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A positive deviance approach to Roma education

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Abstract

Across Europe, Roma students suffer from high abstention and dropout rates due to segregation in schools and classrooms, discrimination they face from the administrations, teachers, and peers, poverty, seasonal migration, and low expectations regarding education. This article, on the other hand, focuses on successful Roma students, asking whether there are any common structural factors that explain their success. The research is based on the "positive deviance approach", which suggests that solutions to community problems already exist within the community. Therefore, this article aims to contribute to developing effective policies or strategies to address the educational challenges faced by Roma by focusing on solutions employed by the community members themselves. I conduct in-depth interviews with successful Roma individuals from Türkiye, and complement the research with existing data and reports. The main findings suggest that material and non-material support, socialization, mixed schools and guidance had a positive impact for success. The findings have the potential to influence the policy responses of international organizations, governments, and civil society.

Keywords

Roma, education, Türkiye, policy, social inclusion

Introduction

I have been volunteering with Roma civil society for 10 years. During this period, I have organized numerous training sessions with Roma youth and, as a member of the national selection board for the Roma Education Fund, I have evaluated hundreds of applications

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

from Roma students. I have also had the opportunity to meet successful university students and graduates. These experiences allowed me to hear the stories of Roma students and learn about the conditions they face. Despite the challenges, there have always been successful students who managed to complete their education at higher levels. This overlooked point is what I would like to focus on with this article: are there any common structural factors contributing to the success of Roma students? If common factors can be identified, it would be possible to focus on them to develop more informed and effective policies.

The article is based on the positive deviance approach, an asset-based approach, which suggests that solutions to community problems already exist within the community.[1] By paying attention, listening, and systematically analyzing the stories of outperformers, it is possible to identify more effective solutions already being practiced by the community members. The approach has been known since the 1960s but it gained broader recognition after the 1990s (Zeitlin, 1991; Zeitlin et al., 1990). Marsh et al. (2004) argue positive deviance approach leads to more effective policies through social mobilization, information gathering, and behavioral change. They also note that the approach creates excitement in the communities as it offers an alternative to "receiving criticism for their inadequacies" (Marsh et al., 2004: 1177). The successful policy outcomes of the positive deviance approach are well-documented, particularly within the healthcare and development sectors (Herrington and Van de Fliert, 2017; Lapping et al., 2002; Marsh et al., 2004; Sarnkhaowkhom et al., 2022).

With regard to education, based on successful Māori students in New Zealand, Webber and Macfarlane (2020) develop a model whose components are familial pride, personal pride and a sense of embedded achievement, tenacity and self-esteem, belonging and connectedness, and broad knowledge and skills. Accordingly, academic achievement of the Māori students can only be strengthened through increasing their connectedness and pride to their ethnic identities (Webber and Macfarlane 2020). Singhal and Svenkerud (2019) discuss the positive outcomes of applying a positive deviance approach in the province of Misiones in Argentina. As school children were engaged in agricultural work, school drop-out rates were high except for a few schools. Drawing on the practices identified in schools with low dropout rates, successful interventions were implemented through increasing involvement of parents and community leaders, the modification of assignments to align with students' abilities, and the provision of free breakfast instead of lunch (Singhal and Svenkerud, 2019: 9). Ayala (2011) focused on dropout rates among Hispanic students in a school district on the US-Mexico border. The findings revealed the importance of personal characteristics, encouragement and support from parents, family or teachers and, for some students, support from peers for school attendance and success (Ayala, 2011). Kallman (2012) carried out research with college students with learning disabilities in the Southwest border region of the US. The findings underline the importance of support and involvement from family, peers, teachers, mentors, and positive reinforcement from them for the success (Kallman, 2012). LeMahieu et al. (2017) discuss an intervention implemented in a high school in California, USA, aimed at increasing graduation rates and reducing dropout rates. The study emphasized the role of teacher support, and students' academic and active participation in clubs, teams, and other extracurricular activities (LeMahieu et al., 2017).

As opposed to the studies conducted in a particular province, district or school, Harper (2012) conducted interviews with 219 successful Black men from 42 colleges across 20 states in the USA. He argues involvement and encouragement of parents, family members, and teachers; access to scholarships; same-race peer mentoring; access to additional educational resources and programs; and responding productively to racism are the reasons behind the success of the interviewees (Harper, 2012). Similarly, Ponte (2024) conducted comparative research on the educational policies of Massachusetts, the US, Estonia and Castile-Leon in Spain. She argues commitment to equity and justice, giving a central role to teachers, accessible preschool education and using assessments are among the reasons for the success of these cases (Ponte, 2024). Iyer et al. (2021) examine the success of ethnic minority students in Lao Cai province of Vietnam and argue that the government policy of providing free boarding schools for gifted ethnic minority students constitutes a form of positive deviance when compared to the success of other minority schools. The article follows a similar path by adopting a larger focus rather than a single district or school.

