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**Teachers of Punjabi Sikh Ancestry: Their Perceptions of their Roles
in the British Columbia Education System[1]**

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Abstract: This study examines role perceptions of teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry in the British Columbia public education system. Twenty teachers, thirteen females and seven males were interviewed. Three of the participants were born in Canada, while seventeen immigrated to Canada. The participants ranged in age from their early twenties to their late forties.

The results of this investigation indicate that these teachers see themselves playing a wide range of roles in the education system. They recount that they serve as bridges between the Punjabi Sikh community and the education system acting as translators, cultural informants and role models. These teachers are also committed to influencing selected cultural values of Punjabi Sikh parents in order to reflect mainstream attitudes toward education and gender roles.

This research has important implications for public school districts and for teacher education programs that recruit, train and employ minority teachers. This research suggests that it is critical to acknowledge teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry not just as "professional ethnics," but as educators with a range of skills and talents as varied as those of their mainstream colleagues.

Introduction

> I can understand what it's like not to be white ... I ... tell ... (my students) that I
> did speak another language when I was a little girl, and I know what it's like to
> learn English ... so when they're going on how they're not the same as everybody
> else in the classroom I say to them, "My God, you are ahead of the game, you
> already know another language, learning English should be a piece of cake." ... It
> certainly helps with the parents ... I am a person of colour, then I must know what
> it is like to be a minority in a world of … white people, right?
>
> – Amanpreet, teacher

Changes to Canada's immigration policy since 1962 have led to an increasingly diverse population, linguistically, racially, ethnically and culturally. New emphasis on family reunification increased immigration from non-Anglo European sources including Asia and Africa (Fleras and Elliott 1996, 292; Subhas 1982, 15).[2] The diversity created as a result of changing immigration policy is apparent in many classrooms in Canada's major cities. However, the growing presence of minority students has not been paralleled by growth in the number of minority teachers (Beynon, Toohey, and Kishor 1992). Scholars in Canada, (Beynon and Toohey 1995; Thiessen, Bascia, and Goodson 1996) the United States (Chinn and Wong 1992; Sleeter 1993) and Great Britain (Ghuman 1995; Osler 1997) have analyzed the need to attract more minorities into the teaching profession. Research on the experiences of minorities who do enter the teaching profession is only in its early stages (Casey 1993; Foster 1990; Ghuman 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994; Osler 1997; Sleeter 1993; Thiessen et al. 1996).

Little is known about the barriers and successes minority teachers encounter, how they negotiate between mainstream society and their cultural group, and what roles they are expected to play by parents, students, school personnel, their communities and themselves. This study will begin to fill these gaps. Twenty teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry who work in the public education system in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia were interviewed. The interview data furnished by thirteen women and seven men provided valuable insights into how participants interpreted their roles within the mainstream school system and what they viewed as successes and difficulties in their careers. The analysis of this information points to ways in which the public education system and teacher education programs might become more supportive of minority teachers in public education.

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[2] The long history of immigration from the Punjab region of India and settlement in British Columbia will be summarized later in this paper.

Theoretical and Research Background

The present study was undertaken from an interactionist theoretical perspective, which theorizes that individuals are active agents in "constructing and negotiating" their social worlds (Fleras and Elliot 1996, 27). An interactionist perspective begins with social behaviour as a key variable for understanding social life. According to this outlook we do not live in a predetermined world. Rather we create our reality by applying meaning (interpretations) in conjunction with others in a variety of situations (Fleras and Elliot 1992, 19).

In the interactionist model, society (and more specifically intergroup dynamics) is theorized as dynamic, continuously under creation, interpretation and recreation, with individuals playing an important role in initiating and implementing change. In this tradition we felt the experiences of individual teachers needed to be examined in their own right. Furthermore the interactionist theoretical approach emphasizes the importance of considering historical factors in developing understanding of the experiences of these teachers (Fleras and Elliot 1992, 21). McCarthy (1993) also stresses the importance of attending to the specific social, cultural and historical and gendered contexts in which social interaction occurs. In line with these approaches we provide some detail on the social, historical and cultural context of the Punjabi Sikh community in British Columbia.

Ogbu (1978) and Gibson (1988) affirm the importance of cultural values, especially the value placed on education by Punjabi Sikhs in a California farming community. McCarthy also acknowledges the potential importance of culturally specific influences but alerts us that essentialist explanations of inequality, which focus exclusively on cultural influences, "ignore or flatten the differences within minority groups" (McCarthy 1993, 118).

