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Faith, Visibility and Voice: A Qualitative Study of Amritdhari Sikh High School Students’
Educational Experiences

By

MANDEEP KAUR SAHOTA
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

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in the

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of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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Committee in Charge

2026

DEDICATION

ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕਾ ਖਾਲਸਾ, ਵਾਹਿਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਕੀ ਫਤਹਿ

Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fateh
The Khalsa Belongs to God; Victory Belongs to God.

*This dissertation is dedicated first to my father, **Nazar Singh Sahota**, my greatest role model, and the person I have spent my life trying to emulate. Through relentless work and quiet courage, he built a life that embodies everything the American dream promised. He created opportunities he himself never had, so that I could walk through doors he spent a lifetime opening. But more enduring than his ambition are the Sikh values he has instilled in me. To be kind. To put others before yourself. To have the courage to take a stand, even when it is costly. These are not lessons he taught me in words. They are lessons he lives in front of me, every single day.*

*To my mother, **Jaswinder Kaur Sahota**, whose quiet strength shaped my earliest understanding of what it means to love without condition. As an immigrant mother who worked full time and still sat beside me for homework, spelling tests, and last-minute Walmart runs the night before school projects were due, she showed me that love is not a feeling. It is a choice, made again and again, through sacrifice and steadfast care.*

*To my brother, **TJ**, thank you for your encouragement, your generous and kind heart, and your ability to bring light and laughter when I needed it most.*

*And to my children, **Avani** and **Niam**. You are the reason this work matters. May you always pursue your dreams with the same courage and determination that your Nanaji (maternal grandfather) carried across an ocean. You are, and will always be, my greatest gifts. This one is for you.*

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Happy *Bhenji*, you are my older sister, my confidant, and one of the greatest constants in my life. Your grace, integrity, and emotional intelligence have carried me more times than you know.

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ABSTRACT

In American public schools, Amritdhari youth, students who wear turbans and other Sikh religious markers, face a paradox: they are among the most visible students, yet among the least represented in curriculum, policy, and equity conversations intended to protect them. This phenomenological qualitative study examines how Amritdhari Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley experience belonging, identity affirmation, and marginalization in public schools, and how they draw on cultural and spiritual resources to navigate these environments.

Eight Fresno County high school students participated in semi-structured interviews. Drawing on Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000), and Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994), this study used RADaR methodology (Watkins, 2017) to analyze data addressing three qualitative research questions.

Findings reveal that participants experienced conditional belonging alongside the near-universal exclusion of Sikh identity and history from formal curriculum, generating a burden of educational labor that students carried largely in silence. A unifying finding emerged across all eight participants: being culturally visible but invisible within the formal curriculum. Students, however, were not passive recipients of harm. Seven of eight drew on spiritual capital rooted in gurdwara participation, devotional practice, and Sikh historical consciousness as primary sources of resilience and resistance, developing sophisticated navigation strategies in response to institutional conditions they did not create. Family served as a universal, if contextually varied, source of support throughout.

The findings identify institutional conditions, not individual students, as the primary site for intervention. The study urges educators, school leaders, and policymakers to move beyond

cultural celebration and pursue meaningful curricular inclusion, religious literacy, and equity frameworks that fully honor the spiritual and cultural humanity of Amritdhari Sikh youth.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2022, a Sikh high school student in Whiteland Community High School in Indiana was suspended along with peers who allegedly attacked him and knocked off his turban. The Sikh Coalition described the incident as a bias-motivated attack and criticized the school for punishing the student rather than addressing harassment (De Pacina, 2022; Sikh Coalition, 2022). In a separate 2015 incident, Inderjit Singh Mukker, a Sikh father, was physically assaulted in a road rage attack as a teenager shouted slurs, called him “Bin Laden,” and broke his cheekbone before the attack was later classified as a hate crime (Sikh Coalition, 2015). This event shocked the Sikh community, reigniting concerns about the safety of visibly religious Sikhs in public spaces, including schools.

These stories are not isolated. Rather, they point to a broader pattern in which Sikh students navigate public school environments that often lack the cultural awareness, religious literacy, or institutional infrastructure to affirm their identities. In many cases, school responses to incidents involving Sikh students tend to focus on disciplining individuals rather than addressing the underlying systemic bias and exclusion (Sikh Coalition, 2024; Singh, 2016). In the absence of intentional support systems, Sikh students frequently face environments marked by misunderstanding or invisibility. In more severe cases, this can escalate to targeted bullying and violence, as reflected in the Whiteland suspension case and the widely reported assault on Inderjit Singh Mukker (De Pacina, 2022; Sikh Coalition, 2022).

Despite these ongoing harms, the experiences of Sikh youth remain largely absent from educational equity conversations. This absence is particularly striking given the long-standing

presence of Sikh communities in the United States. Sikhism, the fifth-largest religion in the world, has a 125-year history in the United States (Nesbitt, 2005). More than 500,000 Sikhs live in the country, and among them are *Amritdhari* youth, or Sikhs who have formally committed to wearing sacred articles of faith such as the turban (*dastar*), unshorn hair (*kesh*), steel bracelet (*kara*), and ceremonial dagger (*kirpan*), which represent some of the five articles that signify their Sikh identity (Takhar, 2005).

Yet, in many school environments, these religious markers are frequently misunderstood, sometimes seen as distracting, unfamiliar, or even threatening, rather than recognized as meaningful expressions of religious identity (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010). Such misunderstandings can result in cultural invalidation for Sikh students or disciplinary actions that marginalize their faith-based practices. This creates tension between Sikh students' efforts to express their identities and their schools' ability, or willingness, to support that expression. While similar dynamics have been studied among other visibly observant religious youth, such as Muslim students who wear *hijabs* (Ali & Bagheri, 2009), research addressing the Sikh experience remains sparse in broader educational literature (Milne, 2025; Singh, 2014).

The few studies that do exist often take the form of legal case reviews, community advocacy reports, or broader surveys on bullying rather than in-depth qualitative accounts of Sikh youths' everyday schooling experiences (Sikh Coalition, 2012; Joshi, 2006). For example, Singh (2014) points out that many Sikh students in the United States face verbal harassment, religious bullying, and a lack of recognition from teachers, yet their stories remain absent from educational policy discussions. Even in large-scale anti-bullying efforts, Sikh students' unique spiritual visibility is often overlooked under more general racial or ethnic categories, leaving their experiences unaddressed and their voices unheard (Sikh Coalition, 2022). This

underrepresentation in scholarship contributes to a critical gap in both teacher preparation and school equity efforts, where Sikh students continue to be neglected despite increasing calls for religious literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result, many educators and school systems may lack the tools, training, or frameworks to support Sikh students in culturally and spiritually responsive ways.

In addition to religious misrecognition, Sikh students may also experience a different kind of marginalization through the lens of the model minority stereotype. Originating in the 1960s, the model minority stereotype emerged to portray Asian Americans as academically successful, hardworking, and socially compliant, often in contrast to other marginalized racial groups (Lee, 1996). While this stereotype may appear complimentary on the surface, it functions as a mechanism of erasure. By grouping Sikh students under the broader Asian American category, schools may assume they do not require additional support, overlooking the unique racialized and religious challenges they face. Furthermore, educators may miss signs of discrimination, bullying, or emotional distress if Sikh students appear to perform well academically (Atwal & Wang, 2019). At the same time, the visibility of their religious markers can subject them to increased scrutiny, misidentification, or Islamophobic bias, particularly in a post-9/11 sociopolitical climate (Nadal et al., 2012).

While these challenges persist, the field of education has made important strides over the past three decades to address inequity and exclusion through frameworks such as Culturally Responsive Teaching (Gay, 2018), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Collectively, these frameworks have reshaped educators' thinking about equity, elevating students' cultural knowledge, identities, and lived experiences as sources of strength rather than deficit. Still, most of these approaches remain

grounded in a secular paradigm, where culture is acknowledged but spirituality is often ignored or stripped away. When religion is addressed, it is typically through Christian-centric assumptions or, more recently, in relation to Muslim students (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Sikh students, despite being one of the most visible religious minority groups in American schools, are rarely named in these discussions. Without empirical data to inform how Sikh students experience belonging, affirmation, or bias and discrimination, educators remain ill-equipped to support their success and well-being.

Understanding these dynamics is especially important in California's Central Valley, a region with one of the largest Sikh populations in the United States. Fresno County exemplifies this diversity, with Fresno Unified students speaking more than 76 languages and over half of the county's residents identifying as Hispanic. Yet, like many regions, Fresno County continues to face persistent challenges in educational equity, as lower-income students often have fewer resources, larger class sizes, and reduced access to advanced coursework and extracurricular opportunities (Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission [Fresno EOC], 2024). National studies have shown that Sikh students, especially those who wear turbans, are at an increased risk for bullying and exclusion in school environments. According to the Sikh Coalition, more than two-thirds of Sikh students surveyed reported being bullied, with rates significantly higher among students who wore articles of faith (Sikh Coalition, 2022). While these data are national in scope, they provide important context for exploring similar dynamics in under-researched regions such as Fresno County.

Statement of Purpose

Grounded in this national context, this qualitative study explores how Amritdhari Sikh students enrolled in Fresno County's comprehensive public high schools experience cultural responsiveness, institutional recognition, peer and educator support, and the extent to which their cultural and spiritual identities are acknowledged, affirmed, and respected within the school environment. By centering the voices of Sikh youth who wear visible articles of faith, the study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature and inform more inclusive practices in policy and pedagogy. Through semi-structured interviews and written reflections with 8 participants, the study investigated how these students describe their experiences of affirmation or marginalization in relation to their religious identity. The insights gained from this study have the potential to inform equity-driven frameworks, guide educators' professional development, and shape school policies that honor the full spectrum of student identities. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were explored:

Research Questions

1. How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students in Fresno County describe their experiences of cultural responsiveness and their sense of belonging in school settings?
2. In what ways do Amritdhari Sikh high school students feel their visible religious identities are affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within school settings?
3. How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students navigate challenges related to their religious identity at school, and what sources of support or resistance do they draw upon?

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks to examine how Amritdhari Sikh high school students experience affirmation, exclusion, marginalization, and cultural responsiveness in California public schools. The primary framework guiding this research is Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) by Dr. Tara Yosso, which provides an asset-based understanding of how marginalized students draw upon various forms of cultural knowledge and skills to navigate educational environments (Yosso, 2005). In addition to CCW, this study draws on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000), which emphasizes affirming students' cultural identities and lived experiences in teaching and learning. Finally, this research incorporates an emerging framework of Spiritual Epistemology, which recognizes spirituality as a legitimate and embodied way of knowing and being (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994; Kaur Singh, 2014). Together, these frameworks provide a layered lens for understanding how Amritdhari Sikh youth, whose religious and cultural identities are both highly visible and often misunderstood, navigate their school environments.

Community Cultural Wealth

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework reorients how we understand students of color, not as lacking, but as holders of deep cultural insight, strength, and resilience cultivated through generations. The term 'students of color' broadly refers to racially and ethnically minoritized populations in the United States who have been historically marginalized within educational systems. This term encompasses Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other non-white student groups whose cultural knowledge

and lived experiences are often overlooked in traditional schooling contexts (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Grounded in Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth introduces six forms of capital that students from marginalized communities possess: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. These forms of capital are not only interconnected but also dynamic, shaped by the lived experiences and collective histories of communities that have long endured structural oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005). The two forms of capital from Yosso's model that are especially important in this study are navigational capital and resistant capital.

Navigational capital refers to the skills, strategies, and resources students use to maneuver through institutions and spaces that were not created with them in mind. This includes the ability to persist, adapt, and advocate for oneself in settings where systemic inequities exist. It recognizes that students who succeed despite these barriers are not merely surviving; they are exercising complex and powerful forms of navigational agency (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, resistant capital comprises the knowledge and behaviors students inherit from histories of collective resistance and oppositional consciousness. This capital is rooted in the legacy of social justice struggles within their communities. It includes the ability to critique, challenge, and push back against assimilationist norms and educational practices that marginalize non-dominant cultures and identities (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

Although Yosso's CCW framework was originally developed to examine the experiences of Chicanx college students in higher education, it remains highly relevant and transferable to high school students, especially those whose hyper-visible identities place them in the margins of dominant school cultures (Liou et al. 2009). For Amritdhari Sikh students, whose turbans and other religious articles mark them as visibly different, school is often a space of cultural

dissonance. These students routinely navigate institutions that are not structured to understand or affirm their spiritual identities, resulting in social isolation, stereotyping, and at times, outward discrimination (Saran & Eames, 1980; Singh, 2014). Despite their young ages, Sikh high school students are already developing and exercising complex forms of agency in response to these challenges.

By applying Community Cultural Wealth to this context, this study recognizes that the assets Yosso describes, especially navigational capital and resistant capital, are not confined to students in higher education. Rather, they are cultivated through lived experience and intergenerational knowledge, often beginning well before adolescence. Sikh students draw on navigational capital as they learn to assert their religious rights, explain their identity to teachers and peers, and make calculated decisions to protect their physical and emotional safety in unsupportive environments. Additionally, resistant capital is evident when Sikh students refuse to downplay their religious identity, instead choosing to educate peers, confront misconceptions, and lean on their spiritual values for sustenance and support. These forms of capital are developed not only in the home or *gurdwara* (Sikh community center of worship), but also in the daily negotiations of identity and belonging within their schools.

While Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework offers a powerful foundation for recognizing the strengths of minority students, it does not explicitly account for spirituality or religious identity as distinct forms of capital. In response to this gap, Pérez Huber et al. (2009) identified spiritual capital as the seventh form of CCW, distinct yet interconnected with the original six forms. Drawing on CCW to analyze the experiences of undocumented Chicana college students, Pérez Huber et al. (2009) noted that spirituality often played a critical role in fostering resilience and a sense of purpose. She defines spiritual capital as a set of

resources and skills grounded in a spiritual connection to something greater than oneself, encompassing the religious, indigenous, and ancestral beliefs and practices often learned through family, community, and the inner self (Pérez Huber et al., 2009, p. 721). Importantly, Pérez Huber et al. (2009) argue that although spiritual experiences connect to other forms of CCW such as aspirational capital, "what these women describe is something different. Their faith and hope are nurtured by a spiritual connection and prove to be a powerful resource" (p. 722).

Building on Pérez Huber and colleagues' (2009) work, Park et al. (2020) further theorized spiritual capital by synthesizing research across Communities of Color and educational contexts. Through their comprehensive literature review, Park et al. (2020) demonstrate how religion and spirituality function both as sources of the six original forms of CCW and as a distinct form of capital in their own right. They clarify that spiritual capital operates through relationships with the self, community, and transcendent reality, and is often enacted collectively through culturally situated practices rather than solely as an individual belief system. Park et al. (2020) show how spiritual capital intersects with aspirational, familial, resistant, linguistic, social, and navigational capital across diverse communities of color, extending the relevance of Pérez Huber et al.'s (2009) concept beyond the Chicana/Latina context. Importantly, spiritual capital does not replace or revise CCW but extends it, making visible a dimension of community wealth that has historically been undertheorized, particularly for racially and religiously minoritized students.

Although neither Pérez Huber et al. (2009) nor Park et al. (2020) formally revised the CCW framework, their collective work invites us to consider spiritual capital as a complementary and necessary construct for understanding how students draw strength, grounding, and resistance from their spiritual and religious traditions. In the context of

Amritdhari Sikh students, this study takes up that invitation by exploring spiritual capital as it emerges through Sikh lived practices. Customs such as wearing the turban (*dastar*), engaging in community service (*seva*), participating in daily meditative prayer (*simran*), and adhering to a moral compass informed by the Sikh faith offer both inner grounding and resilience. These embodied spiritual practices help students navigate educational spaces that often misrecognize or marginalize their identities, and in doing so, function as critical sources of strength and agency (Dillard, 2006).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

While Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) functions as a foundational lens for recognizing the cultural, communal, and now spiritual strengths Amritdhari students bring to school, it does not fully address how classroom instruction and teacher practice can either affirm or marginalize those identities. To explore this dimension, this study also draws on Geneva Gay's theory on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (2000), which emphasizes the importance of affirming students' cultural and experiential knowledge within both the curriculum and the broader classroom environment. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) rejects the notion of culturally neutral teaching and asserts that effective instruction must intentionally reflect and honor students' identities, languages, and traditions (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Gay, 2010). For Amritdhari Sikh students, CRP offers a lens to examine whether educators affirm or ignore their rich spiritual traditions, grounded in centuries of resistance, service, and a deep commitment to social justice. This framework also highlights the educators' pivotal role in either cultivating inclusive, affirming spaces or perpetuating symbolic violence through erasure, stereotyping, or passive indifference to students' full selves (Gay, 2010).

Spiritual Epistemology

While CRP offers a powerful lens for examining whether educators affirm students' cultural and linguistic identities, it, too, remains largely silent on matters of spiritual identity and religious expression. For students whose faith is deeply embodied and publicly visible, this omission is significant. To address this gap, this study draws on an emerging body of scholarship that positions spirituality as a legitimate and embodied way of knowing, particularly among communities whose identities are closely tied to faith-based practices. Dillard (2006) frames spirituality as an epistemology grounded in memory, experience, and ethical responsibility, arguing that spiritual ways of knowing are central to how African American women navigate academic spaces. Similarly, hooks (1994) challenges the dominance of secular norms in education, asserting that no classroom should be spiritually barren, and that acknowledging spirit is essential to holistic, liberatory learning. Within the context of Sikh students, practices such as participating in the *Sangat* (spiritual fellowship), engaging in *Shabad Kirtan* (musical worship), and adhering to the *Rehat Maryada* (code of conduct) are not merely ritualistic or dogmatic; they are lived forms of knowledge, identity, and resistance. For Amritdhari Sikh youth, spirituality is inseparable from identity. It is deeply practiced, central to their worldview, and integral to their being. It serves as spiritual capital that sustains them in educational environments where their faith may be exoticized. By positioning spirituality as an epistemological resource, this study seeks to honor the full humanity of participants whose educational experiences cannot be understood apart from their spiritual identities.

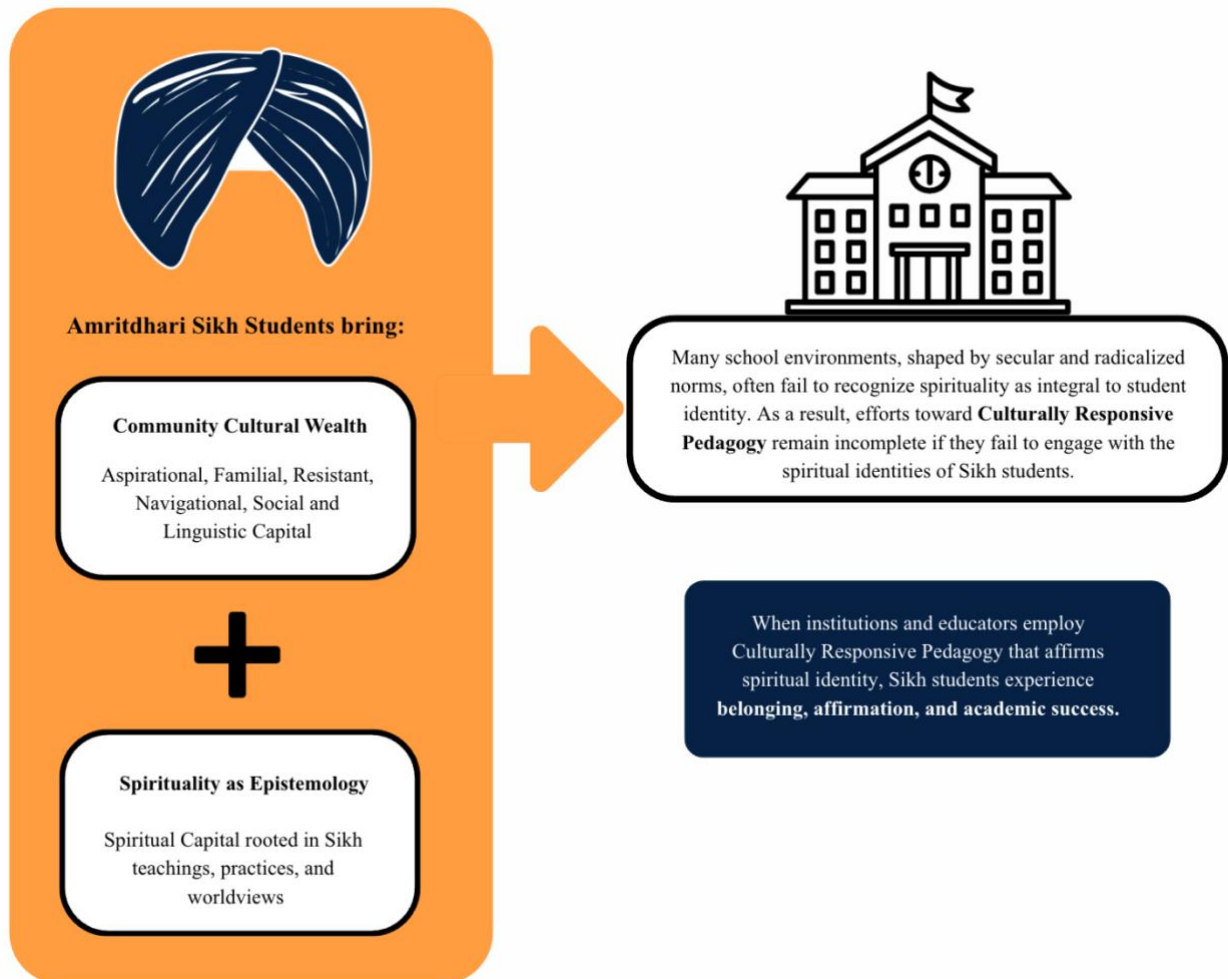
Framing the Study

Together, these three frameworks provide a holistic structure for examining Amritdhari Sikh high school students' experiences within public school settings in Fresno County.

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) offers an asset-based lens that centers on the cultural knowledge Sikh students bring, particularly through forms of navigational and resistance capital and, as this study introduces, spiritual capital. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000) sharpens the focus on the role of educators, curriculum, and school environments in either affirming or marginalizing student identity. To extend these frameworks, this study incorporates spiritual epistemology, an emerging scholarship that affirms spirituality and faith-based practices as legitimate and embodied ways of knowing (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994; Kaur Singh, 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model guiding this study, which brings together community cultural wealth and spiritual epistemology as the primary assets Sikh students carry into schools. The model highlights how recognizing these assets within culturally responsive pedagogy fosters belonging, affirmation, and academic success, whereas neglecting spirituality under secular or racialized norms leaves equity efforts incomplete.

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework for the Study: Centering Sikh Students' Spiritual Identity Within Culturally Responsive Pedagogy



CHAPTER 3

SIKH HISTORY, FAITH AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The educational experiences of Amritdhari Sikh students cannot be understood apart from the deep historical, spiritual, and political legacies that shape their identities. Grounded in a faith born from resistance to caste, religious orthodoxy, and tyranny, Sikhism has long insisted on the inseparability of spiritual devotion and social justice. This literature review situates Sikh students within that tradition, one marked not only by resilience and community strength, but also by government betrayal, displacement, and misrecognition across continents and centuries (Singh, 2004).

This review begins by tracing the foundational values of Sikhism, such as *seva* (selfless service), *chardi kala* (resilient optimism), and the principle of *Ik Onkar* (one universal creator present in all beings), exploring how these teachings established a framework for both inner discipline and collective defiance. From the martyrdom of the Sikh Gurus to the rise and fall of the Sikh Empire, and into the trauma of 1984, the Sikh community has continuously responded to injustice with spiritual and political resistance. These legacies shaped post-1984 migration patterns, particularly to California's Central Valley, where diasporic Sikh communities rebuilt cultural and religious life while carrying the weight of historical trauma.

Yet even in the Western diaspora, safety remained elusive. After 9/11, Sikh Americans, especially those who wore turbans and beards, became targets of violence, misidentification, and suspicion, culminating in hate crimes, gurdwara attacks, and school-based harassment (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010). For many Sikh youth, this produced a painful contradiction: to be hyper visible in appearance, yet invisible in curriculum, policy, and pedagogy. To better

understand this contradiction, this review next examines research on peer interactions and school climate, with attention to how Amritdhari Sikh students navigate bias, bullying, and misrecognition from classmates and educators alike. These daily experiences in school settings lay the foundation for the final section, which turns to culturally responsive pedagogy not simply as a theoretical framework but as a necessary intervention to affirm and protect minoritized religious identities, such as those of Amritdhari Sikh youth.

Spiritual and Sociopolitical Foundations of Sikhism

Sikhism, founded in the late 15th century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) in the Punjab region of South Asia, emerged in response to profound social inequality marked by entrenched exclusionary social hierarchies (Mandair, 2013; Nesbitt, 2005). The region was shaped by religious orthodoxy, where both Brahmanical Hinduism and Islam imposed rigid dogmas and privileged clerical authority over personal spiritual expression (Singh, 2004). Caste oppression was particularly severe under the *Hindu Varna* system, which enforced systemic social stratification and denied lower castes, especially the Dalits (those historically considered "untouchable" and placed outside the four-tiered Varna hierarchy), access to education, religious spaces, and economic mobility (Sharma, 2011). Gender discrimination was also pervasive, with women confined to domestic roles, excluded from religious participation, and subordinated under patriarchal norms (Jakobsh, 2003).

In this context, Guru Nanak Dev Ji offered a radical spiritual and ethical vision grounded in the principle of Ik Onkar, the belief in one universal creator present in all beings, even those from marginalized castes. Through his poetry, public teachings, and extensive travels, Guru Nanak emphasized a direct, unmediated relationship with God, one that did not require clergy or priests. He championed core values such as equality, honest labor (*Kirat Karna*), communal

sharing (*Vand Chakna*), and selfless service (*Seva*); laying the foundation for the Sikh spiritual tradition to be grounded heavily in social justice (Mandair, 2013; Singh, 2004). His teachings rejected both the ritualism and social hierarchy of Brahmanical Hinduism and the authoritarian tendencies of Islam (Nesbitt, 2005). Instead, he envisioned a spirituality grounded in a socially just world that transcended caste, creed, and gender.

Figure 2.

*Guru Nanak Dev Ji with Bhai Mardana, a Muslim Minstrel, and Bhai Bala, a Hindu Companion
During his Spiritual Journeys Across South Asia and Beyond*



This inclusive message (see Figure 2 above) was carried forward by nine successor Gurus, who continued to develop Sikh theology and its institutional structures. Collectively, the ten Sikh gurus shaped a community rooted in spiritual growth, moral courage, and resistance to social injustice. A defining feature of Sikhism is its unwavering insistence on the inseparability of spiritual practice and social responsibility, a principle that transforms devotion into agency and

action. This was not merely theoretical; it was embodied within the lives of the Gurus themselves, whose leadership served as a blueprint for confronting oppression and standing with the marginalized. Guru Arjan Dev Ji, the fifth Guru, exemplified this fusion of spirituality and resistance when he compiled the *Guru Granth Sahib*, a revolutionary theological scripture that uplifts the voices of saints from diverse backgrounds, including low-caste Hindus and Muslim poets. In doing so, Guru Arjan Dev Ji enshrined a powerful message of egalitarianism, interfaith unity, and the inherent dignity of all people within the Sikh scriptures, ensuring it would guide generations of Sikhs to come (Nesbitt, 2005).

Martyrdom, Sovereignty, and the Formation of the Sikh Identity

Guru Arjan Dev Ji's unwavering commitment to Sikh principles in the face of Mughal oppression marked a pivotal moment in Sikh history (see Figure 3 below). Under the reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir, Guru Arjan Dev Ji was arrested and ordered to alter the contents of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Holy scripture, and convert to Islam. Guru Arjan Dev Ji courageously refused both demands. According to Sikh historical accounts, he was made to sit on a burning hot plate while scalding sand was poured over his body. Despite the excruciating pain, Guru Arjan Dev Ji remained composed, immersed in deep meditation and the remembrance of the divine. He was executed in 1606, becoming the first Sikh martyr. As Singh (2014) notes, his martyrdom is remembered not for the brutality he endured, but for the profound grace with which he upheld Sikh values even in the face of violent tyranny.

