

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Housing Instability and Roma Children's Educational Engagement: Perspectives from Teachers and Volunteers*

Ozan Uştuk¹ 

Abstract

Inequalities experienced by the Roma remain a complex challenge, particularly in education. Despite various initiatives, their impact on the Roma communities' daily lives has been limited. This article is based on applied research aimed at reducing early school-leaving rates among Roma children in Türkiye. The study highlights that the high rates of early school leaving cannot be fully understood without considering the profound impact of housing instability on their educational experiences. By exploring the intersection of educational challenges and housing insecurity through the perspectives of elementary school teachers, preschool teachers, and volunteering university students engaged with a Roma community, the findings reveal that the constant threat of displacement and inadequate living conditions severely disrupt educational engagement, undermining the stability necessary for academic success. However, these perspectives also expose critical gaps in understanding, particularly among educators who often overlook the significance of housing insecurity in shaping educational outcomes. By situating these challenges within the broader context of systemic housing issues, this research underscores the need for comprehensive, community-based interventions that address the root causes of educational inequities among Roma students. The study advocates for a holistic approach to educational equity—one that addresses both the material and psychological dimensions of housing insecurity, thereby creating pathways for genuine social mobility and inclusion for Roma children.

Keywords: Roma • Housing Instability • Education • Early School Leaving • Exclusion and Discrimination

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1 Sorumlu Yazar: Ozan Uştuk (PhD, Assoc. Prof.) Izmir Institute of Technology, General Culture Courses Department, Izmir, Türkiye, E-mail: ozanustuk@iyte.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-4062-8404

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Introduction

Inequalities experienced by Roma communities are intricately linked to widespread illiteracy and systemic barriers in education (Klaus & Marsh, 2014, p. 338; UNICEF, 2011; Cemlyn et al., 2009; Council of Europe, 2003, p. 73). Addressing these inequalities has often led to a focus on educating the poor as the primary solution to persistent disparities (Uştuk, 2019). This approach was evident at the launch of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), an initiative aimed at coordinating efforts by various international and national actors to integrate Roma populations (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017, p. 2). Twelve European countries with significant Roma populations developed individualised Decade Action Plans to address key areas, including education, employment, health, and housing (International Steering Committee, 2005, p. 3). However, by the conclusion of the Decade in 2015, there was limited evidence of significant reductions in disparities between Roma and non-Roma citizens across Europe. Education, despite being identified as the most successful priority, achieved only minimal success (Curcic et al., 2014).

The extent of Roma exclusion in education remains profound (O’Nions, 2010, p. 482). Critical theory has long criticised educational institutions for functioning as an “ideological apparatus” (Althusser, 2014), reinforcing and reproducing social inequalities. Scholars like Bourdieu and Passeron emphasised the role of cultural capital in perpetuating these inequalities (1990). For instance, Zachos and Panagiotidou (2019, p. 13) assert that education has historically served as a tool for transmitting nationalist ideologies, with national homogenisation being a primary motivation behind the formalisation of education.

However, initiatives like the Decade of Roma Inclusion and subsequent documents, such as the European Commission’s reports on the implementation of the E.U. Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, often overlook the “hidden curriculum” of schooling (Illich, 1973) and the power relations that dictate the priorities addressed. As a result, the data derived from these documents often fail to represent the lived experiences of the Roma communities. Consequently, despite the enthusiasm generated by the Roma Decade, it failed to significantly impact the daily lives of most Roma (Brüggemann & Friedman, 2017, p. 5). The narratives surrounding Roma education often focus on perceived deficits, reinforcing their marginalisation. These naïve and modernist discourses addressing Roma’s educational situation have permeated even in some academic writings (Ivasiuc, 2018, pp. 131-132).

The situation of the Roma communities in Türkiye mirrors these challenges. Despite the Turkish National Education Fundamental Act, No. 1739 (İlköğretim ve Eğitim Kanunu, 1961), which guarantees equal access to education, exclusionary practises against Roma children in Turkish public schools are common (Uştuk, 2019); Marsh,

2008, p. 58; Arayıcı, 2009), resulting in high dropout rates (Özateşler, 2016; Bedard, 2004; Arayıcı, 1998). Additionally, despite growing official incentives aimed at tackling discrimination, Roma communities in Türkiye continue to suffer from poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion (Uştuk & Tunç Cox, 2020). The Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation (Secretariat) (2013) compiled and summarised civil society monitoring reports from seven countries: Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. Notably, Türkiye was not included in these efforts, as the impact of the initiatives was deemed minimal. In the recent decade, “Turkey as a party to U.N. treaties and a Member State of the Council of Europe, as well as a candidate for E.U. accession” (Danka, 2008, p. 81) started to pay attention to the problems of the Romani communities, especially after the Romani Opening initiated in 2009 (Gençoğlu-Onbaşı, 2012). “Turkey’s civil society received an important boost from the E.U. accession process in financial and political terms. Nonetheless, the liberal atmosphere was suffocated in the mid-2000s by a nationalist backlash” (Gökçen and Öney, 2008, p. 139). “The 2009 E.U. The Progress Report warned Turkey to take measures regarding the Roma population” (Önen, 2013, p. 608). The report specifically highlighted (European Commission Turkey, 2009, p. 29) that: “Turkey has yet to establish a strategy to address the Roma population’s problems and provide it with adequate legal protection”.