Feminist scholars have articulated the importance of developing theoretical paradigms from the narrative experiences of women, and they have documented how power relations in society have subordinated and marginalized women (Bannerji 1993; Carty and Brand 1993; Etter-Lewis 1991; Ng 1993; Patai 1991). Furthermore, minority feminist scholarship illustrates how minority women's experiences in family, education and career development differ from minority men's experiences (Bannerji 1993; Carty and Brand 1993; Ng 1993). Thus, the experiences of female Punjabi teachers need to be examined in their own terms.

Studies that examine the experiences of North American teachers of African ancestry also provided background to this study. The works of Casey (1993), Foster (1990), Henry (1992) and Ladson-Billings (1994) on the experiences of African-American and African Canadian teachers indicated that minority teachers individually and collectively act as agents for social change and

attempt to transform the educational settings they work in to mitigate the effects of racism, poverty and institutional barriers for their minority students. We wondered if commitment to social change would also characterize the experiences of teachers of Punjabi ancestry in the current study.

There has not been any work done in examining the professional experiences of Punjabi Sikh teachers as a group in the Canadian school system. Relevant material on teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry is drawn from the British studies of Osler (1997), Ghuman (1995), and Blair and Maylor (1993). In these studies Punjabi Sikhs are respectively designated as Black (Osler 1997) or South Asian (Ghuman 1995) as described below.

Osler's British study (1997) explored the experiences of 48 Black minority teachers, administrators and high school students and students in education faculties. This group included individuals of South Asian (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi) and West Indian ancestry. Several common themes emerged from Osler's interviews. Firstly, teachers identified that schooling was viewed by their own families as a key element in achieving success. Consistent with their own parents' desires, these teachers felt a commitment to minority students and felt they had higher expectations for their students' educational achievement than did their white colleagues. Secondly, these teachers were often isolated and believed that their professional and personal skills and experiences as minority educators were paradoxically either not acknowledged or taken advantage of by their colleagues and supervisors. For example, some of the teachers noted that because they spoke an additional language they were expected to act as translators as well as carry out their teaching duties, but they were neither compensated nor explicitly acknowledged for taking on these extra tasks. Thirdly, they found support by networking with other minority teachers.

Finally, racism was a prominent theme in these stories. Teachers who were schooled in Britain recounted how they had experienced racism throughout their education. As a result, many sought higher academic qualifications "in an attempt to outweigh anticipated discrimination in employment" (Osler 1997, 122). This racism also motivated "a desire to transform education so that it serves future generations (of minorities) better ... and so that it meets the needs of all" rather than just white students (ibid.).

Ghuman's (1995) British study focused on contrasts between first and second generation teachers of Indian and Pakistani ancestry. Interviews respectively with 25 first and 25 second generation teachers revealed important differences between the two groups in regard to securing a first teaching post, perceptions on promotion, language barriers, institutional racism and

ethnocentrism. First-generation teachers experienced greater difficulties than second-generation teachers.[3]

Blair and Maylor's British study (1993) examined the perceptions of 18 minority female student teachers, eight of whom were South Asian. They concluded that minority teachers often play the tenuous role of "the professional ethnic."

> [Assuming that minority teachers possess] specialized knowledge and expertise of minority ethnic cultures and customs [is a] practice which can lead to the marginalization of [minority] teachers and endanger their chances of promotion (64).

In contrast to the above-outlined group studies, Allen (1994, 182) provides a personal perspective on her experiences as a minority educator in the United States. She argues that "the quest for positive role models... risks stereotyping minorities on the basis of race and gender imposing upon...[minority and women] teachers the...obligation" to act as perfect role models rather than as individuals. She contends that teachers of colour provide all students with important role models of successful people contributing to society. Would the teachers in our study feel the same way?

Qualitative Methodology

In this research, narratives of teachers were collected through semi-structured interviews. This is the same methodology employed in a number of important studies of minority teachers (Casey 1993; Foster 1990; Henry 1992; Ladson-Billings 1994). Beynon and Toohey suggest that "knowledge of the individual will help both in preventing the group perspective from becoming a stereotype and in designing initiatives which will respect the needs and concerns of individual students" (1995, 456).

While qualitative research can yield rich insights into the phenomena under investigation, it also has some limitations. One of these relates to condensing the data for journal publication where space constraints require selectively presenting a few statements in order to represent a wide set of experiences. In qualitative research it is also necessary to acknowledge the influence that the presence of the researcher has on the participants. We need to be cognizant of our own biases and not consciously impose our perceptions when interpreting teacher narratives. To assist us in maintaining awareness of our potential biases we each independently analyzed the interview transcripts and then compared the outcomes of our separate analyses. The following section details key dimensions of our respective positions and locations indicating the ways in which our positions are different but complementary.