This legacy of resistance was deepened under Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, the ninth Guru, who in 1675 was publicly executed by the Mughal Empire for defending the religious freedom of persecuted Hindus in Kashmir. Offered a choice between conversion to Islam or death, Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji chose martyrdom, a decision rooted not only in the defense of another faith but

in Sikhism's core belief in the universal right to spiritual freedom (Nesbitt, 2005). His sacrifice is widely regarded as a defining act of interfaith solidarity and spiritual courage, a moment that forever inscribed justice as a sacred duty within the Sikh consciousness.

In the wake of this sacrifice, the Sikh community emerged with a heightened sense of unity and purpose. The martyrdom of Guru Teg Bahadur Ji profoundly shaped the Sikh collective consciousness, reinforcing the conviction that spiritual integrity must be defended even at the highest personal cost (Singh, 2004). His example not only solidified Sikhism's role as a guardian of religious freedom but also inspired a renewed commitment to protect the rights of all communities, regardless of faith or background (Singh, 2004). In the decades following his execution, this ethos became deeply embedded in Sikh identity, laying the moral and spiritual groundwork for the transformative leadership of Guru Gobind Singh Ji (Grewal, 1998).

Figure 3.

Guru Arjan Dev Ji Seated on a Burning Hot Plate During His Martyrdom at the Hands of Mughal Emperor Jahangir



This tradition of resistance continued under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Guru, who formalized the *Khalsa* in 1699. The Khalsa is a spiritual and moral collective of initiated Sikhs committed to upholding justice and resisting oppression. This marked a transformative moment in Sikh history. For the first time, the Gurus explicitly called on Sikhs to defend themselves and others against oppression and tyranny. While Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founding Guru of Sikhism, laid the foundation of a faith rooted in peace, compassion, and spiritual devotion, Guru Gobind Singh Ji expanded this vision to include the righteous use of militaristic force when necessary to protect and defend the oppressed.

As a part of the initiation into the Khalsa, Guru Gobind Singh Ji instructed members to adopt the five articles of faith, or the five Ks, as enduring, visible commitments to divine discipline, moral courage, and readiness to defend the vulnerable and the marginalized (See Figure 4 below). Each of these articles carries deep theological, ethical, and historical meaning within Sikhism (Grewal 1998; Nesbitt 2005; Singh 2004). Kesh, or unshorn hair, worn naturally and often tied beneath a turban, symbolizes the acceptance of God's will, the perfection of the Creator's design, and maintenance of spiritual discipline (Nesbitt, 2005). The turban itself functions as a public declaration of Sikh sovereignty, dignity, and service, ensuring that Khalsa members can be recognized in any crowd and called upon to aid those in need (Singh, 2014). The Kara (a steel bracelet) is worn on the dominant hand as a constant reminder to act righteously and avoid wrongful deeds, its circular form signifying the eternal nature of truth and the unity of God. The Kirpan (a ceremonial dagger) embodies the Sikh duty to protect the oppressed and confront injustice, affirming that the use of force is justified only in self-defense or in defense of others (Nesbitt, 2005). The *Kachera* (cotton undergarments) represent self-

control, moral restraint, and personal integrity, while the *Kanga* (a wooden comb) signifies the importance of cleanliness, order, and disciplined living (Singh, 2014).

Collectively, the Five Ks (see Figure 4 below) transform the Sikh body into a living expression of faith and justice. An outward manifestation of inner convictions that is inseparable from Sikh identity itself (Singh, 2004; Singh, 2014). By binding spiritual devotion to everyday practice, Guru Gobind Singh Ji ensured that the Khalsa would stand as a community both spiritually steadfast and visibly sovereign, prepared to embody courage, uphold righteousness, and defend the dignity of all people (Grewal, 1998). In doing so, he forged a collective identity in which personal faith and public presence were inseparable (Singh, 2014). The five Ks became not merely articles of faith, but the defining symbols of a shared consciousness, one that unites Sikhs across geography and generations in their commitment to justice, equality, and service (Nesbitt, 2005). Through these enduring markers, the visible Khalsa identity was permanently inscribed into the Sikh way of life, ensuring that every initiated Sikh carried the tradition's history, values, and responsibilities upon their person. In this way, belief and action are permanently intertwined, creating a visible living testimony to resilience, sovereignty, and moral responsibility.

Figure 4.

The Five Ks of the Khalsa



The Sikh Empire and Colonial Resistance

These foundational acts of defiance and moral clarity did not end with the lives of the ten Gurus. In the centuries that followed, Sikh communities continued to embody this ethos of resistance. A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the rise of the Sikh empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who ruled from 1801 to 1839. Under his leadership, the Sikh Empire emerged as a formidable independent state in Northern India, marked by religious pluralism, prosperity, and military strength. Maharaja Ranjit Singh's governance was notable for its inclusive approach. He appointed Hindus and Muslims to high-ranking positions in his administration, funded the restoration and protection of religious sites across faiths, including Hindu temples and Muslim mosques, and enforced policies that prohibited forced conversions or religious discrimination. His court was intentionally composed of individuals from diverse religious backgrounds, reflecting a broader ethos of peaceful coexistence. At the same time, he invested in Sikh religious infrastructure, commissioning key projects such as the gold-plating of the Harmandir

Sahib (Golden Temple), which became both a spiritual and symbolic center of Sikh sovereignty (Singh, 2004). Despite its strength and autonomy, the Sikh Empire became a primary target of British colonial ambitions. The Anglo-Sikh Wars, fought between 1845 and 1849, were fiercely contested and revealed the formidable military power of the Sikh army. It was only after two major wars and substantial resistance that the British were able to annex Punjab, marking the fall of one of the last indigenous sovereignties in the Indian subcontinent (Singh, 2004).

This ethos of resistance and community strength continued well into the colonial period. During British rule in India, Sikhs, though a small percentage of the population, were disproportionately represented in the British Indian army, where colonial powers viewed them as part of the “martial races” (Tatla, 1999). Yet Sikhs were not merely agents of the colonial empire; they were also at the forefront of anticolonial resistance, both on the Indian subcontinent and across the diaspora. The Ghadar Party, for example, was a transnational revolutionary group formed by Punjabi Sikh immigrants in North America that sought to overthrow British rule through armed struggle and grassroots organizing (Tatla, 1999). Among the most iconic figures of resistance against the British was Bhagat Singh, a Sikh revolutionary and intellectual who became a symbol of radical defiance against colonial authority. At 23 years old, he was executed by the British for his role in anti-imperial activities, including the 1929 bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi, an act intended not to harm but to “make the deaf hear” (Nair, 2009). Bhagat Singh’s legacy lives on not only as a martyr of India’s freedom movement but as a representation of the Sikh community’s longstanding commitment to justice and resistance to tyranny.

Partition, Betrayal, and the Politics of Postcolonial India

Following India's independence in 1947, Sikhs encountered new forms of political and cultural marginalization. The partition of British India into two separate nations, India and Pakistan, was framed largely as a solution to the Hindu-Muslim tensions, with Pakistan envisioned as a homeland for Muslims and India as a secular, Hindu-majority state. Yet Sikhs, who had long viewed Punjab as their spiritual and historical homeland, were not granted a nation of their own. Instead, Punjab was physically divided between the two new countries, with the western portion becoming a part of Pakistan and the eastern portion remaining in India. The division severed the geographic heart of Sikhism, placing key historical gurdwaras, including Nankana Sahib (the birthplace of Guru Nanak), on the Pakistani side, while the Golden Temple remained in India. The partition triggered one of the largest mass migrations in human history, displacing millions of Sikhs and resulting in horrific violence, loss, and trauma (Talbot & Singh, 2009).

Despite making significant sacrifices during India's independence struggle against the British, Sikh aspirations for a sovereign and autonomous homeland were largely ignored by the new Indian state. This sense of betrayal was amplified by historical memory, particularly the belief that Sikhs had long stood in defense of religious freedom, including protecting Hindus from forced conversions to Islam under Mughal rule, often at great personal cost. Many Sikhs felt that the solidarity they had once extended to others, especially the Hindus, during times of persecution, was not being reciprocated in the postcolonial political settlement. Instead of recognition, their calls for political and cultural autonomy were dismissed, and Punjab remained under tight central control even after India's independence (Tatla, 1999).

1984 and the Silencing of Sikh Dissent

These tensions deepened over the following decades, especially amid demands for greater linguistic, cultural, and agricultural sovereignty in Punjab. The situation reached a breaking point in 1984, when the Indian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, launched Operation Blue Star, a military assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, under the pretext of removing armed Sikh separatists. This military operation was carried out during a major religious observance, and the use of tanks and heavy artillery within the sacred complex of the Golden Temple resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians, including women and children, as well as extensive damage to the gurdwara (Kaur, 2010). For Sikhs across India and the global diaspora, the assault was not merely a political act; it was experienced as a sacrilegious violation and a deep wound to their collective identity.

Later that year, on October 31, 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh, in direct retaliation for her authorization of Operation Blue Star. The assassination of the Indian prime minister, while shocking to the Indian public, was interpreted by some within the Sikh community as an act of retributive justice, rooted in a long tradition of resistance to tyranny. In the immediate aftermath of Gandhi's assassination, organized and state-enabled violence erupted across Delhi and other major Indian cities, targeting innocent Sikh civilians. Government officials and political leaders from the ruling Congress Party were widely implicated in inciting, directing, and participating in the violence against Sikh civilians (Human Rights Watch, 1991; Tatla, 1999).

Eyewitness accounts and human rights investigations reveal how voter lists were used to systematically identify Sikh households, while police either stood by or actively participated as mobs looted Sikh gurdwaras, torched Sikh-owned businesses, and dragged turbaned Sikh men

from their homes to be beaten or burned alive. Over 3,000 Sikhs were killed, and thousands more were displaced in what is now widely recognized as a pogrom, and not a spontaneous riot (Aulakh, 2015).

These events shattered the already fragile relationship between the Indian state and the Sikh community. The sense of betrayal ran deep. First, the Indian government violated Sikh gurdwaras. Then, when brutal violence broke out in the nation's capital, the same government failed to protect its Sikh citizens. The trauma of 1984 reverberated across generations, fueling feelings of alienation, grief, and mistrust. Many Sikh families fled India in search of safety, stability, and the freedom to practice their faith without the fear of persecution. This wave of post-1984 emigration contributed to the expansion of the global Sikh diaspora, particularly in countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Tatla, 1999).

The Sikh Diaspora in California's Central Valley

The United States, particularly California's Central Valley, emerged as a significant destination for Punjabi Sikh immigrants in the late 20th century. The region was already home to early Sikh immigrants who arrived in the early 1900s to work in agriculture, railroad construction, and the lumber industry. These pioneers had established some of the country's first gurdwaras, forming tight-knit communities. Their resilience was tested by exclusionary laws such as the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, which banned further immigration from most Asian countries, and California's Alien Land Laws, which prohibited "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning or leasing land, effectively targeting Asian immigrants, including Sikhs (Leonard, 1992; Takaki, 1998). Still, they found ways to resist, often placing property titles in the names of U.S.-born children or sympathetic allies (Leonard, 1992; Takaki, 1998).

Following the violence of 1984, a new wave of Sikh immigrants, many of whom were fleeing Indian state-sanctioned repression and religious persecution, joined these communities. The post-1984 wave of immigrants included not only farmers but also professionals, students, and families seeking safety and spiritual refuge (Kaur, 2010; Tatla, 1999). They expanded the religious, economic, and cultural presence of Sikh Americans in cities like Fresno, Stockton, Yuba City, and Livingston, where gurdwaras, Punjabi-language programs, and local businesses flourished. For many, California's Central Valley offered not only economic opportunity and a climate reminiscent of Punjab, but also the cultural infrastructure needed to preserve their language, religious practices, and intergenerational values (Bald, 2013; Takhar, 2005).

September 11th and the Racialization of Sikh Americans

However, even as Sikh families began to rebuild their lives in the diaspora, they soon discovered that safety was never guaranteed. The terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, marked a turning point in the racialization and public perception of Sikh Americans. In the wave of retaliatory violence that followed, Sikh men, particularly those who wore turbans and beards, were frequently misidentified as Muslim and targeted by individuals seeking revenge. Just four days after the terrorist attacks, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Mesa, Arizona, was fatally shot by a man who had declared his intent to "kill a Muslim," making it one of the first and most visible post-9/11 hate crimes in the United States (Singh, 2014).

But Sodhi's murder was not an isolated incident. In the months and years that followed, Sikh Americans across the country faced a surge in racial profiling, workplace discrimination, gurdwara vandalism, and school-based harassment (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Sikh Coalition, 2012). One of the most devastating attacks occurred more than a decade later, in August 2012, when a white supremacist opened fire at a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, killing six

Sikh worshippers and injuring several others during Sunday services (Yaccino et al., 2012). This mass shooting, though nationally mourned, highlighted how the Sikh religious identity continued to be misunderstood, miscast, and violently targeted in American public life. More recently, in August 2025, 70-year-old Harpal Singh was violently attacked near a Sikh gurdwara in North Hollywood while taking his daily walk. He was beaten with a golf club, suffered a skull fracture and internal bleeding, and remains in critical condition. Though authorities have not yet classified the assault as a hate crime, community members are urging that bias be seriously investigated as a motive (Harter, 2025; Sikh Coalition, 2025). Together, these incidents underscore how Sikh Americans continue to face both acute violence and everyday marginalization.

For many Sikh Americans, especially youth, the post-9/11 era crystallized a painful paradox: they were hyper-visible as persons of suspicion, yet invisible in civic, curricular, and cultural narratives. Their turbans, beards, and other articles of faith made them stand out, but often not in ways that generated understanding or support. Instead, these visible markers became sources of fear, ridicule, and exclusion, even in spaces designed to foster growth and belonging, such as schools. Despite their significant presence in American society and the deep spiritual traditions that shape their identities, Sikh students continue to encounter environments where their experiences are misunderstood, marginalized, or entirely overlooked (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010; Atwal & Wang, 2019).

These historical and contemporary experiences are not just background information; rather, they shape the spiritual, emotional, and social landscape that Sikh youth bring into American public schools. The legacy of resistance, spiritual discipline, and continued marginalization across different continents informs not only how Sikh youth see the world, but

also how they are seen within it. Understanding these foundations is essential to affirming Sikh youth's full cultural, spiritual, and social identities in educational settings.

CHAPTER 4

SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

Discrimination in School and Institutional Neglect

This section of the literature review examines the sociocultural landscape within U.S. schools, with particular attention to the experiences of Amritdhari Sikh students whose visible religious identity often makes them vulnerable to misrecognition, bias, and exclusion. This marginalization is not limited to peer interactions but also surfaces in educator perceptions, disciplinary responses, and broader institutional norms. The following section synthesizes empirical research on how discrimination manifests in school environments through peer dynamics, teacher microaggressions, and systematic patterns of neglect.

Atwal and Wang's (2019) quantitative study provides crucial evidence of victimization patterns among Sikh American adolescents. They drew on survey data from 199 Sikh American adolescents across 120 schools in 61 California cities. The researchers used path analysis to examine links among wearing religious head coverings, being perceived as foreigners, victimization, and mental health. Their findings showed 76.4% of Sikh American adolescents reported at least one type of school-year victimization, often tied to race and religion. Wearing a religious head covering was linked to being stereotyped as foreigners, which related to both verbal and relational victimization. Male students experienced higher rates of verbal victimization. The study documented that being perceived as a foreigner predicted more overall victimization, which then correlated with lower self-esteem and increased depression and anxiety (Atwal & Wang, 2019). This research gives a clear empirical foundation to understand how

visible religious markers render Sikh students vulnerable to systematic exclusion with measurable psychological consequences.

Existing scholarship on Sikh students illustrates both the insights that can be gained and the limitations that arise when research is not grounded in community-informed knowledge. One such example is Charbonneau's (2011) mixed-methods study, which explored the cultural and academic experiences of Sikh students in Merced County, California, through interviews, surveys, and archival data. While he identified themes of cultural in-betweenness and exclusion, his framing and language often reflected the very misunderstandings his study aimed to address. For instance, his casual description of turban shapes trivialized the sacred significance of the Sikh faith and signaled an outsider interpretive lens. While the study sought to illuminate Sikh students' experiences, it demonstrated that research not rooted in insider epistemologies can inadvertently reproduce partial or flattened understandings of complex religious identities. Charbonneau's (2011) work, therefore, underscores the importance of centering Sikh voices, knowledge systems, and interpretative frameworks in both scholarship and educational practice.

This need for more culturally grounded approaches is not unique to the Sikh community. The marginalization of religious identity in schools is echoed across broader studies of faith-based student populations. Dupper et al. (2015), for example, conducted a qualitative study involving semi-structured focus groups with 50 adolescents from Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and Unitarian Universalist backgrounds in a region where Evangelical Christianity was the dominant religious affiliation. Using grounded theory and constant comparative analysis, the researchers uncovered how religious-based exclusion was a common experience across these minority faith groups. Students described being penalized for missing school on religious holidays, silenced when attempting to share their beliefs, and subjected to curricula that erased or distorted their

traditions (Dupper et al., 2015). The study found that in several cases, teachers, not just peers, perpetuated microaggressions and exclusion (Dupper et al., 2015). These findings align with recent data from the Sikh Coalition (2024), showing that educator bias and institutional neglect are not isolated. Instead, they are symptoms of systemic marginalization, in which one faith is positioned as normative within school culture.

In response to this kind of exclusion, some communities have created alternative spaces of affirmation and faith-based resistance. Klein's (2015) ethnographic study offers such a model. Observing anti-bullying classes at a Sikh gurdwara in California, Klein documented how Sikh middle and high school students were equipped with practical and cultural tools to navigate identity-based harassment. Through role-play, group discussion, and collective storytelling, students practiced articulating their beliefs in the face of ignorance while grounding themselves in their Sikh identity (Klein, 2015). These lessons, shaped by intergenerational wisdom and collective resilience, offered what public schools often fail to provide: a safe space where students' faith and identity are not only protected but affirmed. While situated outside of formal educational settings, Klein's study raises a powerful question: What would it mean for schools themselves to take on this work? Rather than relegating religious identity to the margins or hiding behind notions of secularism as a rationale for its exclusion, how might schools actively center faith-based identities as a broader commitment to educational equity?

Exclusion is not confined to K-12 schools; it extends into higher education as well. DeVere's (2020) qualitative study of Sikh college students illustrates how exclusion persists into higher education. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, DeVere explored how students navigated bicultural identity within predominantly white institutions. Participants described microaggressions from peers and professors, a lack of cultural understanding by academic staff,

and a persistent burden of having to explain their faith. These higher education experiences echo earlier school-based patterns and suggest that the discriminatory dynamics Sikh students experience in high school do not simply disappear; they evolve. In this way, DeVere highlights how unaddressed discrimination compounds over time, following Sikh students across educational landscapes well into their adulthood.

Synthesis of Literature on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

These questions lie at the heart of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), a framework that seeks not only to acknowledge students' identities but to center them within teaching and learning. For Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley, CRP presents a promising framework for cultivating not just inclusion, but recognition, a pedagogical stance in which students are seen, respected, and empowered as they are. Building on this foundation, the following section synthesizes existing literature on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP), tracing its theoretical roots, core principles, and key empirical applications across educational contexts.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) continues to gain scholarly and practical recognition as a framework that centers students' multidimensional identities within the learning environment. At its core, CRP challenges "neutral" or colorblind approaches to teaching and instead urges educators to affirm students' lived experiences, epistemologies, and cultural capital as vital mechanisms for supporting their academic and social development (Gay, 2000). For Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley, CRP offers not only academic affirmation but also cultural visibility in school environments that often render their spiritual and ethnic identities invisible.

Geneva Gay's (2000, 2010, 2018) work on culturally responsive teaching provides a theoretical cornerstone for much of the scholarship on CRP. Rather than conducting a single empirical study, Gay engages in an extensive qualitative synthesis of educational research and theory, drawing on multicultural education (Banks, 1993), critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and her own case-based observations from teacher education and K-12 classrooms. Her approach is interpretive and conceptual, integrating evidence from numerous studies, many of which are qualitative, alongside real classroom narratives to build a coherent framework for culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010). Gay (2018) argues that conventional, "culturally neutral" pedagogical approaches fail to meet the needs of students from minority communities because they disregard the central role that culture plays in shaping how students learn, communicate, and construct knowledge. She asserts that culture is not a simple "add-on" to instruction, but an essential foundation of effective teaching. Using detailed classroom vignettes and teacher narratives, Gay illustrates how instruction that affirms students' cultural identities enhances academic motivation, comprehension, and a sense of belonging. Her work is widely cited not only for its conceptual rigor but for providing classroom practitioners with a practical, theory-informed roadmap to equitable and inclusive teaching.

Student Perspectives: The Impact of CRP on Engagement and Belonging

Building on Gay's (2010) theoretical foundation, Byrd's (2016) convergent mixed-methods study, *Does Culturally Relevant Teaching Work? An Examination from Student Perspectives*, investigated middle and high school students' perceptions of culturally relevant teaching and offered compelling qualitative insights drawn directly from students' own voices. Byrd collected survey data from 315 students in grades 6 through 12 across the United States and

conducted 20 follow-up interviews to examine how students experienced CRP in their classrooms. The survey sample was 62% female, and the racial/ethnic breakdown included approximately 25% white, 25% Latino, 25% African American, and 25% Asian students (Byrd, 2016). The quantitative results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between students' perceptions of CRP and their reported sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy (Byrd, 2016). The qualitative data reinforced these findings, with students highlighting how inclusive curricula, affirming teachers, and cultural representation increased their classroom engagement and motivation. Byrd's findings provide compelling evidence that culturally responsive teaching has measurable academic and affective benefits for students (Byrd, 2016). These findings are particularly relevant to the present study, which centers on Sikh students, many of whom encounter cultural or religious misrecognition in school settings. Byrd's findings lay the empirical groundwork for exploring whether CRP similarly enhances Sikh students' sense of belonging and overall satisfaction with their secondary school environments.

Preparing Educators: Dispositions, Reflection, and Critical Consciousness

While the positive impact of CRP on student outcomes is well documented, its transformative potential depends on how teachers internalize and implement it in their classrooms. Matias's (2013) critical study highlights common pitfalls in the implementation of CRP, particularly among white educators. Using a qualitative, critical race methodology, Matias analyzed counter-stories from pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in a credentialing program to examine their responses to discussions of whiteness and racial identity (Matias, 2013). The study employed semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling to capture teacher candidates' evolving perceptions, resistance, and engagement with culturally responsive pedagogy. Her sample consisted predominantly of white female teacher candidates, reflecting the

broader demographic trend in U.S. teacher preparation programs, where approximately 79 percent of public-school teachers identified as White and non-Hispanic in 2017–18 (Spiegelman, 2020). Matias found that many participants equated culturally responsive teaching with superficial inclusion of multicultural content, rather than engaging in deeper, critical reflection on their own power and privilege. For example, her findings detail instances where teacher candidates exhibited reluctance or defensiveness when prompted to examine their own whiteness, a crucial step that, if overlooked, can lead to a mere tokenistic application of culturally responsive pedagogy. Additionally, thematic analysis of the data revealed patterns of cognitive dissonance, in which participants struggled to reconcile their racial privilege with their roles as educators in diverse classrooms (Matias, 2013). This insight is particularly significant for Amritdhari Sikh students, who are often hyper-visible due to their religious attire. Teachers who have not engaged in deep critical reflection may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary dynamics that leave Sikh students feeling marginalized or misunderstood.

Following Matias's critique of teacher preparation, Rychly and Graves (2012) examined the personal dispositions required to authentically implement CRP. In their qualitative interview study of 15 in-service teachers working in diverse school settings, they found that educators who demonstrate empathy, self-reflection, and cultural curiosity were more effective in fostering inclusive classrooms. These traits enabled teachers to build meaningful relationships with students and avoid tokenistic applications of CRP. The authors emphasized that CRP should not be a checklist of techniques but a sustained commitment to growth and learning (Rychly & Graves, 2012). Their findings reaffirm the importance of reflective teacher preparation, particularly when serving students from underrepresented cultures and religious communities.

Building on this body of work, Villegas and Lucas (2007) proposed a widely cited framework for preparing culturally responsive teachers. Through a synthesis of qualitative research and programmatic case studies, they identified six essential strands for preparing culturally responsive teachers: (1) developing a sociocultural consciousness, (2) affirming views of diversity as an asset, (3) cultivating an ethic of care, (4) building knowledge of students' lives, (5) developing culturally responsive teaching practices, and (6) promoting critical social consciousness (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Their model laid the conceptual groundwork that later scholars, such as Matias (2013) and Rychly and Graves (2012), would later extend. Most importantly, the framework centers teacher beliefs and world views as foundational to implementing CRP effectively. This is especially important when working with students like Amritdhari Sikhs, whose cultural and religious practices may be unfamiliar to many educators.

Systemic Contexts: School Climate & Institutional Care

While Matias and colleagues (2013) focus on teacher preparation in implementing culturally responsive pedagogy, Dessel (2010) expands the conversation to the broader institutional and systemic factors that shape students' daily experiences in school. Her mixed-methods study surveyed 734 students and interviewed school staff to examine how climate and intergroup relations affect student belonging. She found that marginalized students, particularly those from religious or racial minority groups, frequently encountered prejudice, exclusion, and invisibility in school environments (Dessel, 2010). Dessel argues that without intentional efforts to cultivate inclusive school cultures, even the most well-intentioned classroom implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy can be undermined. For Amritdhari Sikh students, this insight is critical. Their experience of school is not shaped solely by individual teachers, but by the

broader institutional climate. Specifically, it depends on the extent to which their identities are acknowledged, affirmed, or protected within the school culture (Cohen et al., 2009).

Sleeter (2012) extends this systematic critique by shifting the focus from school climate to educational policy. In her theoretical and critical policy analysis, Sleeter examines how standards-based reform efforts, particularly those driven by accountability measures such as high-stakes testing, have undermined culturally responsive pedagogy in practice and policy discourse. Drawing on decades of research on multicultural education and teacher development, Sleeter argues that CRP has been treated as optional and supplemental, rather than essential to achieving educational equity. She attributes this to neoliberal education policies that prioritize standardization, test scores, and instructional efficiency over student-centered relationships and culturally affirming practices. Sleeter calls for a reimagining of policy and leadership structures that position CRP as a central component of teacher preparation and school reform, rather than as supplemental enrichment (Sleeter, 2012). When Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) is treated in policy discourse as supplemental rather than essential, students like Amritdhari Sikhs become especially vulnerable to misrecognition, marginalization, and exclusion.

Toward Collective Implementation: Participatory and Schoolwide Models of CRP

While Sleeter (2012) highlights policy constraints, other scholars explore what equity-centered implementation of CRP can look like when school communities collaboratively design culturally responsive school environments. Bal (2018) introduced the Learning Lab, a participatory action research model that convened educators, students, and families in racially and linguistically diverse high schools to redesign culturally responsive behavioral supports. Through iterative co-design, Learning Lab participants reduced disciplinary disparities, elevated student voice, and adopted behavioral expectations to better reflect the cultural knowledge of the

communities they served (Bal, 2018). This model stands in sharp contrast to top-down policy mandates and offers a promising approach to support minority students, especially those like Sikh students whose religious articles, like the kirpan (ceremonial dagger worn across the body), could be misinterpreted under traditional discipline models.

Pardo de Rincón (2024) similarly brings the focus back to educator voice and classroom-level practice, while still grounded in broader institutional dynamics. In her qualitative dissertation study, conducted across three school districts in Oregon, she interviewed and observed ten high school teachers to examine how they understood and implemented CRP. She discovered that the most effective teachers in creating inclusive, affirming learning environments were those who actively sought professional learning, collaborated with families, and consistently invited students to bring their cultural experiences into classroom discourse (Pardo de Rincón, 2024). Though not focused specifically on religious minorities, her findings underscore the pedagogical intentionality needed to support students like Amritdhari Sikh youth.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: From Research to Rationale

The literature on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy offers a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how CRP supports student belonging, engagement, and success. From Gay's (2000) conceptual framing to Byrd's (2016) student-centered research, from Matias' (2013) critical interrogation of teacher bias to Sleeter's (2011) policy critique, the conversation around CRP has evolved to encompass not just classroom practice, but teacher formation and systematic transformation. Across the literature, a common theme emerges: culturally responsive pedagogy is most effective when embraced as a holistic approach, one that lives not only in lesson plans but in educators' mindsets, school-wide practices, and institutional commitments. For Amritdhari Sikh students, CRP provides a powerful framework for

affirmation. Yet, as the literature also makes clear, CRP cannot be effective when applied superficially or treated as a supplement. It must be embodied across educational systems if students like those at the heart of this study are to be fully seen, supported, and empowered.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Amritdhari Sikh high school students in Fresno County public schools.