Positive deviance approach is instrumental in understanding and identifying *what has worked better*, however, it does not absolve the state of its responsibility to provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Rather, it should be seen as a starting point for developing more effective strategies that align with the needs of the community by including them in the process. In fact, Pascale et al. (2010) suggests the first three steps of the positive deviance approach are "define, determine, discover" whereas the last three are "design, discern, disseminate". Accordingly, the article is an attempt at the former while the latter can only be effectively implemented by the state in the context of Türkiye due to legal limitations. Moreover, the need to integrate Roma into policy design is increasingly emphasized (Bhopal, 2004; Flecha and Soler, 2013; Lauritzen and Nodeland, 2018; Messing, 2008). Hence, the positive deviance approach relies on the agency of the community itself, and the identified solutions through it can influence comprehensive policies.

In the literature, the success of Roma students often explained either through individual characteristics such as motivation, resilience, problem-solving or communication skills (Alexiadou, 2019; Çelik, 2016; Óhidy, 2013) or through social factors as socio-economic background; non-segregated schooling (Alexiadou, 2019); support from family, teachers, role models or peers (Alexiadou, 2019; Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017; Kende, 2017; Óhidy, 2013); and institutional support (Alexiadou, 2019; Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017). Since one of the main aims of this article is to contribute to policy-design, the focus is placed on social factors rather than individual characteristics. However, the article provides evidence for the combination of both.

The research was conducted in Türkiye, which is widely considered to host the largest Roma population in Europe. However, the exact figures remain unknown as the state does not collect data based on ethnicity. According to the estimates from the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) in 2013, the Roma population in Türkiye was approximately five million (Foggo et al., 2013). More recent research (Koç et al., 2024) suggests that Roma constitute between 1.4% and 2.7% of the total population[2], which corresponds to between 1.119.213 and 2.305.054 individuals.[3] Regardless of the precise figures, it is clear that Roma constitute an important segment of society.

While existing research in Türkiye is mostly based on one or a few Roma neighborhoods or schools, it is also evident from them that the focus is mostly on the challenges of the Roma students. The reasons behind the educational challenges of Roma are underlined as poverty (Akgün, 2004; Aydın et al., 2019; Ceyhan, 2013; Diler, 2008; Kılınç-Demirvuran, 2007; Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu, 2018; Kırkayak Kültür, 2020; Uğur Rizzi, 2021; Yağlıdere, 2007; Çelik, 2016); early marriages particularly for girls (Akgün, 2004; Diler, 2008; Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu, 2018; Taylan, 2016; Yağlıdere, 2007); low expectations from the education (Aydın et al., 2019; Kesik et al., 2018; Yağlıdere, 2007); residential segregation and insufficient socio-cultural environment (Eren, 2008; Kılınç-Demirvuran, 2007; Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu, 2018; Kırkayak Kültür, 2020; Yağlıdere, 2007); discrimination (Aydın et al., 2019; Kırkayak Kültür, 2020; Uğur Rizzi, 2021); lack of parental networks or support (Kılınç-Demirvuran, 2007; Yağlıdere, 2007; Çelik, 2016); low education levels of parents (Cerit and Porsuk, 2020; Kılınç-Demirvuran, 2007; Yağlıdere, 2007); inadequacies of schools and teachers (Aydın et al., 2019; Eren, 2008).

This article moves beyond merely addressing these challenges to understand how successful Roma students have managed to overcome them. Therefore, the article aims to contribute to developing effective policies or strategies that can be adopted in response to the challenges faced by Roma in education, by focusing on the solutions that the community members themselves have employed. The main findings suggest that material and non-material support, opportunities for socialization, mixed schools and guidance all have a positive impact on success. The article seeks to contribute to the policy responses of international organizations, governments, and civil society in Türkiye and beyond.

After introducing the methodology, I move on to discussing the broader picture of Roma education and complete the discussion with my findings and analysis.

Methodology

Following a qualitative methodology, I conducted 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews in Türkiye between March 2023 and July 2023, after obtaining the ethical board approval. My main criteria for selecting the interviewees were them to be at least university graduates, employed and financially independent. Among the interviewees, seven are women and four are men. Six of them hold Bachelor's degrees, four have Master's degrees, and one has a PhD. In line with the selection criteria, all interviewees are employed and financially independent.

While the primary preference was to conduct face-to-face interviews, the interviews were ultimately carried out via phone or Zoom, as the interviewees were based in six different cities across three countries. The most significant challenge of conducting phone or internet interviews is building trust, particularly when discussing sensitive topics. However, my 10 years of experience working with Roma civil society organizations enabled me to establish trust-based relationships with five of the interviewees, while the remaining six were reached through my contacts in the Roma community. Although I had not met these six interviewees in person before, they were already familiar with me and my work. To further strengthen trust, I obtained informed consent from all participants and ensured their privacy and anonymity; their names are not disclosed, and their personal details are stored separately from the interview data.

Another limitation of remote interviews is the possibility of missing non-verbal cues, such as body language or facial expressions. This limitation was partially mitigated in interviews conducted via Zoom, where visual interaction was possible. During the two interviews conducted by phone, I compensated by using clarifying questions and reflective summaries.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min on average. Interview questions were clustered around four main themes: educational background; reasons behind the choice of schools/universities attended; conditions shaping educational experiences including enabling factors and obstacles; and the transition from education to employment. Interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using Nvivo to identify the trends.

I acknowledge that the number of interviews is limited due to the selection criteria and the unwillingness of some individuals to participate. To complement my findings, I also draw on existing surveys and reports by civil society organizations.

Roma education: Challenges and targets

The main challenges that Roma face in education across Europe include segregated schooling based on residential systems or biased mental assessments; discrimination in schools; socioeconomic disadvantages; low educational expectations; sub-standard school conditions; the informal work of Roma children; and insufficient academic support, all of which contribute to high absenteeism and drop-out rates (Lauritzen and Nodeland, 2018; Sayan, 2019). Since the 1990s, a range of programs and policies have been implemented across Europe to address these issues, often encouraged or supported by organizations such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Union (EU). While some initiatives are official state policies, others are driven by non-governmental organizations (Sayan, 2019; Sayan and Duygulu, 2022b; Sayan and Köçkün, 2024).

Continuing its efforts to promote social inclusion to Roma across Europe, the European Union urges member states "…to cut the gap by at least half between Roma and the general population regarding participation in early childhood education and care. That means ensuring that at least 70% of Roma children participate in preschool by 2030. Member States should reduce the gap in upper secondary completion by at least one-third and ensure that, by 2030, the majority of Roma youth complete at least upper secondary education. Member States should strengthen efforts to eliminate educational segregation and to ensure that by 2030 fewer than one in five Roma children attend schools where most or all children are Roma" with the EU Roma Framework (FRA, 2023: 16).

However, the ROMA Survey 2021 of Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) conducted in Czechia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, North Macedonia, and Serbia demonstrates no significant progress has been achieved in Roma education. The survey results show that:

- "Only two out of five Roma children (44%) attend early childhood education and care, with almost no change between 2016 (42%) and 2021.

- Only every fourth Roma aged 20-24 (27%) has completed upper secondary education. Three out of four young Roma aged 18-24 (71%) leave the educational system early. There has been no progress since 2016.
- In compulsory school, more than half of Roma children aged 6-15 (52%) are in segregated schools where all or most schoolmates are Roma (44% in 2016) […] One in five Roma children experienced hate-motivated bullying/harassment while in school (27% in 2016)" (FRA, 2023: 16).

The challenges faced by Roma became part of Türkiye's political agenda through the EU accession process. As a candidate country for the EU accession, Türkiye was required to adopt strategies for Roma inclusion (Sayan and Duygulu, 2022a; Sayan and Köçkün, 2024). In Türkiye, education at all levels is free of charge and the first 12 years are compulsory at the public schools and universities. According to TUİK [Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu-Turkish Statistical Institute] (2023), the national literacy rate is 97.6%, with 99.3% for men and 95.6% for women. For the individuals aged 25 and older, educational attainment levels in 2022 were as follows: 92.5% completed primary school or higher, 69.8% completed middle school or higher, 47.1% completed high school or higher, and 23.9% obtained an undergraduate degree or higher (TUİK, 2023).

Figure 1 illustrates the disparities between the Roma population and the overall population (Koç et al., 2024).

Figure 1 highlights a striking gap between the rates of individuals with "no education/primary school drop-out" status and those with "high school and above" for both men and women. More than half of Roma women either have no education or dropped out of primary school, with only 4.1% of them achieving a high school education or higher. The corresponding national rates are 21.1% and 26.3%. Similarly, 35.8% of Roma men have no education or are primary school drop-outs, whereas this rate is 13.5% for all men in

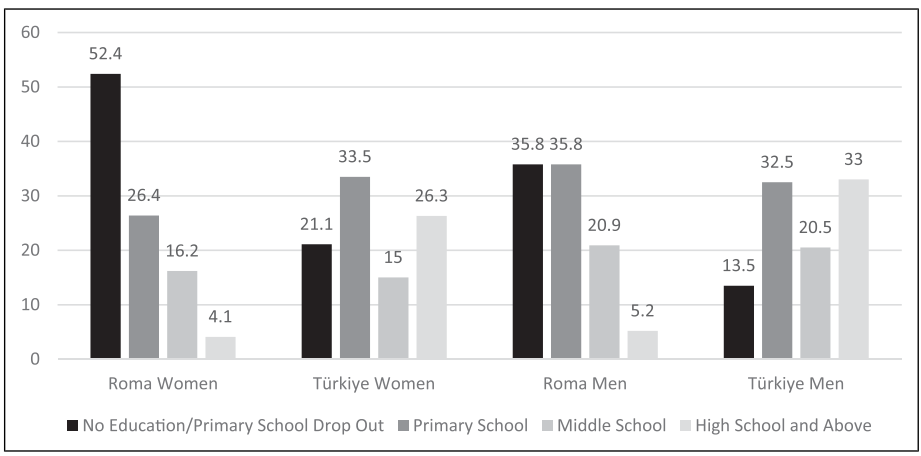

Figure 1. Education level of Roma. Source: Koç et al. (2024) Türkiye Roman Nüfus Araştırması, TÜBİTAK ve Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü, Ankara.

Türkiye. Additionally, only 5.2% of Roma men attain a high school education or higher, compared to 33% in the general male population.

Earlier research has also emphasized the low literacy rate among Roma, often estimated at 30-40% (Alp and Taştan, 2010). Açıkalın and Şahin (2016) found illiteracy rates were 46.1% among Roma women and 19.4% for Roma men in Mersin. While there were no Roma women with undergraduate degrees, the rate of Roma men with undergraduate degrees was 0.2% (Açıkalın and Şahin, 2016: 77). A more recent survey conducted with 600 Roma participants across five cities revealed that 32.3% of them were illiterate, 3.8% were literate but had no formal education; 17% dropped out of primary school; 21.2% completed primary school; 14.2% completed middle school; 6.8% completed high school; 1.7% completed vocational high school; 1.5% completed vocational school; 0.2% completed a distance-learning university program; 1.2% graduated from university; and 0.2% obtained graduate degrees (SODEV et al., 2021).

Recognizing the educational challenges faced by Roma, the government included the strategic objective of "to ensure all Roma children to access to equal opportunities for education and qualified educational services and have them complete at least the compulsory education successfully" in the first National Strategy Paper on the Social Inclusion of Roma People 2016–2021 (Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2016: 3). This strategic objective was reiterated in the second Strategy Document on Roma Citizens 2023-2030 (TC Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığ;ı, 2023).

Under this strategic objective, the first strategy document identifies three strategic goals:

"1. Leaving education by means of early leaves and absenteeism during all stages of the compulsory education will be prevented and the people especially youngsters who dropped out of school because of several reasons in the past will be ensured to continue their education.
2. Knowledge level of Roma families related to socio-economic benefits of education and social assistance regarding education will be increased.
3. Social bonds between Roma parents, students, school, teachers and peers will be strengthened." (Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2016: 4).

The second strategy document introduces an additional strategic goal which is directing Roma to the appropriate vocational schools in line with their capabilities, interests, and expectations (TC Aile ve Sosyal Hizmetler Bakanlığ;ı, 2023: 11). Both strategy documents are accompanied by action plans designed to prevent Roma children from dropping out of school and to keep them in education. Hence, addressing the educational challenges faced by Roma and implementing policies is on the government's agenda. The analysis of the common strategies employed by successful Roma students, discussed in the next section, has the potential to contribute to the government's efforts.

Providing alternative spaces and strengthening social interactions

In the early 1990s, journalist Nazım Alpman was commissioned to produce a news series about Roma in Türkiye. His work eventually led to the publication of one of the first

documentary accounts of Roma, based on his observations. He opens the book by describing so-called "notorious gypsy neighborhoods":

> From that moment on, I spent all my time collecting new information about gypsies […] I was also researching ways to enter and exit the gypsy neighborhoods in Istanbul. Because, according to the first-hand information I received, 'It was very dangerous to enter the gypsy neighborhoods' for visitors from outside like me. Especially when you are a journalist, this risk increases even more. 'Oh, don't go to the gypsy neighborhoods!' I heard this warning so often over the past 20 years that I eventually learned to say 'ok, I understand' and turn away from the warnings as if I was going somewhere else, then turn my direction towards the gypsies. The strange thing was that all the people who warned me that gypsies were dangerous had never been in those neighborhoods in their lives! There were funny parts too. Among those who wanted to 'protect' me from gypsies, there were also gypsies who had moved up one step economically: 'Brother, look, we are Roma too, but we cannot enter that neighborhood!'. Over the years, I have gained a lot of experience and self-confidence on how to enter gypsy neighborhoods. (Alpman, 2014: 8-9).[4]