Recognising growing criticism from civil society towards the Roma Opening in Türkiye, the Ministry of Family and Social Services published the Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023-2030) and its Phase I Action Plan (2023-2025) as a continuation of the Roma initiative. The document articulates a vision of improving the living conditions of Roma citizens and enhancing societal cohesion. The mission underscores a commitment to raising the socio-economic welfare of Roma communities and strengthening social integration through targeted actions in education, health, employment, housing, social services, and social services. While it appears well-intentioned, its language and strategies often perpetuate reductive cultural stereotypes, homogenise diverse Roma communities in Türkiye. Regarding education, the Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023-2030) highlights the importance of integrating Roma children into educational and social activities, emphasising sports, music, and cultural programmes to foster socialisation (p.10). While acknowledging systemic barriers, this approach risks reinforcing stereotypes portraying Roma children as predisposed to artistic or physical pursuits while lacking aptitude in STEM or other academic fields. Such narratives perpetuate pseudogenetic biases, framing Roma as “free-spirited” and unsuited for disciplines requiring perseverance, thereby limiting their educational opportunities to “culturally appropriate” areas (Uştuk, 2024b: 81). In terms of housing, the Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023-2030) highlights the challenges Roma face in adapting to social housing while asserting their preference for single-story detached homes as conducive to their social lives and solidarity (p.

13). By framing Roma preferences and needs as static cultural traits, it overlooks the diverse socio-economic and cultural realities within Roma communities. This reductionist approach risks perpetuating stereotypes rather than addressing Roma's spatial and social rights in a comprehensive and equitable manner.

A scholarly examination of Roma housing in Türkiye reveals a deeply entrenched pattern of exclusion, shaped by socio-political dynamics and economic pressures. This spatial marginalisation limits integration opportunities and intensifies cultural isolation, creating enduring inequalities (Uştuk, 2024a). Studies highlight how residential segregation perpetuates socio-economic disparities, while the creation of intra-urban borders reinforces the stigmatisation and isolation of Romani communities. (Akkan et al., 2017, Gültekin, 2009, Karaman & İslam, 2012). Urban regeneration projects, particularly in Sulukule, illustrate the displacement and marginalisation Roma populations face under neoliberal policies (Uçan Çubukcu, 2011). While framed as development initiatives, these projects often prioritise economic interests over human and cultural costs, as critiqued by Uysal (2012).

Expanding on the challenges faced by the Roma communities in Türkiye, it becomes evident that the lack of success in government-led initiatives is deeply rooted in systemic issues. These efforts often employ a culturalist approach, framing the difficulties faced by Roma individuals as intrinsic to their culture rather than addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuate their marginalisation. By attributing barriers in education, housing, and employment to cultural traits rather than systemic exclusion, such policies mask the underlying issues of poverty, discrimination, and limited access to resources. This instrumental focus, serving political agendas rather than tackling these structural problems, has led to a decline in both motivation and efficacy over time, ultimately reinforcing rather than alleviating the marginalisation of Roma communities.

This article highlights a critical gap in existing research, drawing attention to the overlooked dimension of housing insecurity and its impact on education. While the primary focus was on educational challenges, findings emerged indirectly through related inquiries, underscoring the need to explore the intersection of education and housing. By addressing this connection, scholars can better understand and respond to the structural barriers affecting Roma children's educational outcomes.

Housing Instability and Early School Leaving

Housing instability represents a significant and often overlooked factor in understanding early school leaving among poor communities. It is particularly pronounced in marginalised groups like the Roma, where the constant threat of displacement and inadequate living conditions severely undermine educational

outcomes. Homelessness, while representing the extreme end of this continuum, shares a close relationship with housing instability, as both conditions disrupt the fundamental stability required for consistent educational engagement.

Homelessness can be categorised into different patterns, each with a unique impact on the affected individuals. According to Kuhn and Culhane (1998), homelessness can be classified into three groups: the transitionally homeless, who typically experience short-term shelter stays due to sudden catastrophic events; the episodically homeless, who frequently cycle in and out of homelessness; and the chronically homeless, who are deeply entrenched in the shelter system and often struggle with severe mental health and substance abuse issues. While these typologies provide a nuanced understanding of homelessness, they do not entirely capture the experience of the Roma in Türkiye, who often face persistent housing instability rather than outright homelessness.

Housing instability, even if it does not culminate in homelessness, can have severe repercussions on educational outcomes. This instability disrupts the continuity of care and schooling, severs important relationships, and intensifies stress levels, all of which significantly hinder academic progress (Buckner, 2008; Herbers et al., 2011). Children experiencing housing instability often face frequent school changes (Miller, 2011, p. 300), which lead to lower graduation rates, higher absenteeism, and increased grade repetition (Parrott et al., 2022). Additionally, early academic achievement and school readiness skills are significantly compromised by homelessness, as consistent educational engagement becomes nearly impossible under such conditions (Manfra, 2019, p. 17). Moreover, the constant threat of displacement, coupled with the need to secure even the most basic shelter, diverts attention away from educational pursuits, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage. These factors collectively contribute to the high rates of early school leaving observed among Roma children.

