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Narratives of sacrifice and aspiration: Turkish middle-class families and educational migration to London

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the narrative construction of educational aspirations as drivers of migration among a new wave of middle-class Turkish families relocating to London. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 12 families, the study adopts a narrative-analytic approach to explore the ways migrant mothers use language to frame their decisions, articulate aspirations, and position themselves and their children within both Turkish and British social contexts. The findings reveal how mothers frame migration as an act of ‘starting over,’ producing a moral economy of indebtedness, high educational expectations, and aspirations for children to assimilate into British society. However, these maternal narratives often clash with children’s own experiences of linguistic adjustment, identity negotiation, and educational aspirations. Migration, therefore, emerges as a carefully managed family strategy, entailing both material and emotional costs, as well as contested visions between parents and children. Despite these challenges, mothers remain optimistic, viewing education as a key pathway to imagined futures and upward mobility.

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Introduction

International mobility for education has grown steadily over the past two decades, with an estimated 6.9 million students enrolled in higher education abroad in 2022, a 176% increase from 2.5 million in 2002 (UIS 2024). Once concentrated at the university level, this phenomenon has expanded to include younger cohorts, with growing numbers of families undertaking migration as a family project to secure better educational opportunities, future careers, and global citizenship (Browne 2017; Molz 2021). Education in the Global North, and particularly in Anglophone countries, given the global dominance of English (Galloway and Rose 2015), continues to be framed as a pathway to enhanced social mobility (OECD 2025). This narrative has turned migration into a carefully managed family project for many middle-class households as families seek to secure educational opportunities starting from earlier ages, rather than waiting for university-level transitions (Atterberry 2025; Louie 2012). In such projects, parents make considerable sacrifices, leaving behind established careers and social networks to secure what they perceive as brighter futures for their children. Such decisions are often shaped by a combination of aspirations for upward mobility (Boccagni 2017; de Haas 2021), concerns about domestic educational standards (Kolluoğlu and Dinçer 2023; Syed et al. 2008), and recognition of the role of English as a global language (Lan 2018).

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Securing children's futures through educational migration often involves implicit or explicit 'contracts' between parents and children, in which parental sacrifices are tied to expectations of educational success. This dynamic has been theorised as an '*immigrant bargain*', a concept that captures the negotiation of responsibilities and obligations between parents and children (Smith 2006). Despite the emotional and material costs of migration, including downward mobility (Chen and Buckingham 2024; Gans 2009; Söhn and Prekodravac 2021) and limited social and linguistic capital (Idemudia, Williams, and Wyatt 2013; Norton 2013), parents undertake what Smith (2006) calls a 'life-defining sacrifice' (p. 126). This is motivated by dreams that their children will fulfil their potential through educational success and, therefore, redeem their parents' struggles. However, as Smith notes, children as agentive subjects may resist this pressure to succeed, reject the terms of this intergenerational contract, or pursue trajectories that diverge from their parents' aspirations. Moreover, the imagined futures that parents invest in do not always materialise, as structural barriers in host societies (see Chicas and Melwani 2025), as well as interpersonal and identity-related factors, complicate these migration projects. Nevertheless, parents often sustain what Kao and Tienda (1995) refer to as 'migrant optimism', maintaining hope that their sacrifices will eventually pay off.

This study investigates the narrative construction of emotions such as aspiration and sacrifice in the migration accounts of Turkish mothers in London. As Bamberg (1997) notes, narratives are not merely records of past events but 'representations of something that once happened and what this past happening meant to the narrator' (335). The study takes this meaning-making function of narrative as its starting point, exploring the verbal expression of such emotions through storytelling as participants reflect on their decisions to migrate and navigate unfamiliar linguistic, educational, and cultural systems.

Drawing on a narrative analytic framework (Bamberg 1997, 2011), the study traces how participants orient to storylines of 'starting from scratch' and construct moral accounts of migration. It also considers how emotional and intergenerational tensions are expressed and negotiated in these narratives, as mothers confront the gap between their aspirations and the lived realities of resettlement. The research questions guiding this analysis are as follows:

- (1) How are migration decisions and educational aspirations narratively constructed by mothers as part of a family project?
- (2) What emotional, material, and intergenerational dimensions emerge in these narratives?

Theoretical considerations: educational mobility as a family project

Migration aspirations

Although the main drivers of migration are often framed in economic terms, emotions such as desire, imagined futures, and selves, and identity concerns can also play a significant role in decision-making processes. In this paper, educational migration is examined as stemming from parents' aspirations and desires for imagined futures for their children. Carling and Collins (2018) describe aspiration as more than a rational calculation; it is deeply tied to desire and reflects 'affective and material components of becoming' (p. 918). In other words, individuals imagine new futures for themselves in relation to certain places, what they call 'imagined geographies of migration', and, when circumstances allow, they act on these aspirations by migrating (Carling and Schewel 2018). Building on this, Boccagni (2017) argues that studying migration aspirations as 'imagined constructions of their future' (2) provides an important lens for understanding how personal hopes and structural constraints interact.