As narrated by Alpman, Roma often reside in segregated neighborhoods that are frequently stigmatized in the public eye. According to Koç et al. (2024), there are densely Roma-populated neighborhoods in 26 out of 81 cities in Türkiye. Table 1 presents the distribution of neighborhoods that are densely populated by Roma:

All participants I interviewed for this research were born and raised in Roma neighborhoods. A common theme emerged from the interviews is the tension between the social environment of segregated neighborhoods and schools. This contrast generated both discomfort and motivation, where neighborhoods were associated with limited prospects, schools offered guidance, supportive peers, and spaces for intellectual growth. Interviewees frequently expressed an awareness of the socio-economic difficulties from early ages, which reinforced their determination to create a different life trajectory. In this sense, success was driven not only by exposure to alternative opportunities at school but also by a conscious rejection of the social and economic limitations embedded in segregated neighborhoods as reflected in the following quotations:

> I felt uncomfortable with the environment I was in because what I saw at school was completely different from what I saw in the neighborhood. I was caught between these two different poles. At school, I used to see our teachers as idols, and their attitude towards us was completely different from the attitude we experienced in the neighborhood or within our families. I could have conversations with friends at school, but it wasn't like that in the neighborhood, it was different. (Interview 6).

> I had no choice but to pursue education. I couldn't catch up with anything else. I wanted to escape that life, those neighborhoods. There are good people there, but the environment is very bad. Some of the people I grew up with ended up in prison or died. I had to get out. (Interview 4).

> How much does a child growing up in such an environment really care about school? In our neighborhood, life starts after 11 or 12 p.m. People sleep during the day and wake up at midnight. School and work barely exist. (Interview 3).

Table 1. Estimated household numbers in densely Roma populated neighbourhoods.

Region	Cities	Number of cities	Number of districts	Number of neighbourhoods	Population size	Estimated household number
Mediterranean	Antalya Mersin Adana Hatay	4	20	40	341.208	72.597
Central Anatolia	Ankara Çankırı Eskişehir Konya	4	6	9	32.681	6953
Eastern Anatolia	Gaziantep Diyarbakır	2	8	10	24.671	5249
Marmara	Bursa Balıkesir Çanakkale Tekirdağ Kırklareli Edirne İstanbul Kocaeli	8	40	79	494.884	105.294
Aegean	İzmir Manisa Aydın	3	23	328	925.410	196.896
Blacksea	Artvin Sakarya Düzce Zonguldak Samsun	5	13	25	100.858	21.459
Total		26	110	491	1.919.712	408.449

Source: Koç İ et al. (2024) Türkiye Roman Nüfus Araştırması, TÜBİTAK and Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü, Ankara.

> The greatest motivation is not wanting to live the life that the generations before you lived. You witness the financial problems they struggle with, and those struggles place you in a different social layer of society. You can't help but notice and become aware of them. I feel lucky because I became aware of that when I was only 11. You see what is happening around you, and you want to build a different life. (Interview 7).

According to Aydın et al., (2019: 195), 53.1% of Roma face discrimination when attempting to move into non-Roma neighborhoods. Çelik argues in such neighborhoods where parents cannot afford to move out, the parents of resilient students often develop strategies to limit the exposure of their children to the neighborhood which might not be possible for Roma neighborhoods due to their ethnic homogeneity (2016: 6). On the other hand, these neighborhoods provide a sense of solidarity and community for Roma

(Koptekin, 2017). Therefore, any efforts aimed at desegregation should take these social dynamics into account (see also Ceyhan, 2013).

As a consequence of being part of a "closed group", Roma children have limited or no social interaction with other groups (Diler, 2008; Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu, 2018). Interviewees underline the pivotal role of alternative social spaces in counteracting the negative influences of segregated neighborhoods by providing access to structured, supportive environments such as youth or community centers. These spaces not only provide safe alternatives but also create opportunities for socialization, skill development, self-expression, and confidence-building through pursuing hobbies, spending leisure time, or receiving academic support. The following quotations illustrate how such opportunities helped participants cope with their limited socio-cultural environment:

> The neighborhood is so dangerous. There are some really serious problems going on. Drugs are being sold openly, right in front of your eyes. Violence is constant, early marriages happen, and many illegal businesses are carried out openly. Swearing becomes normal, violence becomes normal. Children don't have anything good in front of them. That's why it's really important for children to have access to a different world to be able to socialize and have someone to spend time elsewhere. For example, I went to chess." (Interview 1).

> The center has already been a great contribution in terms of socialization, being able to express yourself, and gaining self-confidence. I am still the same as I was when I was a child, not much has changed, my shyness is still there. You know, I still can't talk so freely. Back then, it was much worse; I couldn't talk at all. I was the kind of person who couldn't even control her breathing while speaking. But as you can see now, it has improved. In other words, the center was really beneficial for my socialization, and it also helped me develop my interest in painting. I started to believe in myself and my ability to do things. I understood the message, and it truly had a great impact. (Interview 3).