Phenomenology, as described by Merriam and Tisdale (2016), is rooted in the belief that reality is constructed through personal and shared meaning-making. Instead of explaining or predicting, phenomenological inquiry uncovers how people perceive and interpret everyday experiences. Its aim is to identify the essence of a particular phenomenon. Creswell and Creswell (2023) describe phenomenology as a design that distills the meaning of lived experiences for several individuals regarding a specific concept or phenomenon. This made it especially appropriate for studying religious and cultural identity in schools. In this study, the phenomenon of interest was the schooling experiences of visibly religious Sikh students whose identities were shaped by their Amritdhari commitments and articles of faith.

More specifically, the study drew on interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology. This approach sought to describe participants' lived experiences and interpret how these experiences were shaped by sociocultural, historical, and institutional forces (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interpretive phenomenology fits this inquiry because it offers nuanced attention to how Sikh youth understand and navigate affirmation, marginalization, and spiritual resistance in American schools. This approach also recognized the researcher's positionality as a lens for co-constructed meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). As a Sikh researcher, I shared cultural and religious commonalities with my participants. This shaped my interpretive lens and deepened my

understanding of their experiences. This viewpoint informed the study's alignment with conceptual frameworks centered on cultural knowledge, identity, and epistemology.

Conceptual Framework Integration

This study was guided by three interrelated conceptual frameworks: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018), Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005), and Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994). Together, these frameworks provided a lens through which to examine how Amritdhari Sikh high school students experienced affirmation, marginalization, and resistance in school settings. Each framework informed the study's design, particularly the development of the research and interview questions.

Research Questions
RQ1: How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students in Fresno County describe their experiences of cultural responsiveness and their sense of belonging in school settings?
RQ2: In what ways do Amritdhari Sikh high school students feel their visible religious identities are affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within school settings?
RQ3: How do Amritdhari Sikh students navigate challenges related to their religious identity at school, and what sources of support or resistance do they draw upon?

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) informed the first cluster of interview questions, which explored students' experiences of cultural responsiveness and belonging. CRP emphasizes instructional equity, affirming students' experiences, and building relationships. Questions focused on whether teachers and school environments respected Sikh identity, and if students felt understood by adults and peers. This lens assessed how school environments promoted or hindered inclusivity for religiously minoritized students.

Spiritual Epistemology informed the second cluster of interview questions for Research Question 2. These questions examined how participants' religious identities were affirmed or

marginalized in school. This framework viewed spirituality as a way of knowing and being, deeply tied to culture, resistance, and embodiment (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994). It countered secular schooling by recognizing Sikh students' faith as essential to their epistemic lives. Interview questions in this cluster asked students to describe how their articles of faith were perceived and supported (or not) by peers and educators.

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) informed the third cluster of interview questions, which addressed Research Question 3. This cluster explored how students responded to challenges and drew strength from internal resilience and community support. CCW challenged deficit narratives by identifying forms of capital that marginalized students already possessed, including resistant, navigational, and familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Accordingly, students were asked about their strategies for navigating exclusion, their sources of resistance and strength, and what helped them remain grounded and proud in their Sikh identity.

Additionally, participants were asked to complete a student reflection for a school adult (e.g., a teacher, counselor, or administrator) or for a peer. Students could choose to express their message as a personal letter or a one-page collage with short English phrases and images. In their reflection, they shared what they wished others understood about their Amritdhari Sikh identity, their school experiences, and how their school could better support Sikh students. Two of the eight participants completed this reflection, and while the prompt was methodologically purposeful, the limited response rate meant these reflections were not included in the formal data analysis. The prompt was grounded in all three conceptual frameworks. It allowed students to articulate their ways of knowing and spiritual grounding, consistent with Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994). The collage option honored diverse modes of expression and meaning making. The reflection created space for self-advocacy and recognition of lived

strengths, in line with Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Finally, the prompt invited students to critique school practices and imagine more inclusive possibilities, which Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018) seeks to achieve.

Setting

Fresno County, located in California's Central Valley, served as the geographic and sociocultural context for this study. The county is home to nearly 1 million residents, with a racial and ethnic makeup of approximately 53% Hispanic or Latino, 27% White, 9% Asian, and 5% Black or African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Fresno County is one of the most impoverished counties in California, with more than 22% of its residents living below the poverty line and over 30% of children living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Importantly, Fresno County has one of the largest concentrations of Sikh Americans in the United States. Estimates range from 25,000 to 40,000 Sikh individuals. Many live in rural farming communities or work in agriculture-related industries (The Pluralism Project, n.d.). Sikh families in the area have deep agricultural and labor roots dating to the early 20th century. The county remains a hub of Sikh cultural and religious life. This context made Fresno County a relevant and compelling site for investigating the experiences of Amritdhari Sikh students in educational settings.

Participants

The participants in this study were self-identified Amritdhari Sikh students attending comprehensive public high schools in Fresno County, California, through in-person instruction. The inclusion criteria for the study specified that participants had to be Amritdhari Sikh high school students who maintained unshorn hair (kesh) and wore visible articles of faith, including the turban (dastar) and kara, and were willing to share about their school experiences. Gender

diversity was an intentional consideration during recruitment, with purposeful outreach to include female participants, whose experiences navigating visible Sikh identity in school settings may have differed from those of their male counterparts.

Recruitment and Sampling

Recruitment took place in two primary ways. The first and most prominent channel was outreach at local gurdwaras, or Sikh houses of worship, in Fresno County. The researcher made announcements and spoke directly before the sangat, or congregation, at three large gurdwaras, inviting families to learn about the study. These gurdwaras were cultural and spiritual hubs where many Amritdhari youth regularly attended Sunday services and participated in Punjabi language and Sikh religious studies. They provided trusted spaces where families and students felt comfortable learning about and volunteering for the study. Six of the eight participants were recruited from this channel.

The second recruitment channel involved a professional network of local Sikh educators who worked in schools across Fresno County. Many of these educators had established relationships with Sikh students through their roles as facilitators of cultural events, advisors to Sikh Student Associations (SSAs), or organizers of school-based clubs focused on Punjabi culture and language. Some also collaborated with community-based organizations such as the Jakara Movement (n.d.), which supported Sikh youth through leadership development, cultural education, and civic engagement programs within and beyond school settings. These connections provided a culturally grounded and trusted entry point for identifying potential participants. Two of the eight participants were recruited through this channel.

Participants were recruited voluntarily from those who met the inclusion criteria. Following announcements at gurdwaras and outreach through the educator network, interested

students and families contacted the researcher directly to express their willingness to participate. All volunteers who met the eligibility requirements were included in the study. This approach was aligned with criterion-based selection, in which all participants who met predefined criteria were eligible for inclusion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Student participation required both parental consent and student assent forms, in accordance with ethical research practices involving minors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The initial recruitment goal was 8–10 participants, with the understanding that data collection would continue until thematic saturation was reached, or the point at which no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the dataset was sufficiently rich and comprehensive (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final sample included eight participants: three female and five male students.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics (Organized by Gender and School Context)*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	School Context
Navpreet	Female	16	11th	Rural; Large Punjabi Sikh population
Manpreet	Female	16	11th	Suburban; culturally conservative community
Simran	Female	15	10th	Suburban; some Punjabi Students present
Zoravar	Male	17	11th	Suburban

Jaspreet	Male	17	11th	Suburban
Nivas	Male	17	12th	Suburban; culturally conservative community
Armaan	Male	14	9th	Suburban
Balraj	Male	16	11th	Suburban; described as socially hostile

The eight participants ranged in age from 14 to 17 and represented grades 9 through 12 across multiple school sites in Fresno County. Five participants were male, and three were female. All eight were Amritdhari Sikhs who maintained visible articles of faith, including uncut hair (*kesh*) and a turban (*dastar* or *patka*). Table 1 organizes participants first by gender and, within each gender group, by the degree of institutional support in their school context. This organizational structure reflects two key findings that emerged from the analysis: first, that gender mediated the type and severity of identity-based challenges participants encountered; and second, that the density of the Sikh community and the responsiveness of school culture fundamentally shaped students' experiences of belonging, marginalization, and support.

Among the female participants, Navpreet attended a rural school situated within a community with a large Punjabi Sikh population, where Sikh students were well represented, Punjabi was offered as a language course, and Vaisakhi was publicly acknowledged. Manpreet attended a suburban school in a culturally conservative community where her turban made her immediately visible, though her experience was mediated by gender and a quiet navigational style. Simran attended a suburban school with some Punjabi students, but she was among the

only Amritdhari Sikh students on campus. Among the male participants, Zoravar attended a culturally diverse suburban school where longstanding peer familiarity provided a degree of social integration. Jaspreet attended a suburban school without a significant Sikh student population, and Nivas attended a suburban school in a culturally conservative community where he was the only turban-wearing student. Armaan attended a suburban school where he was largely isolated from other Sikh peers, and Balraj attended a suburban school he described as socially hostile. These environmental differences shaped not only the frequency and severity of the challenges students encountered but also their sense of belonging, their access to peer support, and their relationship to their own identity.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. This format was well-suited for phenomenological research, as it offered both structure and flexibility. It allowed the researcher to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to follow each participant's unique narrative (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interview protocol included approximately 14 open-ended questions, aligning with the study's research questions and conceptual frameworks. Questions explored students' experiences with cultural responsiveness, identity expression, belonging, and support or marginalization in school settings.

Participants were also invited to complete a written reflection directed to either a school adult (such as a teacher, counselor, or administrator) or a peer. Students could express their message as a personal letter or as a one-page collage with short English phrases and images. The prompt asked them to share what they wished others understood about their Amritdhari Sikh identity, their school experiences, and how their schools could better support Sikh students.

This reflection was grounded in all three conceptual frameworks of the study. Consistent with Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994), it invited students to articulate their ways of knowing and spiritual grounding. The collage option honored diverse modes of expression, while the prompt itself created space for self-advocacy and recognition of lived strengths, aligned with Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). The invitation to critique school practices and imagine more inclusive possibilities reflected the aims of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018). Although methodologically purposeful, only two of the eight participants completed this reflection. Given the limited response rate, these reflections were not included in the formal data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) technique developed by Watkins (2017). The RADaR technique used tables and spreadsheets to systematically reduce raw qualitative data through iterative revision phases, converting textual data into increasingly focused and manageable formats while maintaining analytic rigor (Watkins, 2017). This approach was well-suited for phenomenological research, which sought to uncover patterns of meaning across participants' lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis process was recursive rather than linear, with continual movement between the data and developing interpretations as each participant's transcript was reduced and compared against prior analyses.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai (Otter.ai, Inc., 2023), an artificial intelligence-powered transcription software, to allow for close, repeated engagement with the data. Transcripts were then organized in Google Sheets into an initial all-inclusive data table with columns for transcript number, interview section, question, participant response, researcher

notes, code, and theme. This table was reviewed, both individually and collaboratively with the dissertation advisor, across multiple phases of data reduction using the RADaR methodology (Watkins, 2017). Each phase involved systematically removing data that did not directly address the research questions, resulting in progressively more condensed tables. Throughout this process, participants' own words were preserved as illustrative data to maintain the authenticity and cultural specificity of the student's voice.

As the data were reduced, the researcher assigned codes to meaningful segments of text. In qualitative research, a code is a short, descriptive label that captures the essence of a participant's expression in a particular passage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, when a student described feeling welcomed on a sports team, that passage was labeled with the code *Belonging-Positive*. When another student described being stared at in the hallway because of their turban, that passage was coded as *Staring/Scrutiny*. Over time, codes that appeared repeatedly across multiple participants signaled patterns in the data, and related codes were grouped together into broader themes that represented shared dimensions of the Amritdhari Sikh high school student experience.

Codes were developed inductively through the reduction process rather than from pre-established categories. As each participant's data was reduced, new codes were generated, and existing codes were expanded or refined to capture the complexity of students' experiences. The resulting codebook reflected several dimensions of the Amritdhari Sikh high school student experience. Codes related to belonging, for instance, captured the range of ways students experienced inclusion and exclusion at school. The initial broad categories were differentiated into subcodes, including *Belonging – Positive*, *Belonging – Isolation/Exclusion*, *Belonging – Conditional/Partial*, and *Belonging – Ambiguous*, as the nuances of participants' narratives

demanded greater specificity. For example, a student who described feeling accepted on a debate team was coded differently from one who described belonging only when peers forgot about their visible difference. That, in turn, was coded differently from a student who questioned whether they had ever truly belonged anywhere at school. Furthermore, codes addressing visibility and recognition examined how students' identifiable articles of faith shaped their daily interactions, including *Cultural Invisibility*, *Cultural Visibility – Positive*, and *Cultural Visibility – Negative* (see Appendix C for all codes).

A set of relational codes captured the quality of students' interactions with peers and teachers. Peer interaction codes reflected a continuum of experience. At one end was *Peer Relationships – Acceptance*, marked by genuine friendship and understanding. At the other end was *Peer Relationships – Exclusion*, where students described being marginalized. Between these poles was *Peer Relationships – Microaggressions*, capturing the subtle but persistent bias students encountered, such as intrusive questions about their turban or assumptions about their background.

Teacher-related codes reflected a comparable continuum of experience. At one end was *Teacher Understanding – Affirmation*, where educators actively learned about and respected students' identities. At the other end was *Teacher Understanding – Avoidance/Ignorance*, where students' religious identities were not acknowledged. Between these two codes was *Teacher Understanding – Misunderstanding*, capturing moments when teachers made inaccurate assumptions about students' faith.

Beyond peer and teacher interactions, students' experiences were also shaped by institutional and structural conditions within their schools. Institutional and structural codes documented the ways school systems either supported or failed Sikh students. These included

Institutional Support, Institutional Barriers, Curriculum Representation, Curriculum Erasure, Religious Accommodation – Granted, and Religious Accommodation – Denied. For example, one student's school offered Punjabi as a language course and made announcements during Vaisakhi, a major Sikh holiday, while other students described a complete absence of Sikh representation in textbooks and coursework.

In addition to relational and institutional dynamics, a set of codes captured explicit forms of bias and discrimination. These included *Religious Misidentification*, where students were incorrectly assumed to be Muslim, and *Islamophobia/Post-9/11 Context*, which reflected slurs, surveillance, and nativist rhetoric, or language suggesting that students did not truly belong in the United States or were perceived as foreign threats. Other codes documented more direct interpersonal harms, including *Bullying/Harassment, Staring/Scrutiny, Exoticization, and Tokenization*. A distinct code for *Bystander Inaction* also emerged. This category captured moments when teachers or staff witnessed discriminatory behavior but failed to intervene. Importantly, this pattern differed from general teacher ignorance as it involved active observation without response and carried a significant impact on students' sense of safety.

Codes grounded in the study's conceptual frameworks captured the strengths, resources, and forms of capital students drew upon to navigate their school environments. These included *Navigational Capital*, which described the strategies students developed to move through spaces not designed for them; *Resistant Capital*, which captured moments when students challenged or refused to conform to dominant norms; *Spiritual Capital*; *Aspirational Capital*; and *Critical Consciousness*. These codes aligned with Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. Codes such as *Faith Practices as Strength, Historical/Intergenerational Knowledge,*

and *Sikh Identity Pride* reflected the spiritual grounding and cultural knowledge central to Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994).

Additionally, support-oriented codes, including *Familial Support*, *Community Support (Gurdwara)*, and *Peer Support*, operationalized Yosso's conceptualization of Familial and Social Capital by documenting the relational networks that sustained students across contexts. At the same time, additional codes emerged inductively from the data that extended beyond CCW's original formulation. For instance, *Faith Practices as Strength*, *Historical/Intergenerational Knowledge*, and *Sikh Identity Pride* foregrounded the spiritual and epistemological grounding of students' resilience.

Moreover, affective codes such as *Emotional Impact (Negative and Positive)*, *Safety Concerns*, *Self-Silencing*, and *Educational Labor/Burden* captured the psychological costs of navigating school as a visibly religious minority. *Educational Labor/Burden* described the cumulative exhaustion students experienced from being positioned as informal educators responsible for explaining their faith and identity to peers and teachers with limited understanding of Sikhism. *Self-Silencing* reflected moments in which students strategically minimized or muted aspects of their identity to reduce social risk.

As these affective patterns became clearer, the analytic process evolved as well. The iterative nature of the RADaR process meant the codebook served as a living document, continuously refined throughout all phases of reduction. As later participants' data were analyzed, new codes emerged when existing categories could not adequately capture the complexity of students' experiences. For example, the code *Identity Struggle* was created to capture one participant's active, often painful contemplation of modifying or removing articles of faith, an experience of internal conflict between religious commitment and the desire for

autonomy or relief from hypervisibility that no existing code addressed. Similarly, existing codes were expanded as new participants introduced dimensions not previously observed. The code for *Familial Support*, for instance, was broadened to encompass not only encouragement but also the pressure, obligation, and constrained choice that could accompany family dynamics around religious identity. The code for *Safety Concerns*, initially defined to capture explicit fears of being targeted, was expanded to include the chronic low-grade anxiety that some students carried throughout the school day, as well as the deliberate strategies they developed to stay safe. These strategies included avoiding certain hallways, monitoring the location of known aggressors, and limiting participation in extracurricular activities where they felt vulnerable.

These refinements strengthened the codebook's analytic precision, but they did not fully account for all dimensions of students' experiences. In several cases, entirely new categories were required. The code *Humor as Strategic Identity Work* emerged when one participant's data revealed a navigation strategy that could not be captured by existing codes for Navigational Capital or Resistant Capital alone. This participant used humor not merely as a coping mechanism but as a systematic, preemptive strategy for controlling the social frame around his visible identity, deflecting microaggressions while simultaneously earning the social capital necessary for safety. Because this strategy carried distinct costs, including the suppression of authentic emotional responses and the accumulation of unprocessed impact beneath a performed exterior, it required its own code to capture both its social function and its psychological toll. Similarly, the code *Reading/Literature as Support* emerged when a participant described finding strength and reduced isolation through reading about people who felt different, a solitary, introspective form of counterspace that functioned differently from the communal support captured by existing codes for gurdwara, peer networks, or social media.

While some emergent codes captured strategic navigation and sources of support, other codes were developed to account for how visibility itself was structured through specific religious articles. A set of article-of-faith codes was created to capture how distinct Sikh religious articles generated different experiences within school settings. These included *Turban/Dastar Experiences*, *Kesh (Unshorn Hair) Experiences*, *Kara Experiences*, and *Five Ks – General*. These codes proved essential because each article of faith produced unique forms of visibility, questioning, and targeting. The turban, as the most visibly recognizable article, generated the widest range of responses, from invasive body-focused questions to physical targeting. In contrast, the kara prompted subtler but still boundary-crossing forms of curiosity and scrutiny.

Beyond embodied visibility, additional codes captured relational and institutional responses to identity assertion. *Self-Advocacy* documented moments when students actively articulated and defended their identity needs, while *Agency/Resistance* captured broader efforts to assert control over their identity narratives. *Social Media as Support* highlighted how digital Sikh communities functioned as virtual counter spaces, offering affirmation and a sense of belonging beyond the physical school environment. The code *Model Minority Stereotype* documented instances in which assumptions about academic achievement intersected with students' racialized and religious identities, shaping expectations placed upon them.

Across all of these domains, identity did not operate along a single axis. The code *Intersectionality* was applied throughout the analysis to capture how overlapping dimensions of identity, particularly gender and religion, shaped participants' experiences in ways that neither dimension could explain alone. For instance, female participants described gendered variants of microaggressions, including assumptions that they were “not allowed” to participate in typical

teenage activities. At the same time, gender sometimes functioned as a partial protective factor against the more overt harassment directed at male peers. Male participants, in contrast, described how masculinity norms constrained their navigational options, making it socially costly to report bullying incidents, express vulnerability, or seek help. These intersectional patterns revealed that Amritdhari identity was not experienced uniformly; rather, it was mediated by gender, shaping the forms of marginalization encountered, the strategies available for navigation, and the emotional costs of those strategies.

Taken together, these refined and emergent codes formed the foundation for thematic development. The complete codebook, including all code names and their definitions, is presented in Appendix C. The final phase of the data table organized the most analytically significant excerpts by code and theme, providing a structured basis for the study's findings. The RADaR technique proved effective in managing large volumes of qualitative data while maintaining systematic documentation of analytic decisions through an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Watkins, 2017). Final themes were developed through thematic synthesis and interpreted through the lenses of the study's three guiding conceptual frameworks: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994). Thematic development was intentionally aligned with the study's research questions to ensure analytic coherence.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is understood not as a neutral observer but as a central instrument in both data collection and interpretation. As a Punjabi-Sikh researcher, I shared cultural, linguistic, and religious ties with the Amritdhari Sikh youth at the center of this study. This insider positionality enabled cultural fluency in interpreting spiritual practices,

community norms, and nuanced religious terminology that might otherwise have been misinterpreted or misunderstood by an outsider. It also fostered relational trust during recruitment and interviews, as participants felt more comfortable sharing personal and sacred aspects of their identity with someone who understood the broader sociopolitical contexts of their identities.

At the same time, being an insider carried the risk of assumed familiarity, of projecting my own experiences, emotions, or interpretations onto participants' narratives. To mitigate this, I engaged in the phenomenological practice of bracketing, which involved intentionally setting aside personal assumptions to remain open to how participants constructed and expressed meaning in their own terms (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal in which I recorded analytical decisions, emotional responses, and critical reflections. This journaling was supplemented by analytic memoing, a research strategy that involved recording reflective notes during the coding and analysis process to document evolving interpretations, analytic questions, and thematic insights. As Saldaña (2021) explains, memoing acts as a companion to coding and supports critical thinking about how patterns emerge, how categories form, and how theoretical meaning begins to take shape.

Additionally, I engaged in regular debriefing conversations with my dissertation advisor, who brought an outside perspective that challenged my interpretations and helped surface blind spots in my analysis. While my advisor did not share my cultural background, this distance provided a valuable counterbalance to my insider positionality. These practices of reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and advisor debriefing helped ensure that the analytic process remained both critically reflective and grounded in participants' lived experiences. As a Sikh researcher studying Sikh youth, I held a dual responsibility: to engage with my community

ethically and respectfully, and to uphold the rigor, transparency, and interpretive integrity expected in qualitative research.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study, I utilized strategies that demonstrated credibility, dependability, and transparency while remaining grounded in participants' lived experiences. Credibility was supported through the triangulation of data sources, including semi-structured interviews and researcher memos. Triangulation allowed findings to be corroborated across different forms of evidence and reduced the risk of relying on a single data point. Furthermore, credibility was strengthened through peer debriefing with my dissertation advisor, who provided an external perspective to challenge assumptions and refine interpretations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was enhanced by providing thick, detailed descriptions of participants' contexts, religious identities, and school environments. Rather than seeking statistical generalizations, qualitative research aims to offer sufficient contextual detail for readers to consider whether findings resonate in other settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability was reinforced through careful documentation of the research process, including an audit trail of coding decisions, analytic adjustments, and methodological choices maintained throughout the RADaR technique implementation. The systematic nature of the RADaR process, with its multiple phases of data reduction and team-based review, contributed to the dependability of the analysis (Watkins, 2017). Such transparency helped demonstrate that findings were consistent and grounded in systematic procedures.

Confirmability was fostered through reflexive journaling and analytic memoing, which enabled me to surface assumptions, trace evolving interpretations, and ensure that analysis

remained anchored in participants' narratives rather than in researcher bias (Saldaña, 2021).

These practices helped make the analytic process visible and self-critical.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the study's findings, organized around the three guiding research questions. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with eight Amritdhari Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley, the findings illuminate their experiences with belonging, cultural responsiveness, identity affirmation, and marginalization. The chapter also highlights the sources of strength and resistance these students draw on as they navigate school environments. Participants' own words are centered as primary evidence, following the phenomenological tradition, which privileges lived experience as foundational to meaning making (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participants' identities.

The findings show that each participant's experience was shaped by their specific school environment, but consistent patterns emerged across the sample. Several contextual factors influenced students' shared reality. These included the density of the local Sikh community, the presence of co-ethnic educators, school climate hostility, and gender. Different contexts produced different outcomes. Still, every student faced the same core condition: being visibly Amritdhari Sikh in an American public school. These context and identity-based factors are central to the analysis. They explain why some students saw visibility as a source of pride and belonging, while for others it caused chronic anxiety, hypervigilance, and limited participation.

Participant Profiles

The eight participants in this study attended eight different public high schools across Fresno County, California, representing a range of school contexts, grade levels, and lived experiences (see Table 1 in the Methods chapter). All eight are Amritdhari Sikhs who maintain

the Five Ks and wear the dastar (turban), making their religious identity visibly evident in school settings. To ground the thematic findings that follow, this section reintroduces each participant through an individual profile. Profiles are organized first by gender (female, then male) and then by the level of institutional support each participant experienced at school, ranging from most to least supported. This intentional sequencing illuminates how gender and institutional support shape the range of experiences among Amritdhari Sikh high school students.

Navpreet: “When We Performed Bhangra, the whole Gym was Cheering.”

Navpreet is a 16-year-old junior at a rural high school in Fresno County. Her community has a significant Punjabi Sikh population, and she has lived in the same town her entire life. Her parents chose this community for its Sikh presence and small-town feel. Both parents work in the medical field. Their example of balancing professional success with a visible Sikh identity has been foundational for Navpreet. She wants to become a doctor, specifically a pediatric surgeon. Navpreet’s school experience was the most supportive and inclusive among the eight participants. She was never the only Sikh in her classes, as the school’s large Punjabi Sikh population fostered a sense of normalcy. The school offered Punjabi language courses, recognized Vaisakhi, and featured bhangra performances at rallies, institutional practices that were unique among the participants in this study. She was active in the Sikh Student Association (SSA) and described moments of celebration, such as a multicultural rally where she wore a bright Punjabi suit with a matching turban, and the “whole gym was cheering.” The school also employed Punjabi Sikh teachers. Navpreet said, “The Punjabi Sikh teachers definitely understand because it is their identity too. So with them, I never have to explain anything.”

Yet Navpreet’s experience revealed a crucial contrast: cultural visibility does not guarantee academic inclusion. Despite the strong Punjabi Sikh presence on her campus, she

noted that Sikhism remains absent from the formal curriculum. “We are visible culturally but not fully included academically.” This distinction shows that a supportive, visibly diverse environment does not always translate into deep understanding or curricular acceptance. Even in the most supportive environment among participants, there remains a gap between being seen and being truly understood.

Simran: “What’s Hard Isn’t Being Amritdhari, What’s Hard is Other People’s Ignorance.”

Simran is a 15-year-old sophomore at a suburban high school. She lives with her parents and younger brother. Her family is active at the local gurdwara, and Simran helps co-teach Punjabi language classes on Sundays. She calls herself an artist and was on her school's debate team, describing this role with humor since she is usually quiet. Simran took *Amrit*, the Sikh initiation, at five years old. She says this was her own decision. She speaks about her faith with conviction and clarity. Simran's school had a visible Punjabi student population, but she was the only Amritdhari Sikh female student she knew. This put her in a “weird in-between space,” where she was not fully understood by non-Sikh peers or Punjabi Sikh classmates whose families observe the faith differently.

Simran’s school experience entailed persistent educational labor, religious misidentification as Muslim, and inconsistent recognition of religious holidays. For instance, she reported institutional accommodations for Ramadan, but not for Vaisakhi. Despite these obstacles, Simran demonstrated considerable spiritual capital and resilience. She maintained daily devotional practices, including morning recitation of the *Japji Sahib*, a central Sikh prayer. Additionally, she created a series of self-portraits featuring multicolored turbans to reclaim her beauty and anchor her identity in spiritual conviction. In her concluding remarks, Simran

articulated a distinction between institutional shortcomings and affirmation of identity. She stated, "What's hard isn't being Amritdhari. What's hard is other people's ignorance and prejudice. What's hard is living in a school system that wasn't built with students like me in mind. But my actual identity? That's beautiful. That's powerful."

Manpreet: "It's Not Dramatic. But You Still Notice Them."

