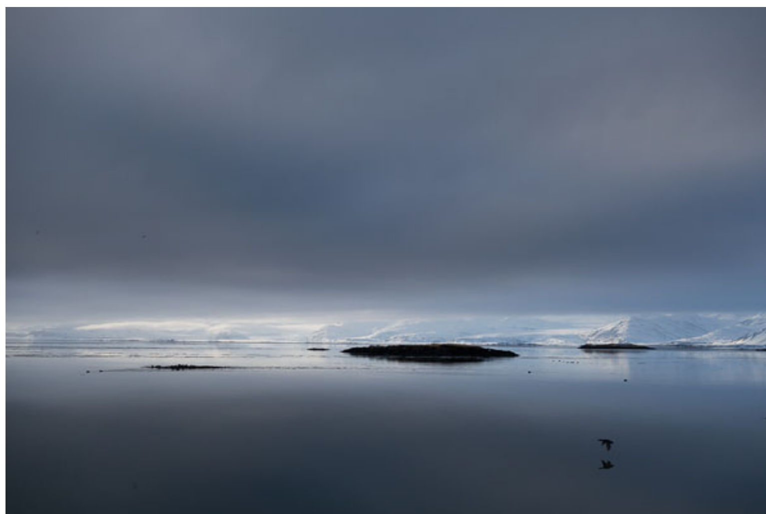
Chapter 15
Fostering Professional Development for Inclusive Education in Rural Iceland: A Collaborative Action Research Project

Edda Óskarsdóttir and Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka



Photographer: Edda Óskarsdóttir

Abstract This chapter discusses collaborative action research carried out by the authors while preparing and teaching a professional development course to develop inclusive school practices. The purpose was to understand how a professional development course on inclusive education can be developed through a distance learning module for diverse participants. The authors discuss how they explored how they were able to be inclusive throughout the course as well as the insights they gained into how course participants developed their own inclusive practice and pedagogy.

E. Óskarsdóttir (✉) · A. K. Wozniczka
University of Iceland, School of Education, Reykjavik, Iceland
e-mail: eddao@hi.is; akw1@hi.is

© The Author(s) 2023

D. B. Hirshberg et al. (eds.), *Education, Equity and Inclusion*, Springer Polar Sciences, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97460-2_15

Keywords Inclusive education · Distance teaching · Professional development · Rural context · Collaborative action research

15.1 Introduction

The idea of inclusion first appeared in the Icelandic education laws in 1995 (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). At first, the laws required schools to welcome all learners living in their catchment area, teaching them according to their needs as equals, but not specifying that this should be driven by the notion of inclusion. Thus, disabled learners were educated in the same building and space as their non-disabled peers, but without access to equal education opportunities (Jóhannesson, 2006; Marinósson, 2011). However, the most recent Compulsory School Act from 2008 states that all learners have the right to quality inclusive education in their neighbourhood school (Compulsory School Act No 91/2008).

Preparing a new education policy 2030, an audit was performed on the implementation of the inclusive education policy. The audit showed that while the official policy is in accordance with international treaties, the concept of inclusive education in schools is not clear and there is need for all school-level stakeholders to develop the capacity to think and act inclusively in their daily practice (European Agency, 2017). As a follow-up to the audit, a compulsory school in rural Iceland contracted with the University of Iceland to provide a professional development course to develop inclusive school practices. All school employees, including teachers, social educators, teacher assistants, custodians, the librarian, the office secretary, after-school staff, the school principal, and assistant principals participated in the course.

This chapter discusses collaborative action research carried out by us, Edda and Anna, the authors of the chapter, while preparing and teaching this course. The aim was twofold: first, to explore how we were able to be inclusive throughout the course; second, to gain insight into how the course participants developed their own inclusive practice and pedagogy. The purpose was to understand how a professional development course on inclusive education can be developed through a distance learning module for diverse participants. The research question was: *How can we design a professional development course that is responsive towards participants and empowers them to develop their inclusive practice?*

15.2 A Whole School Professional Development Approach

Professional development is important for teachers to further their knowledge and develop their competences in working with diverse learners. Professional development (PD) refers to activities focused on the education, training and development opportunities professionals can access (Sheridan et al., 2009). The goal for school staff who take part in PD courses is to improve learners' developmental and educational outcomes.

Three core issues in professional development need to be considered (Slot et al., 2017): *the who*, *the what*, and *the how*. The *who* focuses on the identities and background of participants and the learners with whom they work. The *what* addresses the focus of the PD course and the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, or expectations it is aimed at, as well as the specific content areas. The *how* refers to the strategies used to deliver the PD, such as face-to-face, online, or a hybrid. Building on this model and looking towards writings about reflection in PD, it can be hypothesized that change in professionals' behaviour and practices develop through enactment and reflection on practice, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs (Leitch & Day, 2000).

