psychometrics (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2020; Guðjónsdóttir & Hinz in this volume). In line with the disciplinary roots of special education in medicine and behavioural psychology, disability and deficits are considered as equal which situates learning problems within the individual learner. This perspective calls for identifying the deficit skill that hinders learning and then finding the most effective teaching methods to teach that skill (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012). Resulting in teaching being constructed as a technical application of interventions and strategies specific to types of educational deficiencies

¹ Originalbeitrag der deutschen Übersetzung „Lehrer*innenbildung für Inklusion in Island“ aus dem Sammelband „Inklusive Bildung in Island – Grundlagen, Praktiken und Reflexionen“, open access und print 2024 bei Beltz Juventa erschienen unter der Lizenz CC BY-SA.

Original contribution of the German translation of this article from the anthology “Inclusive education in Iceland – basics, practices and reflections”, open access and print 2024 published by Beltz Juventa under the licence CC BY-SA.

(Baglieri et al., 2011). However, theories of disability studies can be used as a lens to approach teacher education for inclusion, imagining education as a practice of access that can be understood through three generalisations (Baglieri et al., 2011):

1. Ability, disability and ideas about mastery and learning are perceived as fluid.
2. Interactions and settings are conceived as contributing to the creation of disability.
3. Pull-out, tracking or containment practices are questioned as they label individuals as disabled and/ or limit their access to the general curriculum and learning.

This lens is embodied in the view of ‘reconceptualists’ (Baglieri et al., 2011), who call for teachers to take responsibility for transformation of practice through self-reflection and ethical decision-making. Thus, competences for inclusion are based on assuming pedagogical responsibility for all learners and developing approaches to collaborate and learn with others (European Agency, 2020). Ensuring that all teachers are prepared to teach all students calls for teachers to have opportunities to engage with inclusive education theories, policies, and examples of practice through their professional education, both in initial education and professional learning and development. In this chapter, the focus is on how preparing teachers for inclusive education and special needs education has developed in the past 15 years at the University of Iceland.

2 Reforming teacher education – developments from 2008–2019

The year 2008 was significant in education development in Iceland. That year, a new Act for education was set with a clear focus on inclusion, and the former Teacher University merged with the University of Iceland, becoming School of Education within the larger university. There are two other universities that prepare teachers in Iceland, the University of Akureyri in the north that has a comprehensive program and the Academy of Fine Arts in Reykjavík that has a focus on teachers for the arts, such as theatre, visual art and music. But the emphasis here is on the teacher education program at School of Education, University of Iceland, as that has the largest number of teacher graduates.

In addition to the aforementioned changes, a new act on teacher education and teacher certification was approved where a five-year education was required for preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school teachers (lög nr. 87/2008). The regulation following the act specified two main subject fields in teacher education: (1) a school subject or a field of study (i.e., a collection of different subjects with a common denominator across different school grades and subjects) and (2) pedagogy and subject didactics (Regulation No 872/2009 about the Content of Education for Teachers in Preschools, Compulsory and Upper Secondary Schools). The regulation stipulated how many ECTS credits the student should earn within those two fields to be qualified at different school levels but did not define further the content of these credits.

The five-year teacher education can be completed in two ways, either within an integrated five-year program at the teacher education universities ending with a M.Ed. or as a consecutive two-year program at the teacher education universities in pedagogy and methods at the master’s level for those who already have a bachelor’s degree (BA/BS/B.Sc.) in one of the compulsory school’s teaching subjects (Háskóli Íslands, 2023).

During undergraduate studies, student teachers engage in practicum for two or three weeks in schools. At the beginning of the practicum, they observe a mentor teacher in action and eventually assume the responsibility to teach under supervision. At the master’s level, the practicum is spread over the whole second year as a half time job for student teachers. The week is divided between working in schools and studies at the university (Sigurðsson et al., 2023).

In 2008, the School of Education was divided into three faculties, which are as follows: Faculty of Education and Diversity, Faculty of Health Promotion, Sports and Leisure Studies, and Faculty of Education and Pedagogy. The majority of teachers for the three school levels of pre-school, compulsory school and secondary school graduate from the last two faculties. The Faculty of Education and Diversity graduates were, among others, special needs teachers and social educators. The Faculty of Health Promotion, Sports and Leisure Studies graduates are mainly sports teachers and leisure professionals. Many of the teacher educators teach at all faculties although they belong to one of them and preservice teachers can select elective courses from across different faculties. In 2018, the Faculty of Education and Pedagogy was then divided into two faculties: Faculty of Subject Teacher Education and Faculty of Education and Pedagogy – so there were four faculties in the School of Education.