As Carling and Collins (2018) observe, whereas people in many migrant-sending countries once regarded emigration as undesirable, it is now increasingly seen as aspirational, a marker of success, a means of escaping traditional lifestyles (Punch and Sugden 2013), and even a form of heroism.

Similarly, de Haas (2021) argues that international migration is increasingly perceived as a pathway to a 'good life', with some young people he interviewed expressing a strong desire to leave despite having relatively stable lives. Aspiration to migrate is particularly strong in Turkey, where structural constraints and imagined opportunities abroad intersect. This pattern is also observed in India and Egypt (Rutten and Verstappen 2014; Schielke 2008). Rutten and Verstappen (2014), for instance, describe how middle-class Indians who migrate to London often perceive their move as a marker of upward mobility, even though they frequently encounter downward mobility in the UK. Similarly, in Turkey, a nationwide survey of youth aged 18–25 (KAS 2023) found that 63% would choose to live abroad if given the opportunity, reflecting widespread desires for alternative futures beyond the country's borders. These aspirations were shaped less by immediate economic necessity and more by hopes for improved living standards (48%), greater personal freedom (21%), and a sense of safety (17%).

Research has consistently shown that migrant parents often hold stronger aspirations for their children's success than their local counterparts, and education is seen as a key vehicle for their upward social mobility (Ryan 2011; Ryan et al. 2009). Among the Turkish middle-class parents at the heart of this study, migration emerges primarily as a strategy to secure better educational opportunities and career prospects for their children. These accounts reflect middle-class moral norms of 'good parenting' (Yurdakul and Altay 2022), where the willingness to 'start from scratch' is constructed as a necessary investment in the next generation.

Immigrant bargain

When parents' aspirations for a better future for their children are realised through the act of migration, a further moral and affective expectation often emerges that their sacrifices will be justified by their children's academic success. Smith (2006) conceptualises this as an 'immigrant bargain', a moral contract between parents and children. This can be explicitly stated or subtly implied, and the children are expected to repay their parents' efforts through educational achievement. Drawing on his ethnographic work with Mexican immigrant families in New York, Smith argues that parents expect their sacrifices, leaving behind careers, stability, and social networks, to be repaid through their children's educational success. If children validate these sacrifices through hard work at school and eventual career achievement, the family is perceived as having fulfilled the bargain.

Smith's research shows that this dynamic is far from straightforward. Some children resist or reject their parents' narratives of sacrifice and indebtedness, viewing these as stories constructed and imposed by their parents. Others attempt to repay this perceived debt through exceptional effort at school. Smith also observes that gang membership among some Mexican teenagers in New York can be understood as a response to parental pressures to succeed, as these young people seek recognition in more marginal spaces. He further argues that parents' migration projects are often decisions made without fully accounting for the lived realities of their children, who, as immigrant youth, must navigate discrimination and socio-cultural difficulties of adapting to new school environments. These tensions are compounded by classed experiences, as parents working long hours in manual jobs and living in low-income neighbourhoods struggle to provide the stability they once had.

In her study with Dominican and Colombian families in the United States, Louie (2012) explores how migrant parents sustain optimism despite experiences of declassing, linguistic barriers, and socio-cultural adaptation challenges. Her findings reveal that many parents migrated not out of necessity, but from relatively stable lives with home ownership and regular employment. While some eventually attained upward economic mobility, others experienced downward mobility both occupationally and economically. However, regardless of outcome, parents often framed their migration journey as the right decision, describing it as having entered 'the promise of possibility' (41). This narrative of sacrifice and hope allowed them to construct their migration as a

meaningful and worthwhile story. This phenomenon, first introduced by Kao and Tienda (1995) as immigrant optimism, describes how immigrant parents maintain strong faith in the value of their sacrifices, even when confronted with structural barriers. These challenges, including disadvantages in education, access to the labour market, and occupational attainment, are well documented in the literature on migrants from less-developed contexts (Heath, Rothon, and Kilpi-Jakonen 2008; Lan 2018). At the same time, other research suggests that immigrant optimism can ‘paradoxically motivate and immunise immigrants (...) to move on and overcome difficulties’ (Santagati 2020, p. 479).

Previous research on family migration has highlighted how parental aspirations for their children’s education often involve significant emotional and material costs among Chinese (Louie 2004; Tran, Lee, and Huang 2019), Indian (Atterberry 2025), and Latin American parents (Crosnoe 2013; Louie 2012; Smith 2006). The present study turns to the stories of Turkish middle-class families who narrate their move to the UK not as a pursuit of opportunity for themselves, but as a deliberate investment in their children’s futures.

Turkish Migration to the UK

Turkish migration to the UK has historically occurred in multiple waves, beginning with Turkish Cypriots in the 1930s, followed by political refugees and asylum seekers in the 1980s–1990s, and economic migrants in the 1970s after labour agreements with countries like Germany and the Netherlands were suspended (Kirişçi 2003; Özbilgin and Yıldız 2022; Sirkeci and Esipova 2013). These earlier waves were largely composed of male labourers from rural areas, often unskilled or semi-skilled, who settled in North London and worked in sectors such as kebab shops and off-licences (Akgündüz 1993; Bilecen, Tilbe, and Mahmutoglu 2025; İçduygu 2012; İçduygu and Kirişçi 2009). In contrast, the past two decades have seen the rise of a distinct fourth wave: well-educated, middle-class Turkish professionals migrating under the Ankara Agreement. Although the agreement was signed in 1973, the UK began implementing it in 2007 (Sirkeci et al. 2016).

As the Ankara Agreement was binding on the UK as an EU member, the Home Office announced its termination following Brexit on 31 December 2020 (Home Office 2022). This triggered a surge in applications from Turkish nationals (Erem 2020), rising from 4,018 in 2019 to 31,051 in 2020, with over 20,000 submitted in the final three months alone (Home Office 2021). While this increase was partly driven by the deadline, it also reflected broader political and economic uncertainty in Turkey, including heightened economic instability and growing unease over the country’s secular-democratic trajectory. These developments are rooted in deeper historical tensions between secular-modern and religious-conservative visions of society. This divide dates back to the early Republican reforms, which sought to replace the Ottoman-Islamic institutional framework with a secular nation-state model and modern education system (Berkas 1998; Lewis 1999; Yılmaz 2021). A growing body of research identifies the migrants leaving under these conditions as part of a ‘new wave’ of outmigration (see Filiz 2024; Özçürümez and Yetkin-Aker 2016; Yanaşmayan 2018), composed largely of metropolitan, middle-class citizens with secular and Western-oriented outlooks (İkizoglu-Erensu 2025).

Scholars (Alaranta 2016; Karakaya-Stump 2017; Yılmaz 2021) argue that since Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, secular-modern ideals have been overshadowed by a political discourse promoting anti-Western and Muslim nationalist values, which are also reflected in educational reforms (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017; Kaya 2016). Education has been a key site of reform, reflected in the expansion of state religious schools (Imam Hatip), increasing religious emphasis within the national curriculum (Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017), and the symbolic reintroduction of Ottoman Turkish into high schools (Yazan and Üzümlü 2017). Qur’anic and Islamic education has long been part of domestic culture in Anatolia and smaller towns (Saygi and Erduyan 2023), but its expansion through state reforms has increasingly contrasted with the expectations of secular, urban middle-class families.

These anxieties are not only about education but also about belonging. Scholars have argued that secular, urban, Western-oriented citizens increasingly experience a sense of emotional and practical disconnection from the national community (Onay 2024). Yılmaz (2021), drawing on Anderson's (2013) concept of 'failed citizens,' further argues that this group has been symbolically marginalised within today's hegemonic national identity discourse. Similarly, Başer and Öztürk (2022) note that those who feel misaligned with the government's construction of the 'ideal citizen' turn to migration as a way of safeguarding their values and aspirations. In this broader context, the UK emerged as a particularly significant destination, as will be detailed in the following sections.

Methodology

This study draws on narrative interviews with Turkish families in London to explore how educational migration is experienced and narrated as a family project. The first author, a Turkish researcher, accessed the Turkish-speaking community in London through personal networks and a snowball sampling approach. The study focused on families with teenage children aged 12–18 who had been born in Turkey, and were therefore able to recall and narrate their migration journey. Data collection took place between October and November 2024 and consisted of narrative interviews lasting 40–90 min. In total, 12 Turkish families participated, including 10 mothers and 13 teenage children. The first author interviewed the mothers in Turkish, while the second author simultaneously interviewed the children in English in the participants' homes. All participants were provided with detailed information sheets, and informed consents were obtained before interviews.¹

Ethical approval was sought specifically for interviews with mothers, as they were our primary point of contact during recruitment and the participants who consistently consented to share their narratives. Fathers, by contrast, often worked long hours or multiple jobs after migration and were therefore less available for extended interviews. Mothers also described themselves as the main actors responsible for children's schooling and adaptation, a pattern noted in research highlighting maternal centrality in the daily educational labour and decision-making (İkizoglu-Erensu 2025; Lan 2018; Yurdakul and Altay 2022). In some interviews, fathers were present in the household and occasionally contributed to the conversation; however, because ethical approval was granted specifically for interviews with mothers, their comments are not systematically included in the analysis. Informally, mothers and fathers often appeared to be in broad agreement, but our analysis focuses solely on maternal accounts of parenting. All mother interviews were conducted in Turkish, audio-recorded, transcribed (see Appendix for conventions), and later translated into English by the first author.

The participating families were middle-class, with all parents holding university degrees and having established comfortable lives. Most owned their own homes and cars and held stable, professional jobs in urban centres, predominantly in Istanbul. The children migrated between the ages of six and twelve and were enrolled in secondary and high schools in the UK at the time of the interviews. An overview of the participating families with their pseudonyms is provided below (Table 1):

In this study, we focused on participants' narratives to explore how identities and future aspirations are constructed. As Schiffrin (1996) argues, narratives often function as 'self-portraits,' allowing speakers to position themselves in relation to others. We encouraged participants to share personal experiences and stories from their everyday lives. As Tremlett and Harris (2015) note, direct questioning can act as a 'narrowing practice' (13), reducing individuals to fixed social categories. Instead, we sought to elicit more nuanced reflections and adopted a narrative technique (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) to collect and examine the data. This approach enabled us to reflect on not only the identity positionings of participants 'as a process of constant change' (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 393), but also their relationship with the wider world. As Bamberg (2011) argues, narratives, unlike other discourse types, are particularly valuable for tracing time and change, as well as participants' moral and affective positionings about their past and imagined futures. To this end, we adopted Bamberg's (1997) three-level narrative positioning model, and at the first level, we explored how narrators positioned the characters within

Table 1. Participant profile.

Participants	Mother- Child Names	Migration Route & Year, City of Origin	Current Location in London	Employment in Turkey Mother/ Father	Employment in London Mother/ Father
Mom-Daughter	Meltem-Asya	Ankara Agreement, 2018, Istanbul	Edmonton	Teacher/ Army Officer	Teaching Assistant/ Teaching Assistant
Mom-Two Sons	Aynur-Ali&Yusuf	Ankara Agreement, 2019, Bursa	Enfield	Teacher/ Teacher	Teaching/ Assistant/ Construction worker
Mom-Daughter	Selin-Mira	Skilled Visa, 2019, Istanbul	Richmond	Corporate professional / Businessman	Corporate Professional/ Businessman ^a
Mom-Son	Zekiye-Mert	Ankara Agreement, 2020, Istanbul	Richmond	Family-owned Company	Accounts Assistant/ (Uber) Driver
Mom-Son	Funda-Eymen	Ankara Agreement, 2019, Istanbul	Richmond	Directors at an International Company	M.A. Student/Shop Assistant
Mom-Son	Birsen-Aybars	Ankara Agreement, 2020, Istanbul	Finchley	Actress/ Freelance Artist	Babysitter/ Freelance Artist
Mom-Daughter	Melda-Ece	Ankara Agreement, 2022, Istanbul	Central London	Lecturer/ Businessman	Unemployed/ Start-up Company
Group Interview: 3 Mothers + 6 Daughters	Sema, Esma, Latife + Beril,Defne, Ezgi,Sezen, Pelin, Buket	Ankara Agreement, 2020, Istanbul	Richmond	Teachers/ Teachers	Unemployed, Unemployed, Shop Assistant/ Start-up Company

^aThe mother migrated to the UK with her child after a divorce, while the father continues to live in Turkey.

their stories. At the second level, we analysed how narrators positioned themselves in relation to us as interviewers as an *'interactional accomplishment'* (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 385); for instance, as confirmation seekers or as defenders of their perspectives. Finally, at the third level, we examined how narrators constructed their relationship with the wider social and ideological world.

Findings

Narratives of leaving a good life behind

All the mothers involved in this study framed their migration decisions as a parental obligation, expressed through the recurring phrase 'we did it for the children', and grounded in aspirations for an imagined future. In narrating her family's migration story, Zekiye, a mother of two boys, emphasises: *'we didn't come to make money or save money everyone came here for their children'*. In doing so, she highlights that migration was neither a selfish project for individual career or life goals, nor a pursuit of economic gain. Referring to her husband, she adds: *'Mehmet (the father) wants the kids to get into a Russell Group² university'*, referring to Britain's prestigious research-led institutions.

This framing also connects personal sacrifices to broader anxieties about Turkey's future. Families who describe themselves as living comfortably nonetheless position migration as necessary to shield children from political and economic instability. Selin, for instance, who lived in one of Istanbul's most elite neighbourhoods within a gated community, reflects:

Narrative 1. It was more than our own lives

Mira was studying at a good school we were living in a good neighbourhood but it is not only about ourselves – you know – it is also about the general structure of society the course of the economy social polarisation – concerns about security – concerns about the future – when ALL these come together yes (laughter) unfortunately (.)

