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**1. Introduction**

Around 2,000 Roma live in Nişantepe, which also accommodates Özyeğin University. Most of them are faced with urban poverty which now runs even deeper under the pandemic conditions. Poverty and deprivation become more devastating when coupled with disadvantage. This leads to irrecoverable problems, in particular for children. The Strategy Paper on Roma People 2016-2021 states that Roma children are not able to benefit from education opportunities sufficiently, and that they have low access to education, and high absenteeism and early school leaving. Children who are faced with inequality of opportunities in education coupled with social exclusion are unable to establish the much-needed bond with school. When these children become adults, they also have great difficulties in both joining professional life and adjusting to social life. Fighting against poverty, deep poverty, and all other ever-diversifying forms of poverty, working towards eliminating inequalities and inequality of opportunities in education, and taking a rights-based action with the belief that social diversity and differences are a great source of wealth are in fact a natural responsibility that falls on both individuals and the academia. In a bid to eliminate the disadvantage that exists right next door and promote social empowerment, Özyeğin University launched a series of multi-stakeholder efforts in 2019 right after its approach-nişantepe\* project.In addition to the efforts to meet the local community’s basic needs, Özyeğin University’s "Nişantepe Social Empowerment Studies" team also develops a series of academic-based field programs to redress the disadvantage in the fields of "education" and “law”, placing “children” at the heart of all activities. The Nişantepe Educational Support Project, NED, which is the subject of this report, is the pilot application of these collective efforts. In the periodic meetings held with the teachers and authorities from the Nişantepe Primary School, it was observed that due to reasons such as the ongoing social inclusion problems, there was a need for a program that would offer social-emotional learning and core values education, and support social inclusion. To fulfill this need, Özyeğin University and Nişantepe Primary School joined forces to organize the Educational Support Pilot Project in the 2021 Spring semester. Designed as an online program with an 8-week curriculum, the project brought together volunteer OzU students with Nişantepe students with the goal of supporting education. The program was designed to make significant contributions to both Roma children in Nişantepe and volunteer OzU students. The project was also intended to support the development of Roma children, increase their resilience, and promote their social inclusion. It is also envisioned that the program would introduce volunteer OzU students to different layers and dynamics of society and increase their social awareness, thus making significant contributions to their personal development and transformation. Through this program, it is aimed to bring together two different groups that otherwise have a very little chance of crossing paths in the normal course of life in order to contribute to their social integration.

We went to the Ministry of National Education and we were having a meeting with the National Education Director when he said:

“*Your people play the clarinet very well. They play the “zurna”, shrill pipe, very well.”*

This label has been put on us. As if we could do only that.

*“I am a director. I do that well, too”*, I replied.

*“You are different. You stepped up.”*

As if that was an area that you can either go in and out, that you can either rise above or fall below. In fact, this is pure prejudice, the epitome of how prejudice turns into discrimination through “actions”. Roma can play music well, and dance well, because they are surrounded by music, if they are musician Roma, that is. But they do possess other skills as everyone else. These talents must be discovered and also strengthened. Yesterday, I also mentioned to you. The Roma people in Dikili founded a sports club. They have a volleyball team. There is always a Turkish championship to play. However, as they cannot afford jerseys, they cannot attend those tournaments. Or as they cannot afford hotels, they cannot go to those tournaments. Finally, we helped these kids enter a tournament with the support of an MP this year. They returned home with a second place finish despite all that fatigue and lack of motivation.