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[3] In the present study where the majority of respondents immigrated to Canada as young children, the contrasts so important in Ghuman's work were not apparent.

Researchers, Positions and Locations

Researcher #1

I am a teacher, a woman, an Ismaili member of the middle class, a person of South Asian ancestry and a thinking and feeling human being and I daily face many paradoxes working in the public school system. My multiple roles and locations influence the work I do and how I personally perceive my role as a teacher.

I wondered if the issues pertinent to me as an individual South Asian teacher were pertinent to other South Asian teachers. Part of the decision to study teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry was due to the fact that this group is the most populous (over 140,000) South Asian community in British Columbia (Raj 1991).[4]

Do Punjabi Sikh teachers share certain common experiences? How do these minority teachers interpret their practice and define their roles? What influenced them to interpret their practise in such a way? What strategies have they used to "make it" in the mainstream educational system?

Researcher #2

I am a white, Jewish, university professor specializing in the field of multicultural/anti-racist education. I am concerned that there are only small numbers of minority students enrolled in the teacher education program in which I work. Within this program, as I focus future teachers' attention on issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender and language, the voices of students of minority ancestry seem muted. I came to this research interested in what they would say about their experiences away from the gaze of the institution and how their experiences could assist us in attracting more individuals of minority ancestry into teacher education.

Methods

All but three of the individuals interviewed for this study were born in Canada or were under the age of four when they immigrated to Canada. Four of the participants were located by using Simon Fraser University's teacher education program records. Additional participants were identified through networking which yielded six female and six male participants. A letter to the editor of *Teacher*

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[4] A parallel research project on teachers of Chinese ancestry can be seen in, J. Beynon, Ilieva, R. and Dichupa, M. (2001). "Teachers of Chinese Ancestry: Interactions of Identities and Professional Roles." *Teaching Education* 12 (2): 133-52, and as a RIIM Working Paper.

Magazine, which is distributed without cost to all B.C. teachers, explained the project and solicited volunteers, and this yielded the remaining four participants.[5]

The semi-structured interviews based on a set of 21 questions pursued areas such as parental influence on career choice, community perceptions of teachers' roles, relationships with students, attitudes towards multicultural and anti-racist education, multicultural/anti-racist programming in teacher education and perceived effects of employment equity policies and programs on education and work. The interviews, which were between one and three hours, were tape recorded and transcribed. Copies of the transcripts were sent to participants who were asked to review the transcripts, add supporting details, correct any inaccuracies and delete any passages they selected. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

In the analysis of interview transcripts which ensued, the following key themes were identified: parental influence, *appna*, [see p. 9] the teachers' roles as: bridges, translators, cultural informants and role models. We will also examine these teachers' experiences with sexism and racism, their employment histories, and their views on anti-racist and multicultural education and employment equity. Before presenting the data analysis it is important to provide a brief history of Punjabi Sikh immigration and settlement in British Columbia.

Historical Context

Sikhs first came to Canada in the 1890s. Initially, Sikh immigration was limited to males since Canadian laws prohibited the immigration of Asian women. Economic advancement was the primary motive for migration. These men came as indentured labourers and planned to stay only long enough to earn money for the socio-economic advancement of their families' status in India. In 1919, a new Order-in-Council was passed allowing the immigration of Indian wives and their children under 18 (Johnston 1988). However, for the most part, men did not bring their wives and children due to both the cost and their desire to ultimately return to their homeland.

In 1951, under the Canada-India Quota agreement, Canada reluctantly agreed to take a token number of 150 unsponsored Indian immigrants annually. In 1957, this number was raised to 300. Finally in 1967, a non-discriminatory point system was implemented in the selection process. Sikhs were now able to sponsor relatives outside of their immediate family, as other Canadians had always been able to do. Hence, the Punjabi Sikh community is by and large made up of the immigrant

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[5] An earlier study established that the percentage of student teachers of South Asian ancestry in the Simon Fraser University teacher education program during the period from 1988 – 1992 was approximately 2.5%

minorities who, Ogbu (1978) describes, view mainstream educational institutions as paths for upward social and economic mobility. It is in the context of immigration policy, which supported unification of families, that this research is situated.