There are some examples of such youth or community centers in İzmir, Mersin, and İstanbul (Güder, 2017) that provide opportunities for ***socialization*** and ***non-material support***. However, funding shortages have led to the closure of some of them, and those that remain open face the challenge of declining demand from the community (Interview 3).

In addition to restricting the sociocultural environment, segregated neighborhoods might lead to segregated schools, particularly in a country like Türkiye where an address-based education system is implemented. Accordingly, students are required to attend the nearest schools to their registered addresses. Depending on the demographic composition of the neighborhood, primary schools may consist entirely or predominantly of Roma students, often referred to as "Roma schools". Similar to "Roma neighborhoods", these schools carry a stigma.

Nonetheless, interviewees reported that segregation diminishes as students progress in the education system, especially beginning in high school. All of them expressed higher satisfaction with their high school education compared to their experiences in primary and middle schools. In fact, the benefits of ***mixed schools*** and ***the positive influence of peer pressure*** are recognized and underlined by some of the interviewees:

> I considered my high school education sufficient because it was a really good school. It was the best school in the district. There was a competitive environment. The friends I competed with were all very close to me. There was no hostility between us, but the competition pushed us to work harder (Interview 6).

One possible policy option, therefore, is to reconsider the address-based school placement system in disadvantaged neighborhoods. As emphasized by interviewees, mixed schools not only foster interaction among different groups but also generate additional motivation through peer pressure (see also Alexiadou, 2019; Aydın et al., 2019; Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017). At the same time, however, previous studies (Civil Rights Defenders, 2022; Kesik et al., 2018; Uğur Rizzi, 2021) highlight discrimination faced by Roma students from non-Roma students, their parents, teachers, or school administrators, which cannot be overlooked. Aydın et al. (2019: 195) argue 31.1% of Roma face discrimination in schools. On the other hand, Bereményi and Carrasco discuss how non-Roma is often considered as a source of discrimination but they can as well be "*bridging agents* [italics original] that provide orientation and aspiration not only with respect to academic projection and information about how to 'decode the system' but also with a meaningful, affective content" (2017: 29). Therefore, comprehensive policies are needed to address both desegregation and anti-discrimination in a holistic manner (see also Brüggemann, 2012).

Material support

Strategy documents of the government and previous research identify socio-economic issues as the main cause of the education challenges faced by Roma. The existing data, though limited, confirms a significant gap between Roma and the overall population in Türkiye.

As of March 2024, the unemployment rate in Türkiye is 8.6%; with 6.8% for men and 12% for women (TUİK, 2023). The relative poverty rate in 2023 stands at 13.9% (TUİK, 2023). In contrast, a 2021 survey revealed that 47.8% of Roma respondents were unemployed and 21.8% reported having no household income (Romani Godi, 2023). The average household income among the participants was 1416 TL, compared to the minimum wage of 2825 TL, and the poverty threshold of 3192 TL for a household of four members (Romani Godi, 2023). Another study found that 88.9% of Roma participants experienced a loss or reduction of income during the pandemic (SODEV et al., 2021). Survey results from 12 cities further demonstrate average and median income of Roma households is 25% lower than overall population, with significant income inequality and higher poverty indicators among Roma (Aydın et al., 2019).

Financial hardship often results in child labour which in turn contributes to school dropouts. Although child labor is prohibited by law, it remains a significant issue, particularly among Roma. As illustrated in Figure 2, nearly one-fourth of Roma male children are engaged in child labor. In comparison to the overall population, child labor rates of both male and female Roma children are considerably higher.

The Ministry of Family has implemented education support policies and continues its social assistance programs. According to Aydın et al. (2019), 57.9% of Roma receive

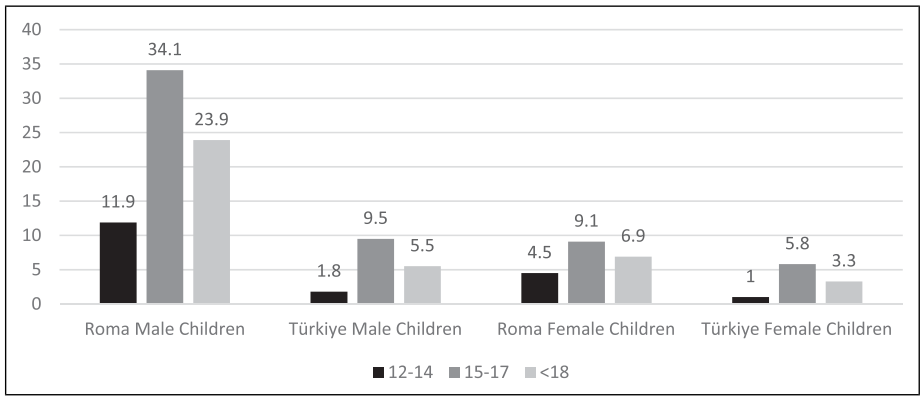

Figure 2. Rate of child labour. Source: Koç et al. (2024) Türkiye Roman Nüfus Araştırması, TÜBİTAK and Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü, Ankara.

social assistance. However, these programs remain insufficient to close the socio-economic gap.