Then again, there was a kid in Konak who was a substance user. His only wish was to become a football player. We encouraged him to play football and “draw his strength from there”. Now he is so successful.Now, it is sports. Then, maybe chess or some other areas. It will not be limited to not just this. Maybe in the future, he’ll also like fencing. Because, these are the times for discovering his true self. Just like every other child, just like every other person... What is the difference between the Elmas when you first started and the current Elmas? First of all, I became aware of my true self. Back then, one can be aware of society and social problems. But then, you become aware of yourself. However, now you become also more aware of how you can solve social problems. But isn’t this the natural process of human beings anyway? The self-discovery process... I mean, there is not a magic pill that can improve Roma’s situation, or that can make all Roma people successful. Multiple methods have to be applied. Don’t we apply (multiple methods) to our own kids as well? The kid goes to school, and if he fails a course, then what do we do? We encourage him to something else. Roma children also need options. They should not be offered only one option to bring to life. Today, unfortunately, even that one single option is served as if it were a grace. Nothing ever done for Roma people is a grace but a right. It is human rights.**Elmas Arus, Zero Discrimination Association“approach\_nişantepe” Panel**

**2. Project Process**

Roma neighborhoods, which have low access to education and education materials, and high absenteeism and early school leaving even under normal conditions, have felt the pandemic’s impact more acutely. During this period, children who had difficulties in accessing online education or unable to find a place to study due to lack of the necessary physical conditions have been drawn away both from education and school. Arising from the inequality of opportunity in education, this process strikes a major blow to Roma’s social, cultural, and economic integration with society, giving rise to “social exclusion”.As a step towards solving this problem, 'social inclusion' was taken as a basis when preparing the program’s weekly curriculum. Enabling individuals to take a closer look from the outside to themselves and the society in which they live, to think about their actions, and when necessary, to find the strength to change these actions is fundamental to educational activities to be carried out within this context. To that end, an 8-week training program has been crafted to offer social-emotional values training. As this is a pilot program, due attention was paid to student selection both on the Nişantepe Primary School and ÖzU front. On the OzU front, the Community Engagement Projects Unit determined the volunteers to be included in the project based on their prior experience in volunteering and working with vulnerable groups. On the Nişantepe Primary School front, students who demonstrate a need for such a program and would be more able to consistently attend the program were determined by Muhammed Der, Turkish teacher who knows students and their families well.Finally, 4 male and 6 female students in grades 5 to 8 at the Nişantepe Primary School were paired with 14 OzU volunteers. Students met online for 60 minutes every Thursday to carry out activities in line with the program curriculum which is explained in detail below.

**2.1 Program Curriculum**

The training program focused on the following key categories:

*-Empathy*

Empathy ensures that students do not harm others or seek any approval or acceptance when making decisions for themselves.

*-Let’s Get to Know Our Emotions*

Not knowing emotions makes it difficult to express oneself and thus leads to communication problems. Whereas, knowing emotions improves the ability to sympathize, and therefore increases empathy. Likewise, those who know their emotions easily recognize their emotional states and thus more easily find ways to relax.

*-Story Telling*

What is desired to be told is narrated and the listener is allowed to play different roles to perceive the gist of the story.

*- Audience Effect*

Audience Effect helps develop a broader understanding of different roles to which an individual can be exposed in life.

*-Nonviolent Communication and Anger Management*

Observing without judgment, being able to ask the questions “What did I see?”, or “What did I hear?”, and expressing the emotions felt are just some of the components that stand out in nonviolent communication. Understanding that problems cannot be solved with anger and acting with this mindset is also fundamental to healthy communication.

*“I” Language vs “You” Language*

The “You” language is perceived as a personal criticism to the other party. In such a case, the person on the receiving end will also reciprocate with the “You” language in order to defend himself. On the other hand, the “I” language only conveys our feelings to the other person in that particular situation. In this case, the person on the receiving end will understand how he makes us feel, which will prompt him to question himself. The “I” language is far from a personal criticism,and is very important to establish a healthy communication.

*- Everything is in your hands*

“I am only one. But still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. I will not refuse to do something that I can do.” Hellen Keller. Problems can be saved not by the outstanding efforts of one person but by everyone doing the best that they can.

*-Friendship*

Friendship is an important step for adjustment to social life. It enables people to start looking through the eyes of others. One of the pillars of emotional and social development is friendship. Solving the problems among friends without parental intervention helps increase self-esteem.