How Female and Male Teachers of Punjabi Sikh Ancestry's Perceive Their Roles

The narratives of female and male teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry clearly indicated both similarities and differences in the way they respectively viewed their role as teacher. Because of space constraints it is not possible to present a representative selection from both the men and the women. Only where their views differ in important ways (e.g. in regard to gender roles) will selections from both groups be presented.

It is important to note that although some of the patterns perceived among the female teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry appeared less marked in the males' responses, there were fewer men, and most of the female teachers were elementary teachers, while most of the men were high school teachers. These may be factors that contribute to the contrasts.

Parental Influence

All of the female and five of the male teachers indicated that their parents had influenced their perceptions about educational attainment. Sahibjeet, a female intermediate teacher, represented both male and female interviewees' experiences.

> My parents, they were raised in India and they didn't have like a lot of formal education… They've been hard menial type of workers... But [are] supportive [of education]. Dad always used to say… I've now got calluses on my hands from doing hard labour and I don't want you kids to do [physical] work, so you go to school. School was a big thing.

Appna

Both female and male teachers felt they were viewed positively by the Punjabi Sikh parents. They were viewed as being *appna* or "one of us." Eleven of the women also related how members of the Punjabi Sikh community would approach them for advice and they felt obligated to assist them.

All of the males felt that the Punjabi community viewed them as being *appna*. For example, Kulbir, a high school mathematics teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience, touched upon some of the expectations he felt the Punjabi Sikh community had of him:

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which is marginally less than the 2.7% representation both in the university population at large and in the population of British Columbia during that time period. (Beynon, Toohey and Kishor 1992.)

>They are the ones who think, O.K. this person is … "one of ours," and you know, let's approach him and get ideas ... And there is definitely a linkage, which I think would be different from a white teacher.

A Bridge for Parents

Consistent with being perceived as *appna*, both male and female teachers felt that they were able to establish strong relationships with the parents because they shared similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. This enabled them to serve as intermediaries between the parents of their Punjabi Sikh students and school personnel. Ten female teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry also shared a common orientation in assisting parents to help their children succeed in and adjust to the school system. Their linguistic skills and cultural background were assets in establishing rapport with Punjabi Sikh parents.

>Roopinder, a first year teacher described her experiences:

>I think they [Punjabi Sikh parents] see that there's that bridging role between the two cultures, as opposed to having white teachers and Indo-Canadian parents, you have somebody in the middle ... I think that makes a difference ... because you are a minority ... you have that extra ability ... [in comparison to someone] who happens to be white, who doesn't speak the language.

A Bridge for Schools: Teacher, Translator, Cultural Informant

The cultural and linguistic knowledge of Punjabi Sikh teachers was often a resource for school personnel. The paradoxical implications of how their cultural and linguistic knowledge can work both for and against the professional careers of teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry will be considered further in the implications section.

Both female and male teachers felt that they were essential actors in transmitting the needs of the school to parents. There were many examples of these teachers assisting their staff with translations and disseminating cultural information. Both male and female teachers used the metaphor of a bridge or intermediary in describing their role.

Following is an example of bridging in which a Punjabi Sikh teacher helped his mainstream colleagues understand a key aspect of Punjabi community life. Kirpal, a beginning intermediate teacher, described how he assisted colleagues when the father of two students in his school died. The staff wanted to acknowledge the loss but were unsure of how to do this. They wondered if sending flowers and cards was appropriate in Punjabi Sikh culture. He informed his staff:

>In Punjabi culture we don't send cards and flowers… but if you guys did, they wouldn't take it as an insult or an inappropriate thing to do. They know that that's part of your culture… I sort of helped clarify the situation… [and] I told them… we don't really have to send cards because I'm going to go over to the family… with my condolences… Then the principal [says], if you're going to go,

> I'll come with you … and one of the other teachers who had a sibling in the class said, okay, I'll go too.

A Bridge for Students

The narratives of Punjabi Sikh teachers illustrated both how their Punjabi Sikh students felt comfortable with them and sought advice from them as well as how these teachers were strongly committed to ensuring their Punjabi Sikh students succeeded. Their accounts clearly indicate that they are able to use their cultural knowledge to work on behalf of their Punjabi Sikh students. Roopinder stated how she was able to establish nurturing relationships with her Punjabi Sikh students. She felt that her students were:

> …uncomfortable going to someone else to talk about... [things]… They know you're there, so if they need you, you can help them... I mean every kid needs somebody they can relate to, for whatever reason, whether you're female, or male, or the same colour, or the same language.

