

Research Article

Learning in Submersion Classrooms Georgian Context

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of ethnic minority students in Georgia's submersion schools regarding their sense of belonging and the management of linguistic and cultural diversity by teachers. With ethnic minorities, particularly Armenians and Azerbaijanis, comprising approximately 13% of Georgia's population, challenges arise due to limited proficiency in the state language, Georgian. Since 2005, Georgia has implemented policies to promote the Georgian language in schools, yet ethnic minority students often face difficulties integrating fully into the education system. The purpose of this research is to examine students' feelings of acceptance in the school community and assess how teachers manage classroom diversity. A mixed-methods approach was used, including a survey of 160 non-Georgian-speaking students and focus group interviews with 38 teachers. The results reveal that teachers' low expectations and ethnocentric attitudes limit the effectiveness of diversity management in classrooms. The study concludes that the lack of intercultural awareness and supportive teaching practices for ethnic minorities hinder their academic success and sense of belonging. The findings suggest that schools need to improve their approach to diversity management by addressing the linguistic and cultural needs of minority students to foster greater inclusion and support academic achievement.

Keywords

Submersion, Diversity, Intercultural Sensitivity, Integration, Minorities, Teaching, Classroom Management

1. Introduction

In today's world, isolated cultures and societies are increasingly rare. However, recognizing and embracing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity as a valuable asset remains a significant challenge. Although progress has been made toward fostering peaceful coexistence in multicultural environments, much work remains to be done.

Georgia, a country with a rich history of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, faces both opportunities and challenges. According to the 2014 General Population Census, ethnic minorities make up approximately 13% of Georgia's popula-

tion, bringing with them a variety of languages and cultural traditions. This pluralistic reality presents particular challenges for Georgia, especially that many ethnic minorities are not proficient in the state language. During the Soviet era, Russian served as the main language for communication among various ethnic groups, and language policy was not a central concern.

However, since 2005, Georgia has implemented a language policy aimed at strengthening the Georgian language and improving its instruction among ethnic minorities [15, 9, 30,

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21, 26, 28]. Despite the presence of non-Georgian language schools—mainly for Azerbaijanis and Armenians, many Azerbaijani students enroll in Georgian schools and they learn together with their Georgian peers in submersion classrooms [8, 10, 2].

Accordingly, immersion-type schools foster linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity, which, in the context of Georgia's ethnic composition, is also accompanied by religious diversity. The existing diversity can present challenges in ensuring equal access to quality education and providing fair opportunities for all students.

The purpose of this article is to explore the perceptions of ethnic minority students regarding their sense of belonging to the school community and acceptance within the dominant cultural group, as well as to examine how teachers manage diversity in the classroom. This research is essential for understanding the current challenges and successes within Georgia's educational context, while also offering valuable insights for other pluralistic societies worldwide, where the integration of ethnic minorities and migrants is a critical concern.

2. Discussion

2.1. Ethnic Minorities in Georgia

According to the 2014 population census, the largest ethnic minority groups in Georgia are Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In terms of linguistic distribution, 91.7% of the population speaks Georgian fluently, with 95.4% of these individuals identifying Georgian as their first language. However, proficiency in Georgian language is limited among ethnic minorities, with only about 1.3% of the Azerbaijani people (which constitutes 6.7% of the total population) and 1.7% of the Armenian-speaking people (accounting for 4.5% of the population) being fluent in Georgian. The remaining part of the linguistic minorities of the country speaks other languages, including Abkhazian, Russian, Ossetian, and others [31].

Out of Georgia's 2,085 public schools, 208 are non-Georgian-language institutions [30]. This indicates that Georgian citizens from diverse linguistic backgrounds not only have access to a complete general education in their native languages but that the state finances to get education in the native language of ethnic minorities (mainly for two largest ethnic groups—Armenians and Azerbaijanis). In minority language schools, Georgian is taught as a subject to help students acquire proficiency in the state language. While ethnic minority students can attend schools that offer instruction in their native language, many choose to enroll in Georgian-language schools, where they learn among their Georgian classmates [10, 8].

