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Promoting interreligious and democratic competencies in future educators

Findings from Georgia

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Abstract

Navigating religious diversity is central to democratic education, yet formal legal neutrality can mask structural inequalities. In Georgia, where the Orthodox Church's majoritarian privileges often contrast with constitutional equality, this study examined interreligious values, attitudes, and self-reported pedagogical readiness among 53 pre-service teachers in a one-year teacher preparation programme. Focus group discussions explored participants' critical dispositions through the lens of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Although participants endorsed universal humanistic values, many conflated *de jure* legality with *de facto* justice. Only those with prior intercultural or religious education training demonstrated readiness to apply diversity pedagogically.

Keywords:

Interreligious competence, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), teacher preparation, substantive equality, democratic culture, intercultural education, Georgia.

1. Introduction

Religion significantly shapes political, social, and personal life, thereby influencing voter behaviour (Esmer & Pettersson 2007), political participation (Driskell et al. 2008), economic preferences (Gill & Lundsgaarde 2004), and attitudes towards social policy (Koch 2006). At an individual level, religion forms a core part of identity, providing belonging and guiding personal development (Cushner et al.

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2000; Gill 2001). In Georgia, where approximately 83 percent of the population adheres to the Georgian Orthodox Church, far exceeding the Muslim (11 percent) and Armenian Apostolic (3 percent) minorities (Geostat 2016), navigating religious diversity is a critical educational imperative.

Formally, Georgia's legal framework, including Article 16 of the Constitution of Georgia (1995) and Article 13 of the Law on General Education (2005), mandates religious neutrality and non-discrimination in public schools. However, from the perspective of protecting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) (Bielefeldt 2013), this nominal equality often masks structural hierarchies, wherein the socio-political dominance and institutional privileges of the majoritarian Orthodox Church systematically marginalise religious minorities within public education. Reports consistently indicate that religious minorities face systemic barriers in educational settings, exacerbated by a gap between *de jure* neutrality and *de facto* majoritarian privileges (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2022; Public Defender of Georgia 2020-2023).

Addressing these disparities requires moving beyond a superficial reliance on formal legal protections, such as statutory non-discrimination clauses and declaratory mandates of school neutrality, which often create a false sense of compliance among educators. Instead, teacher education demands the development of substantive interreligious competencies that enable prospective teachers to critically recognise, reflect upon, and navigate non-formalised power asymmetries and majoritarian dynamics in the classroom (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). Teacher preparation programmes are the fulcrum of this transformation. Educators are expected to model inclusive practices, respect diversity, and foster democratic values (Council of Europe 2017); however, achieving these goals requires specific religious literacy to translate formal policy frameworks into equitable practice.

The driving hypothesis of this article is that while future educators in Georgia frequently express strong humanistic commitments, an uncritical reliance on formal legal neutrality, combined with a lack of targeted interreligious training, leaves them inadequately prepared to address structural religious inequalities in practice. To substantiate this argument, this study examines the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills of students enrolled in Georgia's national one-year (60-credit) post-baccalaureate teacher preparation programme. Designed for university graduates holding subject-matter degrees and seeking state teacher certification, this mandatory programme operates under national qualification standards that formally emphasise democratic values, yet it lacks a dedicated curriculum on interreligious education or FoRB (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement 2016). Rather than merely documenting these competencies, the analysis explores how teacher education should evolve to bridge the gap between theoretical legal parity and the complex reality of religious diversity.

Ultimately, this article explores the potential of a pedagogical shift towards teaching for substantive equality.

2. Contextualising interreligious education: From formal neutrality to substantive competence

To understand the critical role of interreligious education, we can begin by noting that religion broadly shapes personal identity, social cohesion, democratic participation, and educational practice (Cushner et al. 2000; Driskell et al. 2008; Esmer & Pettersson 2007; Gill 2001; Koch 2006). The tension between *de jure* constitutional guarantees and *de facto* majoritarian hegemony in education is a central theme in European human rights jurisprudence. Under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) mandates that states must maintain strict neutrality and impartiality, ensuring that public education is conveyed in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner (Evans 2008).