Special education studies were an optional addition for preschool, primary and secondary school teachers. This was a two-year program and had the requirement of two years field experience before entering, so those interested in becoming special needs teachers had to complete their five-year master program and work in the field for two years before applying. This program was placed in the Faculty of Education and Diversity and the emphasis was on theories on social and disability studies, on academic education more than practical approaches (Marinósson & Bjarnason, 2011). A one-year diploma study was also offered.

In the undergraduate program, emphasis was placed on conceptual foundations, attitudes, theoretical perspectives and organising teaching for diverse learner groups. Learning disabilities and behavioural problems were covered in elective courses (Sigurðardóttir, 2011). According to Sigurðardóttir, there had been criticism that the teacher education program was not adequately preparing student teachers to work with the diverse groups of learners that awaited in schools. Findings from a study on the teacher education program (Guðjónsdóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2012) indicated that there was no course on inclusive education required for ITE at School of Education. Some core courses introduced the policy of inclusive education, theoretical background, and examples of inclusive practices. Inclusive education was the focus of only one course – that was a selective one. Many courses focused on preparing student teachers to work with diverse groups of students, although inclusion was not part of the focus. In the new five-year teacher training program, a required course on inclusive education was added in the undergraduate studies and, in addition, students at the master's level could choose a 40–60 ECTS specialisation on inclusive education (Sigurðardóttir, 2011).

At the graduate level, a program called Inclusive Education was established in the Faculty of Education and Pedagogy in 2017. The aim of this program was on how schools could provide learning environments for diverse learners to grow and learn in a community with their peers and teachers. Further, the aim was to support the participants in developing their professional working theory (Dalmau & Guðjónsdóttir, 2017; UNESCO IBE, 2020) based on theories and concepts of inclusive education. The goal for the participants was to be able to create a school culture built on the strengths of all learners and teachers. A core course (introduced later in this chapter) in this program was grounded in a pedagogy that integrates professional knowledge about teaching, learning and child development and involves an ethical and social commitment to all learners.

3 Developments post 2019

In 2019, an Act on teacher education was adopted in Parliament (Lög nr. 95/2019). At the time when the act was passed, a serious shortage of teachers at the compulsory school level was imminent. In preschools, a constant teacher shortage has been a problem for a long time (see

Hinz in this volume). According to the new Act, licensed teachers, in principle, can be qualified to teach at all three school levels and can move more easily between school levels than before.

To enable students to enter and finish their teacher education, the Act has two major changes: 1) Lowering the number of specified credits in pedagogy and subject areas from 210 to 150 credits to make it easier for students to fit different educational backgrounds into teacher education, such as a BA or BS in other subjects. 2) Making the research-oriented master's thesis optional and allowing students to take courses instead, ending with a Master of Teaching – M.T. The master's thesis had been a hindrance for some students to graduate and making it optional was believed to facilitate the process (Sigurðsson et al., 2023).

These developments in the legal framework opened an opportunity for structural changes in the organisation of special education studies. The program was moved from the Faculty of Education and Diversity to the Faculty of Education and Pedagogy and merged with the program of Inclusive Education. With this move, the prerequisite to have two years of practical experience for entering the program and becoming a special needs teacher was no longer in place. Student teachers can enter directly after their B.Ed. study.

The new program is called Inclusive Education (Menntun allra) and it is organised into three lines of study: 1) Inclusive education and special needs, 2) Inclusive education and support services, and 3) Inclusive education – a diploma study. Lines one and two are 120 ECTS credits and end with a master's thesis and a M.Ed. degree. Line three is a 60 ECTS credit diploma study, primarily aimed at those who want to add to their knowledge in the field of inclusive education. Admission to the diploma study requires two years of work experience in a preschool or compulsory school. The focus is mainly on how to prepare children and young people with different prerequisites for learning and provide them with conditions for developing and learning in community with others.

Line one, Inclusive Education and Special Needs, is tailored to teacher students that have finished their B.Ed. study but do not have their teacher licence yet. So, admission requires applicants to have completed a B.Ed. with 90 credits of specialisation in the field of preschool or compulsory school education, or in a subject of compulsory education. The focus is on students acquiring competence to collaborate with others in developing a school culture where everyone can enjoy their strengths. The line has two specializations to choose from: Diversity among children and young people and multilingualism and multiculturalism. The first year of this study is focused on courses that cover pedagogy of support, theories of inclusion and multicultural education, and research methodology. The second year is for writing the master's thesis and doing an extensive practicum in either special needs support or in working with multilingual learners in selected schools.

The second line is aimed at licensed teachers with teaching experience that are coming back to study for their master's degree. This line has no specialisations, but applicants can choose from a variety of courses and thus create their own specialisation. The goal of the program for participants is to strengthen their professionalism for learning and teaching in an inclusive school in a multicultural society, as well as their ability to lead inclusive school practice on that basis. This line has more elective courses as there is no need for an extensive practicum and the second year is devoted to writing the master's thesis.

This new program for educating special needs teachers with a focus on inclusive education was developed over three years with a broad discussion with various stakeholders. The first students will be admitted in the fall of 2023.

4 An example of a course on inclusive pedagogy

Diverse groups of students in inclusive schools call for professional teachers who have a strong grasp of pedagogical competence and content, an understanding of child development and individual differences and who are devoted to the education of all their students. In this section, we will introduce a course in teacher education that focuses on inclusive education as an example.

The authors of this chapter teach a graduate level course called: Working in Inclusive Practices (WIP). The course was first taught in 1999 and since then it has been under constant reconstruction through the methodology of self-study of teacher educational practice (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2016; 2022; 2023). The course is grounded in a pedagogy that integrates professional knowledge about teaching, learning and child development, and involves an ethical and social commitment to all students.

The course is taught simultaneously on-line and on campus and the content is divided into four main themes as stated in the course syllabus: inclusion, professionalism and leadership, inclusive pedagogy, and collaboration. The themes relate to theory and practice in inclusive educational settings, aiming at learning outcomes that give participants the competence to critically engage with issues and ideas inherent in learning and teaching in inclusive schools. This includes being able to design an educational environment, practice and pedagogy that considers learners' diverse resources. Through this work and reflecting on their professional identity and beliefs, the participants build their professional working theory (PWT).

The course methodology is centred on ideas from inclusive pedagogy and innovation education. Both build on social constructivist approaches, which are exemplified by reflection, collaborative discussions, and opportunities for teacher students to develop new understandings and shape their learning. Innovation education focuses on creativity and knowledge in meeting needs or solving problems identified as important. The aim is to help people developing critical and creative thinking through dealing with every-day situations and to gain capacity for action, using creative and critical problem solving. The core pedagogy builds on the ideas of learners as creative explorers and teachers as facilitators. Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes holistic and creative approaches to teaching practice, assessment, and collaboration within and around school. It begins with the learning of everybody and how the teacher can create rich learning opportunities available for all learners in the classroom to ensure their participation. It involves developing a system of offering equitable learning opportunities built on students' resources and the premises of universal access, active participation and belonging in school. Through the pedagogy of innovative and inclusive education, the goal is to facilitate the development of creative problem solving to enable participants to create learning spaces for diverse groups of learners in inclusive schools.

The learning space created in the course is designed to provide participants with opportunities to reflect on their learning after each session through TOCs (Ticket Out of the Classroom; UNESCO IBE 2020, 33f.) filled in online, and by listing the teaching methods used in each class session. The TOCs are designed to give everyone a voice and a conscious participation in the course development. For each TOC, participants reflect on what they learned that day and what they would like to focus on in the next course session. The TOC replies are anonymous and here are examples of responses:

I learnt about teacher ethics in professional theory. Interesting.

I want to learn more about the ethical part of the PWT.

I learnt that my PWT is work in progress – one must remember that.

I want to learn more about collaboration between school and parents.

Our response is to adjust the next session, based on what was called for in the TOCs, either with increased emphasis on what was already discussed or with a change in focus. At the end of each class, participants list the different teaching methods we employed. The list is compiled on the whiteboard and posted on Canvas. After one class the list read:

- Group work
- Problem solving
- Think-Pair-Share
- Walk and Talk

The aim of the list is to give an overview of as well as to model the pedagogy we employ. Also, our aim is for participants to practice identifying and discussing teaching methods.

One essential ingredient of the learning space created in the course is the freedom participants are allowed to in their assignments. The freedom is stated in the assignment descriptions as creativity is encouraged, such as using prose, video, artwork, podcasts, or some other innovative ways in turning in their assignments. While participants are expected to be creative, they must provide an argument for their work and link it to literature as needed. As an example, participants evaluate their participation and learning through a reflective self-assessment at the end of the course. This learning activity is a critical reflection on and evaluation of their work during the course and what they take away with them from their participation in the various tasks and discussions.

As we develop and teach the WIP course we aim to “walk the talk,” be inclusive, creative problem solvers and build our teaching on students’ resources. In feedback from the majority of participants through the years, we see that they are comfortable with the learning spaces created. However, it often takes them time to get used to the freedom, find the courage to step out of their “box” and approach tasks and projects in creative ways. It can be challenging, both for participants and teacher educators, to move out of the comfort zone, risk uncertainty and explore new ways of planning, teaching, and learning (Guðjónsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir, 2020). We believe, however, that this is the basis for creating a responsive and inclusive learning environment.

5 Discussion

Research has shown that teachers in Iceland have reported insecurity in teaching diverse groups of learners (Óskarsdóttir, 2014). They believe they need more knowledge of different disabilities, learning difficulties, behaviour problems and how to work with learners with diverse language backgrounds. These findings are in accordance with the audit on the Icelandic education system (discussed in Óskarsdóttir et al. in this volume) which showed that many teachers and administrators questioned the degree to which their initial education and/or ongoing professional development opportunities prepared them for the realities of inclusive practices (European Agency, 2017). This meant that they felt unprepared to implement inclusive education as a rights-based approach for all learners.

In previous research on the courses at the University of Iceland, we found that inclusive education is widely addressed in the teacher education program. However, there is a lack of consensus within the program on how to prepare teacher students to work in inclusive settings (Guðjónsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2020). Some courses respond to inclusive education by focusing on developing teachers’ knowledge of various learning disabilities, while others (such as the one we give an example of) focus on building teacher competences in designing their practice to be effective for all learners. Thus, inclusive education is addressed in the teacher education program; the problem, however, is that the teacher educators have different views on how to

prepare teacher students to work in inclusive settings and this results in a lack of consensus on the emphasis in the program. This is similar to what can be seen out in the field, different understandings result in different responses (Baglieri, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Florian & Pantić, 2017).

Courses offered at the University of Iceland will continue to emphasize different aspects and build on different theoretical approaches (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). However, each course should be seen as a piece in the puzzle of a complete teacher education that prepares student teachers for their role in the inclusive education system. This can be achieved by enabling them to build their personal theoretical framework, choose pedagogical approaches and to take a disciplinary stance.

