Special Education Practices in Non-Governmental Contexts: A Qualitative Case Study of the El-Yosser Association for Children with Special Needs in Sidi Slimane, Morocco

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the special education practices of the El-Yosser Association for Disabled People (AYEBSS) in the Sidi Slimane region of Morocco. Grounded in a rights-based framework informed by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the research explores the association's pedagogical strategies, programmatic offerings, and operational challenges in serving children with diverse disabilities. Data were collected through sustained participant observation and semi-structured interviews with six female teaching assistants. Thematic analysis, following the method of Braun and Clarke (2006), identified key themes related to multisensory pedagogical approaches, the therapeutic use of arts and physical activity, efforts toward social integration and skill development, and systemic barriers such as resource limitations and attitudinal challenges. Findings indicate that the association implements a holistic, child-centered model that emphasizes functional life skills, social participation, and psychological support. However, its efficacy is constrained by a lack of specialized materials, assistive technologies, and continuous professional development for staff. The study concludes that while community-based organizations like AYEBSS play a critical role in filling gaps in state-provided special education, their impact requires strengthening through structured partnerships, evidence-based training, and sustained resource allocation. This research contributes to the literature on community-driven special education in low-resource settings and offers insights for policy and practice aimed at inclusive education in the Global South.

Keywords: special education, disability rights, Morocco, community-based organization, qualitative case study, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

The international landscape of disability rights has been fundamentally reshaped by the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which mandates a shift from medical and charitable models to a human rights and social inclusion paradigm (United Nations, 2006). Morocco, as an early signatory and ratifier of the CRPD in 2009, has committed to aligning its national policies with these principles, promoting the full participation, equality, and accessibility for persons with disabilities. Inclusive education and the delivery of quality special education services in Morocco have seen significant advancements legislatively. However, the effective implementation of these frameworks remains inconsistent, particularly in rural and semi-urban regions. This disconnection between policy and practical application has highlighted the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as critical contributors to bridge this gap. NGOs in Morocco actively deliver essential educational and rehabilitative services tailored for children with special needs, addressing systemic limitations. For instance, the National

Initiative for Human Development (INDH) has been instrumental in promoting programs targeting educational equity, particularly in underserved regions (Ibourk & Raoui, 2025). Similarly, local NGOs complement government efforts by implementing community-centric services to enhance accessibility and inclusivity in education (Raoui & Ibourk, 2025). These efforts emphasize the necessity of multi-level collaborations to ensure that children with special needs have equitable opportunities to thrive academically.

This study investigates one such entity, the El-Yosser Association for Disabled People (AYEBSS), located in the Sidi Slimane region. Founded in response to the systemic neglect of children with disabilities within mainstream education, AYEBSS represents a community-based effort to realize the rights outlined in the CRPD. This research aims to provide a nuanced, empirical analysis of the association's operational model, educational methodologies, and the contextual challenges it faces. By doing so, it seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What pedagogical and therapeutic practices are employed by AYEBSS to educate and support children with special needs?
2. How do these practices align with or diverge from the principles of inclusive, rights-based education?
3. What are the primary facilitators and barriers to effective service delivery within this community-based model?

2. Literature Review

Special education has experienced significant evolution within Morocco, shifting from traditional deficit-based models to approaches emphasizing inclusion, individualized instruction, and the development of functional competencies. Moroccan policies, including the National Charter for Education and Training (2000) and subsequent frameworks like the Integrated Public Policy for the Protection of Children in Morocco (2015), demonstrate a growing commitment to inclusive education. These emphasize the development of academic, social, and vocational skills in line with global principles, facilitating independence and stronger community integration. Success in implementing these goals is contingent on educators' capacity to work collaboratively within interdisciplinary teams. They must excel in assessments tailored to diverse learning needs, the development of individualized education plans (IEPs), and the strategic use of assistive technologies to support students with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2000; UNICEF Morocco, 2015).