Here, within the story world, Selin positions her family as secure and stable. However, the conflict emerges from the concerns about broader societal instability rather than dissatisfaction with their circumstances. By saying ‘you know’, Selin invites shared understanding and subtly positions the Turkish interviewer as someone likely to align with her view. At level 3 (Bamberg 1997), the participants in this study including Selin construct themselves as modern, secular, and globally oriented citizens, aligning their identities with the ideals of Turkey’s early Republican era (Keyman and İçduygu 2005) and contrasting this self-positioning with what they perceive as the increasingly religious-conservative orientation of contemporary Turkey. Selin’s reference to ‘social polarisation’ captures this growing divide between secular and Islamist blocs in Turkey. In contrast, she idealises the British education system, noting *‘the state school here is like one of Turkey’s top private schools – students come from all social classes – there are even children of parents who won Oscars or graduated from Oxford’*. For Selin, access to the British school system symbolises entry into elite opportunity structures and global networks, positioning it as an aspirational site where her children can cultivate social and cultural capital.

‘We Want Them to Become English’: parental language and identity aspirations

Mothers’ narratives reveal that their children’s adjustment to school life and learning English were significant sources of stress, but also central to parental aspirations for their children’s futures. Many expressed a strong desire for their children to speak English ‘like native speakers’, without any trace of a foreign accent, suggesting not only a concern with linguistic competence but also an aspiration for their children to blend fully into British society. However, these aspirations for English could come at the expense of Turkish, which was positioned as a non-essential and peripheral role in family life. As Meltem explained, *‘since they will live their lives here I would honestly prefer their English to be much better than their Turkish’*. Similarly, Aynur remarked, *‘we even banned Turkish TV at home so they can focus on English’*, adding that she encourages her son *‘to make friends with English children’* while discouraging him from *‘socialising too much with other Turkish students at school’*.

Mothers often treated Turkish as less important, focusing instead on English and the activities they believed would secure their children’s future in Britain. Funda’s account shows how the opportunity to learn Turkish was repeatedly postponed because her son’s timetable was already full:

Narrative 2. No time for Turkish

we *always* wanted to support him in that but this year there was no time and the year before there was no time either (.) we just couldn’t fit it into Eymen’s schedule- he’s in a good class and he wants to be there so he’s already taking extra maths lessons and goes to drama three times a week and art and boxing as well.

Funda’s narrative constructs her as a highly responsible and supportive mother who closely monitors her son’s demanding schedule and extracurricular activities to ensure his academic success. However, this positioning contrasts sharply with how she frames Turkish, which she treats as optional and easily postponed. Mothers’ narratives about Turkish reveal how they construct their children’s linguistic trajectories as unidirectional towards English monolingualism. The mothers’ language policies reflect their broader identity goals, focusing less on Turkish belonging and more on fostering British or global citizenship. As Zekiye put it:

Narrative 3. We came here to assimilate

we want them to be like English people we want them to be world citizens- unlike the Turks in the north we came here to assimilate (.) at school they asked if we wanted to tick the box so our children wouldn’t eat pork because of our religion and we said NO we want them to adapt- wherever they go in the world they’ll eat bear they’ll eat crocodile so let them try pork too- if they want to eat it fine if not that’s also FINE- we didn’t want them to be marked out in this way

Here, within the story world, Zekiye conveys her aspiration for her children to embody an English identity, which she equates with being ‘world citizens’. She positions herself in contrast to earlier

Turkish migrants in Haringey, North London, whom she views as a closed ethno-national community that failed to integrate and achieve success. Eating pork, a major taboo in Turkey, largely rooted in Islamic identity and cultural norms, becomes a symbolic act of openness for Zekiye. By encouraging her children not to make distinctions based on religious dietary restrictions, she constructs a narrated self as an open-minded, responsible mother, preparing them to adapt seamlessly to global contexts and avoid marginalisation. Therefore, assimilation, understood as full integration into British society by Zekiye, is not seen as a threat but is constructed as aspirational. Similarly, like all the Turkish mothers in this study who position earlier Turkish migrants in London as the antagonist of their stories, Funda remarks that *'I don't intend to be part of the Turkish community here'*, highlighting her aspiration to foster more global connections.

However, these linguistic, educational, and identity-related aspirations of parents often clash with their children's own perspectives and migration experiences. Aynur shared, *'my son refused to speak English for a year and a half and kept saying he wanted to go back'*. Her older son, she reported, was also bullied at school, and he told her, *'everyone talks and everyone laughs in class but the teacher specifically gets angry at me and blames me for everything'*. She suggested that her son experienced discrimination, which led him to seek comfort in friendships with other Turkish students. Aynur added that her son, Ali, even started fasting during Ramadan to align himself with Muslim peers, although the family themselves do not fast. This reflects his attempt to seek belonging and protection by drawing on his own ethnic and religious identities. Interestingly, while many parents described Turkish as low priority, some children chose to take Turkish GCSE or A-level³, either as a way to stay connected to their heritage or as a strategic means to secure an additional qualification they could later draw on. These experiences stand in contrast to parents' aspirations for their children to become 'English' or 'global citizens' in a world where, in practice, borders and boundaries remain firmly in place even in the way children form peer groups.