Role Models For Minority Students

The Punjabi Sikh teachers felt they served as positive role models for their Punjabi Sikh students. Their presence provided Punjabi students with an opportunity "to identify with a person in authority and so enhance" (Taylor and Hegarty 1985, 520) their self-esteem. Mundip, a beginning high school Mathematics teacher indicated why he believed it was important for Punjabi Sikh students to see members of their community in positions of authority:

> I try to be a role model for all the kids but the Punjabi kids I think especially look up to me in that there are so few Punjabi teachers... They'll see me around the community doing things... and it just lets them be more comfortable about who they are.
>
> The special importance of being a role model for female minority students is discussed in the

section on cultural experiences with sexism.

Models for All Students

Eight female and three male teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry were keenly aware that their presence might break stereotypes their mainstream students may have about minority groups. Saranjeet, a primary teacher who works in a predominantly mainstream community, believes that it is important for her to be seen in a position of authority and as a professional because it breaks stereotypes that are commonly held about Punjabi Sikhs:

> For where I... [teach] it's really important that children be exposed to different cultures because they're gonna leave their little... community some day. When they see somebody who looks different or acts different... I want those bodies to

respond to that difference with "Wow, wanna know more about this!" I don't want those bodies to respond with "U-ugh"; and that "ugh" is where the racism grows out of... I think that goes back to... acceptance and tolerance... I want them to accept it as being valid, as being real, as being equal.

Navjosh felt he served as an important role model for his mainstream students as well as his minority students:

I think it's very good for non-minority kids to see minority people in these roles, probably just as important as it is for Punjabi kids to see me... all teachers can have an important impact on kids and so it's just as good for me to have that effect on Johnny... as it is for me to have an effect on Jasdee.

Cultural Experiences With Sexism

Several of the female teachers emphasized the effects of gender roles within Punjabi Sikh culture and how this can restrict opportunities for their female Punjabi Sikh students. In contrast, only two male teachers touched upon this. These female teachers are working to make the school system more equitable for their students, especially female students. However, they are also working actively to help their female students overcome cultural barriers to their educational and career development. Roopinder commented on what she considers the sexist upbringing her Punjabi Sikh students bring into the classroom:

The [Punjabi Sikh] boys treat these girls awful in a lot of cases, and the girls take it, because… that is what they see at home, and that is a part of the culture… you be a good girl, you marry, and be a wife... [I want to] let the girls think for themselves and decide what they want to do.

Baljeet, a high school Physical Education teacher, talked about how he felt the females in Punjabi Sikh culture were treated as inferior and were expected to adhere to more traditional codes of conduct:

The girls ... have it a lot harder than the boys do, 'cause a lot of the boys can get away with a lot of the stuff they do... The parents let the boys get away with a lot more things than the girls do.

Professional Experiences With Sexism

Accounts of several female teachers illustrate the sexism they experience in the workplace. Saranjeet felt she was rendered invisible and excluded from decision making in a hierarchically organized workplace where the administrator was male:

I have talked to other women or colleagues of mine, and I... think that my [sexist] experience isn't... necessarily because of being Indian, but it's being a female in a society where there's a lot of sexism... In the beginning of the year...[the principal asked the staff]...to put their names on a list if they are willing to be teachers in charge if he had to be out of the school... On that list were four

women and one man...[In similar circumstances] the administrator prior to this one…would ask me because I have had administrative experience. This male administrator never ever asked the women on the list… His response was that the male was more effective in dealing with discipline problems...because he was male.

However, it was not only women who were aware of sexism. Kulbir's observations reflect his awareness:

I still think that we are a very male dominant society, even in the teaching community, but I really make it a point to get into projects and situations where there's [gender] equality.

Perceptions of Racism and Stereotyping

Many of the teachers felt that they had experienced racism and the women cited more examples than their male counterparts. Two of the male teachers and the teachers with the most experience, Kulbir and Iqbal, seemed to be more aware of institutional racism. They cited the "old boy's network" and its unwritten rules as well as "hidden agendas" as being some of the institutional barriers they had encountered in pursuing administrative careers.

Jane, a recent graduate, recounted how her colleagues often made negative comments about minority students:

When I was doing my…first practicum I would hear the teachers in the staff room talking about Indo-Canadian kids and their names... [The teachers were saying that] it's like we're going through attendance, like we're reading poetry every morning...and its hard to tell them apart... Why can't they just have normal names?