According to the Ministry of Education, the percentage of non-Georgian-speaking students in Georgian-language schools rose from 38.48% in 2016-2017 to 41.17% in 2021, with a notable increase in regions like Kvemo Kartli and

Kakheti, where ethnic Azerbaijanis make up a large part of the population. This trend reflects the growing recognition that proficiency in Georgian is crucial for social and economic integration [10, 8].

While there is a desire for integration, these trends highlight potential educational gaps in non-Georgian language schools and raises concerns about the opportunities getting quality education for ethnic minority students.

Despite this, the submersion model of bilingual education is seen as a model that fosters monolingualism, with the ultimate aim of linguistic assimilation. In many multiethnic countries, linguistic assimilation is viewed as the primary means of uniting citizens, promoting integration, and achieving social harmony [2].

However, Georgia's language policy does not explicitly aim for linguistic assimilation. Instead, the official goal is to preserve native languages and cultures while strengthening the state language [15, 9, 30]. In contrast, submersion programs are increasingly popular within the ethnic Azerbaijani community [10, 8]. As mentioned previously, this trend may be driven by the desire for rapid integration into the dominant cultural group, as well as the limited access to high-quality educational opportunities in Azerbaijani-language schools.

Regardless of the reasons behind the popularity of submersion education programs, the current situation presents a challenge for both education policymakers and the school community in managing linguistic and cultural diversity. In diverse classrooms, teachers play a crucial role, as their attitudes and expectations towards students often become key factors in determining students' academic success.

2.2. The Importance of Positive Attitudes in Managing Classroom Diversity

Every child has the potential to learn and succeed, and it is particularly important to set high expectations for vulnerable students [29]. Research on education [5] highlights how teachers' expectations play a key role in creating a positive cultural environment that supports student engagement in the learning process. Studies [7, 22] demonstrate that teacher expectations greatly influence student motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. When students develop high self-esteem, confidence, and a strong desire to learn, they are more likely to reach their full potential and overcome educational challenges [5, 7, 22].

Rubie-Davies explored how teacher expectations impact students' performance. Teachers with high expectations showed positive correlations between their attitudes and student achievement, while those with low expectations had negative correlations, which affected students' outcomes [19].

What do we mean by "high expectations"? They refer to a strong belief in a student's ability to achieve specific goals. High expectations are based on the belief that every child is capable of reaching their full potential [20]. Brophy and Good [4] described how teachers convey their expectations to stu-

dents through their behaviors:

1. Teachers set different expectations for each student.
2. They treat students according to these expectations.
3. Students react to these different treatments in various ways.
4. Student behavior matches the teacher's expectations.
5. This leads to higher performance in some students and underperformance in others, reflecting the teacher's biases.
6. These effects are seen in assessments, illustrating the "self-fulfilling prophecy" [4].

Research indicates that teachers often have significantly lower expectations for students from low-income, migrant, and ethnic minority backgrounds [12]. Low expectations from teachers can greatly damage minority students' self-confidence, belief in their abilities, and academic success [12, 18].

Studies also indicate that students with lower academic achievement tend to experience higher levels of anxiety and stress than their more successful peers [1]. School-related stress can reduce motivation and negatively impact self-esteem [17, 1, 16 14]. The stress, tension, and feelings of exclusion negatively affect academic performance, motivation to learn, and overall engagement in educational activities [20, 25, 6, 24].

While high expectations alone don't ensure academic success [13, 12], research shows that a positive school environment and a sense of belonging can greatly improve students' emotional well-being and academic performance [12, 13, 18].

Valdez [23] emphasizes the importance of teachers' intercultural skills and how their expectations shape students' self-belief, confidence, sense of belonging, and learning outcomes, particularly for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In the Georgian context, managing diversity in submersion classes is challenging, especially when it comes to teachers' intercultural sensitivity and their capacity to promote and embrace diversity in classrooms.

This article examines how teachers manage diversity in Georgia's submersion schools and explores ethnic minority students' perceptions of their acceptance within the school community and their sense of belonging.

Prior research on minority students in Georgia's submersion classrooms has focused on the challenges these students face in accessing quality education and acquiring proficiency in the Georgian language [10, 11, 15, 21, 30, 27]. Studies have highlighted a growing interest among minority groups, particularly Azerbaijanis and Armenians, in obtaining better education within Georgian schools and the difficulties they encounter due to limited Georgian language instruction [10, 8]. Despite these efforts, the unique contribution of this article lies in its exploration of minority students' perceptions of their sense of belonging and acceptance within the school community. Unlike previous studies, which focused on language and academic barriers, this research investigates how students

themselves feel integrated into their educational environment, an aspect that has not been thoroughly examined. Additionally, the article explores the role of teachers' expectations and how these influence students' academic success and emotional well-being. The relationship between teacher expectations and students' performance, especially in culturally diverse classrooms, has been understudied in the context of Georgia's submersion education system, making this article an important step in addressing these gaps.

3. Research Methodology

This study used both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative component involved surveying students, while the qualitative method focused on exploring teachers' attitudes and approaches to managing diversity through focus group discussions. The research questions were developed to correspond with the goals of the study:

1. R.Q.1: Do minority students feel accepted by the school community, and do they experience a sense of belonging?
2. R.Q.2: How effectively do teachers manage diversity in the classroom?

3.1. Selection of Schools

The research was conducted in two regions of Georgia—Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti. Both regions are densely populated by ethnic minorities. According to data from the Ministry of Education, these regions are actively involved in implementing submersion education programs. From each region, five schools were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The school must have between 20% and 60% non-Georgian students, to provide an objective basis for observing the submersion program.
2. From each municipality, one school with a small student population and one with a large student population.

A total of 10 schools participated in the research. This selection provides a clear comparison between small and large-scale schools, while also allowing us to generalize the findings to schools in Georgia that are implementing submersion programs.

3.2. Selection of Participants

The target group of non-Georgian-speaking students was randomly selected from the class lists provided by the principals. Every second student present at the time of the survey, aged 12 to 16, participated. Since the participants were under 16, informed consent was obtained from the school administration as their legal representatives. The distribution of participants (Grades 7-9) was as follows: 12 years old - 11, 13 years old - 52, 14 years old - 61, 15 years old - 33, and 16 years old - 3. A total of 160 non-Georgian-speaking students were interviewed, including 95 boys and 65 girls.

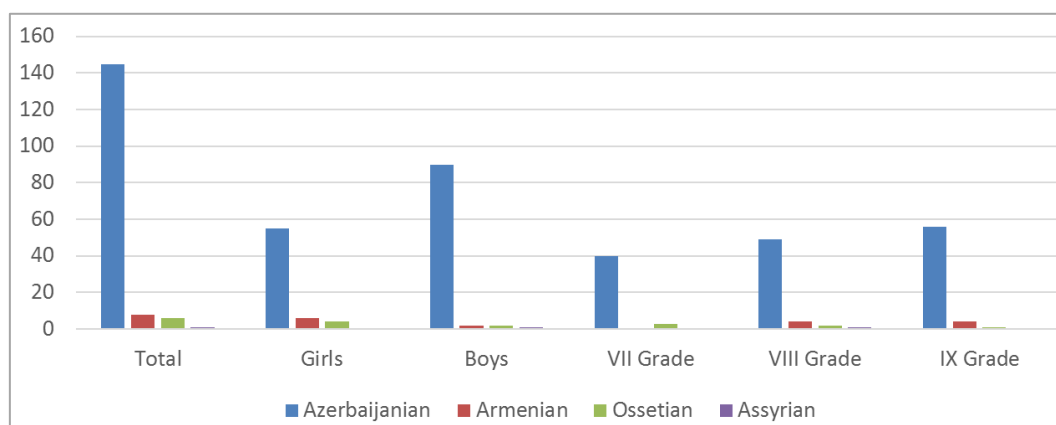


Figure 1. Participants of the study.