The Moroccan 2019 Framework Law 97-13 aims to establish an inclusive educational system. However, its implementation faces persistent challenges such as insufficient training for teachers, inadequate resources, and deeply rooted socio-cultural stigmas associated with disabilities. These obstacles create gaps within the education system, often filled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that play a key role in providing necessary services to marginalized populations. Despite their significant contributions, NGOs frequently operate with several limitations, including constrained funding, restricted operational reach, and a lack of formal integration with the national education framework. Moreover, existing academic research addressing the practices and impacts of such community-based organizations remains limited, especially from an emic and qualitative standpoint. Acknowledging this gap, the current study seeks to shed light on this under-researched domain through an in-depth analysis of a specific case study (Ousiali, 2025; Bouaddi et al., 2025).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative, instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) to achieve an in-depth understanding of the special education practices at AYEBSS. The case study approach is appropriate for exploring a real-life phenomenon within its complex context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection

Primary data were collected over a sustained period through two main methods:

1. **Participant Observation:** The researcher engaged in approximately 60 hours of observation across various settings within the association, including classrooms, therapy rooms, workshops, and outdoor activities. Field notes were taken to record pedagogical interactions, child behaviors, material use, and staff dynamics.
2. **Semi-Structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with all six female teaching assistants (TAs). Interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes each, explored their experiences, pedagogical strategies, perceptions of challenges, and views on child progress. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Supplementary data included analysis of association documents (e.g., technical cards, activity reports, schedules) and informal conversations with administrative and paramedical staff.

3.3 Historical Background of the Association

The Association AYEBSS serves 53 children with disabilities and is preparing to relocate to a larger facility that will accommodate a substantially higher number of beneficiaries. The new center, which spans over 1,000 m², includes green outdoor areas and is fully enclosed to ensure the safety of all children. The foundation of the association is closely tied to the inspiring story of its founder, Mounia Bourguigue, a resident of Sidi Slimane, a Moroccan town with approximately 87,000 inhabitants. After experiencing the disappearance of her 14-year-old son Yosser, who had a disability and went missing for 25 days, Bourguigue was compelled to create an organization dedicated to supporting “children with special needs,” a population often marginalized within the Moroccan educational system.

AYEBSS was thus established to provide care and educational opportunities for children with physical or intellectual disabilities. The center offers a structured environment in which children can attend school while also developing essential social and life skills.

Mounia Bourguigue, previously a distinguished taekwondo athlete who competed at the Olympic Games and World Championships, drew on her public stature to garner the support necessary to establish the association and gain the backing of state authorities. As a result, AYEBSS will soon occupy new and improved premises. Despite these advancements, the association continues to face significant challenges, primarily the scarcity of medical and pedagogical resources in Morocco, including limited access to wheelchairs, physiotherapy equipment, and educational materials.

In Sidi Slimane, the Yosser Association—named in honor of Mounia’s son—pursues the goal of fostering the social integration of children with disabilities through inclusive artistic and recreational workshops such as theater, painting, and music. The center currently accommodates more than 25 children and comprises specialized facilities including a resource room with adapted tools, a space for individualized support, and a rehabilitation room designed to assist children experiencing difficulties with motor functions, speech, and perceptual skills.

3.4 Objectives of the Association

The association seeks to promote the full participation of children with disabilities in everyday life by improving their access to education, fostering their integration into society, and encouraging their

involvement in sports, recreational, and cultural activities. It further aims to raise awareness of the critical role that health and well-being play in the lives of these children, while also supporting families through seminars that address disability-related health issues. In addition to contributing to charitable initiatives and establishing specialized local facilities dedicated to the care and development of children with disabilities, the association is committed to building partnerships with national and international organizations sharing similar objectives in order to enhance communication, exchange expertise, and strengthen mutual support.