References

- Baglieri, Susan, Valle, Jan W., Connor, David J., & Gallagher, Deborah J. (2011). Disability studies in education: The need for a plurality of perspectives on disability. *Remedial and special education, 32*(4), 267–278.
- Ball, Arnetta F., & Tyson, Cynthia A. (Eds.). (2011). *Studying diversity in teacher education*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cochran-Smith, Marilyn, & Dudley-Marling, Curt (2012). Diversity in Teacher Education and Special Education: The Issues that Divide. *Journal of Teacher Education, 63*(4): 237–244. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487112446512>.
- Dalmau, Mary C., & Guðjónsdóttir, Hafdís (2017). From the beginning to the future. Professional Working Theory emerging. In Mary C. Dalmau, Hafdís Guðjónsdóttir, & Deborah Tidwell (Eds.), *Taking a Fresh Look at Education. Framing Professional Learning in Education through Self-Study* (pp. 129–148). Rotterdam: Sense.
- Echeita, Gerardo (2014). *Initial teacher education for inclusion. Key messages and challenges. In Inclusive education in Europe: Putting theory into practice*. International Conference, 18 November 2013. Reflections from Researchers, edited by European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Odense, DK: European Agency.
- European Agency (for Special Needs and Inclusive Education) (2015). *Empowering teachers to promote inclusive education*. Literature review. Odense, DK: European Agency.
- European Agency (for Special Needs and Inclusive Education) (2017). *Education for All in Iceland: External Audit of the Icelandic System for Inclusive Education*. Odense, DK: European Agency.
- European Agency (for Special Needs and Inclusive Education) (2020). *Teacher Professional Learning for Inclusion: Phase 1 Final Summary Report*. (Annette De Vroey, Simoni Symeonidou and Amélie Lecheval, eds.). Odense, DK: European Agency.
- Florian, Lori, & Pantić, Nataša (Eds.) (2017). *Teacher education for the changing demographics of schooling: Issues for research and practice* (Vol. 2). Cham: Springer.
- Forlin, Chris, & Chambers, Dianne (2011). Teacher preparation for inclusive education: Increasing knowledge but raising concerns. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education 39*(1): 17–32. doi:10.1080/1359866X.2010.540850.
- Guðjónsdóttir, Hafdís, & Karlsdóttir, Jóhanna (2012). Skóli án aðgreiningar og kennaramenntun [Inclusive education and teacher education]. *Tímarit um menntarannsóknir, 9*, 132–152.
- Guðjónsdóttir, Hafdís, & Óskarsdóttir, Edda (2016). Inclusive education, pedagogy and practice. In Sylvija Markić, & Simone Abels (Eds.), *Science education towards inclusion* (pp. 7–22). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Guðjónsdóttir, Hafdís, & Óskarsdóttir, Edda (2020). 'Dealing with diversity': Debating the focus of teacher education for inclusion. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1695774>.

Guðjónsdóttir, Hafdís, & Óskarsdóttir, Edda (2023). Enacting inclusive pedagogy in teacher education: Creating a learning space for teachers to develop their professional identity. In: Rob Tierney, Fazal Rizvi, & Kadriye Ercikan (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (Fourth Edition). (pp. 243–253). Amsterdam: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-818630-5.04035-5>.

Háskóli Íslands (2023). Kennsluskra 2022–2023 [Course catalogue 2022–2023]. <https://ugla.hi.is/kennsluskra/index.php?tab=skoli&chapter=content&id=48185>.

Lög um grunnskóla [Act on compulsory schools] nr. 91/2008.

Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla [Act on the education and recruitment of teachers and administrators of preschools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools] nr. 87/2008.

Lög um menntun, hæfni og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla [Act on the education, competence and employment of teachers and heads of compulsory, lower secondary and upper secondary schools] nr. 95/2019.

Marínósson, Gretar, & Bjarnason, Dóra (2011). Þróun náms í sérkennslufræðum við H.Í. [The development of post-graduate programme in special needs education at the University of Iceland]. *Glæður* 21, 34–40.

Óskarsdóttir, Gerður (Ed.) (2014). *Starfshættir í grunnskólum við upphaf 21. aldar*. [Teaching and learning procedures in Icelandic compulsory schools in the beginning of 21 Century]. Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.

Reglugerð um inntak menntunar leik-, grunn- og framhaldsskólakennara [Content of education for teachers in preschools, compulsory and upper secondary schools] nr. 872/2009.

Sigurðardóttir, Anna K. (2010). School–university partnership in teacher education for inclusive education. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 10, 149–156.

Sigurðsson, Baldur, Björnsdóttir, Amelía, & Jóhannsdóttir, Thuridur J. (2023). Five-Year teacher education for compulsory school in Iceland: Retreat from research-based to practice-oriented teacher education? In Eyvind Elstad (Ed.), *Teacher Education in the Nordic Region, Evaluating Education: Normative Systems and Institutional Practices* (pp. 209–223). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-26051-3_8.

UNESCO (2020). *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>.

UNESCO IBE (International Bureau of Education) (2020). *Personalized Learning within Teacher Education. A Framework and Guidelines*. In-Progress Reflection No. 37 On Current and Critical Issues in Curriculum, Learning and Assessment. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343722032_Progress_Reflection_No_37_On_Current_and_Critical_Issues_in_Curriculum.

UNICEF (2013). *Educating teachers for children with disabilities. Mapping, scoping and best practices exercise in the context of developing inclusive education*. Rights, education and protection (REAP project). Australian government and UNICEF partnership. http://worldofinclusion.com/v3/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/UNICEF-Educating-Teachers-for-Children-with-Disabilities_Lo-res.pdf.