Even when students progress to high school, many of the high schools they attend are not found adequate for the preparation for the university entrance exam as many of the interviewees were directed to the vocational schools. Additionally, most of the interviewees emphasized that their families could not afford the financial costs needed for university preparation, including the costs of private training centers, personal tutoring, or study materials. They underlined the decisive role of institutional and financial support in enabling access to educational opportunities otherwise unattainable due to economic problems. At the same time, interviews reveal the agency of students and families in actively seeking out such resources, demonstrating the intersection of institutional support and individual initiative. Therefore, state institutions and targeted financial aid can serve as vital enablers of academic achievement for students from disadvantaged backgrounds as reflected in the following quotations:

> In my last year of high school, I attended a private training center on a scholarship. I think it was from the Ministry of Culture. That's when I met Ms. X. She was the one who arranged the scholarship for me. (Interview 2).

> My family couldn't afford a private training center. I went to the Foundation of Social Assistance and Solidarity [of the Ministry of Family and Social Assistance] with my mum. I wrote petitions for their help, and then I was able to attend a private training center. (Interview 5).

Most interviewees reported working throughout middle and high school, and all of them had to work while pursuing university education. This significantly affected their academic success, often resulting in delayed graduation or the loss of scholarships.

The state provides two types of financial support for university students: loans and scholarships through the Directorate General of Loans and Dormitories [KYK]. Students from low-income families can receive scholarships that they do not need to repay,

provided they maintain consistent academic performance. However, these scholarship amounts are often insufficient to cover living expenses.[5] Many interviewees had to take on additional jobs, resulting in the loss of their scholarships and turning into loans that they had to repay. The Roma Education Fund (REF) scholarship was found beneficial for those who received it; however, it was also insufficient to cover living expenses without additional work. Furthermore, not all of the interviewees were aware of the existence of such scholarship programs. Hence, while financial aid facilitated access to higher education, the economic necessity of constant employment undermined academic performance, highlighting both the importance and the inadequacy of existing support systems in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students, as illustrated in the following accounts:

> I couldn't continue my classes in the first years of university because I had to work. So yes, I was registered, my name was on the list, but I could not actually attend. I was working during that period. Then I found jobs that I could do while going to university. Naturally, I also worked during graduate school. I worked as an accountant, worked in cafes, at shopping centers, and I also gave private lessons. (Interview 1).

> I worked during high school and university. I helped my family with their basket-making business. (Interview 2).

> I worked throughout my university education. I couldn't continue the classes after the first year; I was only going to the exams. My family did not support me. I received a KYK loan, which I paid back in full. I worked as a waiter and in the fields. I had also worked as a photographer before the university, and I continued that during university as well. It had a negative impact on my academic performance. (Interview 6).

> I had the KYK scholarship during my first year, but because I had to work, I couldn't attend classes and ended up failing. The scholarship then turned into a loan. (Interview 1).

> I received the KYK scholarship at first, but it turned into a loan. I was working and started failing my classes. It was a very hard time. I did a lot of different jobs. I received REF twice, but it was not enough to cover living expenses in Istanbul, even though I was staying at a KYK dormitory (Interview 5).

Therefore, ***material support*** including scholarships, financial support, and book support has been crucial for their success despite not being sufficient to cover all living expenses. Increasing and expanding such support has the potential to significantly improve academic achievement.

Personal guidance or support

Another issue highlighted in the literature is the lack of guidance or support from family members or teachers (Alexiadou, 2019; Bereményi and Carrasco, 2017; Civil Rights Defenders, 2022; Çelik, 2016; Diler, 2008; Óhidy, 2013). Indeed, nearly all of the interviewees emphasized the importance of personal support from a family member, role model, or teacher in providing both motivation and guidance:

> One common point among us is receiving personal support from somewhere. This could be a very simple support; a grandmother's encouragement, verbal support from a teacher or a friend. I think this is very important for motivation. (Interview 1).