Iqbal, an experienced high school teacher, talked about the insidious nature of racism in educational institutions and how the old boy's network hindered his career. Like the other men in this study, he focussed attention on structural barriers associated with institutional racism:

I think one of the reasons it is so hard to detect is that… in education people have become really good at what's appropriate and what's not... They know what to say. I know some people who [have a] minority background who...[have said] I want out of here because there is something wrong. I am not making it to the level I should. People around me are being promoted. Nothing is said to them directly... But something is said somewhere else, amongst management or whatever... I think it's there, but it's just much more difficult to prove [that kind of racism].

Perceptions of Multicultural and Anti-Racist Education

Throughout their accounts, both female and male teachers made reference to their strong commitment to multicultural and anti-racist education. As minorities, these teachers have a personal stake in ensuring racial equity. They have been shaped and affected by their own experiences of racism and work to ensure that their students' life chances are not hindered by racism. They expressed concern about the small numbers of minorities in their own teacher education programs and the scant attention to multicultural/anti-racist education in the preparation of all teachers.

Reema reflected on her experiences as a student teacher:

It was a good program… I enjoyed it…but it is a little too white… It doesn't encompass minorities… I just didn't feel as included as maybe I would have liked… It could have been because there weren't many minorities in my group. We live here in the Lower Mainland [which is very racially heterogeneous] and truly [only] three minorities in a group of 30 [student teachers]? And our instructors…they've all grown up here, and when they grew up here there weren't many minorities so they have a different viewpoint [than I do].

Satinder, a high school Mathematics teacher believed anti-racist and multicultural education should be an ongoing part of instruction rather than a separately taught topic:

I strongly believe in a diversified healthy multicultural setting either in school or society. I believe programs such as antiracism are very important… In my classroom the tone is that you respect everybody. And the kids know that… I tell them about my background, where I come from, my parents, and my language. I do bring issues that are happening in our society into the classroom on a daily basis, and if the situation happened in the school, I try to address it.

Employment Histories

Most teachers felt that they were able to secure employment quickly. However, all but two found employment in schools and districts that had relatively high numbers of Punjabi Sikh students and where their cultural knowledge and linguistic skills were seen as valuable commodities. Only two teachers found it difficult to secure employment and felt that the difficulty was a result of their race. Both of these teachers immigrated to Canada at a later age than others in the study, one as a teenager and the other as an adult in her forties.

Sahibjeet described how she used her linguistic and cultural knowledge in order to secure employment:

I... wrote down that I could speak Punjabi on my résumés... I thought if they want to have parent communication…then they actually need to have people that can speak the other language too... [During my interview]... I kept pushing... [that] I

> can speak Punjabi [and that] I can also speak a little bit of Hindi... I went to that school purposely because I knew there was a high Indo-Canadian population.

Interpretation and Recommendations

The experiences of teachers of Punjabi Sikh ancestry provide educators with the opportunity to examine how teacher education programs and school districts can better educate and support mainstream and minority teachers so all children are given equal educational access and support.

Immigration histories

Ogbu (1978) theorized that immigrant minorities viewed mainstream educational institutions "as a means for acquiring the skills necessary for good jobs... They are strongly motivated by the belief that social and economic advancement is possible vis-à-vis education" (pp. 27-28). The teachers in Osler's (1997) study also indicated that their parents believed school success would assist them in achieving socio-economic advancement. Consistent with Ogbu's and Osler's findings, the teachers interviewed in this study perceived that their families view education as a means to help them succeed and improve their positions in Canadian society.

It seems that these teachers' experiences support the liberal perspective that there is opportunity for immigrants in mainstream institutions. However, other dimensions of these teachers' experience, as discussed further on, support a more critical assessment of mainstream institutions.

Community Ties

Casey (1993), Henry (1992), Ladson-Billings (1995), and Osler (1997) demonstrate that minority teachers feel a responsibility towards their communities and that their communities expected them to assist minority children. The teachers in these studies see their work as an allegiance to their community. However, many of the women teachers integrate aspects of their commitment to the parents of their Punjabi Sikh students in their narratives in a way that the men do not. The women actively informed parents about ways they could help their children succeed and encouraged them to support their children. In this way they are similar to the many "black women [who] use their classrooms and status as educators for African-American community development" (Collins 1990, 150).

Osler (1997) discusses how some of the minority teachers in her study felt that they had to prove their abilities and credentials to minority parents before they were trusted. In contrast, the teachers in this study felt that they were trusted because they had an understanding of Punjabi Sikh culture. The women teachers, more than the men, felt a personal commitment to their communities.

