



International Journal of  
**MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION**

**ISSN: (Print)** ISSN 1987-9601

**(Online)** E ISSN 1512-3146

**Journal homepage:** <http://multilingualeducation.org/>

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**Gulnara Bibileishvili**  
Akaki Tsereteli Kutaisi  
State University, Georgia  
Email: [gunabibi@gmail.com](mailto:gunabibi@gmail.com)

To cite this article: Gulnara Bibileishvili (2023): Early Bilingual Education: The Foundation of Social Integration for Communities Representing National Minorities: International Journal of Multilingual Education, #22; DOI: 10.22333/ijme.2023.22000; pp. 113-120.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.22333/ijme.2023.220014>

**Gulnara Bibileishvili**

*Akaki Tsereteli State University, Georgia*

## **Early Bilingual Education: The Foundation of Social Integration for Communities Representing National Minorities**

### **ABSTRACT**

The issue of minority integration has gained significant relevance and importance for all nations in the context of recent years marked by intensive migration and global conflicts. Experts specializing in national minorities highlight the pivotal role of the educational system as a fundamental tool for the civil integration of ethnic minorities in society. Proficiency in the state language among ethnic minorities is also seen as a significant prerequisite for successful integration. At the same time, bilingual education is receiving growing endorsement within the scientific community as a vital means for fostering **bilingual literacy**. Research studies affirm that this educational approach effectively addresses language policy challenges in Georgia. Nevertheless, an examination of the reforms and measures implemented to support the acquisition of the state language by minority groups, spanning from the post-independence period in the 90s to the present day, reveals a certain inconsistency in policy and reforms. This inconsistency stands as a primary contributing factor to less favorable outcomes in the field of education. Over the years, the neglect of a critical period for human development - early childhood education and development - has impeded progress in general and higher education. Notably, a pilot program for early bilingual education has been initiated in regions densely populated by national minorities. The program's design took into account international obligations and the sectoral priorities outlined in the Unified National Strategy of Education and Science. While the initiative itself is significant, a challenge lies in the fact that the program was planned without a preliminary study of the local context. Consequently, measuring the effects of the intervention and considering the possibility of program expansion and replication on a geographical scale may prove challenging in the future.

**Keywords:** *Early bilingual education; Georgian as a second language; Strategy, Social integration.*

### **Introduction**

In the modern civilized world, the social integration of minorities entails the development of crucial mechanisms to facilitate their engagement in public and political life, fostering a sense of identity and belonging to the state and nurturing a positive emotional connection towards it.

Conversely, the state holds a positive obligation to create conducive conditions for the full participation of national minorities, drawing on the historical experience of the country and

incorporating the best international practices while considering the specific context of Georgia (as outlined in the 2021-2030 State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration, 2021).

According to international law, the concept of social integration is characterized as a process that seeks to unify the self-identification of distinct groups within a shared social and cultural framework (OHCHR, *Minority Rights, International Standards and Guidance for Implementation*, 2010; Democracy at the level T.D Sisk. IDEA.2001).

Obviously, this process is closely linked with safeguarding the rights of the targeted group. Various types of international legal instruments ensure the sustainability and reliability of this process. However, it is noteworthy that none of these mandatory or non-mandatory documents explicitly define or explain the specific population category considered as an ethnic/national minority. Moreover, while the term "ethnic minority" is more commonly used and endorsed in the UN system, European systems refer to this group as "national minority" (Action Plan (2022-2024), 2021, p.9). Experts working on issues related to national minorities posit that this discrepancy arises from the lack of universal consensus among countries regarding an acceptable definition. It is also recognized that minorities in each society are characterized by various objective and subjective attributes (European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission Report, 2006).

This gap is addressed, to some extent, by the definition provided by the Venice Commission. According to experts from the "European Commission for the Protection of Democracy through Law" (Venice Commission), a consultative body of the Council of Europe, a national/ethnic minority is defined as "group which is smaller in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members, who are nationals of that State, have ethnical, religious or linguistic features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language" (Association Agreement, 2014).

In the latter decades of the modern era, the international community has significantly fortified mechanisms for safeguarding minority rights. This development particularly gained momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite this notable progress, experts dedicated to minority issues emphasize that the protection of minority rights remains a global challenge in the contemporary world. This reality is particularly pronounced against the backdrop of armed conflicts and extensive migration. Naturally, this shared global challenge also pertains to Georgia.

As a member of the international community and a multi-ethnic, culturally diverse nation, Georgia aspires to hold a respected and esteemed position in the civilized world. Notably, as early as 1921, Georgia adopted a constitution that included provisions for safeguarding human rights. Even today, the Constitution of Georgia stands as a guarantor of safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups,

including minorities. Article 11 of this document ensures the preservation and development of one's own culture and the use of one's native language for all citizens.

Considering the norms and principles recognized by international law, issues concerning minority rights are regulated through national-level legislation. The enactment of the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2014 obligates the state to protect minorities from discrimination. However, it is worth noting that the articles and provisions in the law are quite broad and lack specific clarifications about discrimination. In this context, one can also consider the international obligations undertaken by the country to complement the national legislation. Foremost among these is the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which establishes what is known as a "positive obligation". Additionally, the **European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)**, the **International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)**, and the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** play pivotal roles. However, the current state policy towards ethnic minorities is framed within a three-dimensional context: it aligns with the country's strategic development plan, the pursuit of sustainable development goals, and Georgia's commitment to European integration through the Association Agreement with Europe.

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of new and innovative trends in various aspects of social integration for national minorities and the realization of their rights. A prominent demonstration of this progress is the endorsement of the ten-year document (2021-2030) outlining the State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration by the Government of Georgia. This comprehensive strategy spans a decade and encompasses five strategic focal points of integration policy: (1) Promoting the use of the state language to facilitate integration; (2) Ensuring access to quality education; (3) Fostering equality, civil, and political participation; (4) Encouraging social and economic integration; (5) Promoting intercultural dialogue (State Strategy for Civil Equality, 2021).

The document mentioned above underscores the government's stance, emphasizing that in the process of social integration, the acquisition of the state language by ethnic minorities should be regarded as the primary focus of integration policy (State Strategy for Civil Equality, 2021, p. 33). This viewpoint aligns, to a certain extent, with the perspectives of experts dedicated to minority issues.

Hence, the aforementioned strategic document delineates the chief objective for the state - "State Language for Integration" (Priority I), which, in turn, resonates with the 4th (quality education) and 10th (reduction of inequality) Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN), as well as the objectives outlined in Article 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Within Priority I, the strategic document outlines two tasks: (1) Reinforcing and promoting the prominence of the state language in regions densely populated by non-Georgian speaking populations and (2) Enhancing the

teaching of minority languages as mother tongues. The 2022-2030 Unified National Strategy for Education and Science of Georgia underscores that the challenge of achieving full proficiency in the state language remains a significant priority. State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration also states: “Despite the results achieved in regard to civic integration, in the course of the assessment of the current situation, it was revealed that certain needs and challenges remain, the efficient response to which within the scope of the new strategy is of essential significance, and it will facilitate the realization of the potential of the country’s ethnically diverse population, the consolidation of civic equality, equal and effective exercise by the representatives of various ethnic origins, as by full-fledged citizens of Georgia, of their social, political, economic, and cultural rights“ (State Strategy for Civic Equality, 2021, p.15).

It is widely acknowledged that language policy is shaped by the country's development goals concerning ethnic minorities, internal integration processes, as well as international obligations and the pursuit of civil equality. In alignment with this policy priority, the "State Language Department" in 2021 adopted the State Language Strategy (Unified Program) for 2021-2030. It is important to note that such a coherent approach to language had not been established in the country before this period.

Additionally, over the past two decades, the Ministry of Education and Science has undertaken various measures to enhance proficiency in the state language at higher and general education levels. To gauge and analyze this progress (Geostat, 2014), data from recent years indicates that among ethnic Armenian citizens, 44% are unable to speak the state language, while among ethnic Azerbaijanis, this figure rises to 74%. This situation not only poses a challenge for the national minority community in everyday communication but also hinders their access to information on current affairs in the country, employment opportunities, education, and the full utilization of services. This significantly impedes their participation at all levels of education and integration within society. Although there has been some improvement compared to 2002, as per data from the National Statistical Service of Georgia, the state acknowledges that the achieved result falls short of sufficiency.

Certainly, providing a comprehensive overview, it is crucial to acknowledge that researchers specializing in issues related to national minorities stress that the educational measures aimed at improving the current situation are fragmented and lack a cohesive approach. They underline that the ongoing reforms display inconsistencies and do not align cost-effectively with the stated priorities. As a result, these factors are identified as contributing to unfavorable outcomes (Civil Development Institute, 2017). Additionally, the "Social Justice Center" has assembled "markers related to education," wherein they employ a comparative analysis of demographic data to visually represent the educational attainment levels of ethnic minorities in contrast to the general population of Georgia

(Social and Economic Exclusion of Ethnic Minorities, 2022, p. 7-8)). This graphical representation provides a clear snapshot of the educational landscape for ethnic minorities in Georgia. Specifically, 43.1% of the country's entire population has attained a higher level of education (secondary technical, higher, scientific degree), whereas this figure stands at 26.2% for ethnic minorities. Additionally, the percentage of representatives from ethnic minorities who have not completed full secondary education is notably high, at 23.2%. In contrast, this indicator is 10.1% of the country's overall population. The document further analyzes the issue of education at the regional/settlement level. The percentage of the population without full secondary education is notably higher for Azerbaijanis in Kakheti (54% of respondents). In Kvemo Kartli, it stands at 17.7%, in Pankisi at 11.5%, and in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the percentage of the population without full secondary education is only 9.4%.

In the same context, the same document emphasizes that 63% of ethnic minorities possess limited proficiency in recognizing Georgian letters and reading words. Furthermore, an even larger majority, constituting 84%, face challenges in reading Georgian literature and comprehending its content. These individuals rate their abilities as either very poor or poor. To address this situation, experts in the field recommend that the state continuously process and update ethnically categorized statistical data to assess the effectiveness of existing state programs and approaches. Additionally, the analysis of state-sponsored reforms and measures in the sphere of education for national minorities in acquiring the state language has revealed a longstanding neglect of the critical period for human development - early education and development. Indeed, the significance of this age for child education and development is widely acknowledged and substantiated by scholars and scientists in the field. It is a critical phase that lays the foundation for a child's lifelong learning and growth (Bloch, 1991)

It is important to highlight that the highest legal document in the state's legislative framework, the Constitution of Georgia, gives special attention to preschool education in Article 27. Even though Georgia has been in the process of reforming preschool education since 2013, it was not until 2021 that the commencement of a pilot project for early bilingual education became feasible. This signifies a substantial leap forward in prioritizing early education and language acquisition for children. This development holds great promise for the educational landscape in Georgia.

All three sectoral priorities outlined in the Unified National Strategy of Education and Science for 2022-2030 incorporate a focus on early education. Sector Priority III, "Management, Financing, and Accountability," underscores the need to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the early and preschool education system. Sectoral Priority II, "Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity," outlines Goal 2.1: To promote the participation of disadvantaged children in early education and school readiness programs. This encompasses the mandate for all municipalities to implement targeted policies in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities. The first sectoral priority, "Quality and Relevance,"

envisioning the provision of a high-quality, supportive, and development-oriented educational process by all early and preschool care and education institutions. This includes Task 1.1.3: Facilitating the involvement of the child's parents/representatives and the community in the activities of early and preschool education and educational institutions.

In conjunction with the aforementioned 2022-2030 strategy, a sectoral action plan for 2022-2024 has been developed, which highlights the crucial issue of teacher-caregivers' training. The role of the academic sector also holds significant importance in addressing this challenge. This comprehensive approach demonstrates a concerted effort to prioritize and improve early education in Georgia.

For the democratic advancement of the state, especially in alignment with the Association Agreement with the European Union, which considers the civil integration of national minorities as a key indicator for membership, the active engagement of experts is crucial in executing the strategy and action plan.

The academic sector plays an irreplaceable and paramount role in driving the dynamics of this process in accordance with the state's interests.

Georgian scientists concur with their Western counterparts that bilingual education, as a promoter of bilingual literacy, should be regarded as a significant tool to address the challenges posed by language policy. However, it is worth noting that this issue remains underexplored at the academic level.

In accordance with the aforementioned 2022-2030 strategy, a sectoral action plan for 2022-2024 has already been developed, which highlights the concern of a shortage of teacher-caregivers. Once again, the involvement of the academic sector is pivotal in resolving this issue.

In essence, for the democratic progress of the state, grounded in the Association Agreement with the European Union and aligned with sustainable development goals, the civic integration of national minorities is a pivotal indicator. It is equally vital to actively engage expert communities in the implementation of the strategy and action plan. This collaborative effort is essential for the inclusive and harmonious development of the nation.

### **Main Findings:**

- The legislation of Georgia recognizes education as a tool for promoting social integration and is fully in line with ratified international conventions and the Associated Agreement with the European Union. It upholds the equal rights and interests of communities representing national minorities.

- Georgian experts and scientists share the view of their Western counterparts that bilingual education is crucial for developing bilingual literacy in students. As such, it should be considered a significant tool to address the challenges posed by language policy.
- One highlighted problematic issue is the inconsistency in the process of implementing bilingual education in the Georgian educational system.
- An analysis of reforms and measures supported by the state revealed a longstanding neglect of the crucial period for human development - early education and development. Discussion in this regard only began in 2021, and it is currently in the pilot phase, requiring continuous monitoring, research, and evaluation of results.
- The 2022-2030 Unified National Strategy of Education and Science prioritizes early education across all three sectoral areas.
- Municipalities are mandated to implement targeted policies for introducing early bilingual education in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities.
- To successfully implement early bilingual education, emphasis is placed on the need for training and retraining of teacher-caregivers. Additionally, the importance of working with parents is highlighted. The academic sector is recognized for its role in addressing these issues.
- For the democratic progress of the state, grounded in the Association Agreement with the European Union and aligned with sustainable development goals, the civic integration of national minorities stands as a pivotal indicator. Active engagement of expert communities in the implementation of the strategy and action plan is equally crucial. This collaborative effort is essential for the inclusive and harmonious development of the nation.

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