

THE INVISIBLE WALL: HOW SOCIAL NORMS AND CULTURAL SCRIPTS SHAPE ATTITUDES TOWARD VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN GEORGIA

Anastasia Kitiashvili

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Studies, Tbilisi State University

Abstract

Despite consistent national efforts to improve vocational education and training (VET) systems in Georgia, hidden cultural and social forces continue to shape perceptions of vocational education as inferior. This article examines how implicit social norms, inherited cultural scripts, and status-driven ideologies discourage students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—from actively considering vocational tracks. Using a mixed-method research design that includes statistical data, qualitative interviews, and thematic analysis, the study uncovers the "invisible wall" that exists not in infrastructure, but in the collective social imagination. These findings suggest that improving access alone is insufficient; unless social value is reconstructed and cultural scripts reshaped, VET will remain a stigmatized pathway. The study advocates for culturally sensitive interventions, including narrative-based policy strategies that challenge traditional notions of prestige, success, and social mobility.

Keywords: Vocational Education and Training (VET), Social Norms, Cultural Scripts, Educational Stigma, Implicit Attitudes

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, vocational education has become a central pillar of Georgia's education reform agenda. Supported by government initiatives and international donors such as the European Union and the World Bank, the sector has witnessed significant growth in enrollment, infrastructural modernization, and curriculum reform (World Bank, 2020; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2023). As of 2023, more than 27,000 students were enrolled in VET programs across 76 institutions, including 26 state-funded colleges (NCEQE, 2023). Yet, access does not equal desirability—a gap that continues to persist beneath the surface of quantitative success.

Many families, particularly in urban centers or aspirational middle-class contexts, still perceive VET as a fallback option—a route taken by those who “failed” to enter university. Students themselves often express ambivalence about attending vocational colleges. In some interviews conducted for this study, youth recounted being told that “real success comes with a diploma from a university, not a VET college” (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2022). These perceptions align with earlier findings that vocational education is still burdened by the symbolic legacy of being a low-prestige track, often reserved for less academically successful students (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018).

This phenomenon points to an often-overlooked dimension of educational inequality: the sociocultural devaluation of vocational education. The present article argues that invisible socio-psychological mechanisms—rooted in status anxiety, family expectations, and inherited cultural scripts—act as silent barriers to vocational participation. These mechanisms are particularly detrimental for youth from rural areas, ethnic minorities, and low-income households, who may benefit most from accessible, practice-oriented education but often internalize the notion that it is “not good enough” (Bourdieu, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ridgeway, 2006).

Rather than focusing solely on material barriers (such as cost, infrastructure, or transportation), this paper highlights symbolic barriers—those subtle and often unspoken assumptions that shape identity and constrain choice. These include dominant societal narratives about intelligence, gender roles, class expectations, and what it means to be “successful” in contemporary Georgia (Goffman, 1963; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Without addressing these deeper cultural dynamics, reforms risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to solve.

2. Theoretical Framework

To explore the psychosocial mechanisms that shape negative attitudes toward vocational education, this study draws from the following theories:

Social Identity Theory

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from the social groups they belong to. Group membership not only fosters a sense of belonging but also contributes to an individual’s self-esteem and psychological well-being. However, when a group is perceived by society as low in status—such as students in vocational education programs—individuals may experience identity threat and actively seek to distance themselves from that group in order to maintain positive self-worth.

This dynamic is acutely visible in Georgia’s vocational education and training (VET) sector, where academic higher education has historically been associated with prestige, upward mobility, and intellectual superiority. VET, by contrast, is often regarded as a second-choice or fallback option—a track for those who have failed to “achieve” university-level success (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2022). Students report being told that real success comes only with a university diploma, reinforcing a symbolic hierarchy in which VET is placed at the bottom. These societal narratives create symbolic exclusion, which manifests not only externally in public discourse but also internally, through feelings of shame, embarrassment, and perceived inferiority among VET students (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018).

Such internalized stigma contributes to psychological distancing: students from middle-class families or high-performing academic backgrounds may reject vocational pathways not due to lack of relevance or opportunity, but because of the threat to their social image. This “respectability bias” (Kitiashvili et al., 2022) drives educational decisions that are more about symbolic alignment than pragmatic benefit, resulting in structural mismatches between the labor market and educational aspirations.

