

## **The role of the Special Education teacher in the social inclusion of the handicapped**

Deysi Turcas Robert <sup>1\*</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7658-7520>

Niurka Tellez Rodríguez<sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7470-6311>

María Lidia Rivera Mallet <sup>2</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8556-817X>

<sup>1</sup>Universidad de Oriente. Cuba.

<sup>2</sup>Universidad de Guantánamo. Cuba.

\*Autor para la correspondencia: [deysit@uo.edu.cu](mailto:deysit@uo.edu.cu)

### **ABSTRACT**

In Cuba, the improvement of the Special Education Subsystem is being developed, in this process, a key element is to understand the role of the teacher in the process of social inclusion of the disabled. This work presents a theoretical/methodological analysis of the role of the Special Education teacher for the social inclusion of the disabled. For the development of the research, the methodology of the quantitative-qualitative paradigm was used, systematized by means of the analysis-synthesis methods, induction-deduction, interviews, questionnaires, documentary analysis. The conclusions obtained show some shortcomings of Special Education teachers, which requires the theoretical-methodological construction of this role.

**Keywords:** Special education; Disabled; Social inclusion; Training; Teacher's role.

### **Introduction**

Cuban Higher Education shows in its institutions a whole organization that intends, from the base, to contribute to efficiently manage its processes and that these tend to improve the quality of the professional being trained. In this sense, the fact of being able to acquire new ways of achieving university-society interaction becomes more relevant,

in order to achieve a local development approach that privileges relations with managers in terms of social inclusion, from the initial training.

The University, as a teacher trainer, must be capable of preparing education professionals who, from contents and management channels, can achieve fundamental transformations in the process of educational inclusion, adjusted to the latent socio-educational complexities of the current XXI Century. However, it is necessary to continue investigating the initial training of the Bachelor in Special Education as a socio-educational manager for the social inclusion of the disabled in the local context.

There are pedagogical foundations that justify highlighting the need for the teacher's role in the social inclusion of the disabled and these have to do with the changes that have been developing in postmodernity in the understanding of disability and in the network of interactions that are generated around the care of the disabled; therefore, new constructs are needed that allow the teacher to generate synergies with the actors and managers of the social inclusion process. The educational practice and the author's experience on the subject reveal the following limitations regarding the role of the teacher in the process of social inclusion:

- Shortcomings in the process of interconnection of the teacher with other local actors in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- Overvaluation of the teacher's role in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- Poor knowledge of the complexities and potentialities of the local environment for the social inclusion of the disabled.

The main origins of this situation are based on the following causal assessment:

- Insufficient theoretical and methodological conception of the training process of the Special Education teacher, for his role as a local actor in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- Indefinitions in the acting model, of the deployment of the role of the Special Education teacher as a local actor in the social inclusion of the disabled in the different scenarios of the local context.

At present, there is a contradiction between the demands placed on teachers in the inclusion of students with disabilities in the context of diversity, on the one hand, and on the other hand, their lack of preparation to take on the challenges and complexities

presented by the social inclusion of the disabled in the local context. These reasons allow us to understand the need to improve the training process of this education professional, reconstructing a role that integrates theoretical, conceptual and praxeological axes in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.

The training of Special Education teachers for the social inclusion of the disabled should be considered as a space for reformulation, analysis and reconstruction of the role of this subject, linked to the whole process of educational change faced in education from the ecological approach.

From the revealed factual manifestations, the scientific problem is defined as: Insufficiencies in the training of Special Education teachers that limit their professional role in the process of inclusion of children with disabilities.

The background of this problem shows that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in the global agenda Education 2030, ratifies that inclusive education as a right, in order to deploy the potential of the so-called marginalized and vulnerable groups; this position supports the need to address the complexity of the teacher's role in inclusion.

Teacher training is a topic that has been gaining more and more importance in the current XXI century, researchers from various branches of scientific knowledge have dabbled in this subject. In the case of Special Education teacher training, researchers such as Echeíta, (2016); Valenzuela-Zambrano; Panao; Chacón-López and López-Justicia, (2017), allude to positions that point to the need to promote the inclusive teacher culture of the teacher from the determination of their training needs related to the attention to diversity, the analysis of the tutor-teacher support teacher link, as well as the construction of the profile and reflection on the role of the teacher from the inclusive perspective. Similarly, in the Ibero-American region, other studies have approached teacher training related to inclusion from novel and heterogeneous perspectives.