Manpreet is a 16-year-old junior at a suburban high school. She enjoys English class and reads for pleasure. She relates to complex fictional characters who are different or face adversity, often seeing herself in their struggles. Her family, including her parents, older brother, and cousins, are all Amritdhari. Manpreet is reserved but socially comfortable, and she maintains a small, close group of friends. Unlike others, she navigated school by consistently minimizing challenges. She described her experience as "pretty normal" and said her challenges were "small things" that were "not dramatic." Manpreet was the only participant to identify gender as a relevant factor. She noted, "I'm a girl," and observed Sikh boys at her school "get more comments."

Unlike previous participants who emphasized shared cultural heritage, Manpreet's primary source of belonging was interfaith solidarity rather than co-ethnicity. Her best friend, who is Muslim and wears a hijab, shared with her a mutual recognition that transcended their specific religious practices. Manpreet also drew identity affirmation from reading and literature rather than from the gurdwara, which she never mentioned as a source of support. Her statement, "It's not dramatic. But you still notice them..." reflected small moments of misrecognition that, while subtle, carried weight in shaping her experience as a Sikh student. This contrast with participants who found support in traditional religious spaces is explored further in the findings.

Jaspreet: “Just See Us. Acknowledge Us. Learn About Us. Include Us. And When We Tell You Something is Wrong, Believe Us.”

Jaspreet is a 17-year-old junior and varsity soccer striker at a suburban high school. He is outgoing and direct, describing his faith as “everything,” not just a weekend practice. He lives in a close extended family, where cousins are best friends, and volunteers at his gurdwara, co-teaching Punjabi classes on Sundays. Outside of school and faith, he is an avid gamer. Jaspreet is closely connected to his family’s immigration story. His uncle was assaulted in a post-9/11 hate crime, shaping Jaspreet’s understanding of the stakes of Sikh visibility in America.

Jaspreet speaks about his identity with a confidence that he acknowledged took years and considerable pain to develop. He described his school experience as "complicated". Although he is well-liked, has strong friendships, and found genuine belonging on his soccer team, he also endured significant harassment during his freshman and sophomore years rooted in post-9/11 conflation of Sikhs with Muslims. Over time, Jaspreet developed strategies to navigate hostility, moving from silence to strategic engagement. His faith practices, especially reciting *Gurbani*, the sacred Sikh hymns, center him. He draws strength from his father’s lived experience and from the knowledge that Guru Gobind Singh Ji created the Khalsa, knowing Sikhs would face persecution for being visible. His closing words capture resilience and a call to action: “Just see us. Acknowledge us. Learn about us. Include us. And when we tell you something is wrong, believe us.”

Nivas: “Sometimes People Think If You’re Not Reacting Loudly, You’re Not Affected.”

Nivas is a 17-year-old senior at a suburban high school and has lived in his community for nearly his whole life. He describes himself as quiet at school but talkative among family and gurdwara friends. He participates in weekly seva, or selfless service, at his gurdwara, including

carrying chairs and serving langar, the communal meal shared with all visitors. He maintains close ties with his extended family, including grandparents who live nearby.

Nivas attends what he describes as a culturally conservative school environment, “Lots of American flags. A lot of conservative politics. A lot of people who have grown up around people who look like them.” In this homogenous environment, his turban set him apart before he ever spoke a word. He has endured racist jokes, including “7/11” and “9/11” comments, a physical incident in PE where a basketball was thrown at his turban while a teacher stood silent, and persistent religious misidentification. There are no Punjabi Sikh teachers at his school, and his primary belonging space is the student-run Jakara Club, a Sikh youth organization that promotes cultural identity, leadership, and community engagement, which he describes with an incisive tension: “Sometimes it feels empowering. Sometimes it feels like we’re doing extra work just to have space.”

Over the course of high school, Nivas moved from freshman-year silence to calm, assertive advocacy, a shift that produced one of the study’s most powerful critiques: “It’s weird that we have to justify just existing.” His closing statement captured a pattern that echoed across multiple interviews: “Sometimes people think if you’re not reacting loudly, you’re not affected. But you can be affected and just choose not to show it.”

Zoravar: “Just Because I’m Laughing Doesn’t Mean It Never Hits.”

Zoravar is a 17-year-old senior at a suburban high school where he is one of the few students who wear a turban. He is deeply engaged with rap music, not as a passive listener but as an analytical student of lyrics and messaging. He also plays recreational basketball, though he joked that he is not good enough to make it pro. He had known many of his classmates since elementary school, was well known on campus, and maintained a wide circle of friends. He

immediately identified himself as "the funny one," a designation that proved to be far more than a personality trait, as humor was the primary way Zoravar navigated his school environment.

Yet despite his social familiarity and popularity, his belonging was not automatic; it was actively constructed through continuous comedic performance. When a classmate asked during a 9/11 documentary, "Yo Zoravar, is that your uncle?" he responded with escalating absurdist humor: "Yeah, bro, that's my cousin too. Family reunion was wild... and don't worry, I parked my jet next to your mom's old minivan." But the performance masked what was happening internally: "My face was hot, and my chest was tight, but if I didn't laugh, now I'm the sensitive kid. So I pick chill. You've got like two seconds to decide who you're going to be in that moment." He articulated this tension explicitly: "Silence is dangerous... If I control the vibe, I control what they notice." His closing statement, "Just because I'm laughing doesn't mean it never hits. I'm good. I'm not miserable. But there are layers," captured the tension between outward resilience, expressed through Chardi Kala (the Sikh principle of maintaining high spirits and optimism in the face of adversity), and the quiet accumulation of harm that defined his experience.

Armaan: "I Don't Know If I Ever Really Felt Like I 'Belonged' Anywhere."

Armaan is a 14-year-old freshman at a suburban high school and the youngest participant in the study. He is quiet and easygoing, describing himself primarily through hobbies such as video games and occasional basketball. He began wearing a turban in sixth grade and speaks about his faith in matter-of-fact terms, treating it less as something he reflects on and more as something he simply lives with. At lunch, he can usually be found in the computer lab playing games with a small group of classmates, a space he described as the closest thing he had to a sense of belonging at school.

Armaan described his school experience as "fine." He had encountered stares and questions about his turban but framed these moments as "not really a challenge, just awkward." He tended to define positive school experiences by the absence of overt hostility: "Nobody's ever been mean to me or anything." When a teacher devoted a single slide to Sikhism in the curriculum and mispronounced key terms throughout, Armaan did not speak up, a moment that reflected the quiet accommodation that characterized much of his school experience.

Balraj: "The Kids At My School Are Rough. They're Looking For a Weak Link to Pick On."

Balraj is a 16-year-old junior at a suburban high school that he described in stark terms: the students are "rough" and "looking for a weak link to pick on." He lives with his parents, grandmother, and a 12-year-old brother who is in seventh grade. Balraj noted that his brother copies everything he does, including how he ties his turban. This awareness of his brother's watchfulness weighs on Balraj as he expresses a responsibility not to "mess up" because his choices would cascade directly to his younger sibling. Balraj enjoys basketball and is self-admittedly good at it, but he did not try out for the school team because some of the students who have bullied him are on the roster. He watches the Golden State Warriors avidly and spends hours indulging in car videos, which he identifies as his primary hobby.

Balraj's school experience has been shaped by sustained and evolving hostility. During freshman year, peers called him "Raghead," misidentified him as Muslim, and asked whether he hid things in his turban. The harassment has since become less overt but no less present; staring, comments framed as jokes, and a low-grade ambient threat that he described with precision: "You kind of get used to it. But you don't really get used to it." To manage his environment, Balraj developed a codified system of behavioral rules, avoiding eye contact with students he

identified as aggressive, mapping which spaces to avoid during school transitions and lunch, and adjusting his movement through the school accordingly. Where other participants developed navigation strategies oriented towards engagement or advocacy, Balraj's approach is organized entirely around threat avoidance. School, for him, is a space to survive rather than belong.

The costs of this hostile environment are visible across every domain of his school life. Despite knowing the answers, he no longer raises his hand in class, unwilling to draw additional attention to himself. Despite his skill on the basketball court, he chose not to try out for the school team because some of the students who bully him occupy that space. After a classmate attempted to pull off his patka (a Sikh head covering worn to protect uncut hair), an incident that everyone, including Balraj, laughed off, he stopped changing in the locker room altogether. Instead, he began layering his PE clothes under his regular clothes and changing privately at lunch. He has not shared the full picture with his parents. "Sometimes I wish I could tell my parents this," he said, "but I don't." This convergence of academic self-silencing, foreclosed opportunity, and withheld family communication represents the most comprehensive pattern of self-silencing observed across the study's eight participants.

Balraj's primary support comes from his mother, who reminds him of why his identity matters, and from the broader sense of strength he draws from being around other Sikhs. Yet he was candid about the limits of that support in sustaining him through daily school life. "Day to day, it really sucks," he said. Unlike every other participant in this study, Balraj cited no specific spiritual or devotional practices as sources of strength. He was the only participant who did not identify institutional reforms or provide recommendations on ways to improve conditions for students like him. When asked, he pointed instead toward the exit, offering only that he would go to another school.

His identity struggle was the most acute and unresolved in the study. He described imagining cutting his hair, not out of lack of conviction but out of the desire to simply walk into class without being noticed first. He acknowledged that his turban, which represents so much, sometimes feels like a burden, “Sometimes I feel like it represents pressure.” Balraj closed with a reflection that, in its brevity and honesty, distinguished him from every other participant in this study. Where Simran named her identity as “beautiful” and “powerful,” where Jaspreet issued a call to action, where Nivas reframed silence as chosen restraint and where Zoravar named the layers beneath his laughter, Balraj looked toward other Sikh young men who move through the world with unapologetic confidence and offered a quiet, unguarded assessment of where he stands, “When I think about history. Or when I see other Sikh guys who just own it. Like they don’t care what anyone thinks. I’m not there yet, though.”

Cross-Case Themes

The preceding profiles establish the distinct contexts, identities, and school experiences of each of the eight participants. While no two participants navigated identical conditions, their accounts reveal consistent patterns that cut across individual differences. The following section presents the thematic findings of this study, organized as a cross-case analysis that examines commonalities that emerged from the experiences of all eight participants.

Eight themes emerged across the three research questions. Through cross-case analysis, two key themes were identified within Research Question 1: conditional belonging (Theme 1) and curriculum erasure and institutional invisibility (Theme 2). Findings supported three themes within Research Question 2: the burden of educational labor (Theme 3), tolerated but not supported (Theme 4), and the turban as a site of misrecognition (Theme 5). Three themes emerged within Research Question 3: spiritual capital and the gurdwara as counterspace (Theme

6), family as a complex source of support (Theme 7), and evolving navigation strategies (Theme 8). Theme 8 is positioned as the chapter's closing theme because it synthesizes findings across all three research questions, providing a bridge into the discussion chapter that follows.

Research Question 1: Belonging and Cultural Responsiveness

The first research question asked: How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students describe their experiences of cultural responsiveness and their sense of belonging in school settings? Two themes emerged from the data regarding this question. First, belonging was conditional and fragmented, confined to isolated pockets rather than experienced as a schoolwide reality. Second, Sikh identity was systematically erased from the curriculum and institutional life, producing a form of structural invisibility that persisted even with significant Sikh student populations.

Table 2.
Thematic Findings Organized by Research Question

Research Question	Themes
RQ1: How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students in Fresno County describe their experiences of cultural responsiveness and their sense of belonging in school settings?	Theme 1: Conditional Belonging
	Theme 2: Curriculum Erasure and Institutional Invisibility
RQ2: In what ways do Amritdhari Sikh high school students feel their visible religious identities are affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within school settings?	Theme 3: The Burden of Educational Labor
	Theme 4: Tolerated but Not Supported
	Theme 5: The Turban as a Site of Misrecognition
RQ3: How do Amritdhari Sikh high school students navigate challenges related to their	Theme 6: Spiritual Capital and the Gurdwara as Counterspace

religious identity at school, and what sources of strength do they draw upon?	Theme 7: Family as a Complex Source of Support
	Theme 8: Evolving Navigation Strategies

Theme 1: Conditional Belonging - “I Belong Here, But Not Everywhere”

Across all eight participants, belonging was never described as a pervasive or inherent feature of the school experience. Instead, students consistently identified specific, bounded spaces, like a club, sports team, or small friend group, where they felt conditionally accepted. They characterized the broader school environment as a space of difference, scrutiny, or apathy. This pattern of conditional belonging, in which inclusion was available only in isolated pockets rather than woven into the entire fabric of school life, was one of the most consistent findings across all eight participants.

Simran, the only Amritdhari Sikh female student at her suburban high school, captured this dynamic when she described her debate team as the singular space where she felt she belonged, “Debate team is probably where I feel most like I belong. But that’s one club, you know? It’s not like the whole school experience.” For Simran, belonging existed in a single extracurricular space and did not extend to the hallways, classrooms, or the school’s social environment. This distinction between a pocket or niche of belonging and a broader experience of isolation was critical. Simran further described being caught in a “weird in-between space” where she was neither fully understood by her non-Sikh peers nor by Punjabi classmates whose families practiced differently. “I am the only Amritdhari Sikh student...so socially, and just like, existing in the space? It’s isolating sometimes...even the other Punjabi kids don’t always understand...so I’m kind of in this weird in-between space.” This experience of isolation, even

among co-ethnic peers, reveals a layer of marginalization that extends beyond the simple binary of Sikh and non-Sikh. For Simran, being Amritdhari marked her as different not only from the dominant culture but also from within her own ethnic community, creating a compounded form of social isolation that few spaces within her school were equipped to address.

Jaspreet's experience offered a parallel but distinct version of conditional belonging. While he was well-liked and socially connected, his deepest sense of belonging was concentrated on his varsity soccer team, where teammates saw him holistically rather than reducing him to a single religious identity marker. "That's when I felt like I belonged. When my teammates saw me as just Jas, their friend and their striker, who also happens to be Sikh. Not like 'the Sikh kid', but just me. All of me."

What made this space exceptional for Jaspreet was not merely tolerance but active affirmation. Jaspreet described how a teammate's genuine curiosity about his faith catalyzed a protective dynamic that extended beyond the team:

Marcus was like, "That's really cool that you stick to your beliefs like that." And from that point on, the team was just....they had my back, you know? Like if someone from another school said something ignorant, they'd shut it down.

Jaspreet's soccer team thus functioned as both a space of belonging and a buffer against external hostility. Yet even for Jaspreet, this belonging was conditional. Outside of the team, his school experience was marked by what he described as a "constant" awareness of being different. A self-consciousness produced not by any single incident but by the cumulative weight of years of hypervisibility:

I think the biggest thing is just the constant awareness. Like even when people aren't being mean, I'm still different. I'm still the kid in the turban. That's how

people know me. “Oh you mean the Sikh kid?” Like that’s my defining characteristic.

This passage reveals that othering does not require malice or ill intent. Even in the absence of overt hostility, being perpetually identified by a single marker, rather than being known as a full person, constituted a form of exclusion that prevented belonging from extending beyond the spaces where Jaspreet was known intimately.

Nivas, attending a suburban high school in a culturally conservative, homogeneous community, described how the political and cultural climate at his school foreclosed the opportunity to belong before any interpersonal interactions could occur:

[My school] has a strong culture. Lots of American flags. A lot of conservative politics. A lot of people who have grown up around people who look like them.

So, when you walk in wearing a turban, you feel different immediately.

For Nivas, the school environment itself communicated who belonged and who did not. His turban marked him as outside the dominant culture from his first day, creating an experience that was structural rather than merely interpersonal, one embedded in the school's culture and environment rather than reducible to any single slight or individual act. Like Simran and Jaspreet, Nivas identified a single bounded space where he felt accepted, the student-run Jakara club. Even this space came with a critical tension:

Probably during Jakara Club meetings...its fully student run...Sometimes it feels empowering. Sometimes it feels like we’re doing extra work just to have space.

but in that room, I don’t have to explain myself. We can talk openly. We can speak Punjabi if we want. That’s probably the only place on campus where I don't feel like I’m being watched.

Niva's description captures a paradox that recurred across multiple participants: students were building for themselves what institutions failed to provide, and while this was empowering, it also represented additional labor imposed on students who were already navigating exclusion. The Jakara club was simultaneously a refuge and indictment of institutional failure. That it was the "only place on campus" where Nivas did not feel surveilled underscores the degree to which the broader school environment functioned as a space of scrutiny rather than safety.

Zoravar's experience introduced a dimension of conditional belonging not observed in any other participant: belonging earned through continuous comedic performance. Having known most of his peers since elementary school, Zoravar described an overall positive school experience, but the mechanism sustaining that experience was labor-intensive and psychologically costly:

Mostly good. I've known most of these kids since elementary school....so, I'm not "the turban kid." I'm just Zoravar. Freshman year was the most questions.

PE locker room, especially. One kid goes, "Is that a bomb in there?" Without even thinking I said, "Yeah bro, wifi router too. Password is Educate Yourself"

Everyone laughed.... after that, those same dudes stopped making those jokes.

On the surface, this passage describes a resolution: the jokes stopped, and peers accepted him. But what it reveals is that Zoravar's belonging was earned through humorous entertainment, not granted through authentic acceptance of his identity. The bomb insult, a direct post 9-11 terrorism association, was never addressed as harm. Instead, it was resolved by Zoravar's own comedic skill. That the discriminatory jokes ceased because the response was more humorous than the provocation, rather than because an institutional agent intervened or peers recognized the harm of the comment, established the terms of Zoravar's conditional belonging: he is

included as long as he is entertaining. Zoravar articulated how his humor serves as a defense mechanism with a precision that no other participant matched, “Definitely. It’s armor. People protect those they like. If you’re funny, you’re safe.”

The word “armor” is significant as armor is worn in spaces of threat, not safety. That Zoravar experiences his humor as protective equipment rather than natural self-expression reveals that his school environment, despite appearing socially functional, requires ongoing defensive labor. His social integration is real. He is well-liked and included by his peers, but that inclusion is built on performance rather than acceptance. When the humor briefly faltered, Zoravar’s emotional residue remained:

One time at lunch, someone said, “If we shaved your head, you’d look normal.” I said, “If I shaved your head, you’d still look like that.” Everyone laughed. But later I was like...that one annoyed me. Sometimes the joke lands and the feeling still stays.

The phrase “the joke lands and the feeling still stays” is among the most important articulations in the entire dataset. It captures the central paradox of Zoravar’s experience: the performance succeeds while the emotional impact persists. He wins the exchange, the class laughs, the conversation moves on, and his standing among peers is reinforced. Yet the implication of the hostile comment, that his turban makes him abnormal, that he would ‘look normal’ without it, still registers and lingers.

The emotional residue Zoravar describes marks a distinct form of conditionality within the dataset. His belonging is secured through emotional concealment, qualitatively different from Simran’s single-club limitation or Nivas’s Jakara Club labor, but no less costly. The cost of this performance-contingent belonging was most visible in what Zoravar could not say:

Sometimes I want to just say, “That’s not funny.” But instead, I’ll say something like, “Bro, at least my culture has history. Yours is just Costco samples.” They laugh. Conversation moves on, but I never actually say, “That hurt.”

This passage reveals a permanent gap between what Zoravar carries and what he performs. The authentic reaction, “that’s not funny,” is suppressed in favor of a comedic counter that maintains his social capital. Notably, Zoravar's response mirrors Nivas's actual response, while the emotional concealment he describes parallels Balraj's withdrawal through silence. Three students, three strategies, one shared reality: authentic emotional responses to identity-based harm are incompatible with maintaining one’s place in these school environments.

The most severe manifestation of conditional belonging appeared in Balraj’s account. Attending a school, he described as socially hostile, Balraj’s experience of belonging was defined almost entirely by its absence. When asked about a time he felt he belonged, his response was striking in its conditionality, “At School? Um...probably just when I’m with my close friends, and we’re joking around and no one’s thinking about how I look. That’s when I forget about it.”

For Balraj, belonging required the disappearance of his identity. Unlike Jaspreet, whose soccer team accepted him as “just Jas, who also happens to be Sikh,” Balraj could only experience belonging when his religious identity was temporarily forgotten, by himself and by others. This represents a qualitatively different form of conditional belonging, one in which the condition is not context-specific acceptance but identity erasure. Belonging for Balraj was not a space where his full self was welcomed; it was a momentary reprieve from being seen at all. This experience was compounded by an environment Balraj described in dismal, almost survival-oriented terms:

I just have these rules that I follow. Like, don't make eye contact with the bad kids. Try to avoid the bad kids, like where they hang out. Just be aware of, like, where I'm at and how I'm moving, and avoid any problems during transitions and at lunch.

Balraj's navigation of school was governed not by belonging or engagement but by a logic of threat avoidance. His codified behavioral rules, such as avoiding eye contact, mapping danger zones, and monitoring his movements during transitions, represent the most explicit survival system described by any participant in this study. School was not a space for learning, growth, or connection. For Balraj, it was a place to endure. This finding carried consequences that extended well beyond social comfort. Balraj identified confidence as the "biggest thing" he had lost, describing how his visible identity constrained academic participation, extracurricular engagement, and even his communication with his own family:

The biggest thing, though, is just confidence. Like even if I know the answer, I don't raise my hand as much because I don't want to draw attention to myself. I don't try out for things. Like, I could have honestly tried out for basketball because I know I'm good, but I didn't because some of those bad kids are on the basketball team. I just don't want extra attention. Sometimes I wish I could tell my parents this, but I don't.

The convergence of academic self-silencing, opportunity foreclosure, and family communication barriers within a single passage is significant. Balraj was not merely excluded from social belonging; his visible identity was actively narrowing his participation across multiple domains of school life. That he withheld his struggle from his parents meant that the support system most likely to help him was undermined by the very dynamic it might have addressed.

Among all eight participants, Balraj was the only one whose response to the question of what he would change about his school was not a call for reform but a desire to leave: “I don’t know if I really can. It’s just that the kids are rough, so maybe I would go to another school.” This resignation was not apathy. It was the endpoint of sustained marginalization without repair. Where every other participant named what their school should change, Balraj named a different school. That distinction is not trivial. It is the distance between reform and survival.

Armaan’s experience offers a different but equally important dimension of conditional belonging. Armaan characterized his school experience as “fine” and “normal,” and when asked about belonging, his response was notable for its ambiguity:

Um.... I don’t know if I ever really felt like I ‘belonged’ anywhere. I guess when I’m playing games in the computer lab with some other kids during lunch, that’s okay. We don’t really talk about personal stuff; we just play games. That’s comfortable, I guess.

Armaan’s use of “comfortable” rather than “belonging” is telling. His threshold for positive school experience was markedly lower than that of other participants, asking not for acceptance or affirmation, but simply for the absence of discomfort. When he described feeling “invisible most of the time” and then added “but that’s also kind of what I want,” he articulated a paradox in which invisibility functioned simultaneously as a form of erasure and as a form of protective strategy. Being left alone was preferable to being seen, because being seen had historically meant being questioned, scrutinized, or misidentified.

Manpreet’s experience introduced something absent from every other account in the data set: cross-faith solidarity. Unlike every other participant, whose primary belonging spaces were either co-ethnic (gurdwara, Sikh Student Association, Jakara Club) or identity-neutral (debate,

soccer, gaming), Manpreet's deepest sense of connection at school was with her best friend, who wears a hijab:

Probably just with my close friends. Especially my best friend. She wears a hijab.

So, like...we kind of understand certain things without having to explain them.

If someone says something kind of ignorant, we just look at each other, and it's like....yeah.

This passage describes belonging rooted in visible religious difference rather than shared faith. Manpreet and her Muslim friend do not practice the same religion, yet they understood the experience of being visibly marked by their religious commitments in a school environment that did not fully recognize either tradition. The non-verbal exchange Manpreet described, the mutual glance that communicated "yeah" without words, represented a depth of recognition that required no explanation. This quality placed her interfaith friendship alongside the gurdwara in functional terms: both offered a space where visible religiosity was unremarkable, where the labor of explanation was unnecessary, and where one's experience was understood without articulation.

Yet Manpreet was also the only participant to name the variable mediating her relatively positive school experience: her gender. She articulated this directly:

Honestly...it's been pretty normal. I haven't had big issues or anything. I think maybe because I'm kind of quiet? And I'm a girl. I've noticed some of the Sikh boys get more comments. For me, it's mostly questions. Or like...people looking for a second.

The critical exception to the pattern of conditional belonging was Navpreet, whose experience at a rural high school with a large Punjabi Sikh population stood in stark contrast to

every other participant. Navpreet described an overall positive school experience, grounded in the simple but transformative fact that she was never the only Sikh student in her class:

Overall, I would say it has been positive. [My town] is rural but has a huge Punjabi Sikh population. So I was never the only Sikh student in my class. There were always other kids who looked like me or whose families went to the same Gurdwara. That makes a difference because you don't feel alone.

Navpreet's experience demonstrates the protective effect of demographic representation. When Sikh students were no longer isolated within a school, the burden of difference was diffused, the labor of explanation was reduced, and belonging became possible as a schoolwide rather than niche-specific experience. Navpreet described a multicultural rally where she wore a bright Punjabi suit with a matching turban and performed bhangra to a cheering gymnasium, "When we performed bhangra, the whole gym was cheering. That moment felt like pride instead of difference. We weren't just tolerated, we were celebrated."

Navpreet's distinction between being tolerated and being celebrated is the sharpest articulation of its kind in the data. It names precisely what was absent from every other participant's account: a school environment in which Sikh identity was not merely permitted but actively affirmed. Yet even Navpreet, whose experience was the most positive in the sample, recognized the contingency of her belonging. "I think if I went to school where I was the only Sikh girl in a turban, it might feel different," she reflected, demonstrating a critical awareness that her positive experience was a function of environment rather than an inherent feature of being Amritdhari in American public schools.

Theme 2: Curriculum Erasure and Institutional Invisibility

The most universally reported experience across all eight participants was the near-total absence of Sikhism from their school's academic curriculum. The finding was consistent across school contexts, geographic locations, and the demographic composition of the student body. Even Navpreet, whose school offered Punjabi as a language course and recognized Vaisakhi through school announcements, noted that Sikhism was "barely mentioned" in the curriculum and history lessons. This pattern of curriculum erasure constituted a form of institutional invisibility that communicated to Sikh students, whether intentionally or not, that their history, faith, and contributions did not merit inclusion in the academia that their schools deemed worth teaching.

Simran articulated the scope and emotional impact of this erasure with particular clarity, "We learn about Christianity...Islam...Buddhism...But Sikhism? Nothing. Not mentioned... We're still the fifth-largest religion in the world. But apparently that's not big enough." Her follow-up reflection linked this curricular absence directly to the ignorance she encountered from peers and teachers, framing the school itself as a producer of the very misunderstanding she was expected to remedy:

It feels like I'm not important. Like my identity doesn't matter enough to be taught about...I can't even blame them that much for their ignorance when the school is reinforcing it by leaving us out completely.

Simran located the source of bias not in individual attitudes but in the institution's curricular choices. By omitting Sikhism from its educational content, the school was not merely failing to include her identity; it was actively reproducing the conditions under which misunderstanding and discrimination could flourish.

When Sikhism did appear in the curriculum, it was often minimal, inaccurate, or both. Jaspreet described a world history unit that reduced an entire religious tradition to a single class period and misrepresented its theological foundations:

We did a tiny section on Sikhism in World History, but it was like...one day. And they got some stuff wrong....they made it seem like we're just an offshoot of Hinduism and Islam, which isn't really accurate. I raised my hand and tried to explain but the teacher was like "Well, that's one perspective" and moved on. That kinda sucked.

Jaspreet's attempt at correction was dismissed as "one perspective," a response that positioned a Sikh student's lived religious knowledge as merely equivalent to a textbook's inaccurate summary, rather than more authoritative than it. This dismissal did not simply invalidate Jaspreet's self-advocacy. It reinforced the very misconception he had tried to correct, and it did so in front of his peers, with the institutional weight of a teacher's response behind it.

Nivas reported an identical experience: "We had one slide about Sikhism in World History. One." He then named the cumulative message this sent: "It kind of makes it feel like we're an afterthought." Armaan, too, recalled a single slide with mispronounced terminology, though unlike Jaspreet, he did not speak up: "The teacher pronounced everything wrong. I didn't say anything, though." When asked directly whether his culture or faith had been reflected in the classroom, Balraj's response was a single word: "No."

Zoravar extended the group's account of curriculum erasure by drawing a direct link between what is taught and what is tolerated. When asked what he would change about his school, he said, "I wish teachers would teach Sikhism properly. Even one real lesson. If people understood it, half the jokes wouldn't even land." This observation reframes curriculum not

merely as a matter of representation but as a mechanism that either enables or prevents peer harassment. Zoravar, whose daily experience is structured around deflecting identity-based jokes through humor, recognized that the jokes themselves are made possible by institutional ignorance. If peers understood what the turban represented, the “bomb” jokes and “Is there a bomb in there?” comments would lose their social footing. This framing positions curriculum inclusion as a form of violence prevention, a connection that, while implicit in culturally responsive pedagogy literature (Gay, 2018), is rarely articulated with such precision by a student.

Manpreet confirmed the curriculum erasure finding while simultaneously demonstrating the minimization pattern that characterized her entire interview, “Maybe a little. Like when teachers list religions, and Sikhism isn’t one of them. But I don’t know...I didn’t really sit there analyzing it. I just kind of noticed it and moved on.” Her account is quiet, hedged, and analytically identical to Simran’s impassioned critique and Nivas’s sense of being an afterthought. What differs is how much permission each student felt to name the weight. Curriculum erasure is an institutional feature, not a function of how loudly a student grieves it.

Curriculum erasure extended beyond individual lessons to the broader institutional recognition of Sikh religious life. Multiple participants described differential treatment between Sikh holidays and those of other religious traditions, particularly Christianity and Islam. Simran offered the most detailed account of this disparity: “During Ramadan...the school made all these accommodations for Muslim students...but then Vaisakhi came around...nobody said anything. No announcement, no acknowledgment, nothing.”

Jaspreet described the same structural inequity in terms of the labor required to observe his faith:

Christian holidays are just built into the school calendar. Christmas break, Easter

....nobody questions that. But when I need to miss school for Vaisakhi or Guru Nanak's birthday, I have to advocate for myself. Fill out forms, explain it to my teachers, and sometimes still lose points for missing class. It shouldn't be that hard.

These accounts reveal a hierarchy of religious recognition embedded in school structure, one in which Christian observance is normalized in the calendar, Islam is increasingly accommodated, and Sikhism remains invisible. For Sikh students, this hierarchy communicated a clear message about whose faith the institution considered worthy of acknowledgment. This erasure was not confined to the curriculum and holidays. It also appeared in the school's own equity efforts. Jaspreet recounted attending a school assembly on hate crimes and discrimination that addressed racism against Black students, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students, but never mentioned Sikhs. "Even when the school is trying to include everyone, we're left out. I felt completely annoyed sitting there. Like my experiences don't even register." That the omission occurred within an anti-discriminatory assembly is significant. It suggests that Sikh students are excluded not only from mainstream institutional life but from the mechanisms designed to address exclusion itself.

Manpreet's arrived at the same conclusion as Zoravar, though in her own quieter register, confirming the same casual connection between curriculum absence and daily burden, "Maybe just like more education. Like learning about Sikhism in class, so people don't have to ask basic questions. But I don't think the school is bad or anything. It's just...maybe more awareness." The hedging and apologetic qualifier, "I don't think the school is bad or anything," reflects the social labor Manpreet undertook simply to voice a critique. Where Simran named a school system that was never built with students like her in mind, Jaspreet urged schools to stop

excluding people, and Nivas called for real education rather than one slide, Manpreet arrived at the same structural diagnosis through a much narrower opening. Yet her observation that a more inclusive curriculum would mean people "don't have to ask basic questions" identifies the same causal link Zoravar named: curriculum erasure produces the ignorance Sikh students are then left to address on their own.

Navpreet's experience, once again, offered a critical counterpoint. Her school offered Punjabi as a language course, recognized Vaisakhi, which commemorates the founding of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji in 1699, through announcements and social media, and hosted cultural performances at rallies. Yet even here, Navpreet identified a gap between cultural visibility and intellectual inclusion. "It is kind of like we are visible culturally but not fully included intellectually."

Research Question 2: Affirmation, Support, Ignorance, and Marginalization of Religious Identity

While Research Question 1 examined the structural conditions shaping Amritdhari Sikh students' overall experiences of belonging, Research Question 2 turned to a more specific inquiry: in what ways do Amritdhari Sikh high school students feel their visible religious identities are affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within school settings? This question focused on how their visible religious identities, including the dastar, kara, and other articles of faith, were treated by the educators and institutions around them. Three themes emerged. First, students bore an exhausting and age-inappropriate burden of educating others about their identity, a labor produced by the institution's failure to incorporate Sikhism into the curriculum and school culture. Second, Sikh students' religious identities were tolerated but not supported, occupying a space between prohibition and affirmation that participants experienced as

institutional indifference. Lastly, the dastar functioned as a site of persistent misrecognition, becoming the focal point of religious misidentification, racialized surveillance, exoticization, and physical targeting.

Theme 3: The Burden of Education Labor

A third pattern emerged across all eight participants: the persistent burden of educating peers and teachers about Sikhism. This labor consumed emotional energy, disrupted their sense of safety and ease within the classroom, and positioned students as religious ambassadors in contexts where they were simply trying to be students. Coded as educational labor across the dataset, this pattern was reported by every participant, through the form it took and the toll it exacted varied considerably.

Simran described the weight of this labor with a directness that captured both its relentlessness and its fundamental unfairness:

I'm constantly explaining. And honestly, I'm tired of it... Why is it my job to educate everyone? I'm 15 years old, and I'm in 10th grade. I'm trying to learn math and write essays about Shakespeare. I shouldn't have to be a cultural representative every single day.

Simran's invocation of her age is analytically significant. At 15, she was being assigned a job that belonged to the school and its institutional agents, not to her. That burden deepened when teachers, rather than stepping into this gap, deferred to her as the classroom's resident Sikh expert. Simran recounted a biology class in which a peer's question about whether Sikh people do not cut their hair for genetic reasons triggered a chain of institutional failures. The teacher, uncertain how to respond, turned to Simran and asked her to explain the Sikh practice of keeping unshorn hair:

There was this one time in biology class, we were learning about genetics and heredity, and this boy, Tyler, raised his hand and was like, "So is it true that Sikh people aren't allowed to cut their hair because of their genes?" And like, that's not even how it works, it's not genetic, it's religious. But the teacher didn't really know how to respond, so she kind of looked at me and was like "Simran, do you want to explain?" So, I had to explain, in front of the whole class, about kesh and why we don't cut our hair, and how it's about accepting God's will and respecting the form we were given. Most kids were listening, but it was just awkward because it wasn't really related to what we were learning, and I felt put on the spot. The teacher meant well, but it would have been better if she had just said "That's a religious practice, not a genetic trait" and moved on.

What is notable in this passage is not only the teacher's abdication of responsibility but Simran's precision about what should have happened instead. She was more prepared to correct the misconception than the educator was. That reversal speaks directly to the failure of teacher preparation programs to equip educators with basic religious literacy. Simran named the emotional aftermath, "Humiliated. Angry. Like, why do I have to defend my religion in biology class?...I'm not a spokesperson. I'm a student."

Jaspreet described a version of this labor that had become so routine that it influenced how he moved through school entirely:

Oh yeah, all the time. Like, constantly. I'm basically a walking educational moment. Freshman year was the worst because everyone was new and had questions... After a while, it got exhausting, like... I'm just trying to get through my day, you know? I don't always want to be the Sikh ambassador.

Jaspreet further distinguished between genuine curiosity and questions designed to challenge or undermine his faith, noting that the latter “feels more like attacks than actual curiosity”:

But then some people ask questions that are like... clearly designed to challenge me or make me feel stupid. Like ‘if your religion is about equality why do you have to wear specific things?’ or ‘isn’t cutting hair just natural, why make it religious?’ Those questions feel more like attacks than actual curiosity. And I try to answer them respectfully but inside I’m like, why do I have to justify my faith to you?

That distinction between curiosity and hostile questioning reveals a dimension of educational labor that goes beyond simple inquiry. Students not only explained their faith but also continuously assessed the intent behind each question and calibrated their responses accordingly. This constant discernment constituted cognitive and emotional labor that non-Sikh students never had to endure.

Nivas reported the same exhausting cycle of misidentification and layered explanation: All the time. People assume I’m Muslim. Which isn’t bad. But they say it like it’s negative. So I explain I’m Sikh. Then I explain what that means. Then why I wear a turban? It gets tiring being the unofficial spokesperson.

Nivas’s account adds an important nuance. The misidentification itself was not neutral. His qualifier, “which isn’t bad,” signals that he felt compelled to defend Islam even while clarifying he was not Muslim, because the assumption was delivered with a negative charge. Each encounter, therefore, required not one but three layers of response: identity clarification, religious education, and turban explanation, multiplied across four years of high school.

Zoravar's relationship to educational labor took a unique form in the dataset. Where other participants experienced it as a burden to be managed or endured, Zoravar performed it through comedy, embedding explanations within jokes rather than delivering them as lessons. Yet this transformation did not eliminate the labor. It disguised it. His observation that a better curriculum would mean the jokes would not land reveals an awareness of the gap his humor was operating within, even if the labor itself remained invisible to those around him.

For participants who lacked the confidence, knowledge, or energy to engage, the labor manifested differently. Armaan described exchanges that were brief and quickly closed: "When people ask why I wear a turban, I just say it's part of my religion. They usually say, 'oh, cool' or 'okay' and then we don't talk about it anymore." He also acknowledged the limits of his own religious knowledge: "I'm not really good at explaining it because I don't know all of the history and stuff that well." Armaan's experience shows that educational labor is burdensome not only for those who perform it extensively. It is also limiting for those who cannot, leaving them with interactions that neither educate others nor affirm their own identity.

Balraj, navigating the most hostile environment in the study, developed the most energy-conserving approach: "Sometimes I answer. Sometimes I say, 'It's religious,' and leave it at that. You get tired of explaining yourself." His minimal engagement was not indifference. It was rationing, a survival-oriented conservation of emotional resources in an environment where fuller engagement carried real social risk.

Manpreet's experience of educational labor was qualitatively distinct from every other participants. She described her encounters with a matter-of-fact quality that suggested neither exhaustion nor resentment:

Mostly questions. Like, ‘Do you sleep in that?’ or ‘Does it ever come off?’ Sometimes people say it looks cool. One time, someone grabbed my kara to look at it. That felt a little weird. But I don’t think they meant anything by it. I just said, ‘Oh, please don’t.’ And they stopped. So, it was fine.

This passage contains multiple analytically significant elements. The questions Manpreet describes, “Do you sleep in that?” and “Does it ever come off?”, are the same body-focused, objectifying turban questions reported by every participant, yet she received them without the anger Simran described, or the exhaustion Jaspreet reported. Her mention that “sometimes people say it looks cool” is the first and only instance across all eight interviews of a spontaneous positive peer response to the turban, a notable finding given the volume of negative, intrusive, and hostile turban encounters described by the participants. The kara-grabbing incident constitutes uninvited physical contact with an article of faith, a boundary violation Manpreet resolved through quiet, effective boundary-setting and framed as “fine.”

What distinguishes Manpreet’s educational labor is not its absence but its unburdened quality. She performed the same function as every other participant, explaining her identity to peers who did not understand it, but experienced it as unremarkable rather than taxing. Whether this reflects a genuinely lighter experiential load, mediated by gender and the school context as she herself suggested, a deeper internalization of low institutional expectations, or a navigational style that processes impact differently is a question the data cannot resolve. What the data can confirm is that Manpreet’s “kind of annoying,” the strongest negative emotional expression in the entire interview, occupies the mildest position on a spectrum that otherwise includes Simran’s “Humiliated. Angry,” Jaspreet’s “that stuff hurt,” Nivas’s “it made me feel small,” Balraj’s “day to day it really sucks,” and Zoravar’s reflection that “the feeling still stays.”

Navpreet named the structural roots of this burden directly: “Sometimes it feels like the responsibility is always on us to explain ourselves. It would be nice if teachers incorporated it more, so it was not always student led.”

Where Navpreet identified the problem, Jaspreet articulated the remedy. Jaspreet’s call to action captured the structural solution all eight participants implicitly or explicitly endorsed:

I guess what I want teachers and school administrators to know is that supporting Sikh students doesn’t have to be complicated. Just see us. Acknowledge us. Learn about us.

Include us. And when we tell you something is important to us, believe us. That’s really all we’re asking for.

The simplicity of this request to see, acknowledge, learn, include, and believe stands in sharp contrast to the complexity of the experiences that preceded it. The fact that a student could distill the solution so clearly while the institutions around him failed to implement it speaks to the gap between what Sikh students need and what their schools have been willing or able to provide.

Theme 4: Tolerated but Not Supported

Across the data, a recurring pattern emerged in which schools permitted Sikh students’ religious expression without actively supporting, affirming, or protecting it. Participants described this posture of tolerance without support as a form of institutional neutrality that, in practice, felt closer to abandonment than to inclusion. Students were not prohibited from wearing their articles of faith, but neither were their identities acknowledged, understood, or woven into the school’s cultural and curricular fabric. Students felt as though they were allowed to exist on the margins of school life without being invited into the center. Nivas articulated this dynamic with a precision that resonated across the entire dataset:

They allow it. No one's told me I can't wear my turban. So that's good. But there's no proactive support. No recognition of Sikh holidays. It feels like you can exist. But you're kind of on your own.

The framing is significant. Nivas began with a concession, "So that's good," before naming what was absent: proactive support, holiday recognition and institutional care. The turban was permitted as any article of clothing might be, without understanding, without recognition of its sacred significance, and without any institutional responsibility for the student who wore it. This resulted in the posture of presence without active belonging.

Jaspreet named the same position with striking clarity:

On the flip side, they don't stop me from wearing my turban or kara or anything.

So, like baseline, they're not actively preventing me from being Amritdhari. But they're not making it easier either. It's more like neutral. It's like they tolerate it.

But I don't think they like actually support it.

Jaspreet's use of "baseline" is revealing. He had internalized the absence of prohibition as the floor of institutional responsiveness, a minimum standard that met a legal threshold but fell far short of the affirmation that culturally responsive pedagogy demands (Gay, 2018). Armaan's account reinforced this pattern and extended it further. Where Jaspreet named the gap between tolerance and support, Armaan appeared not to see the gap at all:

I mean, I wear my articles of faith to school, and nobody stops me or anything. We don't really get Sikh holidays off, but we don't get a lot of other religious holidays off either, I don't think. I've missed school for Vaisakhi before, and the teachers just mark it as an excused absence. I don't really pray at school or anything, so I don't know about that part.

Armaan's response is notable for what he accepted as sufficient. The school excused his absence for Vaisakhi, but the accommodation was entirely procedural, a checkbox rather than recognition. By comparing Sikh holidays to other minority religions, Armaan normalized the absence of affirmation rather than identifying it as a gap. His standard, "nobody stops me," suggested that sustained institutional indifference can quietly reshape what students believe they are entitled to receive from their schools.

Manpreet's account introduced a further dimension: the student who self-manages so thoroughly that institutional support is never tested. When asked whether her school accommodated her religious practices, Manpreet responded,

I haven't really needed them to be flexible with me. For Vaisakhi, we celebrate at night.

So, I don't miss school or anything. And I bring my own vegetarian meals if I need to.

So, it hasn't really affected my school...It's just kind of something I manage.

What is most revealing is not what the school did or did not provide, but what Manpreet never thought to ask for. Her expectations of teachers reflected the same patterns: "They're respectful. No one's ever said anything rude or anything like that. I don't think most of them know a lot about Sikhism. But I didn't really expect them to." The final sentence is the most consequential articulation of lowered expectations in the dataset. It is not critique; it is acceptance. Where Jaspreet named the gap between tolerance and support, and Armaan normalized it, Manpreet had stopped expecting anything different altogether. The same institutional condition produced three distinct positions, each quieter than the last.

The Weight of Representation. Within this posture of tolerance without support, participants described a pressure that institutional neutrality alone could not dissolve. They felt an obligation to represent their entire community. Navpreet identified this pressure despite attending the most supportive school in the sample:

I think the biggest challenge is pressure. When you are visibly different, you feel like you represent your entire community. If I do well, I feel proud because I am representing Sikhs in a positive way. But if I mess up, I feel like it reflects on everyone. That pressure is kind of silent, but it is there.

This finding was consistent across all eight participants regardless of school context. Simran described "a constant feeling of having to represent my entire religion," explaining that she felt pressure "to be perfect all the time or else I'm confirming whatever stereotypes they might have." Jaspreet named the same weight more simply: "I'm representing not just myself but, like, all Sikhs. Which is a lot of pressure sometimes." Notably, representational pressure persisted even in Navpreet's affirming school context, suggesting that it is not solely a byproduct of hostile or indifferent environments. Rather, it appears to be an inherent condition of visible religious minority status within schools that lack broader Sikh representation in their student bodies, curricula, and staffing.

While the preceding accounts examined how students internalized and responded to institutional tolerance, the data also revealed distinct patterns in how educators themselves engaged with Sikh students' identities. Teacher responses emerged as a significant dimension of the tolerance-without-support dynamic, shaping whether students felt seen, misunderstood, or overlooked. Across the data, educator responses to Sikh students' identities fell into four sub-themes: rare affirmation, well-intentioned misunderstanding, avoidance and bystander inaction.

Rare Affirmation. Genuine affirmation was reported by every participant as exceptional rather than normative, and when it occurred, it was almost always attributable to individual initiative rather than institutional design. Simran recalled a single teacher across her entire school career who had invested in understanding her identity: “He actually took the time to learn about Sikhism because he wanted to pronounce my name right and understand my identity. That was probably the only teacher who made that effort.” She also identified her debate coach, Ms. Lin, who proactively accommodated her Vaisakhi observance: “Ms. Lin....When we had an away tournament during Vaisakhi...she made sure I could leave early so I could go to the Gurdwara. She didn’t make it a big deal.”

The understated simplicity of Ms. Lin’s accommodation is what makes it significant. It required no special training, no policy reform, and no resource allocation. It required only awareness and the willingness to act on it. Jaspreet described a similarly affirming educator, a history teacher, who before a world religions unit, privately asked Jaspreet if he would like to share about Sikhism: “He didn’t make it weird or put me on the spot. He asked privately first, which I appreciated.” These moments of affirmation stood out precisely because they were so uncommon. That participants could recall them with specificity, years later, underscores how deeply students registered the rare occasions when an educator chose to honor them.

Well-intentioned Misunderstanding. Far more common were well-intentioned misunderstandings that revealed fundamental gaps in teachers’ religious literacy. Jaspreet’s PE coach asked why he did not simply remove his turban during practice when it was hot, a question that, while not malicious, demonstrated a complete lack of understanding about the sacred, non-negotiable nature of the dastar:

My PE coach once asked why I don't just take off my turban for practice when it's hot.

And I'm like... dude, that's not how it works. But he wasn't trying to be disrespectful, he genuinely didn't understand. So, I explained it to him and now he gets it. But that's like... another thing I had to teach.

Simran's experience pointed to a different dimension of the same gap. Where Jaspreet's teacher was willing to learn, Simran described a teacher whose lack of understanding had calcified into a pattern: "She makes me feel like she sees me as fragile or like my turban is this problem she has to manage. I just want to participate like everyone else." Good intentions, without understanding, can produce their own form of othering.

Avoidance. The third and most prevalent teacher response was avoidance. Jaspreet named it directly: "They tiptoe around anything related to religion or culture because they're scared of saying something offensive. Which I guess is better than being actually offensive, but it's also weird. Just treat me like everyone else." His ambivalence captures the bind students described: avoidance felt safer than hostility but still produced a kind of erasure.

Armaan and Navpreet described the same pattern with less frustration and more resignation. Armaan noted that his teachers "don't really ask about it or anything. Which is fine I guess," while Navpreet observed that non-Sikh teachers "understand at a surface level. They know what a turban is. They know it is religious. They are respectful. But I do not think they fully understand the depth of it." Surface recognition, offered consistently enough, can settle into acceptance without ever becoming affirmation.

Balraj's account revealed where avoidance becomes costly. "They don't say anything bad. They just don't really know. Like, I think most of them don't even know who I am, personally." For Balraj, teacher avoidance compounded his own quiet demeanor, producing a mutual invisibility in which neither student nor teacher engaged with the other's reality.

Bystander Inaction. Where avoidance became most consequential was in teachers' failure to intervene when students experienced discrimination. This pattern, coded as bystander inaction, emerged as a distinct and significant finding. Nivas described how teachers responded when peers made derogatory comments: "If someone says something out of pocket, teachers usually just move on. Like they don't want to make it awkward. But it's already awkward. Sometimes just saying, 'That's not okay,' would make a difference."

Nivas's reframing, "it's already awkward," exposes the logic of teacher avoidance precisely. By declining to address discriminatory comments, teachers did not prevent discomfort; they redirected it from themselves onto the targeted student. The intervention Nivas identified as sufficient was not a policy change or a curriculum overhaul. Rather, it was a single sentence. The most severe instance of bystander inaction occurred during a PE class, when a basketball was thrown at Nivas's turban:

In PE last year, someone threw a basketball and it hit my turban hard. I remember the sound and then the laughing after. The PE teacher saw it and didn't say anything. I didn't report it because I didn't want to be labeled as sensitive. But it felt intentional. It just made me feel small at that moment.

The teacher's silence, the laughter, and Nivas's decision not to report converge into a single institutional lesson: that his dignity was not worth interrupting class for.

Zoravar's experience introduced a dimension of bystander inaction that is analytically distinct from Nivas's and Balraj's: bystander inaction rendered invisible by the student's own humor. During a history class viewing of a 9/11 documentary, a peer publicly associated Zoravar with Al-Qaida terrorists:

Sophomore year in class we're watching a 9/11 clip. The room's quiet. This kid says, "Yo Zoravar, that's your uncle?" Everyone laughs. I pause for half a second and go, "Yeah bro, that's my cousin too. The family reunion was wild." The class explodes. Then I say, "Don't worry, I left my jet parked next to your mom's minivan." More laughter and then the moment's over.

This occurred during a supervised class. Yet this incident would never appear in a discipline referral or an incident log because Zoravar resolved the moment before an institutional response was ever required. This represents a qualitatively different form of bystander inaction than what Nivas described. In Nivas's account, the teacher's silence was, at least in theory, visible as a failure. In Zoravar's case, the institutional failure was structurally concealed. The school could not see what it had failed to prevent because the student's own performance dissolved the tense moment before any adult was required to respond. Zoravar's body, however, registered what the institution did not: "Face hot. My chest was tight. But if I didn't laugh, now I'm the sensitive kid. So, I always pick chill. You've got like two seconds to decide who you're going to be in A moment."

The somatic detail Zoravar offered about the warmth on his face and the tightness in his chest while he projected a comedic performance reveals the hidden cost of navigating environments that are, at times, hostile. The “two seconds” he described was not hesitation; it was a real-time calculation between emotional authenticity and social survival, a cost that institutions never see and therefore never address.

Balraj offered a unique insight into the dynamics of his school environment, one that complicated the finding of bystander inaction beyond individual teacher disposition: “Some of the teachers are just surviving themselves, like they’re scared of the bad kids.” This was the only account in the data in which a student recognized that teachers, too, were operating within a hostile school climate that constrained their willingness or ability to act. In Balraj’s context, bystander inaction was not solely a function of indifference or avoidance, but also a reflection of institutional conditions in which neither students nor teachers felt safe enough to confront harassment.

Navpreet’s school again provided the critical counterpoint within the sample. With Punjabi Sikh teachers on staff, Punjabi offered as a language course, Vaisakhi recognized through school announcements and the school’s social media accounts, and a thriving Sikh Student Association, Navpreet experienced institutional affirmation on multiple levels: “The Punjabi Sikh teachers definitely understand because it is their identity too. So with them, I never have to explain anything. It just feels comfortable.” The significance of this statement lies in what it identifies as absent: the labor of explanation. For Navpreet, the presence of Sikh educators eliminated the educational burden that consumed her peers at other schools.

Navpreet also described the overall institutional ethos of her school: “I think I feel supported by the school overall. Teachers know there is a big Sikh community here. They are careful about religious holidays. And honestly, I feel like our presence is visible in the school culture.” That careful attention to religious holidays and visible cultural presence registered as noteworthy speaks to how far the remaining seven participants’ schools fell from even this baseline.

Theme 5: The Turban as a Site of Misrecognition

Across the data, the turban emerged as the central marker around which experiences of marginalization coalesced. Participants' accounts revealed a pattern of misrecognition that took multiple forms: post-9/11 racialization and religious misidentification, exoticization and body-focused intrusion, gendered misreading, physical targeting, and, for one participant, the cumulative weight of that misrecognition pressing against his relationship to his own faith. In each instance, the turban was not recognized for what it was, a sacred article of faith embodying sovereignty, dignity, and devotion to God, but was instead filtered through lenses of suspicion, curiosity, or hostility that had little to do with Sikhism.

Religious Misidentification and Post-9/11 Racialization. Religious misidentification, often being assumed to be Muslim based on the turban, was reported by every participant except Navpreet. She attended a school with many Sikhs, so her identity needed little explanation. For the other seven participants, being called Muslim, being asked about Middle Eastern heritage, or facing post-9/11 rhetoric happened regularly at school, not just once. Simran recalled misidentification as "constant," especially during a September 11th history unit: "Teachers assume I'm Muslim. Like, constantly... My history teacher kept looking at me during that unit

[9/11], like he was worried I'd be offended... I'm not Muslim. I'm Sikh. Those are two completely different religions."

The teacher's repeated glances seemed neither hostile nor pointed, but they were revealing, nonetheless. Although the attention may have been intended as concern about being offensive, the effect was to reinforce the misidentification rather than interrupt it, positioning Simran as a representative of a faith she did not practice. Nivas described a related experience: "If something happens in the news with someone who looks like me, people glance at me." Jaspreet reported that "if there's a security situation or a lockdown drill, sometimes security looks at me differently. That feeling of being seen as a potential threat just because of how you look... it weighs on you." Taken together, these accounts suggest that misidentification was not an isolated occurrence for turbaned Sikh students but an ongoing condition, one in which their appearance rendered them hyper-visible in ways that felt surveillance-like and untethered from their actual identities.

The most direct manifestations of post-9/11 racialization took the form of verbal harassment. Jaspreet described sustained incidents during his freshman and sophomore years:

I've dealt with bullying, especially in 9th and 10th grade. People calling me 'terrorist' or making jokes about bombs. After 9/11, which is like, I wasn't even born yet, but apparently it still matters, there's this assumption that anyone who looks Middle Eastern or wears a turban must be dangerous. I've been called 'Osama' more times than I can count. That stuff hurt, especially early on.

Jaspreet was not born when the attacks happened, yet he still experienced their racialized aftermath, inheriting a climate of suspicion that long outlasted the event itself. Nivas described a similar climate in his daily encounters at school: "People saying '7/11' when I walk by. Or '9/11.'

Sometimes they say it quietly. Sometimes louder if they're trying to make their friends laugh. It's supposed to be a joke. But it's like they reduce you to that." Balraj recounted a parallel pattern, though the language directed at him drew on a harsher register. He was called "Raghead," assumed to be Muslim, and asked whether he hid things in his turban. Where the comments aimed at Nivas collapsed his identity into a date, those aimed at Balraj recast his turban as a hiding place for something dangerous, his body marked as a site of suspicion.

Zoravar's experiences echoed those reported by Jaspreet, Nivas, and Balraj, but differed in how he responded to them. Rather than absorbing the harm quietly or expressing visible frustration, Zoravar consistently deflected through humor, turning each incident into what appeared to be a lighthearted exchange. This pattern carried a cost. Because his responses drew laughter, those around him read the incidents as playful rather than injurious, and the religious misrecognition at the center of each moment was effectively hidden in plain sight. His experiences became among the least visible to anyone positioned to intervene.

Nativist rhetoric compounded this racialization further. Nivas recalled being told to "go back to where you came from," and noted the irony himself: "Which is ironic because I was born here. It's not constant. But it sticks." This sentiment was echoed across the dataset: intermittent discrimination carried a lasting impact precisely because each incident activated the accumulated weight of previous ones.

Exoticization and the Turban as a Spectacle. A distinct form of misrecognition emerged: exoticization. Where post-9/11 racialization viewed the turban with suspicion and hostility, exoticization replaced that with fascination. It made the turban a spectacle instead of a sacred article. Jaspreet described this dynamic directly:

There's also this weird interest in how I look. Like people treating me like I'm some mystical foreign thing instead of just like a regular teenager who likes soccer and video games. Girls sometimes ask to touch my turban, which is super uncomfortable. It's not some prop. It's sacred and has meaning.