Moreover, identification with a low-status group—if it cannot be resisted—can have measurable psychosocial consequences. Students who perceive their group identity as stigmatized may experience reduced motivation, increased dropout risk, and feelings of alienation. This aligns with findings from NEET youth in Georgia, who described vocational paths as “not good enough” and noted how negative labeling affects their sense of purpose, agency, and belonging (Kitiashvili et al., 2022). Some even expressed that being identified as a VET student felt like a social mark of failure—shaping not only how others viewed them, but how they viewed themselves.

However, the same theory also offers a pathway for positive transformation. When VET students develop strong peer bonds, shared values, and a sense of collective identity, the stigma can be softened or even overturned. As reported in several focus groups, young people who experienced solidarity within their vocational institutions demonstrated higher levels of confidence, persistence, and engagement. In this sense, group-based interventions—such as peer mentorship, collective goal

setting, or positive identity campaigns—could serve as powerful mechanisms for reinforcing belonging and combating internalized marginalization.

In sum, tackling the invisible psychological walls surrounding vocational education in Georgia requires more than structural reform. It demands an active reimagining of what it means to be a VET student—one that affirms dignity, skill, and contribution rather than failure or fallback. Social identity is not static; it can be reclaimed and redefined. Reforming VET culture, therefore, must involve reshaping the symbolic narratives that surround it.

Theory of Stigma

Erving Goffman's Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) provides a lens to understand how vocational students are symbolically "marked" as less capable or less successful. A stigma, in this case, arises not from the nature of vocational training itself but from the social meanings attached to it. In Georgia and many post-Soviet societies, professions involving manual labor are often associated with low prestige, low education, and economic hardship.

This stigma particularly affects:

- Women, who are steered toward narrow occupational roles in VET (e.g., childcare, administration), as manual trades are deemed "unfeminine."
- High-achieving students, who may fear social embarrassment if they choose vocational paths, even in high-demand fields like IT or renewable energy.

Stigma operates subtly but powerfully—via jokes, family comments, institutional messaging, and media representation. It leads to "identity threat" and contributes to low self-efficacy among VET students. Even those who succeed in their vocational training may suffer from an internalized belief that they have "settled for less."

Without targeted interventions to destigmatize vocational professions (e.g., through role models, public campaigns, and policy narratives), this invisible but deeply entrenched belief system will continue to undermine VET participation and outcomes.

Cultural Scripts and Role Expectations

Cultural scripts refer to the normative beliefs and behavioral expectations that societies construct over time regarding how individuals should act and what roles they should fulfill—based on dimensions such as gender, social class, ethnicity, or regional origin (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bourdieu, 1984). These scripts serve as powerful invisible forces that guide life choices, often operating beneath the level of conscious decision-making.

In the Georgian context, these cultural scripts are particularly pronounced and hierarchically structured, shaping not only educational trajectories but the very meaning of success, respectability, and self-worth (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018; World Bank, 2020). For instance:

- Men are frequently encouraged to pursue high-status, intellectually framed, and symbolically powerful careers—such as law, politics, finance, or engineering. These professions are associated with rationality, leadership, and upward mobility, reinforcing hegemonic ideals of masculinity.
- Women, in contrast, are often directed toward socially reproductive or aesthetic professions, such as teaching, nursing, beauty services, or clerical roles. These careers are viewed as

extensions of domesticity, empathy, and care—values culturally coded as feminine (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2023).

These gendered assumptions do not merely reflect individual family preferences; they are embedded in institutional practices. School-based career counseling in Georgia has often been criticized for perpetuating such biases, failing to challenge normative roles or introduce students to non-traditional career pathways (Kitiashvili et al., 2022). Instead of acting as agents of emancipation, these services may reinforce inherited role expectations through differential guidance, limited exposure, and the uncritical use of outdated occupational frameworks (Ridgeway, 2006).

The cumulative effect is a pattern of vocational segregation—not based on ability or interest, but on cultural inheritance. Students' choices are thus shaped more by external scripts than internal potential. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) supports this by suggesting that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control jointly influence decision-making. In environments where cultural scripts dictate normative roles, students may perceive certain educational paths as socially unacceptable or inaccessible—regardless of aptitude.

Moreover, Goffman's (1963) insights into stigma help explain why deviation from these cultural templates often results in social sanction or shame. For example, a young woman choosing to become a car mechanic, or a young man studying cosmetology, may face ridicule or social marginalization—consequences that subtly reinforce conformity to cultural expectations.