The literature on Roma children's education in Türkiye underscores critical issues such as poverty, discrimination, and the failure of inclusive policies to address systemic antiziganism (Çelik and Uştuk, 2024). Özbaş (2020) highlights how socio-economic disadvantages and resource-poor schools perpetuate intergenerational poverty, while Uğur Rizzi (2021) critiques the gap between policy design and implementation, attributing the failure of Roma inclusion efforts to entrenched societal prejudices and the neglect of structural barriers like employment access. However, while these studies provide valuable insights into educational challenges, there is a notable gap in the literature connecting education with other critical factors like housing, which significantly affects Roma children's engagement with education. Despite the substantial attention given to Roma education and housing in Türkiye, there is a lack of focus on the intersection of these two critical areas. Specifically, the impact of housing insecurity

on the educational engagement and outcomes of Roma children remains underexplored, leaving a significant gap in understanding how spatial marginalisation directly influences educational opportunities and success.

This paper argues that the high rates of early school leaving among Roma children cannot be fully understood without considering the profound impact of housing instability on their educational experiences. Previous ethnographic research conducted in the Roma neighbourhood showed that the constant threat of displacement and inadequate living conditions not only disrupted educational engagement but also undermined the stability necessary for academic success (Uştuk, 2024a). However, these perspectives also reveal critical gaps in understanding, particularly among educators, who may overlook the significance of housing insecurity in shaping these educational outcomes. Considering these challenges, this paper presents findings from a nine-month applied research project aimed at decreasing early school leaving among Roma children through a culturally sensitive volunteering programme. By exploring the intersection of educational challenges and housing instability, this research underscores the need for comprehensive, community-centred interventions that address the root causes of educational inequities, emphasising both the material and psychological dimensions of housing insecurity as perceived and acted upon by different stakeholders.

Methodology

To understand the educational dynamics influencing high rates of early school leaving among Roma children, it is imperative to adopt a holistic approach that engages various perspectives on the issue. A critical examination of social realities emphasises the necessity of “uncovering social blind spots, listening to silenced voices, and questioning the naturalness of institutions” (Krippendorff, 2016, p. 6). This approach is particularly relevant when examining the intersection of education and housing instability, as research shows that homelessness and housing insecurity profoundly disrupt educational trajectories (Manfra, 2019, p. 2). In line with this approach, qualitative research aims to amplify the voices that might otherwise remain unheard (Rothman, 2007, p. 12), recognising that students experiencing homelessness face unique challenges that are often overlooked in traditional educational discourse (Nix-Hodes & Heybach, 2014, p. 145).

Recognising the significance of diverse viewpoints on the same issue, this research project gathers data from three key stakeholders invested in the well-being of Roma children in educational settings: elementary school teachers, preschool teachers, and volunteering university students. These perspectives are crucial for understanding how housing insecurity, including the threat of homelessness, shapes educational experiences

and outcomes—an aspect that has been largely neglected by the meritocratic ideals underpinning the schooling system. As noted by Miller (2011, p. 300), the intersection of homelessness and education necessitates a deep inquiry into the lived realities of those affected, revealing how systemic issues manifest in both educational and housing environments and underscoring the need for more holistic interventions.

A nearby school was strategically selected for its close proximity to the Roma neighbourhood in Urla, located just 500 metres away—a short 7-minute walk—ensuring substantial representation of the Roma population. The Roma community in Urla has been subjected to systemic housing instability, intensified by gentrification policies and urban transformation initiatives. Over the years, the rise in real estate values in Urla, driven by an influx of wealthier residents from Istanbul, has put immense pressure on the Roma neighbourhood. The community has faced threats of displacement and actual demolitions of their homes, often justified by local authorities under the guise of public interest and urban renewal (Uştuk, 2024a). This setting allowed for the exploration of the diverse intercultural perspectives of teachers, civic volunteers, and Roma community members, stemming from their social, cultural, and economic capitals, while also accounting for the impact of housing instability on educational participation and retention.

Unlike elementary school teachers, preschool teachers, appointed by the government, had the autonomy to choose their work locations. In this case, four teachers intentionally opted for this specific neighbourhood because of the scarcity of volunteer teachers willing to engage with Roma children, particularly in the NGO Outreach Containers situated in the local Roma neighbourhood. The involvement of volunteering university students, integral to this research, is particularly noteworthy as they participate in a civic engagement programme at their university, where they actively serve as tutors in the NGO Outreach Containers. Their ongoing interactions with Roma children offer valuable insights into how housing challenges, including the experience or fear of homelessness, influence educational engagement and overall well-being.

This study received Ethical Committee Approval from the İzmir Institute of Technology Social Sciences and Humanities Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. All participants, including the 21 volunteers who engaged in the Roma neighbourhood in 2018-2020, were involved in face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. From this pool, 15 experienced volunteers were selected for in-depth interviews, conducted with their explicit consent. The data collection process was rounded off with interviews featuring a total of 15 volunteers, four preschool teachers associated with the NGO Outreach Container, and ten elementary school teachers working in a public school. Moreover, two focus group discussions, involving eight teachers, were conducted in 2021-2022. However, as these interviews did not directly

address the intersection of education and housing, supplementary data were collected through interviews with Roma residents in the vicinity. These additional data provided a more comprehensive understanding of the housing situation in the neighbourhood.

The study prioritises the voices of teachers, given their authoritative role in educational matters. However, the volunteers' unique insider perspective, cultivated through over a year of contact with Roma children without institutional restrictions, provides a distinct and almost "experience-near" (Geertz, 1983, p. 57) understanding of how housing insecurity shapes educational experiences. Unlike teachers, Roma children perceived and related to volunteers as akin to elder siblings, offering help and nurturing, which allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the children's daily struggles, including their housing concerns.

The study recognises the divergent perspectives of teachers and volunteers, rooted in distinct social positions that produce varied power relations during their interactions. In this way, the research emphasises the intercultural nature of educational dynamics, highlighting how the plurality of voices and the narratives collected from diverse participants represent distinct cultural standpoints. This prompts the imperative question: What insights can be gleaned from exploring the intersection of these diverse worldviews?

While acknowledging "the partial truths" inherent in each party's narratives (Clifford, 1986), the research identifies shared anecdotes and understandings concerning Roma children's educational challenges. These challenges are often deeply intertwined with their housing situation, as the fear or anticipation of becoming homeless significantly influences their engagement with education.

Striving to find an intersection of these narratives, the study critically engages with various and sometimes contradictory accounts, considering the contextual nuances and power relations in which these narratives are constructed. The inquiry aims to unravel how the experience of homelessness, or the fear/anticipation of becoming homeless, alongside institutional racism and discrimination, manifests in educational spaces, highlighting structural inequalities that result in early school leaving among Roma children, rather than attributing it to their cultural tendencies or deficiencies.

Educators' Perspectives on Early School Leaving

According to McInerney (2006, p. 2), discourses surrounding youth alienation, estrangement, and underachievement often place the blame on three key areas: (1) the students, their families, neighbourhoods, and cultural groups; (2) schools and teachers; and (3) public education systems. Drawing on Freire's work, McInerney (2006) argues that any critique of school leaving "must involve both an examination of the

dehumanising forces operating within and outside schools and the development of a renewed project for a critical pedagogy that challenges the logic of instrumental reason and neoliberal approaches to education policy". However, the findings from my interviews reveal that many teachers tend to attribute early school leaving among Roma children primarily to the families and their lifestyle, generalising about the entire community based on negative examples while overlooking the significant impact of their living circumstances.

Teachers frequently highlighted early marriages as a critical factor contributing to early school leaving, reflecting a broader sense of limited future aspirations shaped by their challenging living conditions. The perceived lack of opportunities often leads Roma children and their families to view education as irrelevant to their immediate survival needs, particularly when these needs are not adequately supported by stable housing and employment (Uştuk, 2024b). This view is reflected in the words of a volunteer who noted, "For them, going to school is actually something that limits their lives. Girls are getting married at a very early age. At the ages of 14 and 15" (V5). This sentiment is further reinforced by other volunteers who observed that children often regret leaving school after they have dropped out and assumed adult roles prematurely.

V1¹: A girl who came to our events last year came with a ring on her finger, and another came with her child in her lap. We were quite surprised! This girl is 17 years old.

V11: Some say, "After this age, why would I get an education, I'll better marry". But when they leave school and get married, they regret their choices. Some girl, probably 15-16 years old, said to us, "I wish we would have studied too" when she saw us (*university students*) with the younger kids.

However, attributing early school leaving solely to cultural practises like early marriage neglects the broader structural issues, such as housing instability, that profoundly influence these decisions. Many Roma families live in precarious conditions—leaking roofs, overcrowded homes, and inadequate clothing—that make it difficult to adhere to the demands of the school environment (Uştuk, 2024a). Moreover, elders of the Roma neighbourhood have been raising concerns about rising drug use and violence within their communities, which compounds the challenges faced by children and families already struggling with housing instability.

PST1: Domestic violence is not difficult to be come by. Some kid was coming with muddy shoes all the time. I told her, "you should go to your mother, and she should clean those before she sends you". Then she did for a while, and I was content. One day the child came, wet as a whistle. I sent her home to tidy herself up. Then his father showed up, yelling. Later, we learned that he

1 Throughout the text, I used the following abbreviations: V for Volunteers, EST for the elementary school teachers and PST for the Preschool teachers. The adjacent numbers refer to the order of the respondents.

had a bad temper for using drugs. I was afraid for my life. I cannot imagine a child growing up in such a home.

In this narrative, the emphasis on muddy shoes by the teacher may initially seem incongruent with the more pressing issues the child faces. However, this seemingly mundane observation aligns with the concept that educational institutions serve as classificatory mechanisms, contributing to the establishment and enforcement of legitimate exclusions and inclusions that underpin the social order (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The teacher's focus on cleanliness may reflect an attempt to address visible indicators of the child's challenging circumstances, acting as a tangible, albeit indirect, way to intervene. The subsequent revelation about the child's home life, characterised by domestic violence and drug use, underscores the significance of these seemingly trivial observations as potential indicators of broader societal issues affecting the well-being of students.

Additionally, the lack of residential registration for children who commute between parents poses challenges for school management. These challenging living conditions are not only a source of physical discomfort but also contribute to the psychological stress that impacts students' engagement with education. For instance, the lack of residential stability, often due to the informal labour market's demands, creates barriers to school registration and continuity, as one teacher noted when she had to "cut through the red tape" to ensure that children who had moved were registered at the school. This instability intensifies the sense of alienation that Roma children feel in educational settings, reinforcing a cycle of disengagement and early school leaving.