The practical enforcement of this ECHR standard of objective, critical, and pluralistic educational neutrality highlights the difficulty entailed in protecting religious minorities within majoritarian systems. In *Folgerø and Others v. Norway* (2007), the ECtHR ruled that the qualitative and quantitative dominance of Christianity in mandatory curricula violated parental rights, establishing that exemption mechanisms must not impose psychological pressure or undue burdens on minority students (Martinez-Torrón 2012). Conversely, while the Grand Chamber in *Lautsi and Others v. Italy* (2011) accepted the display of crucifixes as a 'passive symbol' within the state's margin of appreciation, the ruling underscored the ongoing risk that institutionalised majoritarian symbols could compromise classroom inclusivity. Finally, in *Osmanoğlu and Kocabaş v. Switzerland* (2017), the court affirmed that although social integration can justify mandatory participation in school activities, the overarching objective remains the cultivation of pluralism and tolerance. Together, this jurisprudence demonstrates that formal legal neutrality is insufficient if state-sponsored frameworks subject minority students to structural assimilation or psychological marginalisation

In Georgia, constitutional and educational frameworks formally guarantee religious freedom and promote inclusivity (Constitution of Georgia, Article 16; Law on General Education of Georgia 2005, Article 13; European Convention on Human Rights 1950). Yet despite these legal provisions, societal and institutional engagement with religious diversity remains highly uneven (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2022; Public Defender of Georgia 2020-2023).

In view of this systemic discrepancy between formal guarantees and practical realities, the cultivation of specific interreligious competencies emerges as a

pedagogical necessity. Often referred to as religious literacy, these competencies extend far beyond the mere acquisition of factual knowledge about different religious traditions. Rather, they encompass the cognitive, affective, and reflective capacities required to critically evaluate worldviews and navigate power dynamics within pluralistic societies (Koch 2006).

Koch (2006) analytically frames this competency through two interrelated principles: synergy and normativity. Synergy involves a deep, reflective engagement with one's own beliefs, establishing the foundation for personal agency; normativity denotes the capacity for critical, respectful interreligious dialogue and the recognition of shared ethical frameworks. From an analytical perspective, these principles are not static traits but active processes. They are essential for transforming religious diversity from a potential source of conflict into a resource for democratic learning. However, developing these dual capacities is inherently complex. Encounters with cultural or religious difference frequently provoke anxiety, uncertainty, or avoidance, reflecting psychological barriers tied to perceived 'otherness' (Baffelli 2023; Dinnel et al. 2002). Consequently, moving from a stance of value-neutral avoidance to constructive, reflective engagement requires targeted pedagogical intervention (Greeley 1989; Koch 2006).

To understand why pedagogical intervention in Georgia often falls short, these psychological barriers must be analysed alongside the structural context. While the Georgian legal framework nominally aligns with democratic principles of religious freedom, a critical FoRB perspective reveals significant underlying tensions (Bielefeldt 2013). According to the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE/ODIHR 2007), state education must actively ensure pedagogical objectivity to protect minority rights against structural marginalisation. Yet critical FoRB scholarship emphasises that constitutional guarantees of equality frequently mask *de facto* hierarchies, particularly in post-Soviet contexts where a dominant religion is intrinsically tied to national identity (Bielefeldt 2013; Metreveli 2020). As Bielefeldt (2015) highlights, relying on formal legal parity is academically and practically insufficient. Systemic privileges granted to a majority church, such as those institutionalised in Georgia, can inadvertently undermine genuine religious freedom in educational settings by normalising majoritarian dominance.

This structural illusion of equality directly impacts the efficacy of teacher education. Empirical studies in Georgia reveal a consistent pattern: although individuals generally express a formal, superficial acceptance of religious diversity, meaningful interreligious or intercultural engagement remains critically low (Gambashidze 2017; Jajanidze 2022; Kublashvili 2021; Malazonia et al. 2017; Tabatadze et al. 2013). Prospective educators are expected to demonstrate intercul-

tural sensitivity and address diverse learner needs (Law on Teacher Education, n.d.). However, without a critical awareness of the distinction between *de jure* neutrality and *de facto* structural asymmetry, teachers risk inadvertently reproducing the very marginalisation the legal framework claims to prevent.