The juxtaposition of "mystical foreign thing" and "regular kid" captures the gap between how Jaspreet was perceived and how he understood himself. When female peers requested to touch his turban, they treated a sacred article of faith as though it were an artifact to be marveled at rather than a daily expression of devotion.

Body-Focused Intrusion. Body-focused curiosity surfaced as a recurring pattern across participants. Balraj described frequent questions about his hair, including why he did not cut it, how wearing a turban felt, and whether he washed his hair along with his turban, queries that reduced a deeply spiritual practice to matters of hygiene and comfort. Jaspreet recalled classmates asking whether he showered with his turban on or had hair underneath it. Nivas remembered the persistent freshman-year refrain, "What's on your head?"

Zoravar fielded the same questions but managed them through humor. The most common, "Isn't it hot under there?" was usually followed by jokes about hiding snacks. In his telling, a clever response earned respect and revealed the transactional logic of these exchanges. The intrusion became routine, and social standing came to depend on the entertainment value of the reply. Across these accounts, repeated questions about hair, heat, cleanliness, and concealment crossed bodily and spiritual boundaries, pulling sacred practices into the realm of secular curiosity. These moments positioned devotion as something to be explained and justified to anyone who asked.

Gendered Misreading: Suspicion, Pity, and the Assumption of Oppression. Simran reported invasive curiosity that extended beyond the turban itself to broader assumptions about her autonomy: "People ask me weird questions that show they think I'm oppressed... if my parents forced me to wear the turban... if I was allowed to have a phone or go to the movies, like we're stuck in the 1800s."

These questions revealed a worldview that could not reconcile female autonomy with visible religious commitment. For Simran, being asked whether she was "allowed" to go to the movies was more than awkward; the question presumed that her observance signaled restriction or coercion rather than choice. Such interactions, she explained, made her feel "less like a regular person and more like a display."

Manpreet encountered the same deficit framing but received it differently: "Sometimes people assume I'm super strict. Or that I'm not allowed to do normal teenage things. But I don't think they're trying to be rude. They just don't know."

Where Simran read these assumptions as evidence of a flawed worldview, Manpreet absorbed them without visible frustration, attributing them to ignorance rather than ill intent. Her impulse to excuse those making the assumptions echoed a broader pattern of lowered expectations evident throughout her interview, one in which she repeatedly accommodated others at the cost of naming the harm.

Manpreet also reported the only kara-specific incident in the dataset: "One time someone grabbed my kara to look at it. That felt a little weird. But I don't think they meant anything by it. I just said, 'Oh, please don't.' And they stopped. So, it was fine."

This was uninvited contact with an article of faith, reflecting a dynamic seen throughout the sample. Amritdhari students' articles were treated as public objects, not protected religious

expressions. Manpreet set a boundary directly and effectively. The peer complied, and she moved on without grievance.

Physical Targeting and the Body Under Threat. The most severe marginalization involved physical targeting of articles of faith. Nivas and Balraj experienced incidents in PE, in which their turbans or patka were targeted by peers and teachers failed to intervene. Balraj described the patka incident and its lasting effects:

This kid, as a joke, tried to pull my patka off. Like as a joke. Everyone laughed and I laughed too. But after that, I stopped changing in the locker room. I just wore my PE clothes under my normal clothes and changed at lunch before I went into PE. It wasn't this huge, dramatic thing. It just made me more careful about how I move around school.

Balraj's account is notable for the triple self-silencing it contains. He laughed along with his own humiliation, never reported the incident, and quietly restructured his daily routine to avoid the locker room entirely. His repeated insistence that it was "just a joke" feels less like an explanation and more like self-justification, as if labeling it humor could soften the violation. Yet the behavioral change that followed was substantial. He had constructed an elaborate logistical workaround, reorganizing his school day to avoid the space where his article of faith had been physically targeted.

Neither Nivas nor Balraj reported their incidents, and both framed their decision as self-protection. For Nivas, reporting carried the risk of being labeled "sensitive." For Balraj, minimizing what happened allowed him to contain the violation within a narrative he could manage. But silence was not indifference. It was a calculated act, a way of controlling how they were perceived in environments that had already proven unsafe.

Balraj's description of his school's social climate further contextualized this pattern: "The kids are rough. They're looking for a weak link to pick on." In such an environment, the turban and patka were not merely articles of faith but markers of vulnerability within a hostile social ecology. His observation that "you kind of get used to it, but you don't really get used to it" captured the paradox of chronic, low-grade threat: behavioral adaptation without psychological safety. This finding parallels Nivas's observation that in his school environment, "you don't fully relax." Together, these accounts describe a state of hypervigilance that neither participant was fully able to set aside.

The Turban's Weight: When Visibility Becomes Unbearable. The cumulative impact of the misrecognition was most visible in Balraj's account of his relationship to his own articles of faith. He was the only participant who described actively contemplating the removal of his turban:

Yeah. (6-second pause) Yeah, I have. I don't always want to wear my turban. Sometimes I just want to blend in. Like just walk into class and not be noticed first. I've thought about cutting my hair. I don't know if I actually would. But I've imagined what life would be like without it.

The six-second pause before this admission signals the weight of what Zoravar was disclosing. His framing, "I've imagined what life would be like without it," reveals a deep internal conflict. The turban was not something he had chosen freely. It was a sacred obligation he could not refuse. What he longed for was the ability to simply walk into a room, to be seen as a person before being othered.

When Balraj reflected on his relationship to his Amritdhari identity, he offered the most honest and painful articulation of constrained agency across the sample: "It feels like the choice

was already made." It was the single moment in the dataset where the weight of visibility threatened to outpace the will to bear it. Simran had stated, "I took Amrit when I was 5. It was my choice." Jaspreet declared, "I genuinely love being Sikh." Navpreet said her turban was something she "never questioned." Manpreet cited autonomy as her primary source of strength: "And just knowing it's my choice. That's important to me." Balraj's experience stood apart. Not as a rejection of his faith, but as a recognition that the commitment had been made before he was old enough to fully consent to it, and that revisiting it at sixteen carried social and familial consequences too significant to navigate alone.

He further reflected on the gap between knowing what his identity represented and how it felt: "I don't feel super connected to it right now. Which makes me feel kind of bad. Because I know it represents a lot. But sometimes I just feel like... it represents pressure." The familial dimension deepened this struggle. When he imagined his father's reaction, he was precise: "My dad would be really disappointed. Not angry necessarily, but really disappointed, and that feels worse. And my little brother...if I cut my hair, I don't know what that would mean for him." That distinction carried weight. Anger would have implied defiance, but disappointment meant failure. The stakes extended beyond himself. Cutting his hair would not be a private act. It would be a lesson his younger brother absorbed about what it meant to be Amritdhari, a responsibility Balraj carried alongside his own unresolved relationship with his faith.

Research Question 3: Sources of Strength, Support, and Resistance in Navigating School Experiences

Where Research Question 1 examined the institutional conditions shaping Amritdhari Sikh students' overall experiences of belonging, Research Question 2 turned to how their visible religious identities were affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within school settings.

Research Question 3 asked what sources of strength, support, and resistance participants drew upon to navigate those experiences. Three themes emerged.

Participants drew on spiritual capital as the most consistent and foundational source of strength across the dataset, enacted through daily faith practices, theological conviction, engagement with their gurdwara community, and, in some cases, resources outside the Sikh tradition entirely. Family served as a complex source of support, though its nature, depth, and accessibility varied considerably across participants. Finally, participants developed navigational strategies in direct response to the conditions documented in the preceding themes, forming a spectrum from strategic, agentic engagement to survival-oriented endurance. Together, these three themes reveal how students sustained themselves within school environments that were not designed to support them.

Theme 6: Spiritual Capital and the Gurdwara as a Counterspace

For most participants, what carried them through school-based marginalization was not secular coping but embodied faith practices that connected them to something larger than the institutions failing them. Spiritual capital functioned not as a passive inheritance but as an active resource, drawn upon daily and deepened through practice, community, and theological conviction. Simran described how prayer grounded her amid the pressures of school life:

When things are really hard, I do Ardas, and I feel connected to something bigger than all the drama at school. Jap Ji Sahib in the morning centers me... these kids at school don't understand me, but Waheguru understands me. And that's what matters.

Prayer, in Simran's account, was not a retreat from her challenges but a reorientation toward a more meaningful source of recognition. The recitation of the Japji Sahib, the foundational Sikh morning prayer, preceded and contextualized her school experience each day. Her assertion that

"Waheguru understands me" placed the isolation she experienced at school within a relationship she described as more significant than the social dynamics of high school.

This orientation extended to how other participants understood their visible faith. For Jaspreet, the turban was read by peers as a political statement, a cultural curiosity, or a marker of foreignness. In his own understanding, it was a "connection to Waheguru." Prayer reinforced that meaning, grounding the turban's significance in his relationship with the divine rather than in how others interpreted it. Nivas described a quieter mode of engagement: "Just sitting there during kirtan helps." Navpreet cited both kirtan and seva, or community service, as practices that reminded her that "my identity is bigger than school."

Across these accounts, faith practices were present before challenges arose. Where other resources emerged in response to specific incidents at school, daily spiritual practice already shaped how participants understood themselves, their purpose, and their sense of worth before they entered their academic environments.

Zoravar's account introduced two dimensions not observed among other participants. First, he drew on Sikh historical narrative as a source of perspective, measuring his present-day experiences against what the Sikh gurus had endured during their time in history. He expressed this in a colloquial register that differed from the theological framings of his peers: "I've thought about how life would be easier if I blended in. But then I think about Sikh history. The gurus went through way worse than hallway jokes, so who am I to fold because someone said something dumb?"

Second, Zoravar cited rap music as a source of strength, the only participant to do so. He described actively engaging with it, pausing and rewinding lyrics to examine their meaning. He

connected this practice to his broader experience of navigating school: "Rap also gives me strength. A lot of it is about overcoming stuff, and it makes me feel powerful."

Manpreet's account shifted the focus from external sources of strength to internal ones. When asked what made her feel strong in her identity, she responded, "Learning about Sikh history. Especially Sikh women. That makes me feel strong." This was the only instance across all eight interviews in which a participant drew strength specifically from Sikh women's experiences. Where Simran and Jaspreet referenced Guru Gobind Singh Ji and the creation of the Khalsa, Nivas cited a contemporary male Sikh judge in Fresno County, and Zoravar invoked the Gurus' persecution broadly, Manpreet centered women's agency, courage, and contribution within Sikh history as her primary source of strength.

Manpreet also described a source of strength not observed in any other participant's account: "And just knowing it's my choice. That's important to me." She did not cite Ardas, paath, kirtan, or any specific devotional practice. What she named as sustaining was the knowledge that her Amritdhari identity was chosen. It was wholeheartedly hers.

Jaspreet's spiritual capital was rooted in a different kind of ownership, one that was historical and intergenerational, connecting his daily experience to the founding of the Khalsa:

I think about my Gurus. Like, Guru Gobind Singh literally created the Khalsa, knowing that Sikhs would be persecuted for being visible. He didn't make us blend in; he made us stand out on purpose. So when I'm feeling like it would be easier to cut my hair or stop wearing my turban, I remember that. My Gurus chose this for me. This is a gift to me, not a burden.

Jaspreet described this understanding as something he returned to during moments of doubt at school. His grandparents' immigration grounded that historical knowledge in a personal family

narrative: "They came to this country with nothing and built a life while dealing with way more discrimination than I'll ever face. If they could stay strong in their faith through all that, I can deal with some high school drama."

Nivas drew on a different source of strength, not from the Gurus or family history but from a contemporary figure in his own community: a Sikh judge serving in the county. "If he can sit on that bench and be respected, I can handle high school. It puts things in perspective about the future and gives me hope." For Nivas, this example made his own future feel possible in the community where he was growing up.

Nivas also pointed to a developing awareness that he connected to his daily experience of wearing a turban: "I think growing up here wearing a turban every day makes you think about fairness a lot. You notice stuff." He framed this awareness as something that had sharpened over time.

The gurdwara emerged across the data as the primary space where participants described feeling themselves fully. Seven of eight participants identified it as a place of belonging, and their descriptions were consistent in defining it as a place free of the burdens they carried at school. Simran described it this way: "Everyone there just gets it, you know? I don't have to explain anything. I can just be myself." Jaspreet said: "Being around other Sikhs where I'm not the only one, where everyone understands... that's like coming up for air." Armaan was more direct: "I can just be normal there." Nivas offered the most concise articulation: "You're not the only one wearing a turban. That alone changes everything."

Zoravar named the same experience: "At the Gurdwara . . . no explanations needed. I'm just normal." He pointed to a second space that offered similar relief: "Basketball tournaments,

too. When someone passes you the ball, they're not thinking about your turban. They're thinking, 'don't miss.'"

Participants described the gurdwara not simply as a place of comfort but as a space where their identity required no explanation. The turban was unremarkable there, not because it was invisible, but because it was shared. This pattern was consistent across seven participants, regardless of whether their broader school experience was positive or negative.

The single exception to this pattern was Manpreet, who did not mention the gurdwara in her response to a direct question about what helped her navigate challenges. Her identified sources of support were family, her hijab-wearing best friend, and reading: "Also reading. I read about people who feel different in some way. It makes things feel less isolating." Manpreet was the only participant who did not name the gurdwara or sangat as a source of support. She turned instead to more solitary forms of sustenance, and her reading practice was the only instance across all eight interviews in which a participant identified literature as a source of strength.

Balraj's account differed from every other participant in a notable way. While each of the other seven participants cited at least one faith practice as a source of strength, whether prayer, scriptural recitation, kirtan, seva, historical knowledge, or gurdwara community, Balraj named only his mother's encouragement and the general comfort of being around other Sikhs. He described his turban as representing "pressure" rather than pride, and his relationship to his Amritdhari identity as one of disconnection: "I don't feel super connected to it right now."

When Balraj was asked what helped him stay proud of his Sikh identity, his response departed from every other participant's: "When I see other Sikh guys who just own it. Like they don't care what anyone thinks. I'm not there yet, though." The phrase "I'm not there yet" is notable for its honesty and its aspiration. Balraj did not claim pride he did not feel; he

acknowledged its absence while expressing a desire to attain it. Where Simran declared her articles of faith "gifts," Jaspreet described his turban as "a gift, not a burden," Nivas drew strength from "knowing what it represents," Manpreet grounded her strength in autonomous choice, and Zoravar rejected the deficit narrative with "I'm good." Balraj's pride was aspirational rather than embodied. It was a destination he could see but had not yet reached.

Theme 7: Family as a Complex Source of Support

Family emerged as a source of support across all eight participants, but the nature of that support varied in ways that were not uniform across the dataset. For most participants, family provided spiritual grounding, intergenerational knowledge, and unconditional affirmation of their Amritdhari identity. Parents modeled religious practice, grandparents transmitted historical and scriptural knowledge, and siblings offered companionship within a shared faith identity. For at least one participant, however, family functioned simultaneously as the most important source of support and as a source of tension around autonomy and identity ownership. The sections that follow examine how family support was experienced and described across the eight participants.

Simran's mother transmitted a message of sacred worth that transcended the secular judgments of the school environment: "My mom always says, '*Tu Waheguru di beti hai*' [you are God's daughter], and that helps me remember that my identity is sacred and important even when the world doesn't treat it that way." This statement grounded Simran's sense of worth in something outside the school environment, offering a framework of identity and belonging that institutional neglect could not diminish. Jaspreet's father, who had "been dealing with this stuff his whole life," provided both empathy born of shared experience and historical perspective, connecting current challenges to the broader arc of Sikh perseverance.

Navpreet's parents, both of whom wore turbans and maintained successful professional careers, modeled the possibility of integrated identity: "My parents are very grounded in their faith and also very successful in their careers. Seeing them balance both shows me that I do not have to choose between being Sikh and being successful." This intergenerational modeling addressed a specific anxiety, that visible Sikh identity and professional success were incompatible in America, by providing living proof to the contrary.

Manpreet's family offered a model of support that was unique in the dataset, one in which her Sikh identity required no negotiation or explanation: "Definitely my family. Since everyone is Amritdhari, it doesn't feel unusual at home." Manpreet's family support operated through the quiet absence of exceptionalism. At home, being Amritdhari was not celebrated, affirmed, or discussed as a source of strength; it was simply unremarkable. "It doesn't feel unusual," placed alongside her description of school as a space where people looked "for a second" and asked questions, reveals what home, by contrast, provided: a space where her turban required no acknowledgment, no defense, and no explanation. This form of support was not affirmation but normalization.

Zoravar's father provided support through silent embodiment rather than verbal engagement. Zoravar described it this way: "My dad, too. He wears his turban everywhere. He never complains, and if he can do that at work, I can handle high school." This mode of familial support carried a specifically masculine register. Zoravar's father did not discuss challenges or process them aloud; he simply persisted through them. Zoravar's own navigation strategy reflected a similar pattern. He performed with ease, deflected through humor, and absorbed difficulty internally rather than naming it aloud.

Balraj's relationship with family was the most complicated in the dataset, functioning simultaneously as his primary source of encouragement and his primary source of constraint. His mother served as his emotional anchor, reminding him "why it matters." But his account also revealed how family expectations could foreclose the very autonomy that adolescent development requires. His father's anticipated disappointment, his brother's emulation, and his own inability to communicate the full scope of his school experience to his parents produced a dynamic in which the people most likely to help him were also the people he felt least able to confide in.

Balraj described wanting to share his school struggles with his parents but feeling unable to do so. "Sometimes I wish I could tell my parents this, but I don't." He was protecting his parents from the knowledge of his suffering, while his parents, unaware of the extent of his daily experience, were unable to provide the targeted support he needed. This communication barrier, unique to Balraj among the eight participants, represents a critical vulnerability: a student enduring the most hostile school environment in the sample while simultaneously cut off from the most natural source of support.

Armaan's description of family support was the most understated among all eight participants: "My parents, I guess. And my sister sometimes, but she's away at college now." His account lacked the spiritual language that characterized Simran's family support, the historical perspective present in Jaspreet's, and the normalization Manpreet described. Of all eight participants, Armaan's familial support network appeared the most limited, a pattern consistent with the confined spiritual and communal capital that characterized his overall profile.

Theme 8: Evolving Navigation Strategies from Strategic Engagement to Survival

Navigation strategies are presented last because they do not stand apart from the findings of Research Questions 1 and 2; they are produced by them. Participants developed these strategies as direct responses to the conditional belonging, curriculum erasure, educational labor, institutional indifference, and turban misrecognition documented across the preceding themes. Understanding how these students navigated their schools means reckoning with both the human cost these environments exacted and the resilience participants cultivated in response.

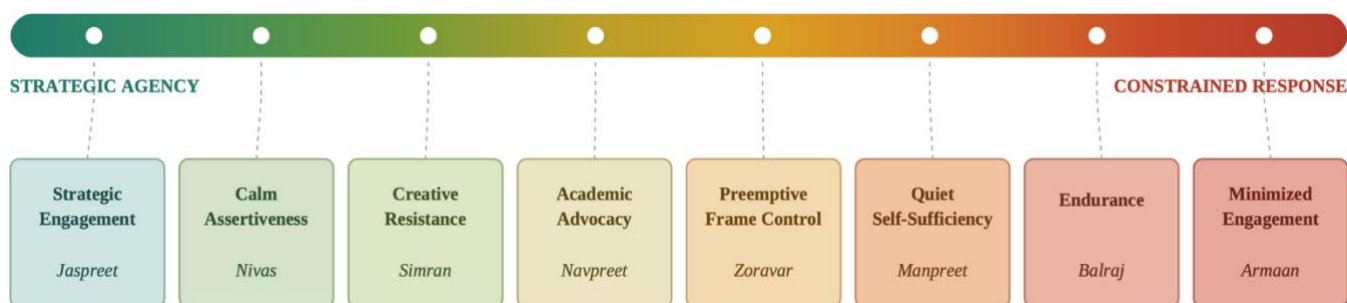
Every participant described some form of navigational response to the challenges they faced at school, but the nature, sophistication, and outcomes of those strategies varied considerably across the dataset. What emerged was not a single model of navigation but a spectrum of eight distinct postures, shaped by the severity of the school environment, the depth of the student's spiritual grounding, and the availability of support networks. As Manpreet's and Zoravar's accounts revealed, gender and personality also mediated how students navigated their academic environments. At one end of this spectrum stood students who had evolved toward strategic, agentic engagement with their school environments. At the other end stood a student whose navigation had contracted into a survival system designed to minimize harm rather than assert identity.

The eight postures are presented in order from those reflecting the greatest degree of strategic agency to those reflecting the greatest degree of constrained response. This organizational structure is not a ranking of participants or a measure of their resilience. Rather, it illustrates the range of navigational demands posed by different school environments and the resources students drew on or were denied in responding to them. Figure 5 visually displays the full spectrum, mapping each posture along a continuum and identifying the core navigational

strategy for each participant. Each posture is then examined as a subtheme in the narrative that follows.

Figure 5.

Spectrum of Navigational Postures



Note. Placement reflects the degree of strategic agency observed in each participant's navigational account, not a ranking of participants. Postures were shaped by the severity of the school environment, the depth of the student's spiritual grounding, and the availability of support networks.

Strategic Engagement: Jaspreet. Jaspreet described the most clearly articulated trajectory of navigational evolution, tracing a progression through three distinct phases:

At first, I tried to just ignore it and hope it would go away. That didn't work. Then I went through a phase where I got really angry and defensive about everything. That didn't work either, and I just ended up in the principal's office a lot. Now I try to pick my battles. If someone's genuinely ignorant but willing to learn, I'll educate them. I've gotten pretty good at explaining Sikhism in like, two minutes or less. But if someone's just trying to get a rise out of me, I don't engage. I just walk away. That took a while to learn, though.

Jaspreet's evolution from avoidance to anger to strategic engagement represents the developmental narrative of navigational capital. Each phase was not merely abandoned but learned from. Avoidance proved insufficient. Anger was counterproductive. Strategic engagement calibrated to the interlocutor's perceived intent emerged as the most effective approach. That this strategy was hard-won rather than intuitive underscores the labor required to develop navigational capital in hostile environments. No one taught Jaspreet this skill; he developed it over years of trial and error and emotional cost.

Jaspreet's navigational development also included a profound shift in how he related to his own visibility. He described moving from minimization to amplification, from trying to make his turban less noticeable to deliberately making it more visible:

I lean into my identity more now, rather than trying to minimize it. Like I used to try to make my turban less noticeable, wear darker colors, and keep my head down. But now I'm like, no, this is who I am. I'll wear bright colors, and I'll talk about my faith when it's relevant. I'm not going to shrink myself to make other people comfortable.

This shift from dark colors and lowered gaze to bright colors and open discussion constituted a deliberate refusal to diminish his own identity in response to others' discomfort. Jaspreet's decision not to "shrink" himself was not passive; it was a daily, intentional choice about how his identity appeared in public space. Jaspreet also named an emotional resource that was unique in the dataset: "Also, spite is a pretty good motivator, not gonna lie. Like when someone tries to make me feel bad about being Sikh, it makes me want to be even more proudly Sikh." This oppositional pride, using discrimination as fuel for amplified visibility, was not described by any other participant.

Calm Assertiveness: Nivas. Nivas described a parallel but distinct evolution, moving from silence to calm assertiveness:

Freshman year, I stayed quiet...but now I speak up more...calmly. Being in the Jakara Club helped... since we had to ask for our own space, it kind of forced us to be confident. It's weird that we have to justify just existing. But I guess it builds character. And maybe good practice for law school.

Nivas's reflection contains a striking paradox: the absurdity of having to "justify just existing" coexisted with a pragmatic reframing of that burden as preparation for his future career. He named the structural problem clearly while simultaneously finding a way to make it useful to him. Nivas also described a navigational tool not present in any other participant's account: the strategic deployment of discomfort. When confronted with racist humor, he developed a response that reversed the direction of social discomfort: "Now I usually just say, 'That's not funny' very calmly. It makes them uncomfortable. Which honestly kind of works." Unlike Jaspreet's educational approach, Nivas's strategy did not aim to inform; it sought to redirect the discomfort aimed at him back to its source.

Creative Resistance: Simran. Simran's navigation combined selective engagement with creative resistance. Like Jaspreet, she made deliberate decisions about when to educate and when to disengage: "If someone seems genuinely curious and respectful, I'll take the time to explain. But if they're being jerks about it, I just walk away. I've learned I don't owe everyone an explanation." Simran also channeled her experiences into artistic expression, creating a series of self-portraits that engaged her identity on her own terms:

I did this whole series of self-portraits where I painted myself wearing different colored turbans in different settings, trying to reclaim my image and show that I can be beautiful and Amritdhari at the same time.

Simran's art operated outside the reactive frameworks of education or disengagement. Rather than responding to how others saw her, she created an alternative visual representation of herself on her own terms. The intentional art project of showing that she "can be beautiful and Amritdhari at the same time" addressed directly the assumptions peers had made about her identity, autonomy, and religious practice.

Academic Advocacy: Navpreet. Navpreet's navigation took the form of academic achievement and advocacy. She described herself as "motivated" and "focused on my goals," and her involvement in the Sikh Student Association provided a space for both support and identity expression:

I think during SSA meetings for sure. We sit in a classroom after school and just talk.

Sometimes we talk about serious stuff like microaggressions or stereotypes. Sometimes we just talk about college plans or family expectations. It feels like a safe space. I do not have to explain why I wear a turban or what it means. That part is just understood.

The SSA served a dual function: processing identity-based challenges alongside ordinary adolescent concerns like college planning. Navpreet also demonstrated an awareness of how her experience differed from that of other Sikh students: "I think I have been fortunate. Growing up in a community with a lot of Sikhs made a difference. But I think it is important to keep listening to student voices because experiences can change depending on the environment." This awareness extended beyond her own school context to include Sikh students whose experiences looked very different from hers.

Preemptive Frame Control: Zoravar. Zoravar's navigation strategy centered on humor as a system of preemptive frame control that governed his social interactions at school. He articulated the foundational logic explicitly: "Yeah. Silence means people start noticing stuff. If I control the vibe, I control what they notice." In Zoravar's account, silence created a space in which peers' attention settled on his turban. Humor filled that space proactively, redirecting attention from his appearance to his words. Where Balraj sought safety through withdrawal and Armaan through quiet disengagement, Zoravar found safety through the opposite: visibility on his own terms. The turban could not be made invisible; therefore, the social frame around it had to be controlled, and the mechanism was laughter. Zoravar's navigation operated through a prepared repertoire of pre-crafted responses to predictable microaggressions:

'Isn't it hot under there?' is the most common one. I'll say, 'No, it's central AC.

Temperature controlled.' Or, 'It's actually a gaming headset. I can hear your thoughts.'...

If you make it clever and funny, people respect it.

The same body-focused questions reported by every participant in this study, about heat, concealment, and hygiene, became in Zoravar's posture, not burdens to be managed but opportunities to earn social standing. Each microaggression was met with a response that deflected the intrusion while entertaining the audience. His observation that "if you make it clever and funny, people respect it" reveals the terms on which respect operated in his school environment: it was not granted on the basis of his identity but earned through the quality of his performance. This navigational mode differed from every other participant's in a notable way. Simran's strategic education preserved her authenticity. Jaspreet's battle-picking balanced assertiveness with pragmatism. Nivas's "That's not funny" redirected discomfort while

expressing genuine feelings. Zoravar's humor, by contrast, suppressed genuine feeling in favor of social mastery. The cost was most visible in Zoravar's description of what he could not say:

Sometimes I want to just say, 'That's not funny.' But instead I'll say something like, 'Bro at least my culture has history. Yours is just Costco samples.' They laugh. Conversation moves on but I never actually say, 'That hurt.'

The response Zoravar suppressed, "That's not funny," is the exact response Nivas delivered calmly and effectively. Across eight interviews, not a single student described a moment in which they told a peer directly that a comment about their identity had caused them pain. That suppression took different forms: humor in Zoravar's account, calm redirection in Nivas's, strategic engagement in Simran's and Jaspreet's, withdrawal in Balraj's and Armaan's, and minimization in Manpreet's.

Zoravar also reflected on his own navigation strategy with notable awareness. He did not merely use humor; he observed how it functioned socially: "Being different makes you observe. You notice who gets to joke and who doesn't. I try not to make other people feel like the only one because I know what that feels like." His experience of being visibly different had sharpened his awareness of how inclusion and exclusion operate in social spaces, and he described deliberately applying that awareness in his interactions with others.