However, current contributions lack constructs that make explicit the role of the Special Education teacher in the inclusion process, in order to situate the pedagogical action according to the nature of what inclusion and disability mean in postmodernity. Hence, the objective of this work consists of a theoretical/methodological analysis of the role of the Special Education teacher for the social inclusion of the disabled.

From the theoretical-methodological point of view, the research is based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy and qualitative methodology. The following theoretical level

methods were used: analysis-synthesis, to approach the peculiarities of the teacher's role in the process of social inclusion of the disabled; induction-deduction method: to achieve abstractions and generalizations about the subject under investigation. The system approach allows establishing the interrelationships between the aspects that singularize the role of the teacher in the process of social inclusion.

The empirical level methods used were: participant observation, interview, questionnaire, documentary analysis and as a methodological procedure, the triangulation of sources and methods, to contrast and integrate the information provided by the sources consulted and the methods used, which allows building a global vision of the topic.

## **Development**

It is significant the diversity of analysis, which has in postmodernity the process of teacher training from the studies conducted by the scientific community in Latin America, reflecting the concern for the approach of this issue tempered to the complexity of the process of inclusion of the disabled.

In this regard, WHO (2001) states that disability is any alteration in the health condition of an individual that may cause pain, suffering or interference with daily activities. Well-being includes multiple domains, one of which is health, which includes the complementary concepts of functioning and disability:

"Functioning is a generic term that includes body functions, body structures, activities and participation. It indicates the positive aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a "health condition") and his or her contextual factors (environmental and personal factors). [Disability is an (also) generic term that includes deficits, activity limitations and participation restrictions. It indicates the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a "health condition") and his or her contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)]" (WHO, 2001, p. 231).

The WHO classification incorporates environmental factors that allude to the physical, social and attitudinal environment in which people live, in which ecological conditions, relationships and personal support, public policies in the field and the level of

preparation of local actors to lead the process of social inclusion of the disabled play an important role.

The Ecological Model of Disability allows us to argue that learning possibilities are not limited to individual competences, but that these are inscribed in the educational context generated, in the recursiveness between the individual and the situational. On the other hand, in the specific Cuban case, when Special Education was recognized as a network of centers, services, modalities of attention, professional resources and extension channels; made available to children, adolescents, young people and adults with special educational needs, whether or not associated with disabilities, teachers, their families and society in general; this position significantly influenced the process of strengthening teacher training in order to improve the quality of education in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.

It should be noted that with the improvement of the conceptualization of the Cuban Special Education Model, the system of services and support of this education professional was enriched, not only for the disabled, but also in advising teachers in regular schools in terms of social inclusion. In response to this, the special education teacher develops new roles: as a support teacher, as a teacher specialized in adjustments and as a specialized counselor.

In Cuba, the training of the Special Education professional is developed according to the characteristics of the training of a professional with a broad profile, typical of the Cuban university at present. This process, unique from the initial and continuous conception, is based on the Model of the Professional, which projects how each teacher should perform in order to achieve comprehensive educational care for children, adolescents and young people with special educational needs associated or not to the disability that constitutes the object of work.

In the training of Cuban Special Education teachers, there are two major modalities: one with a general conception and the other with a specialized conception in the care of children with SEN associated with disability or not; despite this training heterogeneity, it is recognized that there is no significant difference between teachers who work in regular classrooms and specialist teachers or inclusion support teachers. Both modalities share the leading role of the teacher in the attention to diversity for the eradication of the exclusion of the disabled.

Teacher training should place the disabled person at the center of the socio-educational action, in tune with his or her emotional world, potential, interests, needs and

expectations; in this sense, and taking as a starting point the complex socio-educational reality in which the professional work is carried out, it is necessary to go into the features that make this role unique in the process of social inclusion. To this end, it is important to define some elements related to inclusion.

The term inclusion was coined in France in 1974 to refer to people with mental or physical disabilities, or individuals without social security; inclusion is the antithesis of social exclusion.