**2.2 Volunteer Orientation**

Prior to the project, a series of training courses was held to introduce volunteering students to the Roma culture, help them get acquainted with the children's rights, with a particular emphasis on Roma children, and give them an opportunity to listen to, learn from, and discuss with professionals who have worked with vulnerable groups their field experiences, sub-cultural characteristics, and issues to be considered in right-based approaches.

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**2.3 Project Operation**

**2.3.1 Volunteering Principles**

Continuity is of paramount importance in volunteering programs conducted with vulnerable groups. Failure to ensure continuity may do more harm than good to beneficiaries. Therefore, a code of ethics has been prepared so that the responsibilities and principles of the volunteer students are clearly understood. Articles on the absence limit, the team to be contacted in case of any unexpected situation, or the rule of not posting anything on social media about beneficiaries were notified to the volunteers in order to prevent both the volunteers and the beneficiaries from being adversely affected by the project. Meanwhile, things to be considered and things to be avoided by our volunteers when approaching the Nişantepe students are explained in detail in the section which was prepared by taking Children’s Rights as a reference.

**2.3.2 Nişantepe Primary School**

The Nişantepe students joined online meetings in the company and under the guidance of their teachers, in particular Mr. Muhammed Der. OzU members joined the meetings both online and in person, facilitating the process both technically and operationally for the Nişantepe students. Through these meetings, the first contact was established with the students. Following the training process, due care was shown to receive regular feedback and to reinforce the process through either observation or Q&A sessions. At the beginning and at the end of the project, participants were provided with materials to encourage attendance and exchange. Exchanges, such as books personally picked out by the OzU students for the Nişantepe students with whom they are in contact and presented with a personal note, are intended to strengthen the bonds between the two student groups.

**2.3.3 Exchange Groups**

Other than the orientation training offered during the project development phase, “Exchange Groups” were organized, one in the middle of the project, and one at the end. In the first exchange group which was held in the middle of the project, Merve Şen, Psychological Counselor & Psychotherapist, reunited with volunteers again to offer them a safe space where they can talk about their lives and express their difficult feelings and thoughts. Şen highlighted the fact that it is natural to have concerns about the processes for which we attach great importance and put in great effort, but there is no success or failure in volunteering.

The second exchange group which took place at the end of the project explored how to bring the project to a healthy closure with volunteers. During the session, participants discussed the importance of maintaining certain limits in order to protect both sides. Likewise, volunteers are reminded that as each student, each volunteer, and each process are unique, they can express their feelings if they need to during the farewell process, and they can keep in touch with students via the Nişantepe Primary School teaching staff. In all of the exchange meetings, it was emphasized that it is very humane to feel caught in a dilemma or to have difficulty in coping with the situation, and it is highly important to make room for such feelings for psychological development.

**2.3.4 Whatsapp Support Group**

A WhatsApp group was created with a team of counselors always on standby ready to help students for their potential needs. This way, it is intended to support both the volunteers and the Nişantepe students. Furthermore, it is observed that the group was instrumental in enhancing communication and promoting collective feelings among volunteers.

**3. Project Outcomes**

The project brought together two groups that would not otherwise easily cross paths in the normal course of life. The ÖzU students and the Nişantepe students spent time together and made exchanges with each other over the course of 8 weeks. The project’s biggest contribution is this important step towards mutual communication and getting to know one another.

**3.1 Monitoring and Evaluation Process**

A communication channel was kept open with students to receive regular feedback. Additionally, two formal data collection methods were employed.

**3.1.2 Survey Questions**

The volunteer OzU students were asked to fill out surveys prior and following the project. The pre-project survey was designed to understand students’ expectations, emotional states, concerns, if any, contributions they can make to Nişantepe students and benefits they can receive in return. At the end of the project, similar questions were asked to give the volunteers the opportunity to recognize their own personal development since the start of the project.