During the "Promoting Social Inclusion at Densely Roman Populated Areas" (SI-ROMA) project supported by the EU, Roma role models were introduced into the neighborhoods. Similarly, the current national action plan includes measures aimed at informing families. One critical area of focus is preventing early marriages (Aydın et al., 2019; Diler, 2008; Kılıçoğlu and Kılıçoğlu, 2018). According to Koç et al. (2024), 48% of Roma women marry before the age of 18 whereas this rate is 15% in the overall population. Early marriages, in turn, cause higher dropout rates for girls and create a socio-cultural pressure on those who wish to continue their education. A few interviewees expressed that their brothers were granted the option to continue their education, but girls had to actively fight for the right to study, often facing resistance from parents and needing to negotiate and persuade them. In line with the data demonstrated in Figure 1, these accounts highlight gender discrimination and also determination and persistence of interviewees to overcome it as can be observed from the following quotations:

> Early marriages are common in our environment. Girls my age already have three or four children. When I was in high school, they had already started getting married (Interview 1).

> Girls are married at an early age. At home, you are almost invisible, you only become visible once you are married. Once you are married, your opinions are asked, and you become an individual. My family did not support my education. I cried because I wanted to go to high school. They told me, 'You are Roma, you are a girl, girls do not go to school'. I could only do it by convincing my mother. She asked, 'How will we buy the uniform?' My brother went to vocational school. He was a boy and he could study if he wanted to. I didn't have a phone or a computer. My friend told me about my successful university results, and I cried. My family said, 'Go if you want to, but don't expect anything from us.' I said, 'I will study and work.' (Interview 5).

> My dad only let me study at the vocational high school of health sciences to become a nurse. I couldn't get in, so I started working in the fields with my family. I resented working while my friends were going to school. My dad wouldn't let me study anywhere else. I told him I would go to the police if he wouldn't let me. I was 14 or 15. Then he finally allowed me. He wanted my brother to study, but my brother didn't. Now, he is happy that I did. (Interview 2).

While it is crucial to inform families and teachers (see also Starcevic et al., 2016); this should not be viewed as solely their responsibility. The broader socio-economic root causes discussed in earlier sections must also be addressed.

Conclusion

In this article, I focus on successful Roma students -those, who have at least an undergraduate degree, hold stable jobs, and are financially independent. Their testimonies highlight the issues discussed in the literature, including the challenges of living in

segregated Roma neighborhoods and attending segregated schools, limited interactions with other groups, socio-economic difficulties, gender-based discrimination, and inadequate schooling. However, their stories also offer valuable insights into their success, even though the research is based on a limited number of interviewees.

The article reveals what has worked better for successful Roma students is a combination of individual characteristics and institutional structures. Findings demonstrate that access to supportive environments and resources including guidance from families and teachers, attending mixed schools, the influence of peer pressure, access to scholarships, and existence of safe social spaces such as youth or community centers were crucial for their success.

Exposure to mixed schools and alternative social spaces such as youth or community centers provided students with environments that contrasted with the negative influences of segregated neighborhoods, offering role models, peer networks, and opportunities for personal development. Access to institutional support, particularly scholarships, loans, and targeted financial assistance, was critical in making higher education attainable, even if such support was often insufficient and had to be supplemented through paid work. Family and teacher guidance, when present, also played a role in sustaining motivation and preventing early dropouts, while the absence of such support often required students to rely on individual resilience and determination. Gender-based barriers and expectations of early marriage were significant obstacles for Roma girls, yet those who succeeded often did so by persistently negotiating or resisting familial and cultural pressures. In this sense, the "solutions" cannot be attributed exclusively to either community or external structures, but rather to the interplay between them: the determination and strategies of Roma individuals and families were most effective when supported by institutional resources.

In the short term, reconsidering the address-based system for disadvantaged neighborhoods can be an option based on these accounts. The establishment of community or youth centers and encouragement of participation in their activities are another policy option as these centers not only provide a safe space for children to socialize but also help in developing their social skills. Moreover, family and teacher involvement in providing guidance, particularly to prevent early marriages, should be strengthened. Both material support, such as scholarships for living expenses, and non-material support, such as study materials and test books, are crucial for these students' success.

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Ethical considerations

Beykoz University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Board has approved the research on 16.01.2023.

Consent to participate

Informed consents of all participants were taken verbally.

Consent for publication

Informed consents of all participants were taken.

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the collected data, it is not publicly available.

Notes

1. The concept of "community" in this context is used to frame the positive deviance approach. I do not suggest that Roma across Türkiye form a homogeneous group. On the contrary, there are notable differences in language, culture, religious sect or lifestyle among Roma groups. Nevertheless, the educational challenges they face remain broadly similar.
2. As of 2023, the population of Türkiye is 85.372.377 (TUİK 2023).
3. However, it is important to note that the methodology of the research is based on mapping, and Roma living outside of the densely Roma-populated neighborhoods are not included in these estimates.
4. Translated by the author from the Turkish original.
5. 3000 TL as of January 2025, while the poverty threshold is 72.088 TL and the hunger threshold is 22.131 TL for a household of four members (TÜRKİŞ 2025).

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