The contributions of Bauer and Shea (2000); UNESCO, (2005); Jansen, Otten, Der Zee, 2014); Barría (2019); Hernández-Garre; Fernández-Martínez; Carrión-Martínez and Avilés (2018) allude to various types of inclusion, all of them allude to aspects associated with equal rights and opportunities, so it is common to appreciate in the approach to inclusion the approaches of rights, gender and lately the ecological approach which is in our consideration a more integrative approach since it opens the doors to the recognition of the diverse actors and the complex and gradual scenarios where the actions of social inclusion are deployed.

Inclusion is a never-ending process of development, since new barriers can always arise that limit learning and participation, or that exclude and discriminate students in different ways. Inclusion, as UNESCO (2005) points out, has four elements:

- Inclusion as a process.
- Inclusion as identification and removal of barriers.
- Inclusion as the presence, participation and achievement of all students.
- Inclusion of groups that may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or low achievement.

Inclusion as a theoretical and practical category has as its teleology the eradication or elimination of barriers to learning and participation, in which the educational community and its system of resources and support play an important role. However, social inclusion implies attention to priority groups, from the ecological approach or perspective Bauer and Shea (2000) identify five interrelated scenarios in this process:

- The person
- Interpersonal relationships (parent/child, teacher/pupil)
- Inter-setting relationships (parent/teacher, school/home)
- Group interactions (school, neighborhood, work)

- Society with its values and variety of cultures

Society as a scenario of inclusion, favors the devices for the belonging and authenticity of each individual, carrier or not of a disability (Jansen, Otten, Der Zee, 2014).

In this regard Upias, (1976) points out that when he argues that the subject coexists in a particular place and sociocultural moment and through the interaction of this and its environment, can become disabled without being disabled, since it is precisely society who puts the architectural, attitudinal and theoretical barriers that prevent the full social and political participation of people with disabilities.

Social inclusion is built with the collaboration of education professionals, students, family and social agents and actors involved in decision making; social inclusion must be understood in terms of the socio-educational context.

The teacher as an actor in the process of social inclusion of the disabled, favors the construction, reconstruction and consolidation of the inclusive practice of the socio-educational community in terms of dismantling stigmatizing languages and placing the disabled learner at the center, for the design of support programs in the integration of the disabled.

In the pedagogical practice of the special education teacher, there is a pseudo-interpretation and understanding of the disabled student, which implies the existence of barriers that affect the quality of the attention they receive.

It should be noted that disability is a dynamic, multidimensional and complex historical process. The content of this social problem is often based on collective imaginaries that impose barriers that hinder full inclusion. Disability is a multidimensional reality that does not depend solely on a person's functional and structural restrictions or limitations, but also involves both personal and social factors.

Personal factors refer to the characteristics of personality development, the biological, emotional, psychological, reasoning or thinking, activity and communication aspects that distinguish the subject. Social and environmental factors account for the social structures and forces that condition the dynamics of the institutional, socio-economic, political-cultural and environmental environment in which people develop their lives.

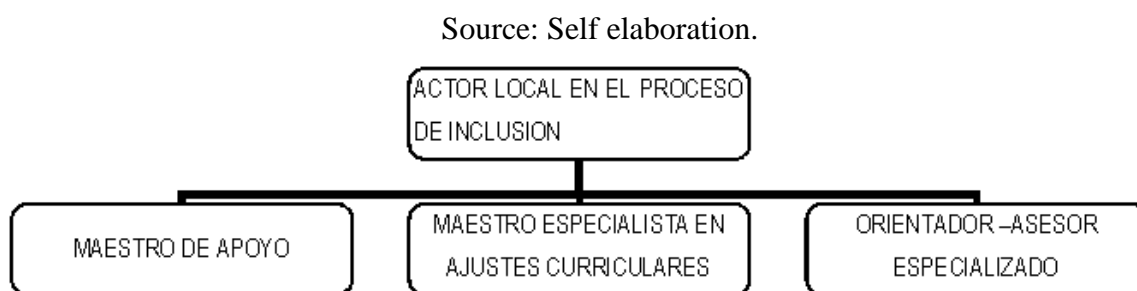
In view of the understanding of disability and the characterization of the disabled, the special education teacher must be able to develop the elements that distinguish his role, based on the use of his abilities and skills in the construction of an acting model that dismantles the instituted and instituting imaginaries, in the institutionalized practices

and the existing barriers in the process of social inclusion of the disabled learner, in this sense the role points towards the identification of the teacher as a social actor in this process.