3.5 Services of the Association

The Association provides a comprehensive range of in-day services that include welcoming children with disabilities, offering structured educational guidance, delivering psychological, social, and health support, organizing transportation, and facilitating recreational and educational activities as well as excursions. It serves 53 children between the ages of 3 and 15, including those with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and intellectual disabilities. Educational activities are conducted throughout the school year in six-hour daily sessions, during which special educators deliver programs in literacy, art, mathematics, music, sports, and psychomotricity, while vocational-oriented workshops such as gardening, cooking, and ICT support children's gradual integration into practical and professional life. Parallel activities aligned with festive or commemorative events enrich the pedagogical program. The association operates through a structured team composed of administrative personnel—including the president, vice-president, director, chancellors, and secretary—alongside paraprofessionals such as a psychologist, a Kinesio therapist, a speech therapist, and a psychomotricity specialist, as well as six teaching assistants and a technical staff responsible for maintenance, transportation, and security. Health services are delivered in dedicated rehabilitation rooms providing physiotherapy, psychosocial support, and other therapeutic interventions aimed at improving physical functioning. Complementing this, the association promotes autonomy by empowering children with disabilities across all stages of special education, and continues to develop specialized educational and training programs to enhance their learning opportunities and societal participation.

3.6 Observations in the Al-Yosser Association

During the researcher's visit to the Al-Yosser Association, staff members offered a warm welcome and provided a tour of the meeting room, classrooms, and activity spaces while explaining the range of services delivered by the organization. The researcher received a technical profile outlining the association's objectives, services, beneficiary numbers, pedagogical and paramedical activities, and details about administrative, educational, and technical personnel, as well as available resources and key stakeholders. The first observation session was conducted with a 35-year-old teaching assistant who has spent a decade working with children with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities; she described both the rewards and the challenges of her work, noting that aggressive behaviors—particularly among some autistic children—are common, though meaningful progress can often be achieved. The association faces significant shortages of assistive technologies and educational materials, prompting the researcher to develop a specialized textbook for children with learning difficulties, Down syndrome, intellectual disabilities, and autism. Within the autonomy group for children aged 5 to 12, instruction focuses on basic concepts such as shapes, colors, body parts, hygiene routines, and food categories. The researcher also observed individual children, including a boy with intellectual disabilities named Moad, and documented several educational games used to enhance attention, comprehension, and cognitive development, such as Mosaic Color Play, food and fruit flashcards, the Portrait Game for emotional recognition, and the "1, 2, 3 I Can Count" game for numeracy and concentration. Teachers also reported difficulties related to toilet training for a child with cerebral palsy and described various behavioral issues, including an autistic child experiencing family-related stress and a case in which harmful parental discipline exacerbated a child's thumb-sucking behavior. Additional AYEBSS activities observed included motor-skills games such as jumping inside circles and throwing colorful balls to improve coordination, as well as number-based jumping games that reinforce numerical recognition through repetition. Dance therapy was highlighted as a particularly valuable intervention, as it encourages children to respond physically to music, supports emotional expression, enhances gross motor skills and coordination, improves posture and balance, and contributes to greater confidence and self-esteem.

3.7 Camping in EL-Yosser Association

At the Al-Yosser Association, female teaching assistants engage children with disabilities in camping activities that provide opportunities for eating, playing, and participating in sports in an outdoor

environment. Camping serves as a meaningful break from the association's daily routine, offering children exposure to nature, opportunities for independence, and the chance to develop new skills such as dancing, singing, and painting. To enhance these experiences, teaching assistants are encouraged to adopt a child-centered special education approach that incorporates various art forms—including theater, drama, visual arts, and therapeutic art—as practical tools for supporting children's rights, fostering positive behavior, and increasing motivation among both staff and students. The association's workshops are designed to introduce children and educators to expressive and participatory activities that build self-confidence, strengthen interpersonal relationships, and provide a safe, supportive environment conducive to personal growth. These initiatives have yielded notable outcomes, including improved concentration among children, heightened motivation to learn, and greater use of innovative, non-traditional teaching methods. To further advance inclusive education within the association, teaching assistants are encouraged to develop effective strategies and practical skills that promote the integration of children with special needs while contributing to a broader framework that upholds children's rights, particularly freedom of expression and participation. This approach also reinforces educators' confidence in their critical role in the cognitive, psychological, and social development of the child. Based on the researcher's observations, teaching assistants at the Yosser Association would benefit from professional training in drama and child theater, fine and creative arts, therapeutic art, and child psychology.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019):

1. **Familiarization:** Immersion in the data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Systematic coding of features of interest across the entire dataset.
3. **Searching for Themes:** Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Checking themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Refining the essence of each theme and generating clear definitions and names.
6. **Producing the Report:** Selecting vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, and relating the analysis back to the research questions and literature.