EST1: Two siblings have a good perception; if they had continued their education, they would have ended up in high places. They went to Torbalı last year for work. Furthermore, then, the district governorship of Urla did not reside them here. I had to cut through the red tape to register those sisters in my school. Another teacher might not bother going that long, and those children would be lost.

Elementary and preschool teachers share the belief that the unpredictable flow of everyday life significantly impacts these children. Many Roma parents are engaged in casual jobs with irregular working hours, leaving them with limited spare time to attend to their children's needs. Even those with regular employment often work late-night shifts, resulting in prolonged periods of sleep in the morning when their children are preparing for school.

PST2: Mothers have good intentions. They say that my child should finish school and not be like us. She sells flowers at night in front of restaurants and bars until 2 am. She has no place to leave the children, so they take their children with them and walk all night to sell something until 2 am. How can this child wake up in the morning to go to school? Imagine! This is how they grow up here.

PST3: They all sleep late and then sleep until noon. It is their habit. Therefore, the children frequently sleep during lessons.

Preschool teachers' viewpoints diverge somewhat from those of elementary school teachers, since they work in the NGO outreach container classrooms in the local Roma neighbourhood. This reveals different interpretations of early school leaving from their viewpoint. At times, their perspectives display ethnocentrism, where the primary issue contributing to early school leaving is perceived to be the Romani way of life. This perception is shaped by the imagery of their housing conditions and the neighbourhoods they live.

Among the four preschool teachers interviewed, three demonstrated genuine dedication to making a positive impact on the Roma neighbourhood. Despite their efforts, a prevailing belief exists that these endeavours are futile due to entrenched patterns of behaviour among the adults, hindering children from conforming to established schooling norms. This perspective indicates a tendency among teachers to focus on imposing their own methods rather than comprehensively considering the context and providing support to the community. The quotes reflect a resistance or inability on the part of teachers to adapt their approach in response to the unique challenges faced by the Roma community.

PST4: We have rules for our children. There are no rules in the Roma families. When the family sets some rules, they can easily follow our rules. They can grasp right and wrong, good and bad.

PST3: They (children) don't respond to our instructions. Last year, there was a challenging student. The boy was raised spoiled and had this habit of doing whatever he wanted. He makes a mess and beats other children. He's clever but mischievous; he's never forced to abide by a rule. Finally, I told the mother that if I do this, you will do the same at home. The mother listened to me, and the child developed a totally different personality a year later.

PST1: You will definitely win five children out of ten. Especially when approaching with love, children can be very responsive. But as soon as the family does the opposite, my efforts are wasted. Because with me, they only spent 6-7 hours tops! But with their families, they spent 20 hours.

Moreover, preschool teachers emphasized that negative behavior patterns exhibited by their peers significantly impact pupils' attendance.

V7: This accomplished boy had just moved to the neighbourhood. He even got a medal for his achievements. He was a very respectful boy. After a while, he started cursing like others and slacking at school. I was not happy with his attitude, so I told him. He said that the others would not involve him in their groups, so he has no other options. After a year, this successful boy dropped out.

V12: They have no one around to look up to. No role model whatsoever.

V13: For example, one of the popular kids always says, "I'm older now. His brother is very

oppressive; he shakes him and says, “What are you doing here?” He says, what are you doing with children?

The existing literature often indicates that negative attitudes among Roma parents are a significant cause of early school leaving. However, my previous research in the same neighbourhood (Uştuk, 2024b) challenges this idea. Contrary to common concerns about the fear of losing their traditional way of life (Levinson and Sparkes, 2006) or potential negative experiences, such as bullying and discrimination in schools (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008, p. 339; Myers, et al., 2010), my findings did not support these claims. Instead, they show that Roma parents in the neighbourhood do not place significant importance on obtaining a good education for their children, primarily because they do not link education with their livelihood and future prospects. Many hold the belief that even with a degree, employers would still exhibit racial biases, hindering job opportunities. Consequently, a prevalent perception emerges among them that time spent in school is a futile endeavour (Uştuk, 2019). Furthermore, a significant number of parents in the community lack education and literacy, rendering them unable to provide adequate support and guidance to their children throughout their schooling journey.

EST4: How can a parent, who knows nothing of maths or English, help and support their kids?

V11: A parent approached me and said; since you will start to come here, take these children and teach them something. On the other hand, most children see themselves as their play friends rather than their teachers. It’s good. They learn while playing. On the other hand, some students directly ask us for help with their homework. I cannot do it myself, they say.

When examining the reasons for early school leaving from the teachers’ perspectives, their interpretations carry some validity. However, there is a notable lack of understanding regarding the profound impact of habitus ingrained in the neighbourhood. Therefore, their attitudes manifest in two directions: either attributing the problems to the Roma cultural way of life, which is ethnocentric, or attempting to enforce compliance with school regulations, assuming that these families have identical opportunities and motivations as middle-class households. In doing so, teachers inadvertently become the ideological apparatus of the system.