The role of the teacher, as a local actor in the social inclusion of the disabled, is understood as a complex systematic process of transdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration, with a critical-axiological base that is directed to the conception and development of a set of knowledge, values, procedures, techniques and diversified instruments, as well as socio-educational resources that make possible the multi-actor articulation in the process of social inclusion of the disabled, based on the conceptualization of the Cuban Model of Special Education.

In the teacher's modes of action, from his role as a social actor in the process of social inclusion (see figure 1):

- Systematically generates processes of socio-educational orientation in pursuit of the process of improvement in the attention to students with disabilities.
- It perfects professional skills for problem solving from axiological critical reflection and negotiation.
- It is instituted as a referent of the modes of action.
- Its strategies are based on the socioemotional education of the actors involved in the social inclusion process.
- It facilitates the proactive participation of the disabled learner and the access to the resources of the environment.



**Figure 1.** Role of the Special Education teacher in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.

The main features of this role are:

- Globalizing and differentiated understanding of the social inclusion of the disabled attending to the diversity and complexity of the contexts, scenario, socio-educational agencies and singularities of each disabled person.



- It is framed in a context of interconnections and social networks in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- It takes into account the global-local society and its complexity in integrated and transversal education, with the participation of diverse agents, actors and resources in the synergies between actors.

People with disabilities require the coordinated and cooperative action and collaboration of different agents involved in the processes of social inclusion (public entities or institutions, social services, organizations, among others).

In the Cuban context, with the improvement of Special Education, networking of educational institutions has been promoted. The networking of schools involves going beyond intra-institutional coordination, this should take into account the groups that are involved in the territory in the construction of the local project of social inclusion of the disabled, for this, the Special Education teacher, from his role as a local actor of this project should generate coordination spaces parallel to the development of the inclusion processes, this involves providing tools and strategy of accompaniment and specialized guidance.

The teacher's role involves redefining the following functions:

- To develop the socio-educational diagnosis and analysis of the context for the identification of improvement actions in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- Promote the integration, in the public and business agenda, of actions to favor the social and labor inclusion of people with disabilities.
- Contribute to the promotion of inclusive communication in the different spheres of action.
- To master advanced models of socio-educational intervention and networking in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- To advise local agents on the fulfillment of the mission and objectives of the process of social inclusion of the disabled, indicators and main work guidelines.
- To create synergies for cooperative and collaborative learning among the different agents and groups involved in the processes of social inclusion from practical theory and action-research.
- To socialize methodological tools for personalized and contextualized attention to the disabled in the local environment.

- To correlate and share information related to the factors that enhance and protect the situation of exclusion and vulnerability of the disabled.
- Stimulate innovation processes in the process of social inclusion to achieve the systematization of the exercise of active citizenship and good practices of socio-educational participation of the disabled.

The search for new interpretations, for the relationships that occur in the pedagogical practice from the role of the teacher as a local actor in the social inclusion of the disabled, is a neuralgic point that is directed to dismantle the existing shortcomings around the disabled. For this purpose, it is necessary to take a reflective look at the current organicity of social inclusion, and to note its internal relations, from the teacher's performance as a local actor in this process.

In order to carry out the diagnosis, the directors of the institutions were sensitized and informed consent was requested from 100% of the selected sample. The period of application of the instruments and techniques comprised the months of September-October 2021 and were applied within the educational and methodological teaching work system established by the school management. See table 1.

**Table 1.** Main techniques used per session.

<b>Técnicas empleadas</b>	<b>Distribución en sesiones</b>
Entrevistas a profundidad	20 sesiones individuales (una con cada docente)
Encuestas	5 sesiones (con estudiantes)
Cuestionario	1 sesión colectiva de aplicación individual del cuestionario

**Source: Self elaboration.**

The evaluations of the responses derived from the application of the different techniques focused on essential aspects such as:

- Level of commitment of the teacher in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.
- Perception of the need for teacher training as a local actor in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.