**3.1.3 Daily Meeting Notes**

Students are asked to put their weekly meetings notes in writing. Students were not provided with a specific framework to that end, and instead were asked to write down their thoughts, feelings, the challenges, and fun moments freely. Daily meeting notes provided guidance for the project, while giving students the opportunity to observe their own week-to-week tranformation and make sense of the process as well as what they were going through.The overall effect of the project on Nişantepe students was evaluated based on Mr. Muhammet Der’s personal observations, one-on-one interviews held with students’ parents, and one-on-one interviews held with OzU students.

**3.2 Project’s Effect on Nişantepe Students**

It was observed that the project had a positive effect on 10 students from the Nişantepe Primary School who joined the project based on the meetings/talks held with the students over the course of and at the end of the project. No negative effect has been observed, with the effect being neutral in two students. The biggest positive effect that was observed among Nişantepe students was the feeling of being loved and valued as a result of having an older person spend their time with them and show care to them. This effect manifested itself in some of the Nişantepe students as transformation into a more talkative and sharing person. Some of the students who at first found it hard to express their opinions gradually eased up and started to express themselves more at ease after the mutual “getting-to-know” process. Also, some of the students expressed that they were able to control their negative feelings (i.e. anger) much better. It was also observed that the OzU volunteers served as role models for the Nişantepe children. This effect also stood out as an important contribution when a Nişantepe student who aspired to become an attorney was paired with a law student at OzU. In addition to positive effects, it was also observed that the project could not be understood by some of the students. For instance, in a post-project meeting held with a Nişantepe student, it was seen that the student did not internalize any of the topics discussed during the project. Teaching staff at the Nişantepe Primary School stated that both the program and the activities were supportive and complementary for the school’s curriculum. Another effect was that the program not only affected Nişantepe students but also their parents. Muhammet Burak Der who met the students’ parents at the end of the project said that the parents were impressed with the positive changes in their children and expressed that their children became more enthusiastic about attending school. This is a highly positive effect of the project, one which was not foreseen during the project development. Rooms for improvement were also observed. Firstly, it is thought that it would be beneficial if the students can receive psycho-social counseling during the project’s conclusion phase in a bid to help students better recognize, internalize, and reinforce the project outcomes, and to have a healthier conclusion-farewell. Here, Nişantepe Primary School guidance counselor meetings play a major role. Also, it is seen that the program’s overall quality can be improved by improving technical infrastructure, in particular audio-visual quality in online meetings.

Muhammet Burak Der’s Quote:

“I feel honored and proud to take part in this event organized at our school. Our children had the opportunity to develop themselves personally and psychologically as a result of these eight-week events. All of the students who provided feedback expressed that they would like to take part in similar projects. I would like to state that the parents’ contributions to student’s regular attendance in these activities cannot be disregarded.Muhammet Burak Der”

Student 1: *“I have an anger management problem. I was getting very angry at matches or so, but I am not getting angry anymore. I am calm.”*

Student 4: “*I want to be an architect. I want to build bridges.”*

Student 2: *“I can be a textile worker.”*

Student 3: -*”What do you want to do when you grow up?”-* Replies with a smile: *“I have never thought about it.”*

Student 5: *“I want to be a lawyer. I am very lucky, because the “Abla[[1]](#footnote-1)” I talked was also a lawyer,but I may also be an actor. Also a director.”*

**3.3. Project’s Effect on the ÖzU Volunteers**

It is seen that the project made significant contributions to the ÖzU students’ personal development and “transformation”. The project enabled the students to recognize and understand their social responsibilities, and gave them the opportunity to develop their communication skills, team working skills, and competencies such as empathy, self-confidence, and multi-disciplinary thinking as they fulfill their responsibilities.During the audio and video calls held with the Nişantepe children, the ÖzU students built on their skills which will make significant contributions to their personal lives, such as effectively coping with problems at hand, and organizing a talk. In addition, the weekly topics of discussion, including the “I” language and “You” language, bullying, empathy, and anger management helped mutually develop the empathy, emotion management, and effective communication skills of both the volunteers and the Nişantepe children. Our volunteers express this situation as follows:

Volunteer 2: *“I realized that before I started this project, I had kept my communication with children on a much basic level. After I joined the project, I saw that individuals who are much younger than we are may have very different lives with very heavy responsibilities. I put myself in the shoes of the person before me and tried to understand her. Sometimes, we became confidants and poured out our hearts to each other. Being able to communicate this effectively with someone who only sees me through a camera made me feel very happy and peaceful. During our talks and activities, the student also helped me realize some things. Teaching her that she should sometimes be able to let go of her own truth, which may not always be right, was a very different experience. In sum, this project in fact re-shaped my viewpoint, developed my empathy skills, and enabled me to be friends with a very sweet girl.”*

Volunteer 1 wrote in the first week’s report: *“At the beginning of the meeting, the first sentence the student uttered was “My knees are knocking together from nervousness. I have a hard time speaking.” In fact, that was exactly how I felt at that moment. For the first time in my life, I took part in such a project. It was a first experience for me and I did not know how I should talk at first. During the meeting, I was a bit nervous at first, worried about saying something wrong to the other person or not being able to express myself right.”* Later on, the volunteer wrote in her subsequent report: “*The student started to talk about himself before we asked and had a great communication with us. He asked the questions in his mind, and answered our questions. We laughed a lot. He talked about his dreams and we talked about many topics and different emotions. The project was so much fun both for us and for the student, and I believe we made nice contributions to each other.”*

Volunteer 3: *“Through this project, I learned to better express myself. I learned to better communicate with people. My self-esteem has increased.”*

Volunteer 5: *“The project developed my interpersonal communication skills, made it easier for me to communicate with other people. It offered me the opportunity to listen to people I do not know, offer them guidance, and share my experiences. In short, the project improved my interpersonal communication skills.”*

The project is intended to provide mutual benefits for both parties. During the project, not only did the volunteer Özyeğin University students develop themselves from technical aspects but also obtained experiences such as moral enrichment and increased self-esteem. This is expressed by our volunteers as follows:

Volunteer 4: *“He wondered whether the three of us would do an activity each week, and we told him that we would spend each week together, if he also wished so.* *He said he was very pleased.* *I was also very pleased to receive such a positive feedback.”*

Volunteer 5: *“He was very happy to meet us, and to play and spend time with us.* *He said he did not talk much with his friends but he was able to talk with us, which made us immensely happy and increased our motivation for the project.* *In each meeting, I become happier and I can feel that the student also wants to see us more.”*

Volunteer 6: *“We did not understand how time went by and we both had a relaxed and fun time together. At the end of the meeting, I felt calm, as if a huge weight has been lifted off of my shoulders.* *These meetings have been good for me and I look forward to the next sessions.”*

Volunteer 7: *“When we were doing the activities, he sometimes answered the questions more maturely than we would have, which both surprised us and taught us new things.* *On my behalf, I can say I am very happy that I joined the project.”*

Volunteer: *“Once again I understood the importance of volunteering for me.* *Thanks to this project, I decided to make volunteering an integral part of my life.* *As I was trying to support the other person, I was also learning a lot.* *I think volunteering activities with children in particular are more valuable.”*

In the pre- and post-project surveys, the students were asked *“When you think about the process you will go though/went through, could you please write down the first three emotions/words that come to your mind?”*, to which they replied as follows:

---------------------------Tablo -------------------------------------------

In addition, when asked “*What did the project change in you*?”, the students replied:

*“I knew that children living in Nişantepe and children that I know (for instance my cousins) do not receive the same education or do not have the same opportunities, and I think this (I mean, the environment in which we live, things we learn) also changes a person’s viewpoint.* *However, the gap was wider than I thought and this urges me to do a lot more for children who do not have equal opportunities. I have always loved children but now I approach them more sensitively and consciously.”*