This process was iterative and recursive, ensuring that themes were grounded in the data. The analysis was conducted primarily in the original language of data collection (Arabic/Moroccan Darija) to preserve meaning, with key extracts translated into English for reporting.

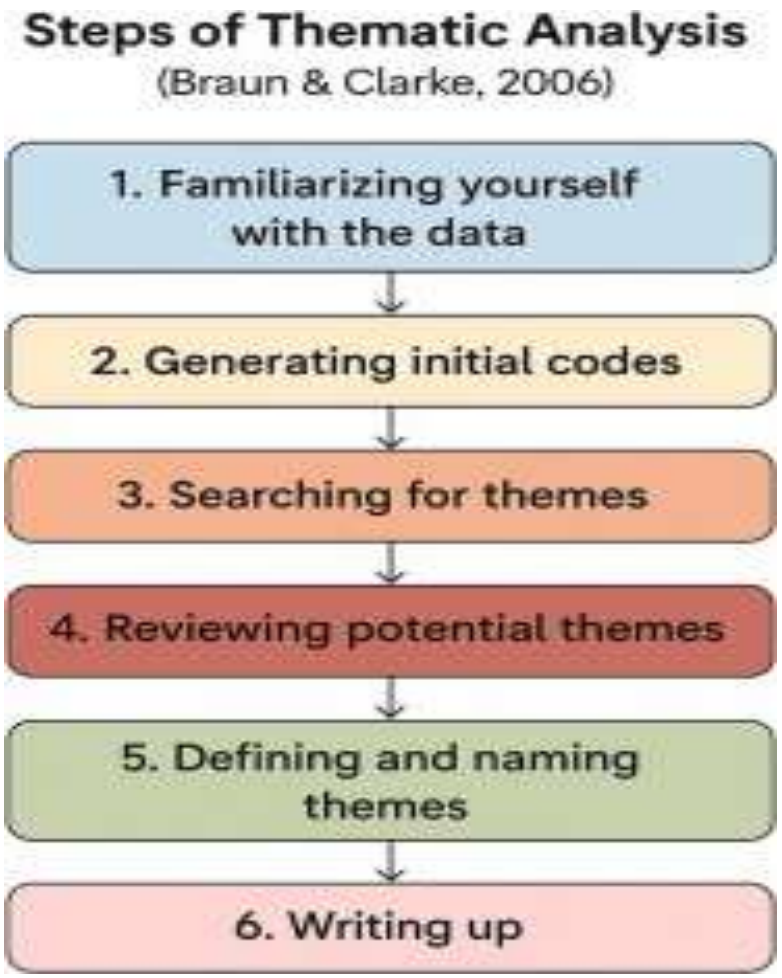

Fig. 1. Six phases in thematic analysis.

4.1 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the association's director and all participating staff. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured for all participants. The study protocol adhered to the ethical guidelines of Ibn Tofail University.

5. Results

Thematic analysis yielded four central themes characterizing the special education practices and context at AYEBSS.

5.1 Theme 1: A Holistic, Activity-Based Pedagogy
Education at AYEBSS is fundamentally experiential and multisensory. Teaching assistants design activities that blend academic goals with sensory-motor development and life skills. For example, literacy and numeracy are taught through games like "Jumping on Numbers" and "Portrait Game," which simultaneously target cognitive recognition, gross motor skills, and concentration. Sessions are structured around weekly themes integrating reading, art, mathematics, music, and sports. This approach aligns with literature on differentiated instruction for children with diverse learning needs (Tomlinson, 2017).