The mothers' narratives also reveal a tension between their high educational aspirations, what Louie (2012) describes as 'migrant optimism', and their children's own imagined futures. For instance, Aynur reports having conflicts and arguments with her two sons as they are *'lazy and comfortable'*, while Meltem, who initially acted like a teacher at home, said she had to give up after her daughter *'went crazy'* under the pressure. While parents often interpret these responses as resistance or lack of ambition, children's views may also reflect a more grounded, experience-based realism constructed through the structural and social challenges they face in their everyday lives. Selin also reflected on this disconnect, recalling: *'I wanted my daughter to study at Oxford or Cambridge but she told me to FORGET IT – she said there's no way – that's a whole other universe.'* When asked whether they imposed pressure on their daughter to pursue such goals, Selin acknowledged: *'yes we do put pressure on her yes (...) we keep reminding her there was a purpose to coming here wasn't there darling?'* What parents often frame as 'gentle reminders' exemplifies the migrant bargain in operation. Children are expected to repay their parents' sacrifices through academic achievement, and this tacit contract may become visible when children begin to resist or reject these expectations.

'Starting over at 40': downward mobility and parental optimism

The identity aspirations of these Turkish families also shaped their choice of neighbourhoods. Unlike earlier Turkish migrants who settled in North London's Haringey, a relatively segregated area, this new wave clustered in Richmond upon Thames, an affluent borough with high educational attainment and outstanding schools, as rated by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (Richmond.gov.uk 2025). Many families coordinated through WhatsApp before migrating, sharing information on schools and housing, and ended up following similar paths, securing the same visas, moving to the same area, and enrolling their children in the same schools.

For mothers, migration was not an escape from hardship but an investment in education. They often stressed that they belonged to a middle class 'with something to lose' and sought to protect

this status by settling in affluent areas with top schools. Zekiye explained this shared strategy as follows:

Narrative 4. We are people with something to lose

Everyone who came around the same time as us had something to lose (...) there are one thousand Turkish families here now in Richmond because the outstanding schools are in Richmond (.) before we came here we already knew which schools our kids would attend- we chased after education for our children even changing countries for it- now we have WhatsApp groups with other Turkish families-GCSE clubs and everything

It is striking how Zekiye describes this new wave of Turkish migrants in Richmond as people having 'something to lose'. Unlike earlier waves of Turkish migrants, predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled workers who settled in North London in search of a more comfortable life than they had in Turkey, these families migrated despite already leading privileged lives. By choosing Richmond rather than a working-class migrant neighbourhood, they aimed to reproduce the middle-class norms and lifestyles they were accustomed to in Turkey, as Zekiye positions herself as part of this goal-oriented group. However, this choice came with significant material costs for almost all participants, except for one family who migrated on a skilled visa with a job offer secured in advance. As Latife noted: '*we paid a huge amount of money to rent a house in the catchment area of an outstanding school*'. For nearly all participants, migration to London involved significant emotional and material sacrifices. The analysis revealed recurring themes of downward occupational mobility, declassing, and the panic and anxiety of starting life over. As mothers recounted:

Narrative (fragments) 5. Starting life from scratch

- (a) 'Our children say we were rich in Turkey are we poor here?' Melda, Funda, Zekiye
- (b) 'Our house isn't nice – the child feels ashamed' Aynur
- (c) 'Children want their own room' Melda
- (d) 'We are living at the bare minimum' Funda
- (e) 'We started from zero' Sema
- (f) 'At 40 we reset ourselves to being 18 again' Zekiye
- (g) 'When you come here you start life from scratch forgetting your past experiences' Meltem

What is notable in these narrative fragments is that almost half of the respondents recounted having the exact same conversation with their children, asking whether they are now poor in the UK (a). Although families do their best to provide their children with similar opportunities to those they had in Turkey, this often proves impossible. For instance, Aynur said her sons feel ashamed of their flat compared to their peers' houses with gardens and therefore, avoid inviting friends over (b). Similarly, Melda reported that while her children once had separate rooms in their 250 m² home in central Istanbul, they now share a room and sleep in bunk beds in a 50 m² London flat (c). This perceived economic hardship is closely linked to the downward occupational mobility that nearly all families in the study encountered. The inability to transfer professional credentials and skills across borders often results in migrants working in positions below their qualifications, and this pattern is widely observed in migration literature (Akresh 2008; Friedberg 2000). As detailed in the participant table (see Methodology), 11 out of 12 families reported occupational downgrading after migration. Mothers often described this process using metaphors of erasure and starting over as seen in (e), (f), and (g). Through these remarks, the mothers at the same time position themselves as responsible parents who sacrificed their middle-class stability in pursuit of the educational success of their children.