Meeting the challenge of strengthening the competences and professionalism of school staff working in inclusive settings calls for professional development opportunities. School leaders are instrumental in collecting the information needed to create professional development opportunities at their schools that will support and motivate each teacher and staff member to work for all learners (Black & Simon, 2014). School leaders should, according to Dorczak, 'release and develop the talents of all teachers or other members of staff as well [as] recognising and activating the potential of all students' (2013, p. 55).

Creating a course for a broad group of participants working in schools calls for the employment of inclusive pedagogy and practice, as teacher educators need to be role models in their teaching. Inclusion is grounded in the ideologies of social justice, democracy, human rights, and access to education for all; it focuses on how to meet the needs of all learners with their diversity and differences (Hick & Thomas, 2009; UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive pedagogy focuses on the beliefs, knowledge, design, and actions of teachers as they strive to include all learners in their classrooms. This involves what teachers do, and how and why they choose to do it (Florian, 2014; Gale et al., 2017; Slee, 2018). Inclusive practice, on the other hand, are the actions and teaching practices carried out by teachers that foster the learning and engagement of all learners (Florian, 2015). Collaboration is an essential ingredient and condition of inclusive practice (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019). The aim of this collaboration is to support teachers in working with diverse students in their classrooms. Thus, teachers and others with different skills and expertise work together and reflect on situations in daily routines to respond more effectively to the needs of learners (Ferguson, 2008).

Adult learning is selective and self-directed (Knowles, 1973), therefore a professional development course should focus on setting goals which are directly applicable to their work or life. While many adults have been away from school for some time or have had some negative school experiences, which may result in low self-esteem or even anxiety (Rubenson, 2011), they bring knowledge and experience, as well as a set of values and beliefs, to the classroom (Illeris, 2011). In teaching adults, using diverse approaches, sharing power (Brookfield, 2013), combining theory with practice, stimulating discussion, listening to students and acknowledging their backgrounds; and being approachable, flexible, and empathetic (Hill, 2014) contributes to the learning process. Extrinsic motivation, such as a hope for a better job or higher pay, play a big part in adult learning. However, intrinsic motivation, including

gaining more work satisfaction, self-confidence, and quality of life, is crucial for a meaningful adult learning experience (Rubenson, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003).

One way of ensuring participation of adult learners in professional development courses is through establishing learning communities that promote diversity and collaboration and provide space for all voices to be heard (Bell-Angus et al., 2008). Through learning communities, adult learners can develop shared understandings by relating their previous experience, current professional context, and new knowledge, and by mirroring their own perspectives in the experiences, values, and beliefs of others (Cornelius et al., 2011).

Today, many educational institutions provide distance education, with courses varying in structure. While some are strictly online, others represent a "hybrid" or "blended" model, combining online and face-to-face teaching (Bates, 2015). Synchronous distance teaching, in which all students participate in the course at the same time, enables interaction between participants and facilitates the creation of learning communities and support networks (Rao et al., 2011).

However, while distance education encompasses the idea of inclusive education, as it increases opportunities of diverse adult populations for professional development (Cocquyt et al., 2017), it involves several challenges, especially while creating online courses for rural and remote communities (Rao et al., 2011). These may include high dropout rates, feelings of isolation, difficulty accessing computers and internet, and too much reliance on text-based learning. Moreover, teaching in a distant setting may be irrelevant if teachers do not understand issues specific to local communities. Thus, educational institutions should consider the context in which the teaching takes place and the realities of the students (Rao et al., 2011). To overcome students' challenges with distance learning, it may be helpful to offer them dynamic connections between classes, for example through online discussions (Hall & Villareal, 2015). Moreover, when distance learning students gather in a single location to attend an online class, they are more likely to continue and finish the course despite the challenges involved (Rao et al., 2011).

The three core issues of developing a professional development course – *the who,* i.e., all school employees with various backgrounds as adult learners; *the what,* i.e., a focus on developing inclusive practices; and *the how,* i.e., a blended model of teaching that is responsive to participants' needs (Slot et al., 2017) – encompass the diverse issues involved in teaching a professional development course and should guide their development.

15.3 Collaborative Action Research Design

This collaborative action research project was built on collaborative inquiry and reflection seeking to understand and transform our practice of teaching (Carr & Kemmis, 2009). By systematically investigating our own practice as teachers we aimed to generate knowledge for ourselves as well as for others (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). Our practice of inquiry requires that we engage in creative and

reflective work, take risks, and use failures as points of departure for new learning and teaching approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015). Throughout the research process we sought to articulate our questions, make an action plan for implementation, outline ways to document the implementation and outcomes, and then reflect on both our learning and that of the course participants. Thus, the research process was intended to be cyclical and iterative (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2015; Waitoller et al., 2016).

