

“Panjabi Language Instruction at the American Sikh Temple School: A Site for
Hybrid Cultural Socialization”

Ravneet Kaur Tiwana
University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and
Information Studies
American Educational Research Association Meeting 2007 Paper
April 13, 2007

1

Ravneet Kaur Tiwana
University of California, Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and
Information Studies
American Educational Research Association Meeting 2007 Paper
April 13, 2007

Introduction

It has been claimed that there is only one language, the English language in the United States, because America is not a “polyglot boardinghouse ...” (Portes and Rumbaut 196). The fact is that America has always been a multilingual society, even though this mythical notion of a monolingual American identity reflecting American loyalty remains with us- as evident in current debates on bilingual education. Many believe academic success can be achieved through an English-only policy that strips immigrant children of the cultural and social capital embedded in their heritage languages skills. Hence, “Americanization” lead by the American public educational system seems to be aimed at, despite its good intentions as the “greatest equalizer, ... [to] alter immigrant culture through language policies where it [is] environmentally most permeable- the care and instruction of children” (Fass 24). To circumvent this form of “Americanization”, many religious and ethnic minority groups have sponsored their own language schools (Steinberg 2001:54). In this paper, I argue that these schools are sites of hybrid cultural socialization through language and religious instruction. By using participant-observation, freelisting, and pilesorting qualitative method techniques, I will show how students believe that attending American Sikh Temple School has a language and religious learning component along as well as socializing with peers. Therefore, providing initial insight into how these heritage language schools are sites of hybrid cultural socialization.

The Relationship of This Work to Other Research in the Field: Contextualizing Heritage Language Schooling in the United States

The notion of “Americanization” in education is not a relatively contemporary practice as it can be traced to colonial New England in the 17th century (Carleson 1987:3). A dominant Puritan belief in self-righteousness and the construction of the colonies into a model Christian nation was believed to be threatened by a growing heterogeneous population. Therefore, the need to “Americanize” the population with Puritan beliefs through education was the “best means for bringing the individual into conformity with society” (3). However, this notion of Americanization through education began in the 17th century, but did not gain full momentum until the mid-19th century when many parts of the nation began to develop free, tax-supported public schools to support their dominant Protestant belief system. Hence, as these schools began to increasingly flourish, America began “... looking with anxious hope to the school as the chief instrument of Americanization” by undermining the capacity of immigrant groups to transmit their native cultures to their American-born children” through language and social practices (Thompson 1920:1; Steinberg 2001: 54). Therefore, many immigrant children had to “lose” a sense of ethnic identity in order to “gain” white-middle class social capital for upward trajectory of success in America. However, segmented assimilation theorists argue that it may be better for children from immigrant families to remain closely knit to their ethnic communities where they can develop a strong ethnic identity to fight against the oppositional stance of Americanization by other American subcultures (Gibson 1988; Waters 1999; Foner

2000). I believe that heritage language schools, such as the American Sikh Temple School, are sites for segmented assimilation where the immigrant community socializes its children with their own version of “Americanization” or hybrid identity through schooling practices.

Research Questions

- What are the pedagogical practices of the teachers at the American Sikh Temple School?
- What kinds of socio-cultural practices and interactions take place between the American Sikh Temple community and American Sikh Temple School community?
- How do American Sikh Temple School students interact with their Panjabi language “schooling” environment

Description of Site

I chose American Sikh Temple School within the American Sikh Temple located in the Central Valley of California because of my familiarity with the site and its predominately recent immigrant and professional as well as working class population. The school administrators are generally from high socioeconomic backgrounds, even though there is some variation in SES backgrounds of the student population. The classroom I focused on had approximately 23 students ranging in age from 11 year old to 15 years of age and two teachers and was considered a Level III class (there are five levels in the school). There was one teacher for language instruction and one teacher for religious instruction. One teacher has a Master of Science degree in Biology from India and the other teacher’s educational background is unknown.

Methodology

The main qualitative methods I used were participant-observation, freelisting, and pilesorting. I had six participant-observations, two freelisting activities, and one pilesorting activity. I visited the site once a week.

Preliminary Findings

The findings were primarily based on a pilesorting activity where students in a Level III class were asked to answer the question “Pick out 10 reasons you come to Punjabi School”. The top ten reasons were:

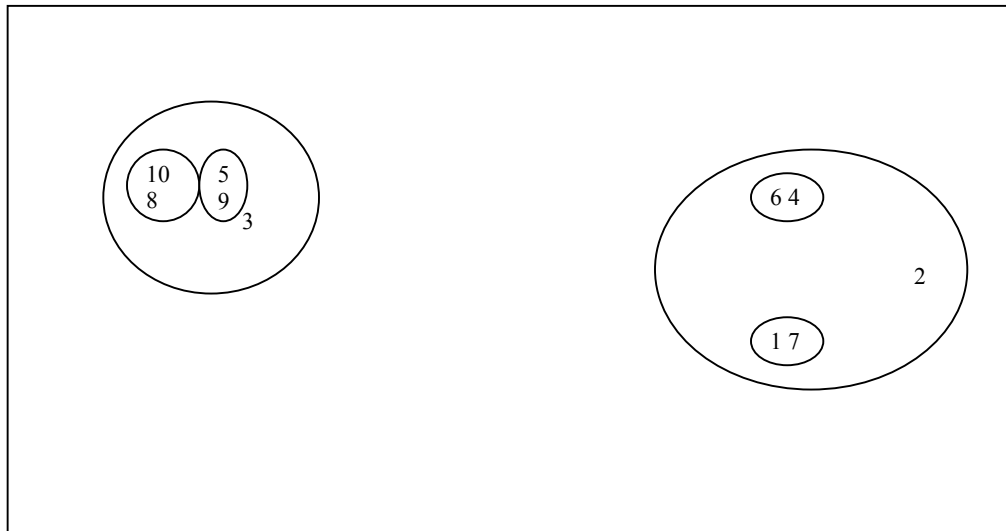
Table I: Top 10 Reasons For Coming to Punjabi School