Beyond the loss of socio-economic status, mothers also faced challenges in navigating the British education system and feeling inadequate. Aynur, for instance, shared that she took a functional writing course to learn how to email her son's teacher about his academic performance, but added, '*we didn't get a response on that either.*' Sema similarly expressed her frustration: '*water*

finds its own way but as a mother I don't know how to provide help this has exhausted my mind and heart – the teacher only said well done- but where does this child stand compared to average? These accounts highlight not only parents' high ambitions for their children's success but also their feelings of disempowerment and lack of support when trying to engage with the school system, despite their educational qualifications and professional backgrounds in Turkey. As Aynur and her husband put it, '*we didn't bring our children here to become kebabçı (kebab sellers)*', drawing a clear line between their aspirations and those they associate with earlier generations of Turkish migrants, who were often employed in low-skilled, working-class jobs. This positioning involves not only the stereotypification and essentialisation of indexical features (Silverstein 2003) associated with Turks in Europe, but also a form of intragroup boundary making through othering earlier generations of Turkish migrants.

For many mothers, these sacrifices only made sense if they resulted in children's academic success. Migration was described as an investment that could easily feel wasted if children failed to meet expectations. As Aynur explained, the value of migration hinged on whether her children could fulfil the hopes she and her husband had built around them:

Narrative 6. If they fail, it was all for nothing

Aynur: we came here for them- if we can't educate them I think sometimes I say this to my husband- don't get me wrong- BUT if we can do something if we see that they achieve something we'll say thank god we came otherwise it will really feel like our life was for nothing- maybe all for nothing (.)

Hasret: do you think that creates pressure on the children? =

Aynur: = I think it does actually- hahaha- sometimes I do emotional blackmail (...) it also comes from the fact that both of our working conditions were quite tough- the attitudes of the people we worked with were not so nice- those hard conditions pushed us to emotionally blackmail them

In this narrative, Aynur reiterates that their migration was primarily for their children's future, using 'we' to position herself and her husband as the agents and morally responsible figures behind their children's educational success. However, the burden of validating the entire migration journey is ultimately placed on the children. When the interviewer asks whether this binary framing of success or failure places undue pressure on the children, in her second turn, Aynur immediately responds by showing her literal alignment. This is followed by laughter, potentially signalling a moment of self-awareness or an implicit acknowledgment of this pressure. With this laughter, she might also be managing how she is perceived by the researcher, as, in this way, her use of the term 'emotional blackmail' is delivered in a light-hearted tone. However, it reveals the serious emotional economy underlying the contract among family members. Aynur then feels the need to justify this pressure by referencing the difficult working conditions she and her husband have endured in the UK. Through this emotionally loaded narrative, Aynur positions her children's success not only as a hope but as a moral obligation, which exemplifies what Smith (2006) terms the *immigrant bargain*.

Discussion

This study has examined the aspirations and sacrifices involved in middle-class Turkish family migration to London, using Bamberg's (1997) three-level narrative positioning framework. Drawing on the interview-based narratives of migrant mothers, the analysis explored how participants construct educational migration as a moral responsibility toward their children, justify their decisions through imagined futures, and position themselves within a global, success-oriented middle-class identity. These narratives were not merely recountings of past events but socially situated, intersubjective acts of identity work (Ochs and Capps 2001). Through them, speakers evaluated their personal roles, positioned themselves in relation to others, and made sense of their place within broader social worlds. In this way, the mothers' stories became a site where private attitudes

intersect with wider discourses (Du Bois 2007) of mobility, identity aspirations, and belonging. By mobilising their cultural and linguistic resources, the mothers justified their decisions, reflected on sacrifice, and framed migration as an investment in their children's future.

Across the six narratives, a broader trajectory emerged: mothers' aspirations for their children's futures were consistently framed as parental responsibilities, but these aspirations depended on sacrifice and often clashed with children's lived realities, as reported by mothers. The opening narratives of leaving a good life behind (Narrative 1) established migration as a project of duty and hope, which then extended into specific aspirations around language and identity, such as prioritising English and assimilation (Narratives 2-3). These were followed by accounts of clustering in Richmond (Narrative 4), where parents' individual projects merged into collective middle-class strategies of securing access to prestigious schools. The analysis then turned to the costs of such projects, as captured in stories of starting life over in their forties (Narrative 5) and fears of wasted sacrifice if children failed (Narrative 6). Taken together, these narratives guided the reader from aspiration to sacrifice, showing how educational migration was simultaneously imagined as privilege and carried as cost.