The chapter builds on data collected during preparation and throughout teaching the course (May 2019–May 2020). All school employees (around 60 people) participated in the course; most of those with a BEd/BA/BS degree worked towards credits, while others took the course as part of their professional development. Data included participants' written assignments and self-evaluation at the end of the course, as well as Tickets Out of the Classroom (TOCs) that participants submitted after each session and consisted of answers to the following questions: What have you learned or what do you take with you after the day? And what would you like to focus on during the next session? Additionally, 45-minute focus group interviews were conducted at the end of the course, with four groups of course participants. Interviewees were chosen through purposeful sampling considering different age, gender, origin, work and educational experience and needs. They were invited to join via email. In addition to data from the participants, we used meeting minutes from our preparation meetings and individual journal notes. Table 15.1 presents an overview of the data collection process.

We discussed the research with all participants at the beginning of the course and asked them to sign an informed consent form. We ensured the anonymity of the

Table 15.1 Overview of data collection

Types of data collected	Participants	Date/period of data collection
Participants' assignments, including self-evaluation	All participants in the course	August 2019–March 2020
Tickets out of the classroom (TOCs)	All participants in the course	August 2019–March 2020
Focus group interviews	Representatives of four groups: 1. Teachers taking the course for credit (8 persons) 2. Teachers who did not work towards credits (6 persons) 3. Other staff (8 persons) 4. Members of the school leadership team (3 persons)	March 12, 2020
Notes from final project presentations during the harvest festival	Edda and Anna	March 13, 2020
Meeting minutes	Edda and Anna	May 2019–May 2020
Individual journal notes	Edda and Anna	May 2019–May 2020

participants by giving them pseudonyms and de-identifying the data. All data were kept in a secure place and only the authors had access to them.

Throughout the course, we used discussions for our continuous data analysis and reflection. During the analytical process, we applied a grounded theory analysis approach in coding the data. We understand grounded theory analysis to be an approach that enables generating a theory to explain what is central in the data (Punch, 2014). Grounded theory analysis is compatible with action research, as one feature of the latter is that it builds on a cyclical procedure in which data can be collected and analysed simultaneously (Charmaz, 2015). In grounded theory, as in action research, the data shapes the research process and its product in a responsive and often innovative way (Waring, 2021).

Our data analysis was a collaborative effort conducted in three phases. In the first phase, we each read and reread through the data to find meaningful messages. In the second phase we read through the data and our initial analysis together and assigned descriptive and interpretive codes to different fragments of data. In the third phase we grouped or connected the main substantive codes into categories such as challenges, responding to challenges, peer-pressure, and support and leadership. The goal was to identify patterns, themes, or threads in the data that would illuminate how we and the research participants developed our practice throughout the study.

15.4 Findings

The findings are presented in three main sections that reflect the timeline of the research: a prologue that presents findings from the stage of preparing the course, an action stage that presents findings from teaching the course, and an epilogue that presents findings from the data gathered at the end of the course.

15.4.1 Prologue

A compulsory school in a rural town in Iceland requested that the University of Iceland offer them a whole-school professional development course focusing on inclusive education. Edda, one of the authors, who specialises in inclusive education, was asked to develop and teach the course. The first step was to have an online meeting between the school leadership team and Edda. In this meeting the school leadership team discussed their vision for the course and determined that it should be 10 ECTS, it should run over more than one term (from August till May), and it should be a blend of online classes and onsite days. Through our discussions we decided that the course should have an inquiry focus where participants would look at their own work and identify what they would like to develop further in their practice; this would allow them to create a learning community in the process. The aim would be to enable participants to use the course to strengthen their practice and

deepen their understanding of their own work, of the concept of inclusive education, and how practitioner inquiry can be applied as professional development.

The next step was to create the course outline, aims, and timeline before travelling to the rural town to meet with the whole school to introduce the course. The point of Edda travelling to the school was to support the school principal in selling the idea to the school staff, assuring them that this course was tailored to their needs and could be an opportunity for professional development, without requiring them to travel to Reykjavík (more than 600 km away).

15.4.1.1 First Encounters

During this first visit to the school, Edda had a chance to meet the school leadership and staff. While introducing the course she got questions that suggested there would be unanticipated challenges. She wrote in her journal:

> Some of the non-teaching staff wanted to discuss with me privately, telling me that they never worked on a computer, that they never read or write anything, and they had not been students themselves for decades. They sounded scared or threatened and I tried to be reassuring, telling them that I would accommodate their needs, we would find a way for them to participate... I think this will be more complicated than 'just' teaching a course.