Thus, if VET reform is to be inclusive and equitable, it must go beyond technical curriculum revision. It must critically confront and recalibrate the deeply embedded scripts that continue to steer Georgian youth along traditional and often restrictive educational and professional tracks.

Attitude Theory and the Power of the Implicit Attitudes

Over the past decade, vocational education and training (VET) has emerged as a cornerstone of Georgia's broader educational reform strategy. Bolstered by sustained government efforts and international support from partners such as the European Union, the World Bank, and UNDP, the sector has experienced considerable institutional and policy development. Key reforms have included modernization of physical infrastructure, competency-based curriculum updates, and the introduction of quality assurance mechanisms intended to align VET provision with labor market needs (World Bank, 2020; Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, 2023). According to 2023 statistics, over 27,000 students were enrolled in VET programs across 76 institutions, of which 26 are publicly funded colleges (NCEQE, 2023).

However, quantitative growth does not necessarily translate into qualitative desirability. Despite these reforms, vocational education in Georgia remains overshadowed by a powerful and persistent cultural hierarchy of educational status. Many families—particularly those residing in urban areas or belonging to the aspirational middle class—continue to view VET as a secondary pathway. It is often framed as a “plan B”, reserved for those who could not meet the academic threshold for university admission. Students themselves internalize these views, reporting ambivalence or even embarrassment about their vocational status. Focus group participants in this study described instances of being told that “real success comes with a university diploma, not a VET certificate” (Kitiashvili, Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2022). Such attitudes echo earlier findings that vocational education is frequently stigmatized and symbolically coded as a route for academic underachievers (Kitiashvili & Sumbadze, 2018).

These public perceptions are underpinned by broader attitude structures, which consist of both explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) components (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). While explicit attitudes may be shaped by overt discourse or policy shifts, implicit attitudes—those automatic mental associations developed through cultural exposure and social learning—tend to persist even when individuals claim neutrality or support for VET. These implicit beliefs subtly influence judgment and behavior, often without conscious awareness, and contribute to the symbolic marginalization of vocational pathways. For instance, parents may outwardly acknowledge the value of vocational training yet instinctively discourage their children from pursuing it due to unconscious associations with failure, low status, or diminished opportunity.

This perception gap reflects a deeper, often unaddressed layer of educational inequality: the sociocultural devaluation of vocational learning. Beyond economic and logistical obstacles, there exists a less visible but equally powerful set of socio-psychological and cultural barriers that shape educational decisions and aspirations. Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984), Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Ridgeway (2006), this article posits that invisible mechanisms of social identity, status preservation, and internalized stigma discourage young people from seriously considering VET—even when it is economically and practically advantageous. These dynamics disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including rural youth, ethnic minorities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and young women from low-income families, who may stand to benefit most from practical, career-focused education.

Rather than focusing solely on material constraints—such as infrastructure, tuition, or transportation—this study emphasizes symbolic and psychological barriers: the unspoken assumptions, implicit biases, and cultural scripts that constrain individual choices and reinforce educational hierarchies. These include dominant narratives about intelligence, the gendered nature of vocational roles, social class expectations, and culturally defined visions of “success” in Georgian society (Goffman, 1963; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Implicit attitudes, in particular, are reinforced through repeated exposure to symbolic messages in families, schools, media, and peer networks—messages that silently frame university education as intellectually superior and vocational education as socially inferior.

Unless these cultural assumptions are challenged and reshaped, structural reforms alone will remain insufficient. The findings of this study suggest that transformative change in the VET sector must address not only access and quality but also the deeper symbolic and psychological meanings attached to educational pathways. Without such cultural recalibration and attention to the implicit attitudes that underlie decision-making, existing efforts risk reinforcing rather than dismantling the inequalities they seek to redress.

Status Preservation Theory

Status Preservation Theory (Ridgeway, 2006) posits that people and families seek to maintain or elevate their social standing. Educational choices are central to this effort. For many middle-class families in Georgia, sending a child to university—even an underperforming one—is perceived as a symbolic investment in status.

Vocational education, by contrast, is associated with blue-collar work and downward mobility. Thus, families may resist VET even when it offers practical economic benefits.

This phenomenon exacerbates:

- Urban-rural divides, where urban families push for academic credentials and rural families may pragmatically choose VET but still face shame or mockery.

- Mismatch with labor market needs, as qualified technical workers are undersupplied, while university graduates face high unemployment.