Volunteers’ Perspectives on Housing and Educational Disengagement

Embracing an alternative approach, the volunteers affiliated with the Civic Involvement Projects endeavour to address the apparent lack of interest or literacy among families, providing guidance to Roma children in Urla. Despite repeated information sessions at the onset of each semester, parents have remained somewhat unaware of the specific roles undertaken by the volunteers, often perceiving them merely as babysitters. Nonetheless, the volunteers expressed a clear willingness to

overlook their perceived image within the Roma community, prioritising their commitment to supporting the children.

V6: They do not grasp what we do with their children. Some of them see us merely as babysitters. But they trust us, and it makes a difference.

V3: Sometimes, the parents come to us and ask us to help their children with homework. The children return home with all their homework completed.

Volunteers play a pivotal role in situations characterised by the absence of parental support. In instances where children are largely left to care for themselves, experiencing considerable autonomy in their daily routines, this child-rearing style is identified by Annette Lareau as “natural growth”. Under this child-rearing style, children encounter extended periods of leisure time, engage in child-initiated play, experience distinct boundaries between adults and children, and partake in daily interactions with kin (Lareau, 2003, p. 3). However, in this particular context, granting children decision-making autonomy over their lives translates into the freedom to leave school without repercussions. The frustration expressed by most teachers stems from their struggle to secure parental support among Roma pupils, thereby diminishing their motivation to enhance attendance rates for Roma children. This situation essentially places blame on parents for the level of involvement they may be unable to provide.

V2: Even if the teacher is stubborn about teaching, the child can decide not to pay attention. Even if you put the notebook in their hands and hold them in the classroom from eight in the morning to five in the evening, it does not make any difference. They are not mentally involved.

V1: The slacking school is standard. There is no authority, no one to guide them.

EST6: We prepare our children for the next day, but the Roma parents do not care. The child comes late, his outfit is not suitable, and he is not clean. Teachers expel them for inappropriate outfits. Hence, the child drops out of school because he feels offended.

PST2: The real problem is habits. Even if we change everything, we can imagine if their habits don't change, they will all be in vain. They stay up at night until 3 to 4 am. Sleep in until 1 pm. There is no discipline. We had to go door to door and invite the children to the lesson. Furthermore, parents always have an excuse.

Interviews with the elementary school's guidance counsellor reveal that the school environment was perceived as uncomfortable not only for the children but also for the parents. Parents tend to view the school as a “government's territory,” with teachers serving as authoritative figures, which they tend to avoid as a life strategy. The school represents a social field where they feel alienated and anxious, finding difficulty in reorienting themselves beyond the confines of their neighbourhood. Consequently, this avoidance hinders their relationship with teachers. The mismatch between habitus and the social field induces anxiety in parents, generating separation anxiety in children and fostering an inclination to leave the school environment. Notably, most teachers

appear to overlook the specific challenges faced by Roma children and their families in educational settings.

EST5: When the mother has anxiety issues, we could not separate her from the mother easily. If her voice trembles when she says, “go to class,” the child soaks up that anxiety like a sponge and starts to fear the school.

EST4: We tried to take the child away gradually. We said just come to one lesson, and then when you felt a little better, you could come for two. But we couldn’t continue because we never saw her again.

EST5: We could not control the mother. We urged her to stay away. As we close on to relax the child, she appears from somewhere and disturbs our process, saying: she is sick, she is nauseous, her stomach hurts. We could not explain to her that the feelings her daughter had were temporary.

EST4: Also, the child said to us: I miss my mother’s scent. Do you know how I suffer?

In a parallel vein, volunteers consistently highlighted that Roma children exhibit discomfort in confined spaces. Many of these children start public elementary school without prior preschool experience, rendering them unfamiliar with the formal school environment. Public elementary schools, with their dress codes, grooming regulations, defined activities, and stringent time schedules, often resemble total institutions, wherein diverse enforced activities are amalgamated into a singular rational plan purportedly aligned with the institution’s official objectives (Goffman, 1958, p. 45). The school environment can be perceived as unfamiliar and restrictive for a Roma child accustomed to an unstructured upbringing throughout their early-life

V15: They usually spend their daily lives in open spaces in front of their homes and mostly work outdoors, such as in agricultural fields. Therefore the children are bored indoors, even for an hour. I think that space directly influences them. The child’s mind works like that through the practical things they do in open spaces.

Due to the delayed adjustment of the Romani children to the school environment, their academic progress tends to be slower compared to their peers. Certain Roma parents expressed that their children felt humiliated in class due to being older than their classmates. In contrast, some teachers, harbouring deep prejudices towards the Romani community, dismiss parents’ concerns as insincere, interpreting their reactions as mere excuses for their purported lack of involvement in their children’s education. However, insights from my fieldwork led me to believe that the attitude of Roma parents is an empathetic response to their children’s emotional and inner states, coupled with a lack of the necessary knowledge and tools to navigate the challenges presented by the educational system.

In contrast to the teachers, volunteers from the Civic Involvement Projects Centre offer a more nuanced understanding of the role that housing instability plays in early

school leaving among Roma children. This direct engagement with the community allows volunteers to see the broader picture of how Roma children's educational challenges are deeply intertwined with their living conditions. They recognise that the absence of stable housing and the associated economic pressures compel children to prioritise immediate survival over long-term educational goals. Volunteers observed that many children, particularly those who are responsible for contributing to their family's income, see education as less relevant to their daily lives.

V12: We saw an eleven-year-old boy chopping wood on a school day.