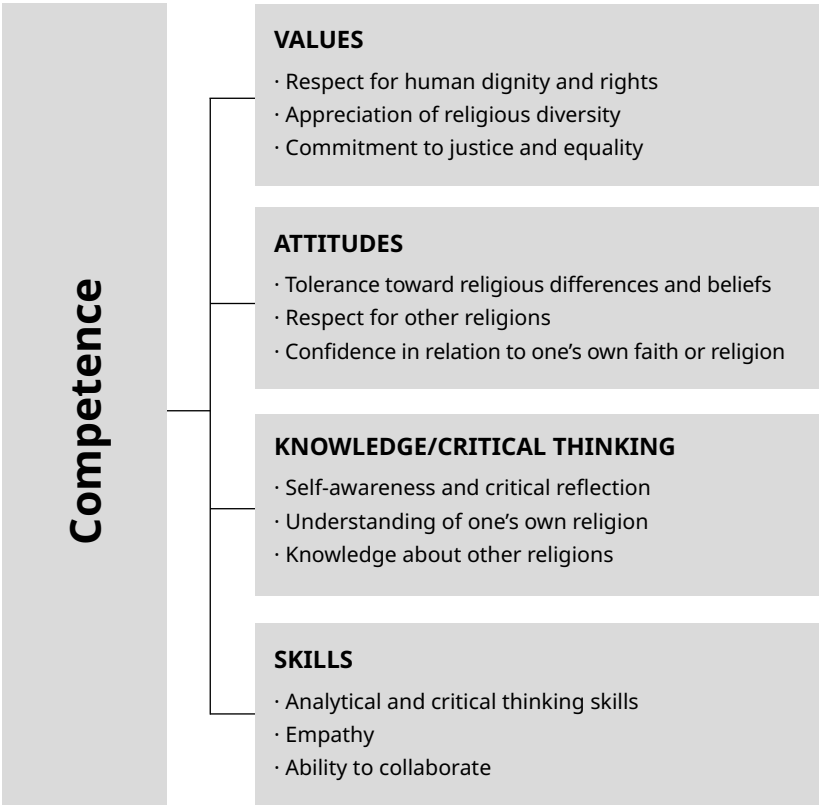
Internationally, the Council of Europe's Competences for Democratic Culture (2017) demand the active integration of knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills to disrupt these superficial understandings of parity. Therefore, evaluating Georgia's one-year (60-credit) teacher preparation programme requires more than assessing basic intercultural and interreligious literacy. It necessitates an analytical focus on whether the programme successfully equips students to recognise systemic privileges, negotiate cognitive anxieties surrounding 'otherness,' and foster substantive equality in their future classrooms. By situating the empirical findings within this critical theoretical nexus, this study explores the extent to which prospective educators are genuinely prepared to navigate the complexities of religious diversity.

3. Research design and methodology

This qualitative study examined how pre-service teachers perceive, articulate, and critically reflect upon religious diversity in the context of democratic citizenship education. The study focused on Georgia's national one-year teacher preparation programme (60 ECTS), the post-baccalaureate pathway for graduates seeking certification to teach in public schools.

Data was collected in March-April 2024 through focus-group discussions with 53 participants enrolled in the programme across five higher education institutions in Georgia, including three in Tbilisi and two in regional centres. The sample comprised 38 female and 15 male participants specialising in civic education (n = 32), history (n = 14), and Georgian language and literature (n = 7). Participants included Georgian Orthodox Christians (n = 46), Muslims (n = 5), and unaffiliated persons or other religious participants (n = 2). The institutional distribution was intended to provide variation in geographic, social, and religious backgrounds rather than to enable university-level comparison.

Focus-group discussions explored four dimensions aligned with the Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2017): knowledge and critical understanding, values, attitudes, and skills. Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, combining deductive coding based on these competence dimensions and FoRB frameworks with inductive coding of emergent themes. National educational and regulatory documents, including the Law of Georgia on General Education, the National Curriculum, the Teacher Professional Standard, and relevant human rights monitoring reports, were used as contextual sources.



The analysis was guided by four research questions:

1) How do future teachers understand and reflect upon cultural and religious identities?
2) What values regarding religious diversity, justice, and equality do they express?
3) What attitudes towards religious differences and non-majoritarian beliefs emerge?
4) How prepared do participants perceive themselves to be to navigate religious diversity and power asymmetries in public-school classrooms?

4. Analysis of research findings

In accordance with national accreditation standards and the unified national framework governing Georgia's one-year teacher preparation programme, university mis-

sions and programme curricula across institutions share a shared normative mandate: explicitly emphasising the promotion of democratic competencies, adherence to European educational standards, and the cultivation of values and skills aligned with these principles. Likewise, the official curricula of the programme across institutions integrate democratic and intercultural values designed to prepare future educators to work effectively in religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse classrooms. These institutional requirements are reinforced by national legislation, including the Law of Georgia on Higher Education (2004), the Law of Georgia on General Education (2005), the Teacher Professional Standard (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia 2020), and the Code of Ethics for Teachers.