When Edda returned, she contacted Anna, the co-author of the chapter, and asked her to co-teach the course, as she saw that it would be important to have someone to share the responsibilities of teaching and planning it. We have worked together in various courses through the years and know each other well, trusting in each other's knowledge, professionalism, and complementary competences.

15.4.1.2 Planning the Course

After the first visit, the preparation phase began. The aim of the course was for participants to strengthen their teaching and practice in an inclusive school and to reflect on their practice with the goal of improving it. The course focused on the theoretical foundations of inclusive education and explored what it means to meet the learning and social needs of all learners with human value, democracy, and social justice as guiding lights. A secondary focus was on how to do a practitioner inquiry, connect it to literature, collect and analyse data, and disseminate the findings. Collaboration was a central theme throughout the course, as the participants were expected to form learning communities where they would learn together and support each other in developing the school practices and ethos.

The course was divided into four themes: theoretical background of inclusion, gathering data, analysing and reflecting on data, and writing and disseminating results. There were also four assignments: a research plan, a literature review, a final assignment (composed of the first two assignments, research findings and suggestions for next steps) and a self-assessment.

We organised the course into four onsite whole day sessions dispersed over 8 months. In the months when there was not an onsite day, we had online afternoon classes for 2 hours. Between these course meetings, participants were expected to do independent work and take part in online discussions. We used Zoom for online meetings and Moodle for online discussions, assignments, and overall course materials.

15.4.2 Action Stage

The action stage is divided into three acts representing our and participants' experiences from the course as it progressed: The Honeymoon, Emerging challenges and opportunities, and All's well that ends well.

15.4.2.1 The Honeymoon

We were satisfied after the first onsite teaching and thought it went well. We were aware of participants being stressed about the course, the workload and what our expectations were. At the same time, there was some excitement in the air, as shown in the TOCs: "I look forward to thinking about my research question and working on something that would be useful for myself and my work" and "what I would like to get out of this course are happier students." The participants enjoyed learning new teaching methods that we modelled during the day, and many were eager to take on the challenge of changing their own practice.

The online sessions took place in the afternoon and the participants were situated in two school buildings, while we were in Reykjavík together in one room. The participants were using two computers, one in each building, and for each there was a person in charge of the technology who asked us questions or told us what was happening. On our screen we only saw a part of the two rooms and there was little interaction between the participants and us, as we could not hear them very well. This felt a bit like teaching through a mail slot. So, we quickly decided that we would either provide pre-recorded lectures or shorter online lectures and use more of our online time for group work. Our aim was to ensure active participation, discussions on the content of the lectures and collaborative work related to preparing inquiry into practice.

During the first afternoon session we divided participants into groups of five. They were asked to draw a large flower with five petals on a sheet of paper, write something that they had in common in the centre of the flower, and then fill the petals with something about them that was unique. Participants were instructed to focus on attributes other than physical ones to encourage more meaningful discussions. As participants stated in the TOCs, this method helped them to "learn more about each other" and "find a common goal". Having evidence of the effectiveness of this approach, we aimed at using at least one groupwork method, such as Walk & Talk, a

Three-Step Interview, or Think-Pair-Share for future sessions (for further discussion see: Alisauskiene et al., 2020).

15.4.2.2 Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

We felt, as the course progressed, that we were facing similar challenges as encountered by every teacher of a diverse group of students. Early on it was clear that the participants had different reasons for attending the course and their engagement level varied. We found our biggest challenge would be to work with the non-teaching staff and some teachers not taking the course for credits. Arna, one of the non-teaching participants, admitted: “We can never use anything to raise our wages, maybe we would have been more positive if we could.... It felt a bit unjust.” Some participants even felt that the course was imposed on them. Eva said: “I am a university student and I have enough work already and I find this to be yet another burden for me and I was just: ‘sorry, I don’t have time for this’.” Participants themselves noticed that this influenced the dynamics of the course, especially in group activities. Tóta gave an example of a group exercise for which “in a group of five, three participants felt they had nothing to contribute to the discussion.” Similarly, Tómas stated that “the biggest challenge was to be in group work with people who didn’t show any interest, they did not get the ECTS for the course and did not show any ambition to participate in an activity.” Our intention with group work was clearly not working. We felt we had little control and overview of the group dynamics when we were teaching online.

The emergent challenges for some participants included access to and understanding of technology such as an online classroom system, returning to school after a long time, and insecurity about being in the position of a learner and about academic writing and reading texts in English. As Auður, a non-teaching employee, stated: “employees have such diverse jobs [...] the emphasis in the course is on our students. Although we are around them for the whole day, we don’t participate in their learning process as such.” Moreover, some participants experienced technical challenges. Theodóra admitted: „Using Moodle wasn’t easy. We submitted everything that we should, but I don’t consider this environment fun to work in.” We had also experienced problems with downloading larger recordings of sessions to Moodle. We felt that the platform provided by the University was not only limited and outdated, but also difficult to manoeuvre, especially for participants who have never experienced a distance online learning platform.