The majority of the students (145) spoke Azerbaijani, while the remaining students spoke Assyrian (1), Ossetian (6), or Armenian (8). The grade distribution was as follows: 43 students in grade 7, 56 in grade 8, and 61 in grade 9.

As part of the qualitative research, four focus group interviews were conducted with teachers, with two groups from each target region. A total of 38 teachers participated, including 28 women and 10 men. All participants taught grades 7 to 9 during the research period.

3.3. Research Tools

A quantitative questionnaire was developed for non-Georgian-speaking students in grades 7 to 9, containing of 42 questions/statements. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale with the following options:

- I completely agree
- I agree
- I somewhat agree
- I disagree
- I completely disagree

In the framework of quantitative research, respondents were asked about their stressors, sense of acceptance within the school community, feelings of belonging, and the degree of acceptance they experienced from teachers and students of the dominant culture.

The teachers focus group interviews conducted using a pre-prepared protocol, consisting of three key sections:

- Teachers' attitudes toward classroom diversity.
- Active teaching practices and strategies for managing diversity in the classroom.
- Teachers' expectations for their students.

Quantitative questionnaire data were analyzed using Excel, while audio recordings of teacher focus group interviews were transcribed, coded (PT1-PT38), and analyzed to identify key themes and trends.

3.4. Study Limitations

This research used a structured, closed-ended quantitative

questionnaire to survey students and focus-group protocols to examine teachers' practices on diversity management. While methods like lesson observations and in-depth interviews with minority students could have provided more detailed insights. However, the chosen approaches were sufficient to address the research questions of the article. The findings offer valuable insights for broader research and the development of relevant educational policies for submersion program schools.

4. Analysis of Research Results

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of minority students in submersion classes, specifically their sense of acceptance and belonging and the expectations set by the school community. The results showed a clear gap between the expectations of teachers and the perceptions of minority students. Specifically, 40.6% of non-Georgian-speaking students felt that teachers expected them to perform worse than their Georgian peers. A follow-up question supported this view, with 70% of respondents acknowledging that teachers expected Georgian students to outperform their minority counterparts.

The finding through quantitative survey on teacher law expectations towards minority students was confirmed by the teacher focus group interviews too. While they expected majority students to pursue higher education, minority students were typically expected to attend vocational schools or leave the school after completing basic education level (grade 9).

"Most ethnic minorities drop out after the 9th grade. They are either unwilling to continue their studies, lack the intellectual ability to complete the program, or are only interested in learning the basics, like Georgian for communication." -stated one of teachers.

The teacher expectations contrast with the students' motivation and desire for quality education at Georgian schools. The survey reveals that many minority students aim to receive quality education and pursue higher education. Specifically, 68.5% of students agreed that they chose to study in a Geor-

gian school for better opportunities of getting quality education.

This finding clearly demonstrates that the school community does not fully understand or address the needs and expectations of minority students regarding the curriculum, teaching methods, and their effectiveness. This was also evident in the teachers' attitudes, as only a small number expected non-Georgian students to complete the full general education curriculum and they assign this responsibility solely to the minority students.

Teachers identify two main factors for school dropout of minority students: 1) for girls, early marriage due to Azerbaijani cultural traditions, and 2) for boys, the need for paid work to support the family. During the focus group interviews, teachers demonstrated limited knowledge and acceptance of Azerbaijani culture, instead exhibiting more ethnocentric attitudes and perceptions. Many teachers view early marriage as a religious tradition and avoid addressing it correctly, even though it is illegal in Georgia and detrimental to the physical, mental, and professional development of young people. As a result, the issue of early marriage is largely ignored by the school community. Teachers avoid discussing its negative consequences with students, and the topic remains a taboo due to teacher's ethnocentric views and misunderstanding of other religious and cultural traditions.