Quiet Self-Sufficiency: Manpreet. Manpreet's navigational profile introduced a posture not observed in any other interview: quiet self-sufficiency. Her account contained no story of evolution, no description of exhaustion or performance, and no survival rules. There was simply management: the quiet, ongoing processing of visible differences as a routine feature of daily life. Manpreet's most distinctive navigational moment illustrates this posture directly. When

Sikhism was omitted from a classroom discussion of world religions, she responded without distress:

In history class once, Sikhism wasn't mentioned when we were talking about religions.

So, I just raised my hand and added some information. It wasn't awkward. My teacher said thank you and moved on.

This was the same structural problem, curriculum erasure, that produced Simran's impassioned critique, Jaspreet's dismissed correction, and Armaan's silence. Yet Manpreet moved through it with a composure that the moment did not demand of her peers. She raised her hand, filled the gap left by her institution, and received a thank-you in return. That the interaction resolved cleanly says something, but it does not say everything. What it cannot account for is what it took to be that composed, to absorb an erasure of your own tradition mid-lesson and treat it as a routine correction rather than an injury. The absence of visible distress is not the same as the absence of cost. Manpreet's quiet self-sufficiency functioned as emotional labor, and the fact that her teacher's gratitude closed the moment without further acknowledgment suggests that the institution received her correction as a service rather than recognizing it as evidence of a gap it should have prevented.

Manpreet's pattern of naming experiences and then immediately softening them appeared throughout her interview. Challenges were described in terms that did not require a strategic response. Her emotional register was notably measured, with "kind of annoying" representing the strongest negative expression across the entire conversation. Whether this reflected a genuinely lighter experiential load or a navigational posture that processed difficulty differently than other participants' more emotive accounts could not be determined from the data alone. Her closing exchange captured both dimensions of this pattern. When asked what she would change

about her school experience, she offered a measured critique: “Maybe just more education. Like learning about Sikhism in class, so people don’t have to ask basic questions. But I don’t think the school is bad or anything. It’s just... maybe more awareness.” And when asked if there was anything else she wanted to share, she replied: “Umm... not really. I just think sometimes it’s small things. It’s not dramatic. But you still notice them.”

Endurance: Balraj. Balraj described a three-phase evolution in his navigational posture: from silence, to performed indifference, to endurance. Each phase involved a deeper withdrawal from engagement, and none included confrontation, education, or help-seeking. His primary coping mechanism was temporal: the knowledge that high school would eventually end. Balraj described the future as an exit from his current circumstances rather than a destination connected to his Sikh identity. His account of daily school life was sustained not by spiritual or communal resources but by endurance:

My mom, mostly. She reminds me why it matters. And being around other Sikhs helps... but honestly, day to day it really sucks. I can’t wait to graduate and get out of this place.

None of the eight participants described their daily school experience in more direct terms.

Minimized Engagement: Armaan. Armaan’s navigation was the least elaborated of any participant. When asked how he navigated challenges, he responded:

I don’t really have to navigate anything? When people ask questions I try to answer if I know the answer. If I don’t know I just say I don’t know. I mostly just keep to myself and do my own thing.

His approach, keeping to himself and minimizing interaction around his identity, paralleled Balraj’s avoidance but without the explicit language of threat or distress. Armaan also separated identity challenges from academic ones in a way no other participant did: “School doesn’t really

feel that difficult because of being Sikh. It feels difficult because of homework, tests, and stuff.” Whether this reflected a genuinely benign school environment, limited awareness of identity-based challenges, or a way of processing his experience that kept those challenges from being named as such could not be determined from the data alone.

Summary of Findings

This chapter presented findings from semi-structured interviews with eight Amritdhari Sikh high school students across Fresno County's public comprehensive high schools, organized across three research questions and eight themes. In response to Research Question 1, findings indicated that belonging was never described as a pervasive feature of school life. Instead, participants identified specific, bounded spaces where they felt conditionally accepted, while characterizing the broader school environment as one of visibility without genuine inclusion. Sikhism was nearly absent from the formal curriculum across all eight school contexts, a pattern that persisted even where Sikh students were demographically visible. Participants described this absence as producing a form of institutional erasure that shaped their daily experience of school.

In response to Research Question 2, findings revealed that participants bore a persistent burden of educating peers and teachers about their identity, a labor that was age-inappropriate and produced by the institution's failure to incorporate Sikhism into school culture and curriculum. Their religious identities were tolerated but not supported, existing in a space between prohibition and affirmation that participants described as institutional indifference. The turban functioned as a consistent site of misrecognition, becoming the focal point of religious misidentification, post-9/11 racialization, body-focused intrusion, and in two cases, physical targeting.

In response to Research Question 3, findings indicated that participants drew on spiritual capital as the most consistent and foundational source of strength, enacted through daily faith practices, gurdwara community, and in some cases, resources outside the Sikh tradition. Family served as a source of support across all eight participants, though its nature and accessibility varied considerably. Participants developed navigational strategies in direct response to the conditions documented in the preceding themes, ranging from strategic, agentic engagement to survival-oriented endurance.

Across all three research questions, contextual factors including school demographics, the presence or absence of co-ethnic educators, the level of hostility within the school's social climate, and gender shaped how participants experienced these shared conditions. Navpreet's experience at a school with a large Punjabi Sikh population demonstrated the protective effect of demographic representation and institutional affirmation. Balraj's experience at the most hostile school in the sample represented the most severe convergence of marginalization, constrained participation, and eroded spiritual connection documented across the study. Across these accounts, being visibly Amritdhari Sikh in Fresno County public high schools emerges as a condition of constant negotiation, revealing not only how students endure but also what schools have failed to provide.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

This phenomenological qualitative study asked three questions. The first examined how eight Amritdhari Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley described their overall sense of belonging within their school environments. The second asked in what ways their visible religious identities were affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within those settings. The third asked what sources of strength, support, and resistance they drew upon to navigate their school experiences. The findings, organized across eight themes, reveal a pattern that is simultaneously particular to this community and deeply familiar within the broader literature on religiously and racially minoritized youth. These students were visible without being seen, present without being included, and resilient without being relieved of burdens that institutions, not students, should be carrying.

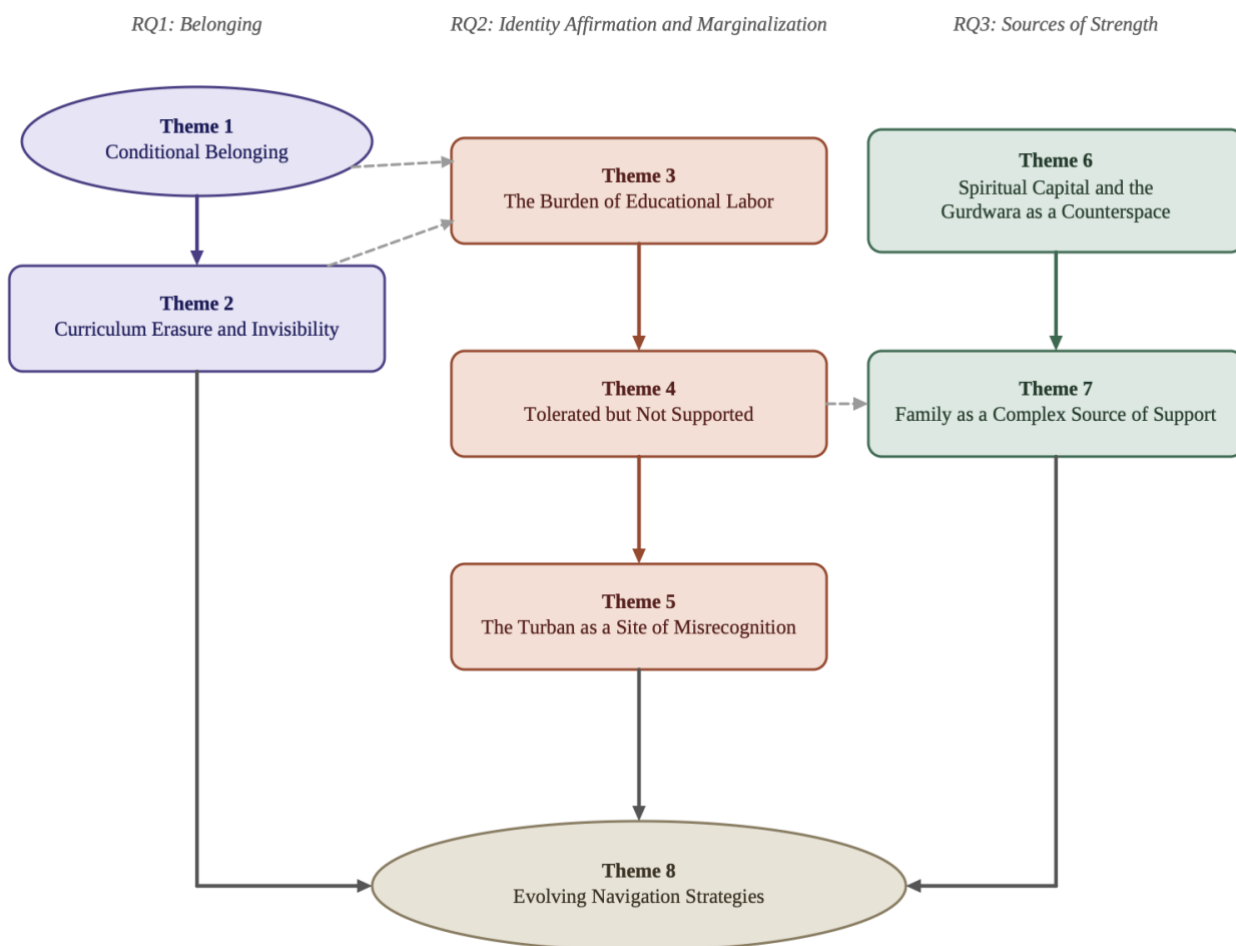
Figure 6 offers a visual map of the eight cross-case themes and the ways they cluster across the three research questions. The first three themes, Visibility and Hypervisibility, Misrecognition and Conditional Belonging, and the Burden of Educational Labor, cohere around questions of belonging and the terms on which these students were allowed to occupy school space. The middle cluster of themes addresses the mechanisms through which religious identity was variously affirmed, flattened, or marginalized in classrooms, curriculum, and peer interactions. The final themes, including Sources of Strength and Navigation Strategies, surface the resources these students drew upon and the strategies they developed in response. Read together, the themes trace an arc from institutional recognition through identity negotiation to

agentic response, and the figure is intended to orient the reader to that arc before the discussion engages each research question in turn.

This chapter situates the findings within the three conceptual frameworks guiding this study, Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018), and Spiritual Epistemology (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994), and connects them to the existing literature on discrimination in schools, religious identity, and culturally responsive practice.

Figure 6.

Thematic Network Display: Eight Cross-Case Themes Organized by Research Question



Research Question 1: Belonging in School Environments

Research Question 1 asked how Amritdhari Sikh high school students described their experiences of cultural responsiveness and belonging within their school environments. All eight participants experienced belonging as conditional, context-dependent, and limited to specific areas of school life, and they described their schools as largely unresponsive to their cultural and religious identities. While students found moments and places where they felt welcome, they described the broader school environment as one in which visibility did not translate into recognition, and presence did not translate into acceptance. The findings for Research Question 1 are organized around two related themes: conditional belonging and the curricular erasure and institutional invisibility that shaped it.

Conditional Belonging and the Limits of Institutional Indifference

The most consistent finding across all eight participants was that belonging was conditional, fragmented, and context dependent. Students identified specific bounded spaces where they felt genuinely accepted. However, they described the broader school environment as one of visibility without welcome. This pattern aligns with Dessel's (2010) finding that marginalized students, particularly those from religious or racial minority groups, often encounter exclusion and invisibility as features of school climate, rather than isolated incidents. It also extends Byrd's (2016) research on the link between culturally responsive teaching and student belonging. Without affirming institutional practices, students constructed a sense of belonging in the margins of school life, rather than having the institution cultivate it schoolwide.

Yosso's (2005) framework of Community Cultural Wealth offers an important lens here. The bounded spaces students described, the Jakara Club, the gurdwara, and the Sikh Student Association, were not simply social refuges. They were spaces where students exercised

navigational capital, the complex set of skills required to move through institutions not designed for them, and where that labor was briefly suspended. That this recognition had to be earned through years of relationship-building and was available in only one corner of each student's school life underscores what Dessel (2010) identified as the limits of goodwill without institutional design.

Manpreet's experience added a previously undocumented dimension: cross-faith solidarity. Her bond with a hijab-wearing Muslim friend was rooted in shared religious difference, requiring no explanation. Dupper et al. (2015) show that minority faith students across traditions share common experiences of exclusion, suggesting that cross-faith recognition is significant. When students from different backgrounds experience the same institutional indifference, their shared invisibility can create solidarity.

Navpreet's story offered a contrast. At her school, both staff and students eased the process of belonging. This supports Gay's (2018) idea that culturally responsive teaching needs to extend beyond individual teachers into the institution. Even there, Sikh students were culturally visible but not fully involved in the school's academic life. Being seen is not enough; meaningful inclusion requires curricular recognition, setting the stage for findings in the next section.

Curriculum Erasure as Institutional Harm

The near-total absence of Sikhism from the curriculum was reported by all eight participants, regardless of school context or Sikh student population. This finding extends Sleeter's (2012) critique of standards-based reform, in which she argues that culturally responsive content has been treated as supplemental rather than essential. In this study, curriculum erasure was not mere oversight. It generated ignorance that students were expected to

remedy through their own educational labor. The connection between absent curriculum and peer harassment reframes inclusion as harm reduction, not just representation. The students' burden as involuntary educators was not incidental but produced by what the curriculum omitted.

For Amritdhari Sikh students, wearing a turban made this burden heavier. Everyday encounters became representative acts. Students could not simply exist; they always stood for the entire Sikh community. This hypervisibility was not just social. It became a constant condition, making it impossible for students to be ordinary high schoolers going through a normal day.

This pattern offers an example of what Matias (2013) called a failure of teacher preparation. Teachers who lack basic religious literacy shift extra responsibility onto affected students. Jaspreet and Nivas mentioned this directly. They became ambassadors for their faith when they just wanted to learn. Seven out of eight participants called the experience exhausting, unfair, and inescapable. Their stories point to an institutional indifference that goes beyond the curriculum.

Research Question 2: Affirmation, Support, Indifference, and Marginalization of Visible Religious Identity

The second research question asked: in what ways were participants' visible religious identities affirmed, supported, ignored, or marginalized within their school settings? Participants' visible religious identities were neither affirmed nor actively marginalized in any singular way; instead, they encountered a pervasive institutional indifference that permitted their presence while declining to protect or honor it. The turban was tolerated, but what it meant theologically, historically, and personally was left unrecognized, and the costs of that gap fell consistently on students. This question is addressed through two interconnected themes: the gap between

institutional tolerance and genuine affirmation, and the specific, gendered forms that misrecognition took in students' daily school experiences.

Tolerated but Not Supported: Institutional Indifference and Its Costs

Curriculum erasure was one expression of a larger institutional stance: tolerance without support. Students described an environment in which their articles of faith were permitted, but their identities were not understood, affirmed, or protected. The pattern found in this study maps directly onto Gay's (2018) distinction between tolerance and affirmation. Tolerance is passive; it requires nothing of the institution beyond non-interference. Affirmation is active; it requires educators to recognize, honor, and integrate students' identities into the life of the school. The participants in this study received the former consistently and the latter rarely, and almost exclusively from individual teachers acting on personal initiative rather than institutional design.

One form of institutional indifference was the misreading of students' turbans. For boys, the turban brought post-9/11 associations with terrorism. For girls, it led to pity and assumptions of oppression. An Amritdhari girl was not feared; she was seen as voiceless and constrained by her own tradition. Neither view recognized the turban as a chosen symbol of faith, and both overlooked students' agency.

This gendered dimension of misrecognition is not unique to the Amritdhari Sikh context. Research on Muslim girls who wear hijabs in schools has documented a parallel pattern: the visibly religious girl is frequently read not as a person of faith but as a victim of faith, presumed to lack the agency that her religious commitment appears to encode (Sensoy & Marshall, 2010; Zine, 2006). Simran and Manpreet both encountered this prejudice, though they received and processed it differently. This finding extends Ahluwalia and Pellettiere's (2010) documentation of anti-Sikh discrimination by attending to how its gendered dimensions operate differently for

male and female students, and it suggests that school equity frameworks must be designed to identify and respond to these distinct forms of misrecognition rather than treating anti-Sikh bias as a singular, uniform experience.

What made these misreadings particularly consequential was what happened and did not happen when they surfaced in classrooms. Teacher bystander inaction emerged as a particularly consequential dimension of this theme. When incidents occurred, the question of whether educators intervened became whether the institution would correct or confirm what peers already believed about the students in front of them. In the cases documented in the findings, teachers consistently chose neither correction nor confrontation. Villegas and Lucas (2007) argue that culturally responsive teachers must develop a sociocultural consciousness, an understanding of how power, privilege, and institutional structures shape students' daily experiences, alongside a genuine ethic of care that treats students' identities and dignity as non-negotiable. Their framework further emphasizes that effective educators build active knowledge of their students' lives, not surface familiarity, but a substantive understanding of the communities, histories, and vulnerabilities students bring into the classroom. The bystander inaction documented in this study reflects the absence of both and extends the literature by locating that inaction not as individual moral failure but as an institutional practice, one in which teacher silence functioned as tacit policy, normalizing the misrecognition of visibly Sikh students rather than disrupting it. In the absence of institutional structures that named Sikh identity as deserving of active protection, individual teachers had neither the mandate nor the preparation to intervene, and their inaction became the institution's answer.

What that answer cost students was named directly in the data. Teachers without substantive knowledge of post-9/11 misrecognition of turbaned Sikh students, or of the

accumulated weight of repeated identity-based incidents, were not positioned to recognize when intervention was required. Nivas's observation that failing to respond to a discriminatory comment does not prevent discomfort but redirects it onto the targeted student names this mechanism precisely. Avoidance is not neutrality. It is a choice with a cost, and in every case documented here, the student paid it.

Research Question 3: Sources of Strength, Support, and Resistance

The third research question asked what sources of strength, support, and resistance Amritdhari Sikh students drew upon to navigate their school experiences. Students drew on a remarkably varied set of resources, most of them self-constructed or community-generated rather than institutionally provided. Faith was the most consistent and foundational of these, but the forms it took, and the degree to which it remained available as a source of strength, varied in ways that were shaped as much by institutional conditions as by individual devotion. The findings are organized across three related themes: the role of spiritual capital as a dynamic resource, the gurdwara and family as sites of support, and the navigational strategies students developed in response to their school environments.

Spiritual Capital as a Dynamic, Not Fixed, Resource

The most powerful and consistent source of strength reported by participants was their faith, enacted through daily devotional practices, engagement with the gurdwara community, historical consciousness, and, in some cases, resources entirely outside the Sikh tradition. These faith practices operated as forms of spiritual capital that were qualitatively distinct from the other resources participants drew upon. Where navigational capital was reactive, a response to challenge, spiritual capital was proactive and constitutive. It did not merely help students cope with marginalization; it provided the ontological foundation for understanding themselves, their

purpose, and their worth. This pattern is precisely what spiritual epistemology names: spirituality as an embodied way of knowing, not an adjunct to identity but the ground from which identity is understood (Dillard, 2006; hooks, 1994). This finding supports Park et al.'s (2020) argument that spiritual capital functions as both a source of the original six forms of Community Cultural Wealth and as a distinct form of capital in its own right.

Participants' spiritual capital took markedly different forms. Simran's was devotional, enacted through daily prayer that reoriented her toward a source of recognition her school could not provide. Jaspreet's was historical and intergenerational, grounded in the theological significance of the Khalsa's deliberate visibility. Nivas drew strength from a visibly Sikh Judge in the community whose professional success made his own future feel possible. These varied expressions all illustrate spiritual capital operating as Perez Huber (2009) described, as resources rooted in a spiritual connection to something greater than immediate circumstances. They also illustrate what Dillard (2006) meant by spirituality as an epistemological resource. Simran's prayer was not only a devotional practice but a way of knowing herself as recognized when school would not recognize her. Jaspreet's historical consciousness was not only identification with a tradition but a way of knowing the meaning of his visible identity that the school could not supply. Nivas's orientation toward a living community figure was a way of knowing a possible future that the school's curriculum did not model. In each case, spirituality functioned epistemologically, as the means through which these students understood who they were and what their visibility meant.

Zoravar's account introduced a dimension of spiritual capital that the existing literature on Sikh student experiences did not capture. His engagement with rap music, studied analytically rather than consumed passively, functioned as spiritual sustenance operating outside the

specifically Sikh tradition. This extends Park et al.'s (2020) framework by suggesting that spiritual capital is not bounded by tradition but is shaped by the conditions under which students must sustain themselves. It also echoes hooks's (1994) insistence that the classroom should not be treated as spiritually barren and that what counts as spiritual sustenance cannot be predetermined by institutional norms. Zoravar's analytical engagement with rap functioned as a way of knowing that carried ethical and existential weight, meeting Dillard's (2006) criteria for spiritual epistemology even as it operated outside the specifically Sikh tradition.

Manpreet's account expanded what spiritual capital can mean in a different direction. Her primary source of strength was not devotional practice or community but the simple fact that her Amritdhari identity was chosen. The literature on spiritual capital has emphasized practices and communities as the vehicles through which it operates (Perez Huber, 2009; Park et al., 2020). Manpreet's account suggests that for some students, the locus of spiritual capital is agency itself, the conscious recognition that one's religious identity is freely held. Read through spiritual epistemology, this is not only a source of strength but a way of knowing oneself as an ethical agent in relation to tradition (Dillard, 2006), a knowledge that the school's framing of her identity as imposed directly contradicts.

Manpreet also drew specifically on the experiences of Sikh women throughout history, a gendered reading absent from any other participant's account. Where Zoravar, Jaspreet, and Nivas each invoked male figures as sources of strength, Manpreet drew on the specifically female lineage of Sikh history. This finding extends the historical dimension of Community Cultural Wealth by demonstrating that the same tradition can be accessed through different gendered lenses, and that for female Amritdhari students, seeing themselves in the lives of Sikh women may provide a form of sustenance that male-centered historical narratives do not fully

offer. Dillard's (2006) articulation of spiritual epistemology was itself grounded in the specifically gendered spiritual knowledge traditions of African American women, and Manpreet's account suggests an analogous pattern within the Sikh tradition, where female historical figures operate as epistemological resources distinct from those that male figures provide. For a student whose visible religious identity is read by peers as evidence of oppression, drawing strength specifically from women who exercised agency and courage within that tradition represents a direct counter-narrative to the misrecognition she encounters at school.

Balraj's account complicates the picture in equally important ways. While every other participant cited at least one faith practice as a source of strength, Balraj named only his mother's encouragement and the general comfort of being around other Sikhs. His turban, he said, "represents pressure" rather than pride. The gap between "represents a lot" and "represents pressure" may be among the most significant findings of this study. It reveals that visible religious identity, under sustained conditions of marginalization and without adequate institutional support, can become a source of distress rather than strength. Spiritual capital, this study suggests, is not a fixed asset that students either possess or lack. It is a dynamic resource whose availability is shaped by the conditions institutions create, or fail to create, around it. Framed epistemologically, Balraj's account suggests that when schools fail to recognize spirituality as a legitimate way of knowing, they do not only withhold affirmation; they actively erode a student's capacity to draw knowledge and meaning from a tradition that should be sustaining them.

The Gurdwara, Family, and Distribution of Support

For most participants, the primary site where spiritual capital was enacted collectively was the gurdwara. Seven of eight participants identified it as the space where they felt most fully

themselves, defined consistently by the absence of the burdens they carried at school. This finding aligns with Dillard's (2006) framing of spirituality as an epistemological resource and with Park et al. 's (2020) argument that spiritual capital is enacted collectively through culturally situated practices. The gurdwara was not merely a social refuge; it was a space where students' ways of knowing and being were not aberrations to be explained but shared truths to be lived.

The single exception was Manpreet, who did not mention the gurdwara as a navigational resource. In its place, she identified solitary and dyadic sources of support, including reading literature about people who feel different. This reading practice constituted a form of navigational capital that operated entirely outside the Sikh community, functioning as a private, portable version of what the gurdwara provided communally: recognition, resonance, and the knowledge that one's experience of difference was shared.

Alongside the gurdwara, family support was a consistent but considerably more varied resource. Simran's mother anchored her identity in the sacred. Navpreet's parents modeled professional success and Amritdhari commitment as compatible rather than competing. Zoravar's father embodied persistence through silent example. Manpreet's family provided normalization rather than affirmation, a form of support distinct from the others but no less sustaining. These varied forms of familial support reflect what Yosso (2005) describes as familial capital: the community memory, cultural intuition, and lived histories that families transmit to children as navigational resources.

Balraj's account, however, revealed the limits of that resource when institutional conditions make it inaccessible. Where every other participant described family as a reliable source of support, Balraj carried his burden largely alone, unable to share the full scope of his school experience with his parents. This communication barrier, unique among the eight

participants, represents a specific vulnerability that existing frameworks have not fully theorized: a student for whom family capital existed but could not be accessed because the weight of what needed to be shared felt too heavy to name.

Navigation as Labor and the Suppression of Authentic Response

The navigational postures participants developed ranged from strategic, agentic engagement to survival-oriented endurance. Jaspreet's three-phase evolution from avoidance to anger to calibrated engagement, Nivas's calm assertiveness, Simran's selective education and artistic resistance, Zoravar's preemptive humor, and Manpreet's quiet self-sufficiency all represent sophisticated forms of navigational capital, exactly as Yosso (2005) theorized: skills developed through experience, not instruction, in response to institutions not designed for the student's success.

Gender mediated how this navigational labor was performed and perceived. Manpreet's navigation, characterized by quiet self-sufficiency, minimization, and an unburdened quality that distinguished her from every other participant, was not merely a personality difference. It reflected a gendered set of social conditions in which the stakes of visible religious identity were lower for Amritdhari girls at her school, as she herself noted: "I think maybe because I'm a girl. I've noticed the Sikh boys get more comments." Simran, by contrast, navigated from a position of greater visibility and greater social risk, combining selective education with artistic resistance in ways that required both assertiveness and creativity. The strategies available to each female student were not simply individual choices; they were shaped by the gendered register in which their religious identity was read by those around them.

This finding is consistent with Abo-Zena's (2019) research on early adolescent Muslim females, which documented how the intersection of religious and gender identities shapes the

specific challenges girls navigate in school settings, including how they negotiate identity in the face of external misreadings of what their religious commitment means. While Abo-Zena's participants faced similar dynamics around visible religious practice being read through a gendered lens, this study extends that work into the Sikh context, where visible articles of faith carry distinct post-9/11 racial and religious meanings that differ by gender. Sensoy and Marshall (2010) observed that visibly religious girls in schools often navigate a combination of self-minimization and quiet boundary-setting, a pattern that closely maps onto both Manpreet's and Simran's approaches, though each enacted it differently. Taken together, these findings suggest that gender not only shapes how Amritdhari Sikh students are misrecognized, as documented in the preceding section, but also shapes the navigational repertoires available to them in response, a dynamic that existing frameworks for understanding religious minority youth in schools have not yet addressed with specificity to visibly Sikh adolescents.

Armaan's navigation warrants specific attention within this spectrum. As the youngest participant in the study, a fourteen-year-old freshman, his navigational strategies were the least elaborated of any participant. Where others had developed sophisticated approaches over years of school experience, Armaan's was to keep to himself and answer questions when he could. This limitation speaks to more than inexperience; it points to developmental positioning. King and Boyatzis (2015) characterize adolescence as a sensitive period for religious identity formation, one in which the cognitive capacities for abstract self-reflection, the social awareness needed to read and respond to bias, and the autonomous sense of self that sustains active navigation all develop progressively across the adolescent years. A fourteen-year-old freshman is early in that arc. Armaan had not yet had the time, the accumulation of varied experiences, or the mature identity anchoring that older participants drew on when they chose assertiveness, humor,

selective disclosure, or artistic resistance as tools for managing their school environments. His lowered threshold for positive school experience, asking not for affirmation but simply for the absence of overt hostility, speaks to this. It also points to the quiet ways in which sustained institutional indifference can reshape what students believe they are entitled to expect, particularly when they are young enough that the institution's silence arrives before a fully formed sense of what they deserve. Armaan's account is a reminder that navigational development is not only a response to the severity of the environment, but also a function of developmental maturity and the accumulation of experience that builds capacity over time.