This may be related to the Indian ideal of womanhood, which emphasizes social duty towards the family and society, and places family and societal needs before her own (Ghosh 1981). Furthermore, as elementary teachers, the women had more contact with fewer numbers of parents and could therefore develop closer relationships with parents.

Not Just Professional Ethnics

Blair and Maylor (1993) argue that regarding minority teachers as "professional ethnics rather than as teachers... can lead to the marginalization of (minority) teachers and endanger their chances of promotion" (p. 64). Osler (1997) reiterates this concern and reports that minority teachers saw their additional language skills "as an asset, (but) they were not convinced that schools necessarily acknowledged or valued these skills" (p. 114).

In the present study it was the more experienced teachers who were aware of the possibility that they could be marginalized as "professional ethnics." Teachers beginning their careers were consistently positive about helping parents and school staff in this bridging role. Whether they will in future experience this same marginalization, or whether their career opportunities will be broader, remains to be seen.

Teaching As a Site of Resistance

Researchers document that the teaching practices of female teachers have become praxis — action sites of resistance and political activity (Casey 1993; Collins 1990; Foster 1992; Henry 1992; Hooks 1994; Ladson-Billings 1994). Many of the female teachers in this study use their role as teacher to model gender roles that are different from what predominates in their community. They were determined to help their female students understand that they had alternatives to traditional gender roles. Paradoxically, these women are trying to both serve as a bridge to their community as well as create a change in their community's values and bring these values more in line with mainstream feminist attitudes towards issues such as gender equity.

Employment Equity Programs

Systemic barriers such as "the old boy's network" and "hidden agendas" have hindered the careers of Punjabi Sikh teachers involved in this study. Employment equity is proposed as one way of challenging the existing power structures and reconstructing the educational system in an inclusionary manner (Allen 1994; Fleras and Elliot 1996: Sleeter 1993).

Whether employment equity policies were instrumental in bringing the teachers interviewed into this profession is not clear. These teachers came from a variety of districts and none of these has

an official employment equity policy. It appears that these individuals were employed in part because administrators saw how valuable they would be to students, parents and colleagues. Once hired, individuals had latitude to define their roles, especially when this self-definition coincided with institutional needs to communicate with parents and children, to interpret, translate, bridge, create harmonious classroom relations and challenge Punjabi community values regarding gender. What is not clear is whether the institution wishes these needs to be officially addressed at a public level, system-wide rather than in specific community and staff settings. The experience of those few individuals in the study who have long teaching careers and have attempted to work at official, public, administrative and policy level indicates that the institution which has openings at the level of community service, is closed at the level of administration and policy development.

Educational Reform

Given the changing nature of British Columbia's demographics and the variety of research supporting ethno-racial diversity in the teaching profession it is essential to attract minorities into the public education system. This is vital for mainstream as well as minority students. Solomon (1996) reminds us that it is important for all students to have:

> representative role models from various racial and ethnocultural groups...
> Dominant group students also benefit from their exposure to teachers of colour as
> professionals and this may help to modify stereotypes and beliefs they may have
> of racial minorities (p. 217).

Canadian liberal policies espouse that mainstream institutions will make accommodations for immigrants. The narratives of the teachers in this study illustrate the ways in which their work makes the government claim of institutional adaptation possible. Many of the teachers in this study work above standard expectations as translators and bridges for parents, colleagues and administrators. The cultural knowledge and Punjabi language skills are central to their effectiveness. The narratives of the teachers presented in this paper clearly demonstrate this largely unacknowledged dimension of their work. While the immigration debate has a huge public forum, the work of these individuals as the *de facto* implementers of institutional accommodation is largely ignored. The assumption that the bulk of immigrant settlement services in the schools will rest on the shoulders of so few, albeit highly and uniquely qualified teachers, seems unrealistic. More public valuing at the district, teachers' federation, ministry and university level, of the roles these individuals play could contribute to a growing number of individuals from this background seeing themselves in this role.

Districts could formally consult with Punjabi Sikh teachers to help identify educational needs in the Punjabi Sikh community and support program development to help meet these needs. The

creation of a formal consultative process would publicly acknowledge the special knowledge of Punjabi Sikh teachers. Conducting these consultations during regular working hours would affirm the legitimacy of the extra work these teachers do.