5.2 Theme 2: Therapeutic Integration through Arts and Movement
The association explicitly utilizes arts and physical activity as therapeutic tools. "Dance Therapy" sessions

are structured to allow emotional expression, tension release, and the development of gross motor coordination, balance, and self-esteem. Similarly, painting, drama, and music are framed not merely as recreational activities but as vehicles for improving psycho-motor skills, fostering self-confidence, and providing non-verbal channels for communication. This reflects a growing evidence base for arts therapies in special education.

5.3 Theme 3: Fostering Autonomy and Social Integration

A core objective permeating all activities is the preparation of children for greater independence and social participation. This is operationalized through "Professional Qualification" workshops (e.g., gardening, cooking, basic ICT) and community-integration activities like camping trips. These experiences are designed to teach practical daily living skills, promote peer interaction, and challenge social isolation. The teaching assistants explicitly see their role as facilitators of social inclusion, bridging the gap between the children and their community.

5.4 Theme 4: Systemic Challenges and Resourceful Adaptation

Despite its innovative practices, the association operates under significant constraints. A salient sub-theme is the severe scarcity of resources, including a lack of assistive technology, specialized teaching materials, updated textbooks, and therapeutic equipment (e.g., wheelchairs, physiotherapy tools). Teaching assistants reported frequently adapting or creating their own materials. Secondly, behavioral and attitudinal challenges were noted, both within the classroom (managing behaviors associated with autism or intellectual disability) and from families, where instances of punitive, non-supportive parenting were reported. These challenges highlight the need for ongoing parent training and support. Finally, while dedicated, the teaching assistants expressed a need for continuous professional development in specialized areas like applied behavior analysis, communication strategies for non-verbal children, and trauma-informed care.

6. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that AYEBSS enacts a community-based model of special education that strongly resonates with the rights-based, inclusive ethos of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD; United Nations, 2006). Its holistic, child-centered pedagogy moves beyond rote academic instruction to address the developmental, social, and emotional needs of children with disabilities, reflecting broader principles of inclusive education (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). The emphasis on arts and movement as therapy aligns with contemporary, evidence-based practices that recognize the interconnectedness of cognitive, physical, and emotional development through multisensory engagement (Malchiodi, 2020; Shafir, 2016).

However, the model's sustainability and potential for scalability are hampered by systemic issues. The resource limitations mirror broader, well-documented challenges in the Moroccan educational landscape, particularly regarding inclusive education infrastructure. The association's reliance on the ingenuity of its staff, while admirable, is not a substitute for systemic investment in assistive technologies and learning materials, a common deficit in resource-constrained contexts. Furthermore, the behavioral challenges and instances of inadequate family support underscore the critical need for a multi-systemic approach that engages families and communities in the educational process, as advocated by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

The study underscores the paradoxical role of NGOs like AYEBSS: they are both indispensable responders to state shortfalls and potentially perpetual fixtures in a system that relies on their patchwork solutions, a dynamic noted in analyses of disability service provision in the Global South (Grech & Soldatic, 2016). For true inclusive education to materialize, the innovations and dedication found in such associations must be supported, scaled, and integrated into the formal public education framework through policy support, funding, and professional partnerships (UNESCO, 2020).

7. Conclusion

This case study illuminates the praxis of special education within a Moroccan NGO, revealing a practice model that is resourceful, holistic, and deeply committed to the principles of inclusion and child development. The use of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis provided a rigorous framework for identifying the core components and tensions within this model. The findings suggest that the success of community-based organizations depends not only on internal passion and innovation but also on external validation and support.

To enhance the impact of associations like AYEBSS, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Foster formal partnerships between NGOs and universities or government agencies to facilitate resource sharing, volunteer programs, and professional development for staff.
2. Develop low-cost, context-appropriate assistive technology and pedagogical toolkits that can be disseminated to community-based centers.
3. Integrate parent education and support groups as a core component of service delivery to build capacity within families.
4. Advocate for policy mechanisms that provide sustainable funding and recognition for qualifying NGOs as complementary service providers within the national inclusive education strategy.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to measure child outcomes associated with such community-based models and explore comparative case studies across different regions in Morocco and the broader MENA region.

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