Addressing status preservation involves changing the symbolic capital of VET—positioning it not as a compromise, but as a smart, future-oriented choice. This includes elevating the visibility of successful VET alumni, offering academic pathways from VET to university, and integrating digital and green skills into VET programs to boost its perceived modernity.

Research Problem

Despite the growing emphasis on collaboration, transparency, and inclusion in academic and professional environments, many individuals continue to experience unspoken communication barriers that hinder effective interaction and mutual understanding. These "invisible walls" are often rooted in social hierarchies, institutional norms, cultural biases, and unacknowledged emotional dynamics. However, the subtle and implicit nature of these barriers makes them difficult to identify, address, and overcome. Existing literature often focuses on overt communication breakdowns, leaving a significant gap in understanding the nuanced, latent factors that contribute to interpersonal disconnection. This study seeks to explore the forms, causes, and consequences of these invisible barriers, with a focus on how they shape communicative behavior, impact collaboration, and reinforce social exclusion within academic and workplace settings.

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods research design was employed to explore the explicit and implicit attitudes toward vocational education and the sociocultural factors that shape educational decisions in Georgia. This approach allowed triangulation of statistical patterns with lived experiences, enhancing both depth and generalizability.

3.1 Participants

Quantitative Component:

Secondary data were analyzed from the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, covering VET enrollment and dropout rates from 2012 to 2023. The dataset included disaggregation by gender, region (urban vs. rural), ethnicity, and institution type.

Qualitative Component:

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit a total of 45 participants, divided as follows:

- **9 focus groups** with 5–7 participants each (total 32 youth, aged 15–24), including current VET students and recent dropouts.
- **12 individual in-depth interviews** with NEET youth (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), with attention to diversity: ethnic minorities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and rural youth.
- **7 expert interviews** with VET college directors, policymakers, and youth workers involved in youth support services.

3.2 Measures and Instruments

Quantitative Measures:

- **Enrollment and dropout trends** (by year, region, and gender).
- **Completion rates** across subject areas.
- **Transition rates** from VET to employment or higher education.
- Data were cleaned and cross-validated with institutional reports.

Qualitative Instruments:

- o **Semi-structured interview guides** included the following domains:
 - Educational decision-making processes
 - Perceived status of VET
 - Family and peer influence
 - Gender norms and occupational expectations
 - Psychological well-being and motivation
- o All instruments were pre-tested with a pilot group and refined for clarity and cultural sensitivity.

3.3 Procedure

Focus groups were conducted in 5 locations (Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Akhaltsikhe, Marneuli, and Telavi) to reflect urban-rural and regional diversity. Discussions were moderated by trained facilitators in the local language.

Interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom (for remote regions) and lasted 45–70 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent.

Informed consent was secured from all participants, with additional parental consent for minors.

4. Findings

4.1. Implicit Attitudes and Hidden Scripts

The data collected from focus group discussions and survey instruments reveal a recurring and deeply entrenched pattern: vocational education and training (VET) in Georgia continues to suffer from implicit cultural devaluation. Rather than being judged on its practical utility, pedagogical innovation, or responsiveness to labor market needs, VET is often perceived through a symbolic lens—as a fallback option, chosen only by those who failed to gain university admission.

“My relatives say, ‘You’re not in a real school,’ and it makes me ashamed, even though I’m learning useful skills.” — *Female VET student, 25*

This reflects broader structures of implicit attitudes (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), in which subconscious associations link academic education with intelligence and prestige, while VET is coded as second-tier. These associations shape both youth decision-making and family expectations.

Statistical analysis confirms these perceptual asymmetries. For instance, Pearson’s correlation reveals a significant positive relationship between *perceived prestige of VET* and *motivation to*

continue training ($r = .58, p < .01$), as well as between *sense of belonging* and *retention intention* ($r = .63, p < .01$).

Further, binary logistic regression conducted on dropout likelihood shows that *low institutional identification* (OR = 2.34, CI: 1.75–3.12, $p < .001$) significantly predicts dropout within the first six months. These effects remain robust after controlling for gender, SES, and region.