For an online course to be inclusive, it is important that everyone has access to and understanding of technology. This was not necessarily the case in the school where the course took place. Eik, a non-teaching participant, explained: “Teachers have computers. But if other employees want to use a computer and go on Moodle to work on their projects during working hours, where are they supposed to do that?” Thus, together with the principal, we decided early on that the non-teaching staff and those who were not taking the course for credits would have a different way of going through the course. They would turn in a research plan and deliver a final presentation but were not expected to take part in online discussions. We expected them to

participate in the onsite and afternoon online sessions, but they could choose which course material they read. Additionally, we formed a group on Facebook as, according to the school principal, participants felt the Facebook platfrom was more accessible for informal discussions. We also allowed participants to submit assignments through email. In the case of participants who did not have access to a computer, the principal forwarded their assignments to us. We found that regular connection and sharing experiences from the course with the leadership team was important in keeping the course going because we lacked an insight into what was happening in the school.

Participants' levels of engagement were influenced not only by current work, but also by previous educational experience. Embla noticed that "for those who have never attended an upper secondary school nor a university it was very difficult, for example videos and other stuff in another language, in English." Although reading material in English is widely used in Icelandic secondary and tertiary education, the diversity in the group meant that we had to give presentations that were not too theoretical but still provided teachers with the necessary pedagogical grounding. These presentations also had to serve the purpose of encouraging other staff to reflect on their work. We also incorporated more visual material such as YouTube videos.

Participants who were used to tackling various academic challenges in their previous university studies mentioned that they had rarely before experienced the freedom we offered in selecting the project topic and its form. Though they welcomed it as a positive change, it also caused some concern. Telma admitted: 'Freedom in working on the projects in this course was considerable and I found it a bit uncomfortable, and it led to some insecurity at the beginning. [. . .] The freedom was so much that I was never really sure if I was doing the right thing.'. Similarly, some participants with university degrees experienced difficulties with coming back to school. As Tinna explained:

> At the beginning of autumn when it was decided to run this course, I was so excited and looking forward to it. I felt this was a great opportunity to get a chance to go to school and have the teachers come here and skip going to Reykjavík... But as soon as I had to start writing something seriously, I began to lose the motivation and I wasn't quite prepared for master studies because many years have passed since I last went to school.

We needed to think of ways to keep all participants motivated and engaged by looking for sources, topics and using vocabulary that would apply to them all. We worried about whether we were succeeding in reaching out to all participants.

15.4.2.3 All's Well that Ends Well

As the course was coming to an end, we wondered if our approach in the course and the changes we had made bore the fruits we had hoped for. The last session we planned in spring of 2020 was a so-called "Harvest Festival" during which participants presented their projects, either through an oral presentation (for those seeking course credit) or a poster (for the remaining participants). The projects' aim was for

participants to research their own practice with inclusive school as a focus, conduct field study by gathering evidence, analyse data in collaboration with course teachers and other practitioners, introduce their findings, and decide on the next steps – all in the spirit of forward-looking and innovative thinking. The overview of participants' final projects is presented in Table 15.2.

This day was an "a-ha!" moment for everyone. We discovered that, despite our worries, most participants were developing their understanding of how to employ inclusive pedagogy and improving their inclusive practices. As the table above depicts, the projects focused on various aspects of school practice, including

Table 15.2 Presentations

Presentation type	Project type	Project title
Oral	Pair	Teachers' collaboration
	Individual	I am not doing this alone. WE should rather do it TOGETHER
	Pair	Teaching natural sciences
	Individual	Science literacy
	Pair	Social skills
	Individual	Teaching bilingual students
	Group	Theme-based teaching – subject integration
	Pair	PALS in mathematics
	Individual	My goals
	Individual	Support services
	Individual	Green screens and talking stop-motion movies – collaborative learning at the lower secondary level.
	Group	All on board – mother tongue, bilingualism and multilingualism in a preschool
	Individual	To be and to do...
	Individual	Fab lab, knowledge dissemination as a facilitator of students' creativity
	Individual	How can I develop culturally responsive teaching of Danish?
	Individual	What is the story of my school? Supportive services at a crossroads
	Pair	Development of inclusive teaching practices in the sixth grade
	Individual	Using technology in school activities and in planning teaching
	Individual	How do I support the work and professional development of all employees to ensure that all students enjoy schooling?
Poster	Group	Tidiness and recycling
	Group	Support staff looking at their practice
	Group	Restitution in the after-school programme
	Individual	More kitchens, better teaching?
	Individual	Support for students with ADHD
	Individual	Teaching swimming through play
	Individual	Goal setting in one's own practice
	Individual	Reading practices in the tenth grade
	Individual	The path to improved attention

developing collaborative practice, and rewriting subject curriculum to make it more student-centred, all with the aim of improving teaching practices to include all learners.