Although these legislative frameworks and university-level curricula formally emphasise democratic competencies and intercultural values, the empirical data reveal a significant divergence between institutional declarations and the lived realities of prospective educators. Rather than merely describing participant responses, the following analysis examines these empirical findings through the lens of interreligious competence, highlighting the structural tensions between declared humanistic ideals, deeply ingrained majoritarian norms, and practical pedagogical readiness.

4.1. Values

The study participants universally endorsed respect and care as core pedagogical values, often grounding these ideals in humanistic principles or religious beliefs such as forgiveness and equality. However, focus-group discussions exposed a notable normative gap between these declared values and actual attitudes. While participants theoretically advocated for the equal treatment of diverse students, their practical reflections frequently revealed an implicit preference for Orthodox Christianity and ethnically homogeneous peers. This dissonance often manifested as stigmatisation towards non-religious individuals or religious minorities. One participant's experience illustrated this point: 'I myself was an example of this unequal treatment. I was not baptised. I felt that I was not like the others – not as much of a Christian as they were. Society influenced me, and I felt pressured. Eventually, I decided to be baptised.' This account highlights the pervasive social pressures that enforce majoritarian conformity, contradicting formal commitments to inclusivity. It may be also understood as a form of psychological coercion and structural marginalisation, potentially constituting a direct violation of FoRB. Furthermore, many respondents explicitly linked Orthodox Christianity with national identity and civic values, treating Orthodoxy as functionally a state religion. Such ethnocentric conceptions of national belonging suggest that the development of genuine interreligious values requires more than theoretical endorsement; it demands critical reflection on how majoritarian hegemony shapes personal and professional attitudes.

4.2. Knowledge or critical reflection

Regardless of their specific affiliation, all respondents identified religion as a central component of their identity, with none expressing complete indifference. However, the depth of interreligious knowledge varied significantly. Muslim participants and students from history programmes demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of diverse faiths, particularly Abrahamic traditions, than their Orthodox Christian counterparts, who relied primarily on family, church, or school-based instruction rather than independent inquiry.

Analytically, the data showed a direct correlation between interreligious exposure and critical openness. Participants who engaged deeply with unfamiliar religions exhibited more nuanced understandings of rituals and traditions, which increased their receptivity to diversity without compromising their personal beliefs. Conversely, a lack of knowledge generated anxiety. As one respondent noted, 'I have never been to a synagogue or a mosque because I feel uncomfortable. … I am afraid I might not behave appropriately. … I don't know how to act, for example, in a mosque.' However, when proactive engagement occurs, cognitive barriers are dismantled: 'I decided to familiarise myself with the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses, curious about what was written that so many people feared. … There was nothing dangerous. I now understand that they believe, and I do too, just in a different way.'

4.2.1. Awareness of legal rights and status of religious minorities

Consistent with the theoretical framework's distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* equality, participants exhibited limited awareness of the actual legal status of religious minorities. Most uncritically defended the Georgian legislative framework, citing superficial examples (e.g., the freedom to wear headscarves or pray) as absolute proof of systemic equality. Relying on the trope of 'Georgia's long-standing history of tolerant attitudes,' the majority avoided critically examining the law's structural application.

Notably, in one focus group featuring both Muslim and Orthodox Christian students, Muslim participants were markedly reserved in expressing concerns about religious inequality, whereas Christian participants felt more secure in openly critiquing the implementation of minority rights. This dynamic itself underscores an underlying power asymmetry that contradicts the students' assumptions of unproblematic equality.

4.2.2. Participation in religious holidays and non-working days

The structural illusion of equality became most evident when the subjects discussed public holidays. According to Georgia's Labour Code (2010), 13 holidays (totalling 17 days of the year) are non-working, of which the majority are Orthodox

Christian; minority religious holidays are largely disregarded. Minorities remain dependent on employer discretion for alternative rest days, lacking guaranteed protection (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2023).

Most respondents, including some minority representatives, were initially unaware of these provisions. However, upon reflection, participants universally acknowledged that this institutionalised privileging of Orthodox holidays is 'not entirely fair.' A Muslim participant articulated the emotional impact of this structural disparity: 'This truly makes me feel a sense of injustice. … How is this handled in European countries? Surely it's possible to share.'

Respondents recognised that such practices constrain the public expression of minority faiths, such as by causing challenges for Muslims performing prayers in educational settings, and foster majoritarian dominance. This realisation highlighted a critical gap between formal legal protections and practical implementation, directly hindering the cultivation of substantive interreligious competencies.

4.2.3. Financial support for religious organisations

Further demonstrating an emerging yet incomplete critical reflection, nearly half of the respondents critiqued the state's financial and property allocations to the Orthodox Church as a form of 'political indulgence.' One participant stated, 'Privileges should not be granted to any single religion … even in financial matters.' While respondents recognised that such structural advantages undermine genuine religious freedom, they struggled to articulate alternative, equitable frameworks. Analytically, this reveals a specific pedagogical challenge: while future teachers can identify systemic inequality when prompted, they lack the conceptual tools and interreligious training necessary to propose practical solutions that balance majoritarian realities with minority rights.

4.3. Attitudes

The development of interreligious attitudes is a dynamic process shaped by exposure, cognitive biases, and long-term socialisation. The qualitative data illustrate how initial perceptions-often rooted in fear or stereotypes-dictate relational dynamics in diverse settings.

4.3.1. Interreligious experience

Direct, ongoing interaction with diverse religious groups strongly correlated with tolerant attitudes. Conversely, limited experience bred scepticism. A substantial majority of participants (representing approximately two-thirds of respondents across four of the five focus groups) exhibited a clear bias towards Abrahamic religions, dismissing other faiths as less legitimate 'sects.' This unfamiliarity frequently manifest-

ed itself as anxiety towards newer religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Baha'is (often confused with Bábism), driven by misinformation: 'Other sects don't, but Bábism scares me because I first learned about it in a negative context, hearing that its followers carried out terrorist acts. … Even after seeking more information, I still feel a certain fear towards them.' These reflections indicate that deconstructing negative initial biases requires sustained pedagogical intervention, emphasising that exposure and critical reflection are indispensable for attitude transformation.

4.3.2. Gender aspects

Preliminary observations from the data suggest a gendered dimension to interreligious apprehension, with female participants reporting higher levels of anxiety regarding unfamiliar rituals. This hesitation was not rooted in hostility or perceived threat, but rather in a fear of committing social or religious missteps: 'I'm not very religious. That's why I avoid interacting with them; I don't want to unintentionally offend sacred topics … it's more that I'm afraid of making a mistake.'

Given the study's qualitative scope, sample size (N = 53), and demographic overrepresentation of female participants (38 female and 15 male, mirroring broader national enrolment trends in teacher education), this pattern should be treated as a preliminary observation rather than a definitive gender-based conclusion. Crucially, however, it illustrates a broader pedagogical challenge, in that the lack of practical interreligious knowledge actively paralyses social interaction. This issue warrants more extensive investigation across larger, quantitatively representative samples.

4.3.3. Attitudes towards Muslim ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia

The intersection of religious and ethnic identity heavily influenced participant attitudes. Respondents generally demonstrated higher acceptance of ethnically Georgian Muslims compared to Azerbaijani Muslims, frequently citing language barriers and cultural distance. Strikingly, one focus group expressed intense hostility towards ethnically Georgian converts, exposing deeply entrenched ethnocentric expectations: 'I cannot forgive a Georgian for being Muslim or practicing any other religion if I find out they have changed their faith.' This conflation of national identity and Orthodox Christianity underscores that negative attitudes towards non-Orthodox individuals persist strongly. It signals an urgent need for teacher preparation programmes to address diversity management and the decoupling of civic identity from religious affiliation.

4.4. Skills

Ultimately, the translation of knowledge and attitudes into pedagogical action (skills) remains the most significant challenge. When participants were asked

how they would navigate religious diversity and power asymmetries in public school classrooms, a majoritarian pattern of pedagogical avoidance emerged across focus groups. Confronted with sensitive topics or potential normative friction, participants predominantly reported relying on instructional silence, topic suppression, or passive adherence to an unexamined concept of 'neutrality'. As one civic education teacher candidate explicitly admitted, 'Religious diversity creates a challenge because people may have different opinions. … I might have to skip certain topics.' This reliance on instructional avoidance underscores a critical gap in practical pedagogical skills. Lacking specialised didactic tools to moderate value conflicts, future teachers revert to self-censorship and curricular omission. In practice, this instructional silence disproportionately affects religious minorities, as it leaves dominant majoritarian narratives unexamined and deprives minority students of an inclusive, safe space for self-expression.