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation could take initiative in supporting minority teachers. Some of the teachers in the study discussed how they had found very few allies who supported the work they did, or that they were the only Punjabi Sikh teacher on staff and that this placed extra pressure on them. Ghuman's (1995) research on South Asian teachers indicates that formal organizations for minority teachers have helped to support the unique work of minority teachers in the British school system. By sanctioning and initiating a minority teachers' network and mentoring programs the British Columbia Teachers' Federation could provide an avenue through which the important work Punjabi Sikh teachers do is acknowledged, valued and supported.

Curriculum is another major area where changes are needed. The Teachers' Federation could, through publication grants, encourage both mainstream and minority teachers to work collaboratively in writing materials not otherwise available commercially. The Ministry of Education plays a major role in curriculum development and implementation. Efforts here must provide opportunities for curriculum that specifies the experiences and histories of Canada's diverse cultural communities. This can be done by assuring that minority teachers are present on all committees involved in curriculum development and review. The teachers in this study identified the Euro-centric nature of the curriculum as being an impediment to the work they do. Many of the teachers pointed out that anti-racism/ multiculturalism was not consistently present in all grade levels. They also expressed concern that it was compartmentalized in the curriculum, rather than being fully integrated. The Ministry of Education needs to develop curricula in conjunction with minority teachers that not only represents the diverse cultural locations and experiences of minorities but also deals with anti-racism and multiculturalism on a day-to-day basis as an integrated part of a variety of subject areas.

Faculties of Education

Teachers in this study related that there were few minorities in their teacher education programs and little or no attention given to multicultural/anti-racist education in their preparation. Faculties of Education need to make a concerted effort to recruit minorities into their teacher education programs and they need to take a strong stance on implementing anti-racism and multicultural curriculum that supports mainstream and minority teachers working together. Many mainstream teachers need to examine their position of privilege and how this has influenced their views on and attitudes towards race. Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996) argue that:

A substantial majority of whites are pervaded with a racial consciousness that is more than simple prejudice and stereotyping; it is rather a broader structure of racialized thought, a way of organizing and processing information about whiteness as well as about...people of colour... New and extensive multicultural programs...are critical for the reduction of white prejudice, hegemony and privilege (pp. 169-170).

In addition, teacher educators are in a position to support future minority teachers by including in teacher preparation programs the diversity of student teachers' experiences and perspectives. As well, curriculum in teacher education that attends to historical experiences of minorities in Canada is key. Multicultural literature for children and young adults is a resource that can be easily included. Approaches to building a respectful classroom climate that attend to racism and linguistic diversity are also dimensions teacher educators need to integrate into the curriculum of teacher education programs. The establishment of faculty mentoring programs for minority teachers, as well as the establishment of minority student resource centres are also options that faculties of education can implement in order to address the needs of minority students.

Conclusion

The teachers in this study play a complex role in the British Columbia public education system. These teachers build bridges between parents and school staff. They communicate to parents the kinds of activities that will support their children in school. At the same time, they communicate Punjabi Sikh cultural practises to staff. The example described earlier of assisting teachers to understand how to respond when a parent died, illustrates this kind of communication.

In addition to bridging between mainstream and Punjabi Sikh cultures, these teachers also try to influence and change selected cultural values in the Punjabi Sikh community to more closely reflect key mainstream attitudes. For example: they are deeply committed to alleviating the cultural sexism their female Punjabi Sikh students experience.

These professional educators combine selected aspects of Punjabi language and culture with mainstream and Canadian school culture. They negotiate the 'either/or' dilemma many minorities face of either maintaining their ancestral language and culture or assimilating into mainstream institutions. In this way they serve as important models to their Punjabi Sikh students.

At the same time as Punjabi Sikh teachers are bridging between Punjabi and mainstream culture and attempting to influence selected aspects of Punjabi Sikh culture, they are also confronting institutional racism and sexism. These educators are forging a new model of what it means to be a teacher that is based neither on total conformity with the dominant institution nor on strict radical

pedagogy. It is a model that reflects their diverse positions and locations and their individual interpretations of how best to work to overcome sexism and racism. Only future study will allow us to observe if and how their role will change over time.

Inclusion of minority teachers in the ways we have recommended — in local districts, the provincial Ministry of Education, the B.C. Teachers' Federation and teacher education programs — will challenge the academy and society and begin the process of transforming them. Challenging existing power structures and relations so as to support minority teachers should bring us closer to living in an inclusive society in which the unique voices, experiences and roles of minority teachers are honoured and valued. "We must act with deliberation and commitment to ensure that *all* . . . have a voice and an audience for the telling of their lives" (Etter-Lewis 1991, 56).

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