The non-teaching staff showed how they had learned about the importance of their contributions to the school. Their projects showed how their understanding of inclusion as a school policy had strengthened. As an example, employees of the after-school programme presented a poster depicting changes in the organisation of their activities. These included dividing students in grades 1–4 into two groups, offering a calmer learning environment and a more personalised approach, as well as improving collaboration between staff of the after-school programme and other school employees. Another group of non-teaching staff prepared a digital presentation of the changes they implemented in the school corridors, canteen, and staff rooms. The group gave examples of how small details, like informative texts or photos on the wall, positively affected accessibility and tidiness in the school and raised awareness of the shared responsibility in the entire school community for keeping the school neat and welcoming for all.

In the end, many participants reported that engaging with the course was a rewarding and eye-opening experience. Amalía, a non-teaching staff member, stated that: 'I value my job more than I did before. [. . .] when people start to talk, and you start to hear what the others are doing, then OK, I do matter. We are all important where we are.' This gave both us and the participants strength and confidence that they can and are prepared to change their practice and to work in learning communities by building on the diverse resources they all bring to the school.

15.4.3 Epilogue

When reflecting on the course, we could clearly see that both we and the participants had to tackle various technological, pedagogical, organisational, and personal challenges. At the same time, we all benefited from these experiences and learned important lessons about the roles of peer pressure and leadership, as well as the prerequisites needed for the development of communities of practice when designing and running a whole school professional development course through distance learning.

As the participants were all working together in the same school, peer collaboration was crucial to sustaining their engagement. The teacher Tara revealed: 'to be honest, I was about to give up several times, but because I was doing the project in cooperation with my co-worker, I felt I could not leave her alone with the project.' Annika, a non-teaching participant, said: 'this was the worst, to have to put it in words, what am I supposed to write? But when we worked together it was totally different.' Other participants seconded Tara's and Annika's experiences. Telma, a teacher, observed: 'I am really satisfied with the fact that we got so many opportunities for group discussions, Our work during this course has strengthened

cooperation and opened new possibilities for cooperation in the future.' This reassured us that our emphasis on group work, discussions and collaboration paid off despite us not being able to monitor the progress of participants' projects on a regular basis.

The school principal had a key role in creating a collaborative space for the non-teaching staff, as she made the decision to meet with them every week to 'spend more time with them and to discuss the goal of our practice, the school policies and how they could be more effective and attend to their well-being at work.' She also used these meetings to support them in the coursework. Allý, a non-teaching staff member was satisfied with this support from the principal: 'I think [...] it almost feels as if it was crucial to create a club, for non-teaching staff [...] it is good to discuss sometimes the things that we cannot discuss otherwise... We enjoyed a lot working on this together. We couldn't have done this without her.' This platform for non-teaching staff to discuss the issues that they encountered in their daily routines was clearly satisfying an unmet need.

One of the most important outcomes for nurturing inclusive practices in the school was development of communities of practice. Shortly after the course finished, we received some positive news from the school principal, who was planning another short course for the teachers on team teaching and collaboration. The idea emerged based on their positive experiences and the benefits they noticed while collaborating on the final projects for our course. This reassured us that the participants would continue to develop their practices and professional learning communities after the course was over.

15.5 Discussion

The aim of this research was twofold: first, to explore how we were able to be inclusive throughout teaching a professional development course focused on developing inclusive school practice, and secondly, to gain insight into how the course participants developed their understanding of inclusive practice and pedagogy.

The course developed through identifying and taking on the various challenges that participants and we faced as we responded to the diverse needs of participants. The challenges were similar to the ones described in previous research on distance or hybrid courses conducted in other contexts, including rural ones (Hall & Villareal, 2015; Rao et al., 2011).

We learned that regardless of the mode of teaching being online or onsite, the responsibility for running a whole school distance education professional development course is different from running a regular graduate level course at the University of Iceland. One main difference is that while most graduate students are powered by intrinsic motivation for studying, the motivation for participation in a whole school development course can be extrinsic (such as orders from the principal or peer pressure), or even non-existent, as some participants may feel that they are being forced to take part (Rubenson, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003).

This connects to our findings regarding the advantages and disadvantages of offering a whole school development course. On the positive side, it can be a catalyst for developing professional learning communities and improving the staff knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards a specific topic (Leitch & Day, 2000). However, we learned that creating a learning community depends greatly on group pressure and support. One challenge of the whole school development course is that individuals who are not motivated to participate may pass negative attitudes on to other participants. This means that to keep everyone motivated, there is a need to attend to the diverse knowledge, experiences and needs of participants, their distinct roles and power in the school– as suggested by Brookfield (2013) and Hill (2014). Some participants had already finished their graduate education, while others had not been students for a long time, and their low self-confidence or even anxiety influenced their attitudes and motivation in participating in the course (Illeris, 2011; Rubenson, 2011).