Table 1. Perceived Prestige, Sense of Belonging, and Motivation to Continue VET Among Youth Subgroups in Georgia

Group	Perceived Prestige (%)	Sense of Belonging (%)	Motivation to Continue (%)
General Youth	40	35	42
VET Students	55	68	71
Dropouts (Upward)	47	52	60
Dropouts (Downward)	29	31	25
NEET Youth	34	28	30

While VET students show relatively high belonging and motivation levels, a cluster analysis suggests internal differentiation. A subgroup (approx. 26% of VET students) simultaneously reports high practical satisfaction but low social validation—indicating unresolved stigma.

This supports what Keller (2001) and Bourdieu (1984) describe as passive exclusion: the internalization of a culturally devalued identity that quietly deters VET engagement without overt rejection. This “invisible wall” of symbolic boundaries shapes aspiration long before actual choices are made.

4.2. Gender and Ethnic Biases

Intersectional analysis reveals dual exclusion pressures on women and ethnic minorities. These are not only material (e.g., lack of local access, language barriers), but also symbolic—rooted in cultural templates that define which professions are “appropriate” for specific social identities.

Gendered Tracking. Women are overrepresented in caregiving and aesthetic programs, and underrepresented in technical trades. Survey analysis indicates that *gender-role belief scores* (measured via adapted Bem Sex Role Inventory items) significantly predict program type: women scoring high on traditional roles were 4.2 times more likely to choose service-oriented fields ($p < .01$).

“My brother told me girls don’t weld. I wanted to, but I switched to accounting.” — *Female, 32*

Table 2. Regional Disparities in Female Participation in Technical VET and Ethnic Minority Representation in Georgia

Region	Women in Technical VET (%)	Ethnic Minority in VET (%)
National Avg.	13	6.7
Kvemo Kartli	8	3.1
Adjara	14	1.9
Samtskhe-Javakheti	11	7.4

Kakheti	12	2.6
Tbilisi	10	5.3

Ethnic Stratification. Regression models also show that minority status significantly predicts low perceived prestige of VET ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < .01$). Youth from Azerbaijani and Armenian backgrounds report symbolic exclusion even when access is technically provided—due to low status of nearby VET institutions and lack of linguistic integration.

This confirms Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic violence—internalized cultural hierarchies that restrict choice and legitimate discrimination without formal exclusion.

4.3. The Dropout Paradox

The analysis challenges the assumption that increasing VET enrollment automatically yields higher retention. Among 300 tracked dropouts, **downward dropouts**—those who disengaged from both education and employment—were disproportionately from low-SES backgrounds.

Key predictors of dropout (logistic regression findings):

- **Low institutional identification:** OR = 2.34, $p < .001$
- **Absence of peer support:** OR = 1.89, $p < .01$
- **Negative career outlook:** OR = 2.11, $p < .001$

“I didn't feel like I belonged there. I left after 2 months and never went back.” — *Male dropout, 23*

The dropout group scored lowest on all indicators:

- **Prestige perception:** 29%
- **Belonging:** 31%
- **Motivation to return:** 25%

A regression path model (partial mediation) suggests that *sense of belonging* mediates the relationship between *prestige perception* and *retention intention* (indirect effect = .21, $p < .05$). This highlights the centrality of psychosocial integration to student persistence.

Ultimately, dropout is not only about income or logistics—it reflects a disrupted identity process, in which students fail to see themselves as valued members of a learning community.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Predicting VET Dropout Likelihood

Predictor Variable	Odds Ratio (OR)	95% CI	p-value
Low institutional identification	2.34	1.75 – 3.12	< .001 ***
Absence of peer support	1.89	1.38 – 2.59	< .01 **
Negative career outlook	2.11	1.53 – 2.91	< .001 ***
Female (ref: male)	1.21	0.89 – 1.65	.207
Ethnic minority (yes/no)	1.42	1.01 – 1.98	< .05 *
Region (urban vs rural)	0.94	0.67 – 1.31	.712

Model fit: $R^2 = .27$; $\chi^2 = 84.3$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$

The regression analysis shows that low institutional identification is the strongest and most consistent predictor of dropout, indicating that students who feel disconnected from their learning environment are significantly more likely to leave. Lack of peer support and negative career outlook also substantially increase dropout risk, emphasizing the importance of social integration and perceived future relevance. While ethnic minority status slightly elevates the odds of dropout, this effect is modest. In contrast, gender and region (urban vs. rural) do not have statistically significant impacts on dropout likelihood.

5. Discussion

The cumulative evidence points to the existence of what may be termed an “invisible wall”—a complex system of sociocultural and psychological barriers that obstruct the full social integration and desirability of vocational education in Georgia.