Such perceptions indicate a broader lack of intercultural awareness, which adversely affects students' emotional well-being and, in turn, their academic performance. The survey revealed that 87.6% of minority students felt stressed in the classroom, concerned about their ability to effectively demonstrate their knowledge.

Moreover, the study found that teachers often prohibited students from speaking their native languages during breaks to promote social interaction in Georgian. While this practice was intended to foster integration, it inadvertently added stress to minority students, hindering their ability to engage in the school environment comfortably.

The study also assessed minority students' sense of belonging in their school community. A large majority of respondents (88.1%) felt they were in a friendly environment with Georgian peers. According to the survey, 83.7% of minority students hoped for friendly attitudes and relations from Georgian classmates when they began their education. These findings suggest that many minority students entered the school with positive expectations, which were largely met. This highlights a positive aspect of the submersion program, indicating that school administrators and teachers can use this to encourage social interaction and integration among students through various school and extracurricular activities.

The study reveals that extracurricular activities are a preferred means for 65% of the surveyed minority students to express their culture and traditions. And they want to actively engage in program and extracurricular activities, where they (55% of respondents) would have the opportunity to present their abilities, culture, and traditions. During focus group

interviews with teachers, I came across differing opinions and viewpoints. The teachers indicate that minority students are ashamed of presenting their own culture, which is completely opposite to the results shown by the survey of minority students. This finding further indicates that teachers have little understanding of the aspirations, desires, and needs of minority students, which is reflected in the poor practice of managing classroom diversity.

"We teach the Georgian language and traditions, and our extracurricular activities are also Georgian-driven. Occasionally, we allow minority students to sing their own songs or perform a traditional dance, but generally, everything is focused on Georgian culture." - One of the teachers shares with us the school's diversity management practices.

Language minorities in submersion schools not only have limited opportunities to present their own culture, but they are also rarely given the chance or support to demonstrate their subject knowledge and skills due to cultural barriers.

The findings suggest that linguistic and cultural diversity in immersion classes is not fully recognized as a valuable resource. Many minority students, for example, reported feeling unable to express their knowledge during lessons due to language barriers, with 61.3% agreeing with the statement, "I often feel that I cannot express my knowledge during lessons because I do not know the language well." This linguistic disadvantage made students hesitant to ask additional questions or seek clarification.

Focus group interviews with teachers highlighted that they primarily used frontal questioning techniques to assess students' understanding, which tended to exclude linguistic minority students. Teachers reported that they rarely had time for extra explanations and recommended that minority students seek private tutoring to improve their Georgian language skills. However, the school did not offer additional lessons in Georgian, reflecting a lack of support for students' language needs. This approach underscores the flawed strategy for managing linguistic diversity and reveals teachers' limited understanding of how to accommodate the needs of language minority students in their teaching practices. Effective diversity management should involve offering equal educational opportunities for students from linguistic minorities.

Based on the research findings, the answer to the research question regarding the sense of belonging to the school community can be summarized as follows: Minority students consistently give positive assessments of their relationships with Georgian peers, with 88.1% of respondents describing the environment as friendly. However, they clearly express concerns about the low expectations teachers have of them as linguistic minorities. While most students entered the school with positive expectations of forming friendly relationships, these were largely fulfilled through interactions with Georgian peers, but not with their teachers. Teachers' low expectations, minority students' difficulty in fully expressing their knowledge, and the lack of opportunities to present their identity and culture may help explain why many students (78.2%) do not feel a

strong sense of belonging to the school community.