This is where the school leaders stepped in as important if not essential actors. Because the school leadership team knew their staff well, they were able to stay alert and work with those who seemed uninterested or unmotivated in taking part in the course (Black & Simon, 2014). For us, communicating and collaborating with the school leader was crucial to be able to acknowledge and respond to participants' needs and challenges. This communication supported us in developing the coursework in the manner of inclusive pedagogy, with equity and flexibility as our beacon (Florian, 2014; Gale et al., 2017; Slee, 2018).

Our experiences with online teaching in this course were somewhat stressful to begin with, as we felt we had little control and a limited sense of what was happening in the school during these classes. However, as our and previous research have shown (Rao et al., 2011), gathering distance students together in the school in proximity with others supported them in overcoming some of the challenges involved in distance learning, and led to a sense of community thinking 'we are in this together.' The lesson we learned was that our emphasis on collaboration was the greatest support for participants' learning (Ferguson, 2008). Relating their experiences and mirroring their own perspectives in the experiences and attitudes of others (Cornelius et al., 2011) gave our participants the courage to reflect on and make changes in their own work for the benefit of their students and the entire school community.

15.6 Conclusion

The chapter offers insights into a whole school professional development approach as means to promote equity and access in education and to positively influence school practices in a rural school. The findings suggest that the co-teaching went well, and we were able to build the course on both our expertise and backgrounds. However, we felt we lacked the knowledge, imagination, and experience to attend better to the realities and needs of employees other than teachers. We also realised

that splitting the school staff into smaller groups might have led to a more personalised approach and would create a space for more tailored content. Another important finding is that there is a need for support and full participation of the school leadership team, as a large part of the course success can be attributed to their involvement. Our research shows that attending to all employees of the school in a professional development course is crucial, as they all contribute to inclusive practices, despite working with students in various areas and to different extents. In the future we could invite colleagues who have the knowledge and experience of teaching courses with non-teaching staff to join us and help us in developing an even more inclusive course, in line with the ideas of inclusive practice (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2019).

Although our study is limited to a single professional development course in rural Iceland, it explores experiences, challenges, and opportunities for both teachers and participants that are common to many other educational contexts and stresses the importance of continuous professional development. Development of innovative distance teaching for the whole school community is one of sustainable pathways to education for all, regardless of the remoteness and diversity of the community, provided it is well prepared, and all employees are motivated to participate and work to a common vision. Those teaching such a course need to be responsive to the needs of participants; flexible in adjusting the learning environment to enhance participation; and open to different teaching, learning, and assessment approaches – just like all teachers in inclusive settings.

Since the course ended in April 2020, we have both had to completely change our university teaching to online-only because of COVID-19. Our experience of teaching this course, and the knowledge gained from researching it, has had a profound influence on our teaching practices and on the inclusive pedagogy we now employ in our online courses.

References

Alisauskiene, S., Guðjónsdóttir, H., Kristinsdóttir, J. V., Connolly, T., O'Mahony, C., Lee, L., Milteniene, L., Meliene, R., Kaminskiene, L., Rutkiene, A., Venslovaite, V., Kontrimiene, S., Kazlauskiene, A., & Wozniczka, A. K. (2020). *Personalized learning within teacher education: A framework and guidelines*. UNESCO.

Bates, A. W. (2015). *Teaching in a digital age: Guidelines for designing teaching and learning for a digital age*. Tony Bates Associates.

Bell-Angus, B., Davis, G., Donoahue, Z., Kowal, M., & McGlynn-Stewart, M. (2008). DICEP: Promoting collaborative inquiry in diverse educational settings. In A. P. Samaras, A. R. Freese, C. Kosnik, & C. Beck (Eds.), *Learning communities in practice. Explorations of educational purpose* (pp. 19–30). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8788-2_2

Black, W. R., & Simon, M. D. (2014). Leadership for all students: Planning for more inclusive school practices. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 9*(2), 153–172.

Brookfield, S. (2013). *Powerful techniques for teaching adults*. Jossey-Bass.