V8: When we ask about their absent friends, they reply, "Went to work". When we asked why he didn't come to class, they replied, "If there is work why would they choose the school?"

V5: They collect paper from the age of eight to nine. They think that if they slack off, they could earn more money. The school does not provide them with actual things, it seems.

V2: Their families also encourage the children to work. The brothers especially call their younger siblings to work together. The kids never seem to bother going to work because they know they must. They must have a job in the future, and they do not believe that school will help them to acquire a job.

V9: Families always support us, always asking if we need something. The families are very nice. But children are always focused on growing up. They think of themselves as a burden to their families.

The Roma community in Türkiye often relies on seasonal and informal labour, including solid waste collection and olive gathering, as well as roles in the entertainment sector, such as performing at weddings. These jobs, while essential for survival, are characterised by instability, low pay, and lack of benefits, perpetuating economic vulnerability. The irregular work schedules and economic pressures often require children to contribute to family income, leading to disruptions in their education and early school leaving. Additionally, discrimination and stereotypes not only limit access to stable employment for Roma adults but also create a stigmatised environment for children in schools, further worsening dropout rates (Uştuk, 2024a, 2024b).

This article highlights how housing instability is an often-overlooked reality by educators when considering its impact on educational outcomes. However, the perspectives of Roma parents vividly illustrate how their living conditions directly affect their children's ability to learn. One parent expressed their longing for basic dignity, saying, "We just want a decent neighbourhood and a safe street. "A real home, not something built from scraps!" (Mother, 45) Another highlighted the daily struggles that make learning nearly impossible for their children: "Our bathroom and toilet aren't usable, and the roof leaks all the time. How can a child focus on schoolwork in a house like this?" (Mother, 40). The dire conditions are further intensified during bad weather, as one parent shared, "Whenever it rains, the house floods, and water runs under the

beds. The kids don't even have proper shoes to wear." (Mother, 35). These reflections underscore the urgent need for educators to recognise housing insecurity as a key factor in educational equity. Volunteers also provided stark accounts of the conditions students must endure, highlighting the near impossibility of studying in such spaces based on their first-hand experiences.

V3: At the start of winter, we ended up stuck in the mud. For three hours, I found myself complaining. Then it hit me—these people live in this environment every single day. I felt ashamed of myself and heartbroken by the inhumane conditions of the houses they lived in.

V5: We initially went there motivated to teach Maths and Turkish, but the environment made that impossible. Rainy days brought overwhelming humidity, and in warm weather, the damp smell was unbearable. The space was too small for the number of students, so whenever the weather was nice, we moved the activities outside and felt a sense of relief.

V10: In the cold, we wore three pairs of socks just to stay warm, while some children would show up barefoot.

Volunteers also highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified the financial pressures on Roma families, leading to increased school dropouts as children were needed to support their families financially. The lack of access to the necessary technological infrastructure for remote learning further widened the gap between Roma children and their peers, reinforcing their marginalisation and limiting their future opportunities.

The findings reveals that housing instability and the spatial conditions of the Roma neighbourhood significantly impact educational outcomes. The frequent need to move due to labour market demands, coupled with the physical inadequacies of their living spaces, significantly undermines the value placed on education within these communities. Many Roma families live in one- or two-room shacks constructed from scrap materials, offering minimal protection from the elements and lacking basic amenities. These cramped quarters often serve as multi-purpose spaces for eating, sleeping, and socialising, leaving no dedicated or quiet areas for children to study. The absence of such independent study areas makes it exceedingly difficult for children to focus on schoolwork or develop disciplined study habits. This intersection of housing and education highlights the need for policies that address the root causes of instability in Roma communities, rather than attributing early school leaving to cultural ways of life.

Discussion

The high rates of early school leaving among Roma children cannot be fully understood without considering the profound impact of housing instability on their educational experiences. The research findings reveal that the constant threat of displacement and inadequate living conditions not only disrupt educational engagement

but also undermine the stability necessary for academic success. While these findings highlight the critical role of housing in shaping educational outcomes, they also expose gaps in understanding, particularly among educators who often overlook the significance of housing insecurity. This perspective aligns with Türkiye's Strategy Document for Roma Citizens (2023-2030), which categorises the challenges faced by Roma communities into key areas—education, employment, health, and housing—drawing on the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) initiative (International Steering Committee, 2005, p. 3). While this categorisation is useful for policy formulation, it can inadvertently obscure the interconnectedness of these issues. Furthermore, academic research often focuses on education or housing in isolation, influenced by disciplinary orientations and researchers' backgrounds, thereby neglecting the critical intersection of housing instability and educational outcomes.

In Türkiye, the Roma community is widely perceived as illiterate, a stereotype that persists even among educators. Quoting Freire (1977, p. 28), O'Hanlon (2010, p. 241) emphasises that “mainstream society sees the marginal people as ‘sick’ and in need of education.” Educators often position themselves as “benevolent counsellors,” seeking to “restore” literacy to marginalised groups through top-down interventions. However, this approach, coupled with an education system steeped in meritocratic ideology, merely reinforces the image of the Roma as ingrates. O'Hanlon (2010, p. 241) further notes that “there is always an ambiguity when institutional help is offered to minority groups, and questions are then asked about why these opportunities are rejected or ultimately seen to fail”.