Tracing this trajectory across the narratives shows how families consistently described downward mobility and occupational loss following migration. Despite these economic challenges, mothers consistently narrated their migration journeys as heroic sacrifices tied to 'imagined geographies' (Carling and Schewel 2018) and 'imagined constructions of their future' (Boccagni 2017, 2). The narratives positioned them as responsible parents who willingly bear the burden of hardship in order to secure their children's futures, associating sacrifice with good parenting and moral duty. For instance, in Narrative 6, Aynur's description of 'emotional blackmail' illustrates how parents explicitly framed sacrifice as a moral debt to be repaid by children's academic success. Mothers' narratives also revealed a strong and enduring belief in higher education as a key pathway to class mobility. This optimism is closely tied to an idealisation of the West, echoing the early Republican ideology in Turkey that equated Westernisation with modernity, and positioned it as something to be 'caught up with' (Cesur, Hanquinet, and Duru 2018; Yilmaz 2021). For the families in this study, 'good education' and 'global citizenship' were understood through this Western-oriented lens, which they saw as contrasting sharply with Turkey's recent political and educational shifts. Due to this romanticisation of the West, the mothers' narratives frequently downplayed the structural barriers and racial discrimination that migrant children face within the host country's education systems and labour markets. As Sharps and Anderson (2021) note, 'upward mobility is also powerfully determined by processes that occur after college, when individuals launch their work careers' (129). These career trajectories are often shaped by perceptions of cultural fit and implicit biases in hiring. However, such structural challenges were largely absent from the idealised visions articulated by the mothers, even though the majority of the children in this project entered the education system at a later age as 1.5 generation immigrants.

Besides, while the parents often frame themselves as the primary bearers of sacrifice and hardship, the findings also reveal the significant emotional and material costs experienced by children in this migration journey. In Narratives 2 and 3, for instance, while parents deprioritised Turkish in favour of assimilation, children did not always follow this path. Some reportedly resisted by seeking belonging through Muslim or Turkish peer networks, while others engaged with Turkish GCSE/A-levels, sometimes as their own way of maintaining ties to heritage. Mothers' accounts described how children faced lowered living standards, such as giving up their own rooms, as well as experiences of discrimination and difficulty adjusting in school settings. The study further found that the concept of the immigrant bargain (Smith 2006) was frequently evoked in parent-child interactions to encourage academic effort (Alvarez 2015). Mothers' narratives showed that children were often explicitly reminded of the family's sacrifices and the expectation to succeed academically in return. When these ambitious expectations were unmet or resisted, several mothers reported that these mismatches had strained their relationships with their teenage children, leading to emotional distance and conflict. Besides, the findings have revealed that parental

expectations concerning linguistic choices and social relationships, such as which language to prioritise or which peers to become friends with, sometimes clash with children's own identity aspirations. These pressures and tensions, shaped by a narrative of indebtedness, invite important questions: whose dream was it to migrate, who ultimately bears the cost, and at what price is future success pursued?

While these insights shed light on the affective and narrative dimensions of educational migration, the study also has certain limitations. It draws on a single round of interviews and focuses on how parents retrospectively construct the narratives of their migration decisions and current experiences, rather than tracing how these narratives evolve. A longitudinal design could offer insight into shifting family dynamics, emerging tensions, and changing perceptions of success. This approach would also be valuable in tracing how the immigrant bargain unfolds over time. Because the data are based on mothers' accounts, the analysis presented here reflects a maternal perspective rather than the full range of parental voices. Future research could incorporate the perspectives of other actors involved in children's educational journeys to examine how aspirations are challenged or co-constructed within broader social networks. In this context, the present findings underscore the substantial emotional and material investments involved in educational migration. Even well-educated and financially secure middle-class parents may experience downward mobility, while their children face considerable pressure to succeed. Taken together, these findings challenge dominant narratives of migration to the Global North as a straightforward path to upward mobility and reveal the emotional, relational, and structural burdens such journeys may entail.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted how educational migration is not only shaped by economic and social conditions, but also sustained through parents' affective and narrative labour. Overall, the study has shown that nearly all parents in this research were unable to replicate the professional and economic status they held in Turkey, even after an average of five years in the UK. Despite working in blue-collar or lower-status jobs, many deliberately chose to settle in affluent neighbourhoods such as Richmond to maintain their middle-class position by securing access to high-performing schools. In this sense, they maintain symbolic middle-class belonging while materially positioned closer to the lower-middle class in the UK context. While it remains uncertain whether the parents themselves will re-establish their previous careers, they place their hopes in their children's ability to achieve upward mobility. They display what Louie (2012) describes as 'immigrant optimism', not through the cultural power of the American Dream, as in Louie's study, but rather through a belief in a British version of that dream through imagined access to elite institutions.

Notes

1. This study received ethical approval from the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee (REC2037) on August 5, 2024.
2. The Russell Group comprises 24 research-intensive public universities across the UK. These institutions are widely regarded for their academic excellence and highly competitive entry standards.
3. GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A level (Advanced Level) are national school examinations in England, typically taken at ages 16 and 18, respectively. Turkish is available as an optional modern language subject, but is often taken outside mainstream schooling, either through complementary schools or private tutoring.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study consist of interview transcripts and are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and participant confidentiality.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

()	contextual information
(...)	omitted parts of speech
(.)	pause of more than one second
–	pause of less than one second or hesitation
CAPitals	high volume
=	contiguous utterances
/ /	overlapping utterances
?	rising intonation
.	falling intonation