A crucial empirical divergence emerged when comparing participants across subject specialisations and prior educational backgrounds. Candidates who lacked specific exposure to intercultural pedagogy or religious history expressed profound paralysis when asked to address majoritarian, religiously laden curricular content in pluralistic classrooms. When discussing how to teach about Abo Tbileli,[2] a core component of the Georgian literature curriculum depicting a Muslim Arab who converted to Christianity and was martyred, a respondent lacking relevant training expressed avoidance: 'I don't understand how I'm supposed to teach 'Abo' differently … should I hide it or make up a new story?'

Conversely, a minority of participants, specifically those who had completed prior targeted undergraduate coursework in the history of religions or intercultural education, demonstrated marked reflective agency and practical readiness. Rather than resorting to avoidance or distortion, these candidates articulated multi-perspective pedagogical strategies and the ability to contextualise sensitive heritage texts: 'Couldn't I give students a topic to write about, such as Abo's sister's diary? They could explore her experiences and doubts.' Another added, 'The topic of Abo is important for Christians … I could focus on his behaviour towards friends and family to present a nuanced perspective.'

These reflections confirm that targeted intercultural training is essential. The focus-group process itself served as a catalyst for critical self-reflection, as participants confronted their own unconscious biases. For instance, one participant reflected upon a childhood interaction with a Muslim peer regarding dietary re-

2 Abo Tbileli was an 8th-century Christian martyr of Arab origin who converted from Islam and was executed for his faith in Tbilisi around 6 January 786. He is venerated as a saint in the Georgian Orthodox tradition and is remembered as a symbol of religious conviction and interfaith history in Georgia (Georgian National Academy of Sciences, n.d.

strictions: 'Now I realise how awkward I behaved and probably projected onto him. I now understand that incident and my behaviour.'

This reflective shift confirms that prospective teachers possess the capacity for interreligious growth when provided with structured, deliberative spaces. However, without the systematic integration of scenario-based learning and critical FoRB literacy in state-accredited teacher preparation programmes, this self-reported readiness remains dormant, leaving future educators unprepared to handle real-time classroom dynamics.

5. Discussion

Synthesising the empirical evidence demonstrates a critical disconnect between normative democratic aspirations and actual pedagogical agency among pre-service teachers in Georgia. Although participants demonstrated strong endorsement of abstract human rights principles, their conceptualisations of pluralism remained heavily constrained by unexamined majoritarian assumptions and a formalistic understanding of state neutrality. This disconnect produces an uncritical endorsement of formal legal frameworks that, in practice, masks majoritarian hegemony, ultimately compelling pre-service teachers towards pedagogical avoidance when confronted with religious diversity in the classroom. Consequently, generic teacher preparation fails to foster the reflective agency required to transform religious complexity into an active resource for democratic citizenship. Addressing this systemic challenge requires moving beyond abstract humanistic declarations towards structural FoRB literacy and scenario-based pedagogical action.

5.1. The pedagogical paradox: De jure parity vs. de facto majoritarian hegemony

The thematic analysis of prospective teachers' knowledge base and value orientations reveals a significant tension between formal legal principles and lived institutional realities. When evaluating the educational and societal status of religious communities, participants initially maintained a strong defence of Georgia's legal and constitutional framework, framing it as inherently neutral, fair, and rooted in a historical tradition of national tolerance. However, when they were prompted to examine concrete institutional asymmetries, such as the state's preferential calendar designation of majoritarian religious holidays or privileged financial allocations, a sharp cognitive dissonance emerged. Participants initially perceived the *status quo* as equitable, but detailed systemic analysis compelled many to acknowledge that formal equality on paper does not automatically translate into substantive fairness in daily life.

This empirical pattern directly validates Bielefeldt's (2013, 2015) theoretical critique regarding the frequent confusion of formal (*de jure*) parity with substantive (*de facto*) equality under FoRB standards. Without critical FoRB literacy, future educators mistake statutory non-discrimination clauses for actual societal equity, overlooking how majoritarian privilege operates through implicit institutional norms, official calendars, and socio-cultural dominance.