The findings from the interviews reveal that many teachers tend to attribute early school leaving among Roma children primarily to the families and their lifestyle, generalising about the entire community based on negative examples while overlooking the significant impact of their living circumstances. This narrow focus overlooks how precarious living conditions—overcrowded spaces often serve as multi-purpose spaces for eating, sleeping, and socialising, with no designated or quiet study areas—make it challenging for Roma children to meet the demands of the school environment (Uştuk, 2024a). Consequently, the perceived lack of opportunities often leads Roma families and children to view education as irrelevant to their immediate survival needs.

For many young people growing up in marginalised communities, low aspirations present a significant barrier to educational and employment success (St Clair et al., 2013). Aspirations are shaped by the “ability to identify and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work towards those goals” (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996, p. 130). However, the “aspirations-achievement paradox” remains puzzling (Stevens et al., 1998, p. 379), as educational attainment is influenced by a complex interplay of individual and family characteristics, as well as economic and social capital (Buttaro et al., 2010, p. 491).

The findings show that the low educational aspirations among Roma children are closely tied to the segregated life in their neighbourhoods. Cultural frames, acting as “lenses through which one interprets events” (Harding, 2007, p. 346), play a crucial role in shaping these aspirations. For Roma children, who live in relatively homogeneous environments, their aspirations are often aligned with those of their parents and older siblings, who do not see education as a viable pathway to improved circumstances due to systemic exclusion from the labour market (Uştuk, 2024a). This perception is exacerbated by their lived experience of housing instability and fear of becoming homeless or lack of ontological security, which disrupts their ability to engage fully in education and reinforces a sense of futility in pursuing academic success.

Education has long been regarded as “a vehicle by which the cultural norms of the dominant group are imposed on the marginal group” (Kendall, 1997, p. 86). This dynamic is evident in the way in which schooling is used to inculcate new national values, norms, and belief systems, often at the expense of marginalised communities’ cultural identities (Bereketeab, 2020, p. 74). For Roma children, whose lives are shaped by the immediate necessity of earning money and supporting their families, these expectations clash with the values upheld by the meritocratic ideals that shape educational environments. This situation is exacerbated by the fear of becoming homeless, which further disrupts their ability to participate fully in education.

Research shows that people of colour, including Roma children, are more prone to leave school early (Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu, 1989; Fine, 1991). This tendency is often interpreted because of “scepticism and incomprehension about the connection between schooling and their chances in the job market” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 147). In the case of the Roma in Türkiye, this scepticism is rooted in a lived reality where education does not necessarily translate into better employment opportunities (Uştuk, 2021). Without a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics between Roma communities and mainstream institutions, there is a risk of reinforcing antigypsyist prejudice by framing Roma children’s disengagement from education as mere “lack of awareness” or “lack of interest” (Ivasiuc, 2018, p. 132).

Using Bourdieu’s concept of the game, we can better understand why Roma children’s dispositions, deeply rooted in their habitus, do not align with the illusion of the educational system—they do not “have a feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80) and see little value in investing in it. For many Roma families, neither the habitus has been developed nor is the “education game” perceived as a viable or worthwhile pursuit.

Interest is to “be there,” to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognise the game and to recognise its stakes (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 77).

To truly address the educational disengagement of Roma children, it is crucial for educators to move beyond attributing resistance to ignorance and instead recognise the structural inequalities that Roma communities face. As Freire (1977) reminds us, education “does not work miracles if there are not enough jobs.” Improving the marginalised position of Roma communities in society requires a comprehensive approach that includes creating more job opportunities and addressing the housing instability that undermines their ability to participate fully in education.

Conclusion

Early school leaving among Roma children is deeply intertwined with broader structural inequalities, particularly housing instability. This instability, characterised by the constant threat of displacement and inadequate living conditions, creates a significant barrier to educational engagement and success. The research highlights how educators, often entrenched in a meritocratic ideology, fail to fully grasp the impact of these structural challenges, instead attributing educational disengagement to cultural deficiencies or a lack of interest among Roma families. In contrast, volunteers, through direct engagement with Roma children over more than a year and without institutional constraints, offer a nuanced and deeply informed perspective on how housing insecurity profoundly shapes educational experiences. While they did not explicitly comment on the housing situation, their accounts indirectly referenced the neighbourhood conditions that make it nearly impossible for children to sustain consistent educational engagement.

Teachers' perspectives overlook the lived realities of Roma communities, where the daily struggle for survival, intensified by housing instability, fundamentally disrupts children's ability to participate in education. The stereotype of the Roma as illiterate and disinterested in education persists, reinforcing the marginalisation of these communities. Yet, as Bourdieu's analogy of the game suggests, Roma children do not inherently lack the ability or desire to succeed in education; rather, they do not see the education system as a game worth playing, given the systemic barriers they face.

To create meaningful and sustainable change in the educational outcomes of Roma children, it is imperative to address these structural issues. This requires not only enhancing access to education but also addressing the root causes of housing instability and creating job opportunities that enable Roma families to escape poverty. Education that fails to account for the lived realities of these communities risks becoming another instrument of exclusion, reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to overcome. A comprehensive approach that combines educational initiatives with efforts to ensure stable housing and economic opportunities for Roma communities is crucial. This integrated strategy can help dismantle the barriers that sustain their marginalisation and pave the way for meaningful social mobility.

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