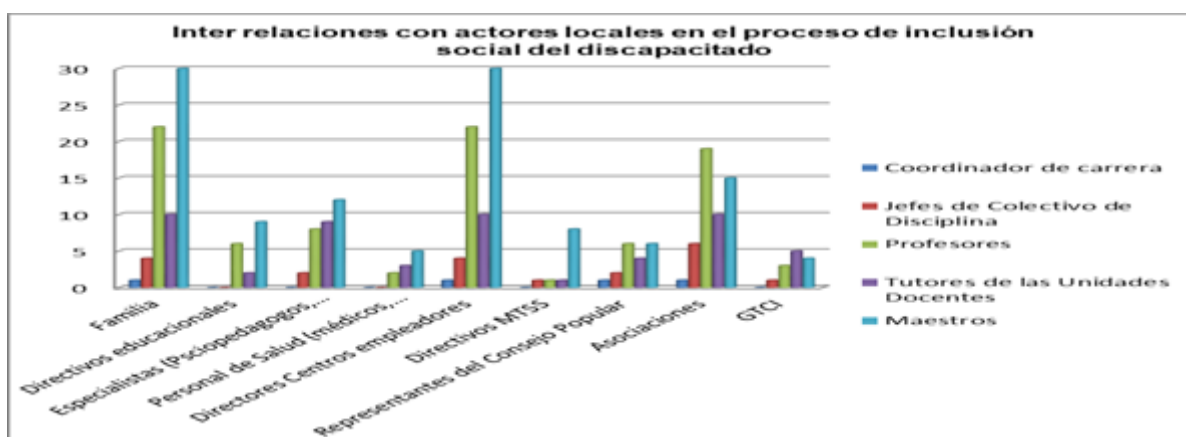
- Forms of linkage of the teacher with the actors in the process of social inclusion of the disabled in the local environment.

The analysis of these data (Figure 2) identified that 43.4% of Special Education teachers consider the need to train teachers as local actors in the process of social inclusion of the disabled to be very relevant, 34.7% say it is extremely relevant and 21.7% consider it to be relevant.

It is evident that 53% of the teachers recognize that they feel committed to the process of inclusion of the disabled and that it requires them to behave ethically and flexibly in relation to their modes of action; these teachers claim to feel passionate about their work and their students, however, they admit that they themselves often fail to get involved in a timely and innovative manner in monitoring the results of the social inclusion process. It is significant to note that 47% of the teachers say they are committed to the process, however, they point out as a concern the outdatedness of the methodological tools and practices of the social inclusion process, as well as the failures in the identification and selection of vulnerable groups at the local level from the networking of educational institutions, which limits the link between professionals and students from special and regular schools. These criteria invite to review the effectiveness of the teacher's role in the process of social inclusion (Borunda, (2020).

42% of teachers consider detrimental the existing social representations around disability, and the existence of factors that hinder the teacher's role in social inclusion.

Source: self elaboration.



**Figure 2.** Actors with whom Special Education professionals interact in the process of social inclusion of the disabled.

In Figure 2 it is possible to identify that 100% of the teachers identify the following as the main actors with whom they interact in the social inclusion process: families and

directors of employer centers, 50% of them identify relations with specialists and associations for the disabled.

The triangulation of the results obtained through the analysis of the answers to the questionnaire with the evaluations obtained through the interviews made it possible to identify the main problems related to:

The lack of definition of the role played by the Special Education teacher in the social inclusion process and of the mechanisms to be used in the link with the local actors involved in this process.

- Lack of intersectoral plans and networks for the timely follow-up of the disabled in the local micro-environment, which are stimulated by the work of the Special Education teacher.
- Insufficient planning of socio-educational actions that include the preparation of teachers for complex situations that occur in the local environment in the attention to the universe of the population with disabilities.

The weaknesses previously identified in the diagnosis allow us to note the need to reconstruct the role of the Special Education teacher.

## **Conclusions**

The training of the Special Education teacher becomes one of the essential conditions for the role of local actor in the process of social inclusion to be viable and optimal, this as facilitator of the process of social inclusion of the disabled should stimulate the differentiating and diversified affective learning of each of the essentialities shown by the development of the disabled.

The role of the Special Education teacher in social inclusion should take into consideration the teacher as a local actor of change, since he/she is the referent of the modes of action for the socio-educational community.