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## The Language and Culture of the Sikh Community In New Zealand

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### **Introduction**

New Zealand is both a bicultural and a multicultural country. Although many people around the world have migrated to this country and brought their own language and culture with them some of these groups are still relatively unknown in wider New Zealand community. This is especially true of the Sikh people, who, despite their arrival in New Zealand over a hundred years ago, are still a small and often overlooked community. The purpose of this paper is to make visible the Sikh community to the Auckland College of Education so that educators can begin to develop some knowledge of Sikh students at the College and Sikh children in the schools.

### **The Punjabi Community in New Zealand**

There are about 3,000 Sikh families in New Zealand. In 1964, Sikhs in New Zealand formed the New Zealand Sikh Society. Its main objectives are to provide instruction in Sikhism, to conduct religious ceremonies, to promote and foster a better understanding amongst the followers of various religions and creeds in New Zealand, to give assistance to the poor and the needy, and to promote the Punjabi language. In our multicultural society, it is important that Sikh youth understand their culture but also blend in with the New Zealand way of life. The youth is like a bird flying for pleasure, it flies with the wind, but it must turn and face the wind in order that it may rise higher.

The Punjabi language has been successfully maintained in New Zealand for a number of reasons. Firstly and most importantly, it is still used extensively in the homes of most Punjabi New Zealanders. The Sikh community has a positive attitude toward the Punjabi language and places a high value on its maintenance. This is helped by the concentration of Sikh immigrants in geographical areas within Hamilton or near to

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Hamilton such as Morrinsville, Orini and on Piako Road. There is also a Sikh community in Auckland, based mainly in Otahuhu.

Sikh temples have been established in Hamilton and Auckland by the New Zealand Sikh Society. The society supplies materials and information to promote the Punjabi language as well as the culture and holds a Punjabi language class in the Sikh temple once a week. In the Orini area, many Punjabi children are in a school where they learn Punjabi once a week. A Punjabi directory is published and supplied to the Sikh community along with regular community publications. Religious and community level functions are celebrated in the temples from time to time throughout the year, as well as traditional sports such as kabbadi, tug of war and national sports like soccer. A Punjabi radio programme is broadcast from Hamilton every Friday. Finally, many Punjabi people visit their home country after two or three years, taking their children with them to visit their grandparents and visit their country of origin.

### **Suggestions for classroom teachers of Sikh children.**

A person's cultural background and language are very personal possessions. Schools play a key role in the social and cultural construction of this identity. I have discussed the ways in which the Sikh community maintains its language. However, teachers too, have an important role to play in the maintenance of minority languages. It is important that teachers promote positive ideas about language and culture among the children. They should encourage pupils to think that it is a good and worthwhile thing to know their mother language. If minority culture students feel proud of their mother tongue they will want to learn it. There is a strong link between language and culture, so promoting the language helps to maintain the culture.

Teachers and schools everywhere in the English speaking world are asked to give fairer treatment to diverse students and their communities. In response to these requests, practising teachers and school administrators are often at a loss in knowing how to do this because their training has done little to prepare them for coping with student diversity. Teacher educators are also anxious to provide more on this topic for student teachers, but a single book addressing as many of the current issues as possible has not appeared.

How can schools become more welcoming places for students from diverse backgrounds? How can they respond to student diversity and still provide high quality education for all? What is the range of issues that teachers and administrators need to think about in providing for students from diverse backgrounds? While these questions are simple, the answers to them are not easy because the need of every child who comes from a diverse background is different. Education for diversity refers to any formal teaching and learning opportunities provided for groups of students who differ in some educationally relevant way from the majority of students attending a society's school. It applies to students who differ on one or more dimension of ethnicity, class, race or language.

Reforms to education for diversity are now receiving world wide attention partly because of the great population shifts that have occurred over recent generations. Increased understanding leads to a stronger relationship between teachers and minority communities yet often New Zealand teachers do not know about the history and experiences of culturally diverse communities, such as the Sikh community. A better understanding of each of our differing cultures is an important first step in ensuring that we live in harmony and prosper together. That is the intention of my paper, to provide some information at least, in order to increase the interest and understanding of New Zealand educators into the small but long established Sikh community of our country.

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### **Bionote**

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