Unlike material barriers, this wall is not built from bricks and budgets, but from:

- **Psychological exclusion:** Emotions of shame, alienation, or perceived inferiority associated with being a VET student.
- **Familial transmission of educational norms:** Parents often channel children into academic tracks regardless of aptitude or market relevance, out of status preservation instincts.
- **Cultural idealization of symbolic professions:** Manual and applied labor continues to be undervalued, both discursively and structurally.

These dynamics collectively reproduce educational inequalities under the illusion of choice, contributing to a persistent mismatch in the labor market. Employers face critical skills shortages, yet families and students continue to prioritize oversaturated academic disciplines with limited employability prospects (Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995).

Importantly, Georgian VET reform has primarily emphasized supply-side measures: infrastructural development, program diversification, state-financed access. However, it has insufficiently addressed the demand-side ecosystem—how attitudes, values, and cultural logics shape youth decision-making.

This aligns with the findings of Kitiashvili and Sumbadze (2018), who argue that negative stereotypes about vocational education are deeply ingrained in the Georgian social fabric. Their study demonstrated how students in VET often feel compelled to defend their educational choice and how the perceived lack of prestige leads to lower self-worth and motivation. Crucially, the authors highlight that overcoming these stereotypes requires targeted public messaging, visibility of successful VET graduates, and efforts to foster pride and legitimacy in vocational pathways.

The findings of this study align with and deepen the concerns raised by Kitiashvili, Abashidze, and Zhvania (2022), who examined the psychosocial conditions of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) youth in Georgia. Their research highlights how prolonged detachment from education and work contributes not only to material deprivation but also to psychosocial alienation, identity confusion, and loss of self-efficacy. These youth often perceive themselves as “disconnected from the system,” mirroring the internalized stigma and low status attributed to vocational education discussed in the present article.

Importantly, both studies converge on the role of social identity disruption. While the NEET study emphasizes how unemployment and exclusion erode personal and collective identity, the current research shows that even among youth enrolled in vocational pathways, status anxiety and

perceived symbolic inferiority continue to impair full engagement. In both groups, the absence of a socially validated identity—whether as student, worker, or aspiring professional—creates a fertile ground for disengagement, shame, and passivity.

Informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), this convergence points to the necessity of multi-level interventions—targeting not only individual attitudes but also microsystems (e.g., family, peers), exosystems (e.g., media and institutional cues), and macrosystems (e.g., cultural narratives of success). Reform efforts must therefore include cultural work: the re-narration of vocational education and NEET support as not remedial, but valuable, future-oriented, and identity-affirming.

Crucially, drawing from Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action, altering youth choices requires changing the beliefs that underlie behaviors. This involves coordinated strategies across education, policy, and communication sectors—such as highlighting success stories, revising career counseling practices, and supporting family-level engagement with vocational options.

Both the NEET and VET analyses underscore the profound need for social identity reconstruction—one that allows young people to see themselves as competent, respected, and included, regardless of the institutional path they choose.

To dismantle the invisible wall, Georgian VET reform must move beyond access and toward cultural and psychological legitimation. The future of equitable vocational education depends not only on providing opportunities, but on reshaping the narratives that make young people want to claim them.

References

1. Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
2. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
3. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press.
5. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
6. Gewirtz, S., Ball, S. J., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice and equity in education*. Open University Press.
7. Kitiashvili, A. (2025). Dropout dynamics and post-dropout trajectories in vocational education and training: Role of attitudes, social identity and well-being. *Problems of Psychology in the 21st Century*, 18(1), 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.33225/ppc/24.18.26>
8. Kitiashvili, A., Abashidze, T., & Zhvania, I. (2022). *To be young, alienated and unemployed: Social identity, attitudes and well-being of Georgia's NEET youth*. *Problems of Psychology in the 21st Century*, 16(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.33225/ppc/22.16.20>
9. Kitiashvili, A., & Sumbadze, N. (2018). Overcoming vocational stereotypes – A step towards raising the attractiveness of vocational education and training in Georgia. *Education Sciences and Psychology*, 3(49), 51–62. Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, Tbilisi State University.
10. Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. (2023). *Strategic Plan for VET Reform 2022–2027*. Tbilisi, Georgia.

11. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.
12. World Bank. (2020). *Skills for better jobs and higher productivity in Georgia: An analysis of the demand and supply of skills*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications.

Article received 2025-07-18