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (2009). Educational action research: A critical approach. In S. E. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of educational action research* (pp. 74–84). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021021
Charmaz, K. (2015). Grounded theory. In J. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd ed., pp. 53–83). SAGE.
Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2015). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research in the next generation*. Teachers College Press.
Cocquyt, C., Diep, N. A., Zhu, C., De Greef, M., & Vanwing, T. (2017). Examining social inclusion and social capital among adult learners in blended and online learning environments. *European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults, 8*(1), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.3384/rela.2000-7426.rela911
Compulsory School Act No 91/2008. https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/law-and-regulations/Compulsory-School-Act-No.-91-2008.pdf
Cornelius, S., Gordon, C., & Ackland, A. (2011). Towards flexible learning for adult learners in professional contexts: An activity-focused course design. *Interactive Learning Environments, 19*(4), 381–393. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820903298258
Dorczak, R. (2013). Inclusion through the lens of school culture. In G. Mac Ruairc, E. Ottesen, & R. Precey (Eds.), *Leadership for inclusive education: Values, vision and voices* (pp. 47–57). Sense Publishers.
European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. (2017). *Education for all in Iceland: External audit of the Icelandic system for inclusive education*. European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.
Ferguson, D. L. (2008). International trends in inclusive education: The continuing challenge to teach each one and everyone. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 23*(2), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856250801946236
Florian, L. (2014). What counts as evidence of inclusive education? *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 29*(3), 286–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2014.933551
Florian, L. (2015). Inclusive pedagogy: A transformative approach to individual differences but can it help reduce educational inequalities? *Scottish Educational Review, 47*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2012.709732
Gale, T., Mills, C., & Cross, R. (2017). Socially inclusive teaching: Belief, design, action as pedagogic work. *Journal of Teacher Education, 68*(3), 345–356. https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0022487116685754
Hall, S., & Villareal, D. (2015). The hybrid advantage: Graduate student perspectives of hybrid education courses. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 27*(1), 69–80.
Hick, P., and Thomas, G. (2009). Inclusion and diversity in education: Inclusive education as social justice. SAGE.
Hill, L. H. (2014). Graduate students' perspectives on effective teaching. *Adult Learning, 25*(2), 57–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1045159514522433
Illeris, K. (2011). Characteristics of adult learning. In K. Rubenson (Ed.), *Adult learning and education* (pp. 47–52). Elsevier.
Jóhannesson, I. Á. (2006). "Strong, independent, able to learn more...": Inclusion and the construction of school students in Iceland as diagnosable subjects. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 27*(1), 103–119. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500510328
Knowles, M. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Gulf Publishing Company.
Leitch, R., & Day, C. (2000). Action research and reflective practice: Towards a holistic view. *Educational Action Research, 8*(1), 179–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790000200108
Marinósson, G. (2011). *Responding to diversity at school*. Lambert Academic Publishing.
Óskarsdóttir, E., GísladÓttir, K. R., & GuðjÓnsdÓttir, H. (2019). Policies for inclusion in Iceland: Possibilities and challenges. In J. Spratt, G. Maxwell, D. Hirshberg, & M. Beaton (Eds.), *Including the north: Comparative study of inclusion policies in the circumpolar north*. University of the Arctic Yearbook. https://lauda.ulapland.fi/handle/10024/63716

Punch, K. (2014). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. SAGE.
Rao, K., Eady, M., & Edelen-Smith, P. (2011). Creating virtual classrooms for rural and remote communities. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92*(6), 22–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/2F003172171109200605
Rubenson, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Adult learning and education*. Elsevier.
Sheridan, S. M., Edwards, C. P., Marvin, C. A., & Knoche, L. (2009). Professional development in early childhood programs: Process issues and research needs. *Early Education and Development, 20*, 377–401. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409280802582795
Slee, R. (2018). *The inclusive education workbook: Teaching, learning and research in the irregular school*. Routledge.
Slot, P., Romijn, B., & Wysłowska, O. (2017). T5. 2 inventory and analysis of professional development and models related to inclusiveness. http://isotis.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ISOTIS-D5.2.-Inventory-and-Analysis-of-Professional-Development-and-Models-Related-to-Inclusiveness.pdf
UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718
Waitoller, F. R., Kozleski, E. B., & Gonzalez, T. (2016). Professional inquiry for inclusive education: Learning amidst institutional and professional boundaries. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 27*(1), 62–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2014.908929
Waring, M. (2021). What is grounded theory? In R. Coe, M. Waring, L. V. Hedges, & L. Ashley (Eds.), *Research methods and methodology in education* (3rd ed., pp. 117–134). SAGE.
Wlodkowski, R. J. (2003). Fostering motivation in professional development programs. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 98*, 39–48. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.98

Edda Óskarsdóttir, EdD, is an associate professor at the School of Education, University of Iceland. She graduated with an MA in special needs education from the University of Oregon, USA, in 1993 and holds a doctorate in Education Sciences from University of Iceland. Her research focus is mainly on inclusive education in connection with teacher education, teachers' professional learning and development, school development and policy making.

Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka, MA, is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Iceland. Her research focuses on immigrant students in various contexts and on culturally responsive and inclusive teacher practices.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.