*“I now understand better that being born into different socioeconomic status in society is not a personal choice, and any prejudices based on a person’s socio-economic status is irrational and baseless.”*

The answers clearly show that the students were at first nervous and worried when approaching the different segments of society that they never had any chance of getting to know before. The project established the first contact and made the first introduction, while also bringing up issues such as equal opportunities. Above all, through this project, participants learned how to emphatize with others. The newly-formed communication/acquaintance replaced negative thoughts and emotions with positive feelings and thoughts such as trust, sincerity, friendship, and mutual happiness. This change in emotions and perspectives is of paramount importance for social inclusion and social integration. These types of projects provide an introduction to and increases social awareness of different segments and dynamics of society, while also contributing to the internalization and development of institutional and non-institutional culture of solidarity.To summarize briefly, the volunteer students who joined the pilot project not only theoretically learned topics such as fulfillment of responsibilities, time management, team working, social environment, coping up with problems, organizing a talk, leadership, emotional intelligence development, empathy, emotion management, effective communication, happiness and health, and self-esteem through seminars and classes but also had the opportunity to put into practice and develop these new skills in the field.

**4. Conclusions & Assessments & Suggestions**

It was observed that the eight-week program contributed to establishing human bonding and interaction which primary school children, in particular, need the most in the learning ecosystem. The project reviews are as follows:

- The strong communication between school management and the local community is seen as an important advantage. The fact that the teachers working with Roma children have a wealth of knowledge about the local community and their life styles, and are aware of the weak link between these children and the education system as well as the reasons thereof serves as a great advantage.

- It is not enough to focus on the child. The child should be addressed with his circle. It is important that individuals who are in contact with the child must act similarly and consistently. Due care must be given to develop the family relationships and the relationship between the school and the family. In that sense, the project’s overall impact which also affected the parents stands out to be of utmost importance.

-It is seen that the children felt more at ease and participated more in dialogues about influential celebrities. Drawing from this observation, it is believed that role models will be instrumental in increasing children’s motivation.

-Once again, it is proven that care, attention, and continuity are the basic requirements for providing the maximum benefit in projects conducted with vulnerable groups.

- It is seen that in these types of projects, better results were achieved when volunteers - in this case the OzU students- attended the meetings in teams of two (and if possible as one female and one male), instead of individually. Having a second person to attend the meeting is proven important, especially when the conversation is stalling or if one of the team member is unable to attend the meeting so that the second person can offer a new perspective, or can ensure the continuity, respectively. It is also seen than a one-hour meeting is enough for both the Nişantepe and the ÖzU students.

- It is observed that entering the computer room is both highly desired and motivational, which is also underlined by Mr. Muhammet Der. The number of students who go to school hungry is very high.\* Therefore, in all types of educational activities, distributing free food at the home institution is a very important motivational tool for ensuring attendance and participation.

-We heard from a mother whose child attends the Nişantepe Primary School that peer violence at school stands out as a factor that keeps children from going to school. This is especially a factor that affects attendance for children who were initially enthusiastic about going to school. Contents that support value development such as anger management will contribute to alleviating this situation.

- It is observed that it is necessary to provide all students in the Nişantepe Neighborhood with extracurricular support (i.e. psychosocial, tutorials, academic), regardless of whether or not they attend school.

-It will be beneficial to have discussions about the relevant subjects at the end of the project for further reinforcement, and if possible, to integrate the program content (i.e. violence-free communication, anger management, empathy) into academic curricula. It is also important to offer a safe space and facilitator support to help participants express their emotions and thoughts over the course of / at the end of the project.

-After the completion of the pilot project, it is seen that it would be beneficial to continue the educational support program by enriching it through sub-programs such as on sports or arts.

1. A honorific, a polite form of address, for a female who is a few years older than the speaker. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)