The findings above raise concerns about the effectiveness of schools' diversity management. In this study, we aimed to analyze teachers' understanding of managing a diverse classroom environment, which is closely tied to the acceptance of minority students and the development of their sense of belonging within the school community.

The study found that diversity management in the classroom, especially regarding linguistic and cultural differences, is not very effective. Teachers have a limited understanding of the specific needs and goals of minority students, which impacts both their academic performance and emotional well-being. While teachers recognize the challenges faced by minority students, many have low expectations, with some believing these students are unlikely to complete the full educational curriculum. Additionally, teachers' ethnocentric attitudes and lack of intercultural awareness create an environment where minority students struggle to express their knowledge due to language barriers. The school's approach to extracurricular activities is also too focused on Georgian culture, offering little support for minority students to present their own traditions. Teachers' limited knowledge of minority cultures and reluctance to address important cultural issues, like early marriage, further reveal the gaps in how diversity is managed.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlights significant challenges in Georgia's submersion schools, revealing a consistent gap between the expectations of minority students and the perceptions of their teachers. Teachers' attitudes and educational practices across the target schools show clear similarities, suggesting a systemic issue in managing diversity and addressing the unique needs of minority students. These findings underscore the need for improvements in how teachers perceive and support minority students, especially regarding academic potential and future educational outcomes.

Teachers' views are often shaped by biases and misunderstandings related to students' cultural backgrounds, which adversely affect students' self-esteem and academic success. These biases contribute to feelings of stress and exclusion, hindering minority students' ability to fully engage and succeed in the classroom. The study also reveals that while high expectations are critical for academic achievement, these expectations must be accompanied by appropriate support systems to address the specific needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students.

Based on the findings of this study, as well as the influence of classroom integration, environmental factors, and the stressors impacting academic success over time, I would like to offer several recommendations for schools implementing submersion programs. These recommendations are intended to support the successful integration of linguistic minorities and ensure they receive an equitable and high-quality education.

Increase teacher awareness via training on diversity management: It is crucial to offer professional development opportunities for teachers to better understand the cultural backgrounds and unique needs of minority students. Training should focus on strategies for managing linguistic diversity, recognizing and addressing biases, and creating an inclusive learning environment that supports both the academic and emotional well-being of all students.

Raise teacher expectations for minority students: To enhance academic outcomes, teachers must set high expectations for all students, regardless of cultural background. Teachers should be encouraged to offer the necessary support for minority students, ensuring they can successfully complete the full curriculum.

Promote cultural integration in school activities: Schools should integrate both Georgian and minority cultures into extracurricular activities and the curriculum. This will allow minority students to express their cultural identity and help foster a sense of belonging within the school community.

Address Social Issues: Teachers and school administrators should be proactive in addressing the social challenges faced by minority students, such as early marriage or the need for paid work, particularly among students from marginalized backgrounds. Openly discussing these issues will help provide students with the support they need to succeed academically.

By implementing these recommendations, schools can create a more supportive, inclusive, and culturally responsive environment that enhances the academic success of minority students and strengthens their sense of belonging and acceptance within the school community.

Abbreviations

R.Q.1	Research Question 1
R.Q.2	Research Question 2
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework
PT1-PT38	Participant Teacher 1-Participant Teacher 8

Author Contributions

Lena-Elene Jajanidze is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Lena-Elene Jajanidze holds a PhD in Educational Sciences and has extensive experience in both academia and the NGO sector. She has taught at Tbilisi State University, where she delivered courses on bilingual education, multiculturalism, and diversity management. She has also managed projects at the Centre for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIIR), focusing on educational research, teacher training, fostering gender-responsive pedagogy in schools and higher education institutions, and promoting youth empowerment through active citizenship. As an educational researcher, she has experience working with both international and local organizations. Her research interests include religion, multiculturalism, bilingual education, and the intercultural approaches through teaching. She has published in international journals and presented at international conferences on topics such as teaching religion in public schools, language acquisition, diverse teaching practices, and teacher education.