Balraj's navigational trajectory stands apart from that of every other participant. Where others evolved toward more sophisticated engagement over time, each of his phases involved deeper withdrawal rather than growth. His primary coping mechanism was temporal: the knowledge that high school would eventually end. The future, for Balraj, was not a space of possibility connected to his Sikh identity but an exit from a present defined by its costs. Together, the navigational strategies documented across all eight participants point not to individual resilience as an explanation but to institutional conditions as the variable. Where conditions were different, as in Navpreet's school, the labor was lighter. Where they were not, the cost was borne entirely by the student.

Taken together, the findings of this study make several distinct contributions to the existing literature on religiously minoritized youth in American schools. Amritdhari Sikh high school students in California's Central Valley experienced belonging as conditional and fragmented, constructed in the margins of school life rather than cultivated by institutional design. Their visible religious identities were tolerated but not protected, and teacher silence in the face of identity-based incidents operated not as individual moral failure but as an expression

of institutional indifference. Misrecognition itself took different forms depending on gender: male students absorbed post-9/11 associations with threat while female students faced assumptions of voicelessness and oppression, producing distinct navigational burdens that existing frameworks for understanding anti-Sikh discrimination have not yet disaggregated. Spiritual capital emerged not as a fixed asset that students either possessed or lacked, but as a dynamic resource whose availability shifted in direct response to the conditions institutions created or failed to create around it. Navigational capital, in turn, proved to be shaped not only by the severity of those conditions but also by developmental maturity and the accumulation of experience over time. Across all three research questions, the institution itself emerged as the primary variable: where institutional conditions changed, so did the weight students carried.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study carry direct implications for educators, school leaders, and policymakers committed to equitable schooling for religiously visible students. These implications are organized around six broad areas, each grounded in the patterns documented across the eight participants.

First, religious literacy must be treated as a dimension of educator competence, not an optional supplement. The burden Sikh students carried as involuntary educators of their peers and teachers was not incidental. It was produced by the absence of institutional knowledge. Teacher preparation programs should equip candidates with foundational knowledge of the religious traditions represented in the communities they will serve, including the theological significance of Sikh articles of faith, the history of post-9/11 racialization of the Sikh community, and the specific forms of misrecognition Sikh students routinely encounter. Professional development for in-service educators must extend this work into schools with Sikh

student populations. A single affirming teacher, like the ones Simran and Jaspreet recalled with specificity years later, can shift a student's experience of an entire institution. That such teachers were exceptions rather than norms is itself a policy failure.

Second, curriculum inclusion is not a gesture of cultural sensitivity but a structural intervention with measurable implications for student safety and belonging. The near-universal erasure of Sikhism from formal curriculum documented in this study produced ignorance that students were then expected to address through their own labor and social performance. District curriculum frameworks, world history standards, and religious studies units should include accurate, substantive content on Sikhism developed in partnership with Sikh community organizations and scholars. This is not supplemental enrichment. It is the baseline that Sleeter (2012) identifies as essential to educational equity, and it is the condition under which harassment rooted in ignorance loses its social footing.

Third, the gap between tolerance and affirmation is measurable and addressable, and schools should be held accountable for closing it. Passive permission is the floor, not the goal. Navpreet's school demonstrates what affirmative institutional investment looks like in practice: Punjabi Sikh teachers on staff, language course offerings that reflect the community, public recognition of religious observances, and a student association that is institutionally supported. These are not extraordinary interventions. They are decisions about where schools choose to invest. Districts with significant Sikh populations should establish clear expectations and accountability structures for moving beyond tolerance toward genuine inclusion.

Fourth, educators' bystander inaction must be named, trained against, and monitored as a form of institutional failure. When educators fail to respond to discriminatory comments or actions, they do not preserve neutrality; they redirect the harm onto the targeted student and

communicate that the student's dignity was not worth interrupting class for. Schools must develop clear expectations for educator response to identity-based incidents, provide training that addresses the specific forms of harassment Sikh students face, and create reporting structures that capture harm that students' own coping strategies may otherwise render institutionally invisible. Given the gendered dimension of misrecognition documented in this study, school equity frameworks must also be designed to identify and respond to anti-Sikh discrimination as it manifests differently for male and female students (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010).

Fifth, California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum represents a policy opportunity whose potential has not yet been realized, and whose future is currently uncertain. Although AB 101 was signed into law in 2021, making California the first state to mandate ethnic studies as a high school graduation requirement, the mandate was contingent on full state funding, which Governor Newsom excluded from the 2025 budget, effectively stalling implementation (Márquez Rosales & Thornton, 2025). The result is a patchwork, with some districts moving forward using their own funds while others have used the funding gap as a rationale to pause (Jones, 2025). Critically, the groundwork for Sikh inclusion has already been laid. The Sikh Coalition and the Jakara Movement successfully advocated for Sikh history and a community-developed lesson plan in the adopted 2021 model curriculum, mobilizing 52 gurdwaras across California in support (Sikh Coalition, 2024). The content exists. The community partnerships exist. What is missing is the institutional commitment to act on what has already been built. School districts in the Central Valley, home to one of the largest Punjabi Sikh populations in the United States, should not wait for a state mandate. Where local will and resources exist, this content can and should be taught now. The students in this study did not need a separate Sikh awareness day. Instead, they needed institutions that treated their history as one worth teaching.

Sixth, this study points to the need for a Sikh Critical Race Theory framework as an analytical and practical tool for understanding and addressing the specific forms of discrimination Amritdhari Sikh students face. Critical Race Theory and its extensions, including DesiCrit (Harpalani, 2013), have advanced scholarly understanding of how racialization operates in educational settings for South Asian communities. Yet these frameworks were not designed to account for the specific convergence of religious visibility, racial misrecognition, and post-9/11 surveillance that defines the school experiences of Amritdhari Sikh students (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010).

The turban is not simply a racial marker; it is a sacred article of faith that is read through a racialized lens, producing a form of discrimination that sits at the intersection of religion and race in ways that existing frameworks have not yet fully theorized. A Sikh Critical Race Theory framework would center the turban as a site of racialized religious misreading, attend to the gendered dimensions of that misreading, and name the specific historical and political forces, including the post-9/11 conflation of Sikh and Muslim identity, that produce the conditions documented in this study (Ahluwalia & Pellettiere, 2010). Such a framework would equip researchers, educators, and policymakers with more precise tools for identifying, naming, and addressing anti-Sikh discrimination in educational settings.

This recommendation carries implications across research, policy, and practice. For future research, it calls for empirical and theoretical work that develops and tests a Sikh Critical Race Theory framework across varied educational contexts, including studies that examine how its analytic categories operate differently for Sikh students of different genders, generational statuses, and regional locations. For policy, it suggests that the categories used to track, investigate, and respond to bias incidents in schools should be refined to recognize anti-Sikh

discrimination as a distinct phenomenon rather than subsuming it under broader categories that obscure its specific contours. For practice, it points to the need for educator preparation and professional development that equips teachers and administrators to recognize the racialized religious misreading of Sikh students and to respond to it with the same seriousness afforded to other forms of identity-based harm. The students in this study named what was happening to them with clarity and precision. The field now needs frameworks capable of receiving what they said, and institutions capable of acting on what those frameworks reveal.

Limitations of this Study

While this study offered important insights into the educational experiences of Amritdhari Sikh youth, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the findings were drawn from a relatively small, purposively selected sample within a single geographic region. The perspectives shared may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among Sikh students in other regions, school contexts, or diasporic communities. Second, participants self-selected into this study, which may have led those with particularly strong positive or negative experiences to be more likely to participate, potentially influencing the range of narratives captured. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may have been affected by memory, social desirability, or participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information about discrimination and identity. Fourth, while the study design included an optional written reflection component intended to capture participants' elaborated thinking beyond the interview context, the majority of participants did not submit reflections. This lower-than-anticipated response rate limited the opportunity for data triangulation across multiple sources. Qualitative research is generally strengthened when findings can be corroborated across data types; in this case, the absence of written artifacts meant that interview accounts served as the sole primary source,

which may have constrained the depth of cross-case analysis. Future studies might consider building structured reflection opportunities more directly into the data collection process or employing member-checking protocols that invite participants to respond to preliminary findings in writing, as a means of generating complementary data sources. Finally, my positionality as a member of the Sikh community facilitated trust and rich dialogue, but it may also have shaped data interpretation in ways that reflected shared cultural understandings. While these limitations do not diminish the value of the study, the findings are best understood as contextually situated and interpreted alongside future research conducted in other settings and with broader participant groups.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand what it means to be visibly Amritdhari Sikh in a California public high school. What it found was a community of young people who carried their faith with profound dignity in environments not built to receive them. Their accounts document not individual experiences of hardship but a pattern of institutional choices, in curriculum, in hiring, in teacher preparation, in bystander response, that produced those experiences systematically. The spectrum from Navpreet's experience to Balraj's is not a matter of individual circumstance. It is a matter of institutional will.

These eight students did not ask for extraordinary accommodation. They asked to be seen, to be taught about, and to be protected. They asked for teachers who understood what the turban meant before asking them to explain it. They asked for curricula that included their history. They asked for adults who would intervene when the moment required it. None of these is a radical demand. They are the baseline conditions of an equitable education, and they were absent from nearly every school in this study.

The knowledge exists. The frameworks exist. The students are already in our classrooms. What remains is the institutional commitment to act on what we already know to be true. Amritdhari Sikh students in California's Central Valley deserve schools that do not require them to carry alone what institutions should have held with them all along. That is not a research finding. It is a moral imperative.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. I am interested in learning about your experiences as an Amritdhari Sikh student in your high school. There are no right or wrong answers. Your perspective is very important because there is very little research that reflects the voices of Sikh students, and what you share can help teachers and schools better understand and support students like you. Please know, you may skip any question that you do not wish to answer, and you may stop the interview at any time. Everything you share will be kept confidential and your name will not appear in any reports. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Part 1: Basic Information *(for researcher reference only; will be separated from transcripts and analysis)*

1. First name or preferred pseudonym: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Grade level: _____
4. Gender identity: _____
5. School name: _____

Part 2: Interview Questions

Cultural Responsiveness & Belonging (Guided by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Research Question 1)

1. To help me get to know you, please share a little about who you are. You might include things like: your interests, your family or community, what's important to you, or how you describe yourself to others.
2. How would you describe your overall experience at your school as an Amritdhari Sikh student?
3. Do you feel your teachers understand your Sikh identity? Why or why not?
4. Have you seen your culture, language, or faith reflected in the classroom, curriculum, or school events? Can you share examples?
5. Can you tell me about a time at school when you felt like you truly belonged? What made that possible?
6. Can you tell me about a time when you felt excluded or invisible at school? What happened?

Affirmation or Marginalization of Religious Identity

(Guided by Spiritual Epistemology; Research Question 2)

1. How do teachers, staff, and classmates usually respond to your articles of faith, such as your turban, kara, or unshorn hair?
2. Have you ever had to explain your Sikh identity or religious practices to someone at school? How did they respond?
3. How has your school ever made it easier, or harder, for you to practice your faith (for example, during religious holidays, prayer, or wearing your articles of faith)?

Navigating Challenges and Drawing on Strength

(Guided by Community Cultural Wealth; Research Question 3)

1. What challenges have you faced at school because of your visible religious identity (for example, wearing a turban, having long unshorn hair, or other articles of faith)?
2. How have you responded to or navigated those challenges?
3. Where do you find strength, support, or encouragement when school feels difficult? (This could be from family, friends, teachers, your gurdwara, your faith, or other places.)
4. What helps you stay proud of your Sikh identity at school, even when it's hard?

Closing Questions

1. If you could change one thing at your school to make it a better place for Sikh students, what would it be?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to share that we haven't talked about today?

Closing Script: Thanks so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with me today. Before we wrap up, I want to tell you about one more part of this study, a short reflection activity you'll complete after this interview. This gives you another way to share your thoughts and experiences in your own way and style. You'll get to choose how you want to express yourself. You can write a personal letter to someone at your school, like a teacher, counselor, or classmate, explaining what you want them to understand about being an Amritdhari Sikh student. Or, if you prefer something more visual, you can create a one-page collage using short English phrases and images that express your message. Your reflection will include three parts:

1. **My Identity and Beliefs:** What being Amritdhari Sikh means to you and why your articles of faith are important.
2. **What I Want You to Understand:** What you wish others at school knew about your experiences and feelings.
3. **How My School Can Support Me:** What schools can do to make Sikh students feel safe, respected, and included.

You'll get the reflection instructions right now, at the end of our interview, and you can take them home with you. You'll have two weeks to complete the reflection. You can email it to me,

take a picture and text it to me, give it to me in person, or share it in any other way that feels comfortable to you.

Just so you know, you will not be mailing this letter or collage to your school or to anyone at your school. It comes directly to me, and only I will review it as part of this research study. Parts of your reflection may be analyzed as part of the data I collect, but your name and any identifying information about your school, teachers, or peers will be removed before anything is shared or quoted.

This is not a graded assignment, and there are no right or wrong answers. You can skip anything you don't want to answer.

Do you have any questions before I give you the reflection instructions?

If I have any follow-up questions, I may reach out later, and I can also share a summary of the study once it's done if you'd like.

APPENDIX B

Student Reflection

Purpose: You have an important story. This activity gives you a chance to share your thoughts and experiences as an *Amritdhari* Sikh student. You get to decide what others at your school should understand about your identity, faith, and daily life. This is not a graded assignment. There are no right or wrong answers. Your voice matters.

Your Privacy

You are in control of what you share. Your reflection will only be used for this research study. Your name and identifying details will be kept confidential. Nothing you write will be shared with teachers, school administrators, or other students in a way that reveals who you are. You may skip any part you do not feel comfortable answering.

Who will you address this to?

Choose one person at your school who you want to share your message with:

- A teacher
- A counselor
- An administrator
- A classmate or peer

Choose how you want to express your message:

Pick ONE option:

- **Option A:** Personal Letter: Write a letter directly to the person you chose. Use clear, respectful language.
- **Option B:** Collage One-Pager: Create a one-page collage using short English phrases and images (printed or drawn) to visually share your message.

Your reflection should include these three parts:

1. My Identity and Beliefs

What does being Amritdhari Sikh mean to you? Why are your articles of faith (for example, your turban, kara, and unshorn hair) important?

2. What I Want You to Understand

Share what you wish people at school knew about your experiences, feelings, and daily interactions.

3. How My School Can Support Me

Describe what your school can do to help you and other Sikh students feel safe, respected, and included.

Guidelines

- Use English for all writing
- Be honest and thoughtful
- Keep your message respectful
- Only share what feels right for you

Length/Size

- Letter: At least one full page (handwritten or typed)
- Collage: One full page filled with images and words (you can use a medium like Canva)

How to Submit Your Reflection

When you finish, please **submit your reflection directly to me (the researcher)**. You can:

- Email it to me at mksahotasangha@ucdavis.edu
- Take a clear photo and text it to me at 559-433-5085.
- Hand it to me in person, whatever feels most comfortable to you.

Please send or give it to me **within two weeks of completing your interview** (or sooner, if you're ready).

Your voice has power. Thank you for sharing a piece of who you are so others can learn, grow, and make school better for every Sikh student.

APPENDIX C

Codebook

Codes and Definitions

Code Name	Definition
Belonging – Positive	Student expresses feeling welcomed, included, valued, or genuinely at home within a school space. Captures moments when the student describes school, a classroom, an extracurricular setting, or a peer group as a place where they feel they belong as their full Amritdhari Sikh self.
Belonging – Isolation/Exclusion	Student describes feeling isolated, invisible, left out, or actively excluded from the school community. Includes accounts of being overlooked in social groupings, feeling unseen by peers or adults, or being structurally separated from the life of the school.
Belonging – Conditional/Partial	Student experiences acceptance that is limited, qualified, or contingent on circumstances such as context, peer group, academic performance, or willingness to downplay aspects of identity. Belonging is present but comes with terms attached.
Belonging – Ambiguous	Student's relationship to belonging is unclear, contradictory, or resists categorization. Captures accounts in which the student both belongs and does not belong depending on the moment, or in which the student describes belonging in ways that cannot be cleanly sorted as positive, conditional, or excluded.
Cultural Invisibility	Student's culture, religion, or identity is not acknowledged, represented, or seen in school life. Includes absence from curriculum, absence from cultural programming, and the broader experience of being in a space where one's identity has no recognizable presence.

Cultural Visibility – Positive	Student’s identity is visibly acknowledged in ways that affirm and celebrate it. Includes moments when peers, teachers, or the school actively recognize the student’s Sikh identity with genuine respect and interest rather than tokenism or spectacle.
Cultural Visibility – Negative	Student’s visible identity becomes a source of unwanted attention, scrutiny, or othering. Includes being singled out because of appearance, being treated as a curiosity, and preemptive visibility management in which the student anticipates negative attention and adjusts behavior in response.
Peer Relationships – Acceptance	Positive peer interactions that affirm the student’s identity or treat the student as a social equal. Captures friendships, inclusion in peer groups, and everyday exchanges in which the student’s Sikh identity is a non-issue or is genuinely embraced.
Peer Relationships – Exclusion	Peers exclude, avoid, or marginalize the student. Includes being left out of social activities, being ignored in group settings, and being treated as socially invisible by classmates.
Peer Relationships – Microaggressions	Subtle discriminatory behaviors from peers, including dismissive comments, backhanded remarks, intrusive questions, mocking imitations, and small but repeated slights that communicate othering without rising to overt harassment.
Teacher Understanding – Affirmation	Teacher actively learns about, respects, and affirms the student’s Sikh identity. Includes teachers who ask thoughtful questions, incorporate the student’s background into classroom discussion appropriately, or intervene when peers make discriminatory comments.
Teacher Understanding – Misunderstanding	Teacher demonstrates a lack of knowledge about Sikh identity or makes incorrect assumptions. Includes confusing Sikhism with other traditions, mispronouncing or misusing religious terms, and making well-intentioned but inaccurate statements about the student’s faith.

Teacher Understanding – Avoidance/Ignorance	Teacher ignores, avoids, or remains willfully ignorant about the student’s identity. Distinct from misunderstanding in that the teacher has opportunity to learn or engage but declines to do so, leaving the student’s identity unaddressed in the classroom.
Institutional Support	School policies, practices, structures, or resources that support Sikh students. Includes inclusive curriculum choices, supportive administrative responses to incidents, presence of trusted adults, and formal accommodations that treat Sikh identity as legitimate and worth protecting.
Institutional Barriers	Institutional policies, practices, or structures that create obstacles for Sikh students. Includes dress code conflicts, inadequate responses to bias incidents, and formal or informal practices that make it harder for the student to participate fully in school life as a visible Amritdhari Sikh.
Religious Misidentification	Student is incorrectly identified as Muslim or conflated with Islam, or is otherwise misread as belonging to a religious or ethnic group they do not belong to. Includes being called slurs directed at Muslims, being assumed to speak Arabic, or being linked to events involving Muslim communities.
Curriculum Erasure	Sikhism is absent from curriculum, textbooks, multicultural programming, or classroom discussion. Includes world religions units that skip Sikhism, history units that omit Sikh experience, and multicultural events that overlook Sikh communities.
Curriculum Representation	Sikhism or Sikh history is included in curriculum, instructional materials, or classroom discussion. Captures moments when the student’s tradition is treated as legitimate academic content worthy of the same attention as other religious or cultural traditions.
Religious Accommodation – Granted	School accommodates religious observances, articles of faith, or practices. Includes permission to wear articles of faith in activities with dress or safety rules, flexibility

	around religious holidays, and access to space or time for prayer or observance.
Religious Accommodation – Denied	School denies or creates barriers to religious observances or the wearing of articles of faith. Includes being asked to remove a kara for sports, being denied absence for religious holidays, or being required to justify practices that are already protected.
Navigational Capital	Student uses skills and strategies to maneuver through school spaces that were not designed for them. Includes strategic engagement (choosing when and how to participate), strategic discomfort (tolerating distress to achieve a goal), self-silencing, humor-based frame control, withdrawal, spatial avoidance, internal behavioral rules, temporal coping (waiting out a class or period), and quiet self-sufficiency (solving problems independently rather than seeking institutional support).
Resistant Capital	Student challenges, critiques, or refuses to conform to dominant norms that marginalize their identity. Includes overt pushback, refusal to perform assimilation, articulating critique of unfair treatment, and the use of humor as a form of resistance that names and redirects discriminatory framing.
Spiritual Capital	Student draws strength from spiritual beliefs and practices. Range includes robust devotional (daily prayer, active engagement with scripture), receptive/contemplative (reflective or quieter engagement), historical/disciplinary (drawing on Sikh history and the discipline of the Khalsa), low salience (spirituality present but not central), diminished (eroded access to spiritual sustenance), and autonomy-grounded (spiritual capital rooted in the conscious choice to maintain identity).

Familial Support	Family provides understanding, encouragement, or material and emotional support. Captures the full spectrum of family involvement, from parents modeling identity and navigating school advocacy to siblings and extended family offering solidarity, counsel, and practical help.
Community Support (Gurdwara)	Gurdwara community provides belonging, understanding, or solidarity. Includes participation in Sangat, relationships with community elders or youth, and the experience of the gurdwara as a space of recognition that contrasts with school.
Peer Support	Specific peers or peer groups provide acceptance, solidarity, or emotional support. Includes friendships with other Sikh students, cross-cultural friendships that affirm the student's identity, and peer groups that function as protective spaces within the broader school.
Faith Practices as Strength	Religious practices provide grounding, stability, and psychological resource. Includes prayer, Nitnem, meditation, Shabad Kirtan, and the rhythms of daily observance understood by the student as sources of strength distinct from community or family support.
Educational Labor/Burden	Student bears the responsibility of educating peers, teachers, or others about Sikh identity. Range includes exhausting (repeated, draining explanations), under-resourced (lacking language or material to respond to questions), positive (willingly sharing identity as meaningful work), deflective (using redirection to avoid deeper engagement), humor-mediated (managing the task through humor), and matter-of-fact/unburdened (treating explanation as routine and unremarkable).
Self-Advocacy	Student speaks up for their rights, educates others about Sikh identity, or asserts their needs in institutional contexts. Includes addressing teachers directly, reporting incidents, requesting accommodations, and publicly claiming space for their identity within the school.

Emotional Impact – Negative	Negative emotional responses to school experiences. Includes hypervigilance, hidden impact (distress not visible to outside observers), minimized affect (downplaying in the moment), guilt, anxiety, somatic stress (physical manifestations such as tension or fatigue), post-deflection residue (emotional aftermath of deflecting an incident), and consistent minimization patterns (habitual downplaying that obscures cumulative effect).
Emotional Impact – Positive	Positive emotional states connected to identity or school experience, including pride, strength, centeredness, calm, confidence, and joy grounded in the student's Sikh identity.
Islamophobia/Post-9/11 Context	Experiences of bias shaped by the post-9/11 climate of surveillance and anti-Muslim sentiment, which is extended to visibly Sikh students through racialized religious misreading. Includes slurs, nativist rhetoric ("go back to your country"), news-triggered surveillance (heightened scrutiny following terrorism-related events), and peer humor that embeds terrorism references into everyday interaction.
Intersectionality	Student navigates the convergence of multiple identity aspects, including religion, race, gender, generation, and immigration history. Now includes gender as a protective factor for female participants whose visible religious identity is read differently than that of male participants.
Agency/Resistance	Student actively resists marginalization or asserts identity through action, speech, or stance. Captures visible moments of refusal, self-determination, and identity-claiming that go beyond internal coping into outward expression.

Sikh Identity Pride	Student expresses pride, value, or love for Sikh identity. Range includes robust theological (pride rooted in explicit engagement with Sikh teachings), quiet acceptance (pride expressed without elaboration), low salience (identity affirmed but not foregrounded), aspirational (pride tied to future goals and community contribution), discipline-grounded (pride rooted in Khalsa discipline and practice), and quiet certainty/autonomy-based (pride grounded in the conscious choice to maintain identity).
Historical/Intergenerational Knowledge	Student references Sikh history, the Gurus, intergenerational narratives, or community role models as a source of strength. Includes drawing on the lives of the Sikh Gurus, martyrs, contemporary Sikh figures, and family members who have carried the tradition forward.
Turban/Dastar Experiences	Experiences specifically related to wearing the turban or dastar. Includes questions from others, comments, physical interference, the experience of tying and maintaining the turban, and the meaning the student attributes to it within their school context.
Kesh (Unshorn Hair) Experiences	Experiences related to maintaining unshorn hair. Includes questions from peers and adults, logistical dimensions of care, pressure to cut hair, and the meaning the student attaches to kesh as a visible article of faith.
Kara Experiences	Experiences related to wearing the kara, the steel bracelet worn on the dominant hand. Includes questions from others, conflicts with dress codes or athletic rules, and the meaning the student attaches to the kara.
Five Ks – General	Experiences related to wearing or maintaining the Five Ks (kesh, kara, kanga, kachera, kirpan) as a collective commitment, rather than tied to a single article. Includes moments when the student speaks about the Five Ks as a unified practice or when multiple articles are addressed together.

Staring/Scrutiny	Student is stared at, scrutinized, or made to feel like a spectacle in public or school spaces. Captures sustained visual attention from peers, adults, or strangers that signals the student is being read as unusual or out of place.
Exoticization	Student is treated as exotic, fascinating, or other. Includes comments that frame the student's identity as interesting in a foreign or novel way, requests to touch or examine articles of faith, and attention that positions the student as a curiosity rather than a peer.
Tokenization	Student is used as a representative or spokesperson for all Sikhs or for their entire religion. Includes being asked to answer for the whole tradition in classroom discussion, being expected to explain unrelated current events involving South Asian or Muslim communities and being treated as a stand-in for a group rather than as an individual.
Bullying/Harassment	Direct harassment, bullying, or mean-spirited behavior targeting the student's identity. Includes name-calling, physical intimidation, threats, turban-pulling or attempted turban-pulling, and repeated targeted mistreatment that rises beyond microaggression.
Safety Concerns	Student expresses fear, anxiety, or concern about physical or emotional safety. Includes concerns about specific locations (hallways, restrooms, routes to and from school), concerns triggered by news events, and broader anxieties about being a visible target.
Social Media as Support	Student finds community, validation, or support through social media platforms. Includes following Sikh creators, participating in online Sikh youth communities, and encountering content that affirms identity in ways the school does not.
Bystander Inaction	Teachers, staff, or other adults witness discrimination or harassment but fail to intervene. Captures the institutional silence that follows visible incidents, including situations in which an adult is present and aware but does nothing.

Self-Silencing	Student consciously suppresses an emotional or verbal response to discrimination or discomfort. Includes performative ease (appearing unbothered while experiencing distress) and minimization (publicly downplaying the significance of an incident) as potential forms of self-silencing.
Aspirational Capital	Student draws motivation from role models, future visions, or aspirations. Includes looking toward college, career goals, and imagined future contributions to community as sources of strength that sustain the student through current challenges.
Critical Consciousness	Student demonstrates awareness that their experience is shaped by structural forces rather than individual prejudice alone. Includes naming institutional patterns, recognizing historical context such as post-9/11 Islamophobia, and articulating how race, religion, and policy intersect in shaping their school life.
Identity Struggle	Student actively contemplates modifying or removing articles of faith in response to sustained marginalization. Captures moments in which the cost of visible identity becomes a subject of internal negotiation, whether or not the student ultimately makes any change.
Model Minority Stereotype	Student encounters the assumption that they are academically successful, compliant, and in no need of support. Includes the presumption of high performance, the presumption of non-complaint, and the erasure of struggle that follows from being read through this stereotype.
Humor as Strategic Identity Work	Student uses humor as a primary and multifunctional strategy for managing visible religious identity. Humor operates as deflection, connection, critique, self-protection, and identity claim, often simultaneously, and serves as a core tool rather than an occasional one.

Reading/Literature as Support	Student finds strength, validation, or emotional processing through reading about characters who experience difference, marginalization, or identity-based challenges. Distinct from Social Media as Support (platform-based) and from academic engagement more broadly. The reading is specifically therapeutic and identity-affirming, providing a form of recognition the school does not supply.
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