Furthermore, this uncritical posture carries profound pedagogical consequences. As established in ECtHR jurisprudence, most notably *Folgerø and Others v. Norway* (2007) and *Lautsi and Others v. Italy* (2011), public educational environments that fail to critically interrogate state-sponsored religious privileges inevitably exert an undue psychological pressure on religious minority students, compelling implicit conformity or socio-religious marginalisation. In the Georgian context, where Orthodox Christianity is tightly interwoven with national identity, an educator's inability to identify structural asymmetry reinforces majoritarian dominance within the classroom, converting public schools from inclusive spaces of democratic learning into environments of passive assimilation.

5.2. Cognitive anxiety, 'synergy,' and the intersectional boundaries of identity

The data on prospective teachers' attitudes towards religious differences and non-majority belief systems revealed a pronounced hierarchy of tolerance. While traditional Abrahamic faiths (such as Islam and Judaism) were generally granted a baseline of socio-historical legitimacy, non-majority and non-Abrahamic groups, specifically Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, were frequently marginalised through stigmatising framing as 'sects' or potential threats to social cohesion. Moreover, intersectional dynamics deeply conditioned these attitudes:

- Ethno-Religious Boundaries: Participants exhibited high acceptance towards ethnic minority Muslims (e.g., Azerbaijani Georgians), framing their faith as an acceptable, traditional component of their ethnic heritage.
- National Belonging vs. Apostasy: Conversely, ethnic Georgian converts to Islam or Protestantism were frequently viewed with scepticism or overt disapproval, with their conversion being interpreted as a betrayal of Georgian national identity.

These findings map directly onto Koch's (2006) theoretical model of interreligious competence, specifically the dimension of synergy. Koch posits that true interreligious synergy requires an individual to possess both a secure, critically reflected understanding of their own identity and a deep cognitive familiarity with the internal logic of the 'other.' When pre-service teachers lack structured knowledge regarding non-majority belief systems, their attitudes are dictated by societal stereotypes and identity preservation mechanisms.

As highlighted by Baffelli (2023) and Dinnel et al. (2002), high levels of cognitive anxiety, stemming from a fear of making doctrinal errors, losing control over classroom discussion, or compromising national-religious identity, lead educators to erect rigid boundaries around group identity. Consequently, attitudes towards diversity remain reactive rather than reflective; without systematic intervention, cognitive anxiety converts pluralism from a democratic resource into a perceived socio-cultural threat.

5.3. Pedagogical readiness, 'normativity,' and practical skills: moving beyond avoidance

When evaluating self-perceived and practical pedagogical readiness to handle religious diversity in public school classrooms, the vast majority of pre-service teachers reported a reliance on strategies of pedagogical avoidance. The primary tactics cited included skipping controversial textbook sections, enforcing a strict silence on religious topics, and retreating to a superficial, non-committal stance of 'neutrality.' However, a crucial exception emerged among participants who had completed prior specialised coursework in history or intercultural education. These individuals demonstrated marked reflective agency and practical confidence, proposing multi-perspective pedagogical strategies. For instance, when discussing historical narratives laden with religious complexity, such as the hagiography of Abo Tbileli, these candidates demonstrated the ability to contextualise the text historically and humanistically, enabling constructive discussion without imposing dogmatic interpretations or alienating non-Orthodox students. This divergence in practical capability illustrates Koch's (2006) concept of normativity, or the capacity to actively negotiate, moderate, and resolve value conflicts within pluralistic spaces on equal terms. General teacher training instils basic pedagogical theories, but it fails to impart the specialised skills required for normative negotiation.

This observation is corroborated by the Council of Europe's (2017) Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) framework, which emphasises that abstract democratic values and cognitive knowledge remain inert unless accompanied by targeted practical skills, such as multi-perspective analysis, critical listening, and conflict transformation. Without deliberate scenario-based training, pre-service teachers lack the practical tools necessary to operationalise democratic values, falling back on avoidance and thereby perpetuating majoritarian silence in the classroom.

5.4. Policy and curricular implications for 60-credit teacher preparation programme

The empirical and theoretical insights synthesised in this study carry direct policy implications for higher education reform and national teacher qualification

frameworks in Georgia, particularly regarding the standardised 60-ECTS Teacher Preparation Educational Program.

To bridge the gap between abstract democratic values and practical classroom competence, systemic curricular restructuring is required across three core pillars:

- Embedding mandatory FoRB modules: The 60-ECTS curriculum must integrate dedicated instruction on human rights and FoRB literacy. Training must move beyond basic legal overviews to include critical analytical tools that help teachers recognise structural asymmetry, dynamics of church-state relations, and minority rights.
- Transitioning to scenario-based pedagogy: Teacher preparation courses must reduce reliance on passive lecture formats and adopt case-based, scenario-driven instruction. Exposing pre-service teachers to simulated classroom dilemmas helps de-escalate cognitive anxiety, moving educators away from strategies of avoidance and towards active moderation.
- Institutionalising multi-perspectivity in subject didactics: Subject-specific methodology courses (especially in history, literature, and civic education) must explicitly model multi-perspective teaching methods. Educators should be trained to present historical and cultural texts through diverse lenses, enabling them to honour cultural heritage without marginalising non-majority students.

While this study provides nuanced qualitative insights into the dispositions of 53 pre-service teachers across Georgia, the analytical scope of these findings suggests critical pathways for future empirical inquiry. The qualitative focus-group design effectively captured socially negotiated discourse and self-reported readiness; however, prospective educators' articulated values and stated pedagogical strategies may diverge from their real-time behavioural choices in complex classroom environments.

Building directly upon the empirical patterns identified in this research, particularly the high levels of cognitive anxiety and reliance on pedagogical avoidance, future studies could employ longitudinal, classroom-based observational frameworks to evaluate how graduates of the 60-ECTS programme manage religious diversity in practice over time. Intervention studies evaluating dedicated, scenario-based FoRB modules within teacher education curricula will be essential to establish evidence-based models for overcoming majoritarian blind spots.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the cultivation of interreligious competence and democratic readiness in future educators requires significantly more than

the passive absorption of humanistic values or an uncritical reliance on statutory frameworks. Moving from diagnosis to structural reform, this study highlights the urgent necessity to reconfigure teacher preparation in Georgia from passive constitutional literacy towards critical, diversity-sensitive pedagogy. Addressing the pervasive tension between abstract democratic ideals and majoritarian classroom practices requires a systemic shift in how teacher training programmes operationalise FoRB. Generic teacher preparation, which tends to conflate formal legal neutrality with substantive justice, leaves pre-service teachers vulnerable to majoritarian hegemony, ultimately pushing them towards pedagogical avoidance when they encounter religious complexity in the classroom. Left unaddressed, this instructional silence risks perpetuating educational spaces where religious minority students face implicit coercion, psychological marginalisation, and the denial of their fundamental rights.

Bridging this gap between declared democratic values and practical classroom execution demands a structural and pedagogical transformation in teacher education. It is insufficient for interreligious and democratic competencies to remain simply as declaratory policy goals within university missions or national legislation. The empirical evidence provides a clear mandate for systemic reform, in that pre-service teachers who completed targeted coursework in intercultural education or the history of religions exhibited significantly higher levels of reflective capacity, cognitive synergy, and practical readiness to utilise diversity as an educational asset. Consequently, national accreditation bodies and higher education institutions should restructure the standardised 60-ECTS Teacher Preparation Educational Program. The curriculum should transition from theoretical instruction to experiential, scenario-based learning, multi-perspective didactics, and explicit training in FoRB literacy, elevating interreligious moderation from an optional, peripheral addition to a core, assessable professional competency.

Beyond the Georgian context, this study offers vital theoretical and empirical contributions to the broader international scholarship on teacher education, human rights, and democratic culture in transitioning and majoritarian societies. It underscores that interreligious competence is not an innate disposition that develops spontaneously through general higher education; rather, it is a contextually mediated, specialised skill set requiring deliberate pedagogical cultivation. In societies where a dominant majoritarian faith is interwoven with national identity, public education serves as a critical battleground between passive majoritarian conformity and authentic pluralism. By equipping future educators with the analytical capabilities to deconstruct structural privilege and the normative tools to moderate value conflicts, educational systems can transform classrooms into genuine foundations for pluralistic, democratic societies.

To build upon these insights, future research should employ longitudinal observational methodologies to examine how graduates of reformed teacher preparation programmes operationalise FoRB principles and manage religious diversity in live classroom environments over time. Furthermore, given the empirical variations identified in this study, future inquiries should systematically investigate the intersectional and gendered dimensions of interreligious anxiety among teacher candidates, providing the empirical foundation needed to design even more targeted, context-sensitive pedagogical interventions.

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