Reason	Ranking
Parent(s) Make(s) Me	1
Fun	2
Learn Punjabi	3
Make Friends	4
Learn to Write In Punjabi	5
Be With Friends	6
Pass Time	7
Learn About Religion	8
Learn To Read In Punjabi	9
Learn Japji Sahib	10

These findings show that children come to the American Sikh Temple School both for language as well religious and socializing purposes. However, interestingly the top reason students came to school is because their parent(s) make(s) them. Hence, showing that the parents have a large role in the socialization process.

Interestingly, I then conducted a pilesort with the software “Anthropac”, which allowed me to create a two-dimensional picture of how the top ten reasons laid out for the participants on a two-dimensional plane. I had 22 student participants in the pilesorting activity from one class at the American Sikh Temple School. The pilesort picture showed ultimately two distinct fallings for the top ten reasons for coming to American Sikh Temple School.

Table 11: Pilesorts for One Classroom In Sikh Temple School For Freelist Question #1



Note: The Numbers in Pilesort Coordinate With Ranking Numbers and Items in In Table I.

The two main groups were for language and religious learning and the second one was for socialization purposes. Hence, showing that students’ perceived the American Sikh Temple School focused on language and religious instruction as well socialization with peers. My participant-observations showed that the children enjoyed making friends and

did a lot of socializing during class, breaks, and after school. In class I could hear students discussing their public school education and trips they were planning to go on.

I plan to continue this study by including more participant-observation and individual interviews with the students about their pilesorts to gain more insight into why they decided to group the reasons into two distinct groups. However, this freelisting and pilesorting activity allowed me to focus and gain an immediate understanding of what may be going on at this site.

Conclusion

My main conclusion from this short study was that there is a hybrid cultural socialization taking place at the American Sikh Temple School, particularly through conversations that take place between students and teachers. The freelisting and pilesorting activities show that American Sikh Temple School is a site for language and religious instruction as well as socialization. The children know that they are coming to American Sikh Temple School to learn Panjabi as well as religious scriptures (i.e. Japji Sahib); however, these activities are strongly complimented by being able to socialize with their own peer group. The participant-observation notes reflect that this peer group socialization is important because students discuss personal and academic issues taking place outside of the American Sikh Temple School and in their middle and high schools. Furthermore, the teachers will bring up these issues with their students during class time or even ask questions pertaining to their own children's schooling. Therefore, American Sikh Temple School is not an isolated schooling experience, but a site for a form of hybrid cultural socialization.

Limitations of The Study

There were many limitations in this study as presented. The major limitations were the number of participant-observations I was able to conduct because my study was delayed by approximately five months. Hence, the preliminary findings I have in this paper or really those found in the beginning of study. I feel as though my participant-observation is not as focused as it would be after a few more months of observations. Another limitation of the site is that the American Sikh Temple School only takes place on Sundays, which limits the amount of visits I can make to begin to understand the rhythms of activity at the site. Hence, six visits is not a lot considering this limitation. Therefore, I would argue that the participant-observation, freelisting, and pilesorting were important insights into American Sikh Temple Schooling experience and laid the foundation for future work; however, they are at the initial stages of the study and provide limited information. For example, I can not make border conclusions of how hybrid cultural socialization takes place at the site or strongly show that its takes place at all. However, my study shows how particular methods could be use to gain initial insight. Therefore, future studies with in-depth interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and community members will help in learning more in-depth about the phenomena taking place at the American Sikh Temple School.

Future Study

An added element to the study will be interviews and school visits with both students attending and not attending the American Sikh Temple School at their respective K-12 schools. This information will help me gain insight into the role of hybrid cultural

socialization outside of the American Sikh Temple School and it compliments or conflicts with the socialization taking place in American K-12 schooling.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the University of California, Los Angeles Institute of American Cultures for giving me an Asian American Studies Center Research Grant to conduct this study.

References

Borgatti, Stephen P. "Athropac" Software.

Carleson, Robert A. 1987. *The Americanization Syndrome: A Quest for Conformity*. London and Sydney: Croom Helm.

Foner, Nancy. 2000. *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gibson, Margaret A. 1988. *Accommodation with Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Portes, Alejandro and Ruben G. Rumbaut. "Learning the Ropes: Language and Education". *Immigrant American: A Portrait*, 2nd Edition. University of California: Berkeley, 1996. 193-231.

Steinberg, Stephen. 2001. *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Thompson, Frank V. 1920. *Schooling of the Immigrant*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers.