

Pedagogical Possibilities with Culturally Conscious Picturebooks Centering South Asian American Youth

Saba Khan Vlach

Since the 9/11 attacks, the Muslim Ban, and the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans from all parts of Asia have endured the consequences of the misknowledge and stereotypes or single stories¹ about their languages, religions, cultures, and immigration. In a study of South Asian American students' perceptions of experiences in school, focusing on their teachers' cultural competence, nearly 80% of students said they had experienced the model minority stereotype, and nearly 70% said they had received less support from their teachers than their peers. Furthermore, 73% of the students described their teachers' South Asian cultural proficiency as "low."²

What can social studies teachers do to increase their cultural proficiency with South Asian American communities?

They can incorporate the increasing number of children's and young adult books written by South Asian authors into their teaching.

In this article, I will discuss 13 contemporary picturebooks by South Asian authors that I categorize as *culturally conscious*³ picturebooks (see Table 1 for full list). These books show us the beauty of the lived experiences of South Asian American children and their families. In this moment, we, social studies educators, must consider the realities that our South Asian American students and their families are experiencing. In response to these realities, social studies educators can intentionally expand our curricula to weave in voices and stories from these communities.

Culturally Conscious Picturebooks Featuring South Asian American Youth and Families

For the books featured in this article, I applied Sims's definition of *culturally conscious* to books written by South Asian authors who write from a perspective of cultural insiders as they portray South Asian American stories through their use of language, stories, and illustrations. Culturally conscious

literature is for everyone; however, the authors and illustrators intend for their stories to serve as mirrors for young people from their shared cultural backgrounds.

I was introduced to these 13 books as part of my work in the South Asia Book Award (SABA) committee, a project of the South Asia National Outreach Consortium (SANOC).⁴ These books were considered for the SABA in 2019, 2020, and 2021. The authors of the 13 picturebooks are South Asian women who currently live in the U.S. In addition to being considered for the SABA award, many of the titles received additional awards and recognition in the field of social studies (see Table 1).

In these culturally conscious South Asian American children's picturebooks, the protagonists are young children who live in the U.S., and the stories typically center on their day-to-day lives at home with family and friends. In these picturebooks, young South Asian American children will see and hear their own lives through language, food, holidays, relationships, and stories passed down from their elders. By sharing culturally conscious texts like these, teachers can enact their acceptance of and commitment to their students' home cultures.

Author's Positionality Statement

I am a South Asian American, Muslim woman who grew up in New York and Texas. As a child, I loved to visit our local public library and check out as many books as I could carry. I loved to read and share what I was reading with family and friends. But I never expected to see myself or my family in the pages of the children's literature I was reading.

Times have changed. These days, I am happy to say that I can see myself in many different types of texts. As an elementary classroom teacher for nearly 20 years, I challenged myself to include multiple perspectives and voices in our classroom library. In the early 2000s, it was hard to find chil-

Table 1. Culturally Conscious South Asian American Picture Books that Portray Family Life in the United States, 2019–2021

| Picturebook | Synopsis and Recognition |
|---|---|
| <p><i>Priya Dreams of Marigolds and Masala</i> Beaver’s Pond Press, 2019 Meenal Patel</p> | <p>As Priya and her beloved Babi-Ba prepare dinner each evening, Priya always asks, “What is India like?” 2020 SABA Award, Young Readers</p> |
| <p><i>Bilal Cooks Daal</i> Salaam Reads, 2019 Aisha Saeed, Anoosha Syed, illus.</p> | <p>Bilal and his father cook daal for dinner—an old family favorite! Bilal is proud to share his daal with his friends at home. NCSS Notable Trade Books for Young People, 2020 SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American</p> |
| <p><i>The Many Colors of Harpreet Singh</i> Union Square Kids, 2019 Supriya Kelkar, Alea Marley, illus.</p> | <p>One way Harpreet expresses his emotions is through the colors of his patkas. When his family moves to a new town, Harpreet wears white patkas because he feels shy and does not want to be seen. 2020 SABA, Highly Commended Book SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American ALA Notable Books, 2020, Younger</p> |
| <p><i>Leila in Saffron</i> Salaam Reads, 2019 Rukhsanna Guidroz Dinara Mirtalipova, illus.</p> | <p>Every Friday, Leila and her extended family gather at her Naani’s house for dinner where she can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch her family’s home country of Pakistan.</p> |
| <p><i>The Yellow Suitcase</i> Penny Candy, 2019 Meera Sriram, Meera Sethi, illus.</p> | <p>Asha and her family travel to India for her grandmother’s funeral.</p> |
| <p><i>Binny’s Diwali</i> Scholastic, 2021 Thirty Umrigar, Nidhi Chanani, illus.</p> | <p>It is the big day that Binny will share about Diwali with her friends at school. Although she feels nervous, she shares the beauty of the Festival of Lights!</p> |
| <p><i>Archie Celebrates Diwali</i> Charlesbridge Publishing, 2021 Mitali Banerjee Ruths Parwinder Singh, illus.</p> | <p>Archie is excited to celebrate Diwali, but she is nervous about what other families in her neighborhood will think of her family’s traditions.</p> |
| <p><i>Bindiya in India</i> Mango & Marigold Press, 2021 Monique Kamaria Chheda, MD Debasmita Dasgupta, illus.</p> | <p>Written in verse, we get to tag along with Bindiya as she visits her family in India for the first time for a family wedding.</p> |
| <p><i>Bindu’s Bindis</i> Union Square Kids, 2021 Supriya Kelkar, Parvati Pillai, illus.</p> | <p>Bindu loves the bindis her Nani sends her every month from India, but Bindu is not sure she wants to wear her bindis in front of her friends at school.</p> |
| <p><i>Hair Twins</i> Little Brown and Company, 2021 Raakhee Mirchandani, Holly Hatam, illus.</p> | <p>Every day Papa fixes his own hair before wearing his patka, and he fixes his daughter’s hair. They are hair twins! SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American</p> |
| <p><i>Laxmi’s Mooch</i> Kokila, 2021 Shelly Anand, Nabi H. Ali, illus.</p> | <p>The kids at school call the hairs on top of Laxmi’s lips “whiskers,” and she turns to her Mummy and Papa for comfort through their stories about strong and beautiful women who all had a <i>mooch</i>. ALA Notable Books, 2022, Younger SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American</p> |
| <p><i>Home Is in Between</i> Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021 Mitali Perkins, Lavanya Naidu</p> | <p>Shanti and her family leave her village in India and move to a new town in the United States where Shanti discovers that home is in between. NCSS Notable Trade Books for Young People, 2022 SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American</p> |
| <p><i>Fatima’s Great Outdoors</i> Kokila, 2021 Ambreen Tariq, Stevie Lewis, illus.</p> | <p>Fatima and her family take their first camping trip, and as she enjoys her new camping adventures, she recalls stories from her parents’ childhoods in India. NCSS Notable Trade Books for Young People, 2022 SocialJusticeBooks.org, South Asian American</p> |

dren's literature that depicted South Asian culture, language, history, migration, and family. Now, as a teacher educator, I continue searching for quality culturally conscious texts, and since my work on the SABA committee, a brand-new world of children's literature has opened up to me.

When I write curriculum with culturally conscious South Asian American picturebooks, I turn to Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's framework of Culturally and Historically Responsive Education (CHRE) to design, develop, and plan my units of study.⁵

Culturally and Historically Responsive Education

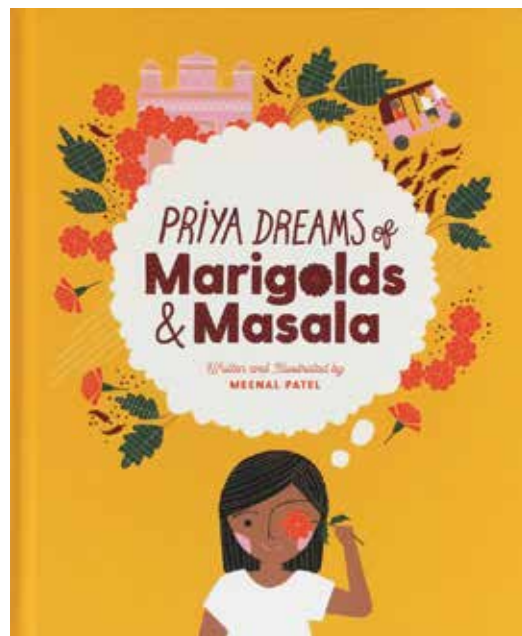
In this article, I offer pedagogical possibilities with these 13 picturebooks using Muhammad's framework of CHRE from her pivotal text, *Cultivating Genius*.⁶ With her framework of CHRE, Muhammad invites educators to design, write, and develop curricular units of study by moving beyond the state standards into five *pursuits*: *identity*, *skills*, *intellect*, *criticality*, and *joy*. She takes up the term *pursuits* from the tradition of the first Black Literary Societies in the early 1800s. These societies, Muhammad writes, "shared knowledge and promoted ideas to cultivate a scholarly and literate way of life... and gave them means to meet the greater end of elevating their minds and social conditions."⁷ That work continues today in organizations such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks and Education for Liberation. Such organizations have always sought the liberation of young people and their communities by uplifting their voices and cultural narratives while pursuing the well-being of all.

The Five Pursuits and South Asian American Culturally Conscious Picturebooks

There are many ways that social studies educators can utilize picturebooks like the ones shared in this article for instruction that will integrate and normalize the presence of South Asian voices into their curricula. For example, these 13 picturebooks could be incorporated into units of study on such social studies topics as family, immigration, language, economics, culture, home, change, and geography. With these 13 picturebooks (or some subset of them) as a text set, educators can create opportunities for inquiry into the culture and cultural diversity of South Asian families in the U.S., highlighting the similarities and differences among South Asian cultures. This type of inquiry can disrupt the dominant narrative that South Asian people are a homogenous group with a single story.

I will provide examples of the kinds of pursuit statements (for each of the five pursuits) that educators might write when starting to create social studies curriculum or units of study for their young learners. It is important to note that the pursuit of *skills* is the pursuit where educators record the state standard(s) that will be taught during the unit. As

Muhammad guides us, pursuit statements begin with either "Students will..." or "I can..." I will also offer suggestions for activities that would support teachers and learners in these pursuits.



Identity

According to Muhammad, the pursuit of identity guides learners towards the affirmation of their own and others' complex, layered, sociocultural identities.⁸ Muhammad writes, "Youth need opportunities in school to explore multiple facets of selfhood, but also to learn about the identities of others who may differ."⁹ These picturebooks invite South Asian American children to see representations of their home cultures in the context of school, incorporating many of the social studies objectives from the NCSS theme **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**.

Sample Identity Pursuits:

Students will write stories about their daily experiences at home and school and compose titles that include their names.

Nine of the picturebooks include the name of the main character in the title (e.g., Binny, Bindu, Archie, Laxmi, Bindiya, Bilal, Harpreet, Leila, Priya). Students and their teacher can discuss why the authors included the main characters' names in their titles. Teachers can ask students to discuss, "What is a main character?" Learners can also interview family members to learn more about their name and the names of the people in their families. Students can inquire into what their names mean and their families' traditions in choosing names.

Students will describe what home means to them.

Educators can invite their young learners to think about home in terms of people, place, and geography. Educators can ask, “Where do you feel at home?” and “When do you feel at home?” The main characters in these picturebooks are celebrating holidays (e.g., Diwali), crossing national and international borders (e.g., U.S., India), learning about their culture and the country their family emigrated from through stories from their elders (e.g., grandmothers), accepting themselves (e.g., hair), and sharing their culture with their “American” friends (e.g., food, clothes, bindis). For example, in Perkins’s *Home is in Between*, Shanti realizes “She was good at making anywhere feel like home. Especially here. In the space between cultures.”¹⁰ Learners can create artistic responses to represent all the ways they think of home. Students and teachers can also inquire into the structures and materials people around the world use to build their homes (including their own) and make connections to geography and climate.

Students will share important words to describe themselves from the many languages they speak, including English.

All the picturebooks embed the main character’s family’s language (e.g., Urdu, Hindi) at various levels throughout the book with glossaries at the end. Most of the picturebooks also include thoughtful notes from the authors, telling their own stories of language, religion, and culture. Teachers can create anchor charts or word walls with their learners to record these special words in multiple languages. This work can be celebrated and expanded over time.

Skills

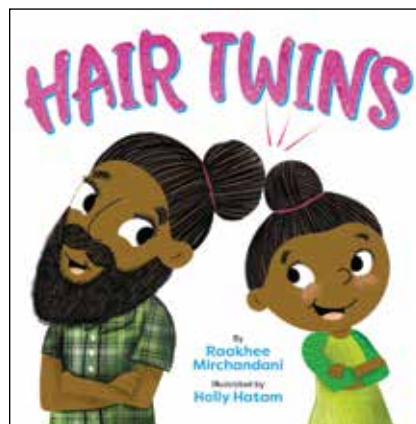
Muhammad defines skills to mean “competence, ability, and expertise based on what educators deem to be important for student learning in each content area.”¹¹ The Ten Themes from NCSS center culture, identity, geography, community, and social/political realities. Each of the 13 picturebooks presented in this article invite readers to engage at the intersection of multiple social studies themes.

Sample Skill Pursuits:

- *Students will give examples and describe the importance of cultural unity and diversity within and across groups.*
- *Students will demonstrate an understanding that people in different times and places view the world differently.*
- *Students will use appropriate resources, data sources, and geographic tools such as maps to generate and manipulate and interpret information.*

With these picturebooks, students can learn about the

geography of South Asia and the experiences of immigration and border crossing. In *Leila in Saffron*, Leila metaphorically crosses the border from the U.S. to Pakistan when she and her family have dinner at her Naani’s house.¹² In *Bindiya in India*, Bindiya travels by plane to India for the first time to attend a *shaadi* (wedding). The story ends, “celebrating with family on her final night, she thinks aloud, ‘what an amazing sight.’”¹³ Or, with these texts, teachers can work to disrupt the single story of Asia as one people and one place. Instead, they can use these texts along with maps and globes to study the 48 countries of Asia and the 3 main countries of South Asia: India, Pakistan, and Nepal. Students can inquire into the multiple languages that families from South Asia speak as well as the roles of elders in different South Asian communities.



Intellect

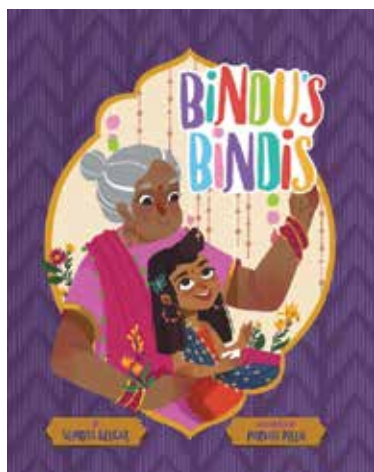
Muhammad explains that intellect is an expression of new knowledge that can be set into the context of the world. “Cultivating students’ intellectualism means developing their mental culture...intelligence isn’t just about academics, but also emotional intelligence and self- and social awareness.”¹⁴

Sample Intellect Pursuits:

- *I can celebrate many holidays including Diwali, Ramadan, and Eid.*
- *I can describe the people and cultures of India.*
- *I can study the differences across religions in South Asia, including Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism.*
- *I can listen to stories about why families emigrate.*

The 13 picturebooks offer learners insight into South Asian American culture and invite us all to inquire into the multiple religions and traditions of South Asian Americans. *Binny’s Diwali* includes the context of school. In this story, it is Binny’s day to present the Hindu festival of Diwali, and her father sends her to school with blessings: “May the words you speak today be as sweet as *jalebis* and as soft as

pedas.”¹⁵ And, in Mirchandani’s *Hair Twins*, a Sikh father and daughter always fix their long hair together. Mirchandani explains in her note that this book “is a celebration of the bond between a Sikh father and his daughter, inspired by my husband, Agan, a turban-wearing Sikh American, and our daughter, Satya. As part of their religion, Sikhism, both Agan and Satya don’t cut their hair.”¹⁶ These books will not provide all the answers to any of these questions, yet they can be used as resources in any of these areas of inquiry with the support of additional multimodal texts including videos, photographs, songs, and more books about South Asia. For these intellectual pursuits, educators can work with community members to create opportunities for learning to happen with the community, including parents, cultural organizations, and religious organizations. Students will benefit from engaging with cultural artifacts and primary sources as they develop their intellectual understandings of South Asian cultures.



Criticality

According to Muhammad, “Teaching criticality asks, ‘How will I engage students’ thinking about power, anti-oppression, and equity in the text, in communities, and in society?’”¹⁷

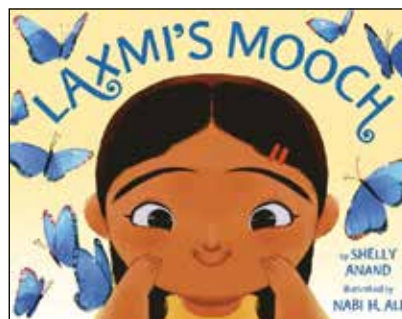
Sample Criticality Pursuits:

- Students will give examples of and explain group and institutional influences such as religious beliefs, laws, and peer pressure, on people, events, and elements of culture.
- Students will inquire into contemporary events regarding Anti-Asian sentiments in the U.S.

Across these books, the main characters have concerns about being accepted by their friends in the community and school. They are not sure about how they should present themselves, due to the uncertainty and rejection they experience in public. Students will learn about the racism that South Asians experience in the United States. For example, in *Bindu’s Bindis*, Bindu picks up her beloved Nani (grand-

mother) from the airport and proudly wears her bindi on her forehead, until they encounter a crowd of people shouting and holding signs that read “go back.” Although Kelkar does not explicitly unpack the political context, she makes space for readers to inquire further about what is happening and why it is happening.¹⁸ In *Laxmi’s Mooch*, Anand challenges Western notions of beauty, specifically for young girls. Laxmi seeks comfort from her family when, while imitating animals at recess, she is called a good cat by a classmate, Zoe. Laxmi’s mom responds affectionately, “Aww, you’re my little billi [cat].” But Laxmi clarifies, “No, Mummy! She was calling me hairy!”¹⁹

Right now, South Asian American young people are contending with many layers of racism and violence. It is necessary for educators to work to share stories that acknowledge and speak back to these realities. As Muhammad states, teachers cannot “teach students to have a Critical lens if teachers don’t have one themselves.”²⁰ Across these titles, it is up to the teachers and learners to further inquire into the tensions by studying current events and listening to each other’s perceptions of such events. These books make the tensions visible and accessible, but the stories are not about injustice and mistreatment. Rather, these stories are about what I will share next—the fifth pursuit—*JOY!*



Joy

Muhammad shares that joy is in some ways the ultimate pursuit of education. When young people experience joy in their learning and ways of being they create space within themselves to grow, heal, and experience humanity.²¹

Sample Joy Pursuits:

- I can compare and contrast the characters’ experiences and geographical connections to each other, myself, and my friends.
- I can write stories about the parts of my culture that make me feel proud.
- I can make a list with my family about all the things that we love to do together.

In each of these 13 books, the main characters experience the joy of their identities, cultures, families, religions, and

languages. Students will learn that South Asian American cultures and families are full of love, joy, and unity. Students will learn that South Asian American families are proud of their heritage and that they work hard to maintain their culture in the United States through family dinners, holidays, and stories. Every story presented in this text set ends with joy! Saeed ends her lovely picturebook, *Bilal Cooks Daal*: “Daal is tiny. Daal is tough. But with a little time, and a lot of patience, it becomes the softest, tastiest, best thing in the whole wide world. And the best part is sharing it with friends. That’s why Bilal loves daal so much.”²² This sentiment rings true across these 13 books—the protagonists all express their love and gratitude for their identities, their families, and their cultures.

Closing Thoughts

As educators engage culturally with their South Asian students, they can organize their curriculum and instruction using Muhammad’s five pursuits, which build knowledge beyond skills or standards, leading to “liberation, self-determination, self-reliance, and self-empowerment.”²³ A key question Muhammad sought to answer was, “How do we engage youth in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking practices in pedagogies that are responsive to the social times and responsive to the social, cultural, ethnic, and gendered identities of our youth?”²⁴ With culturally conscious South Asian literature, we can learn how South Asian (American) cultures are very much alive in our students’ homes today, and educators should strive toward addressing those cultures in their classrooms. This shared cultural knowledge can allow social studies teachers who are ethnic outsiders to teach culturally relevant curricula to their students.

What a long way we have come from when I was a child! I could have never dreamed of seeing myself in the pages of picturebooks. Moreover, I could not have imagined my teachers reading any one of these 13 books to the class. In addition to these 13 titles, there are many more titles available to support teachers in bringing South Asian culture to life in the context of U.S. schools. I invite social studies educators to learn more about culturally conscious literature written by South Asian authors with awards like SABA in order to incorporate the voices of South Asian youth into their social studies instruction. ■

Notes

1. Kevin K. Kumashiro, “Posts’ Perspectives on Anti-Oppressive Education in Social Studies, English, Mathematics, and Science Classrooms.” *Educational Researcher* 30, no. 3 (2001): 3–12.
2. Punita Chhabra Rice, *South Asian American Experiences in Schools: Brown Voices from the Classroom* (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).
3. Rudine Sims, *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children’s Fiction* (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1982).
4. South Asia Book Award, University of Madison-Wisconsin, <https://southasiabookaward.wisc.edu/>
5. Gholdy Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (New York: Scholastic, 2020).
6. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*.
7. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 25.
8. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*; For more on the definition of “sociocultural” identities, see Keffrelyn D. Brown and Amelia M. Kraehe, “The Complexities of Teaching the Complex: Examining How Future Educators Construct Understandings of Sociocultural Knowledge and Schooling,” *Educational Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010): 91–115.
9. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 67.
10. Mitali Perkins, *Home Is in Between*, illus. Lavanya Naidu (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).
11. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 87.
12. Rukhsanna Guidroz, *Leila in Saffron*, illus. Dinara Mirtalipova (New York: Salaam Reads, 2019).
13. Monique Kamaria Chheda, *Bindiya in India*, illus. Debasmita Dasgupta (Cambridge, MA: Mango & Marigold Press, 2021).
14. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 105.
15. Thrity Umrigar, *Binny’s Diwali*, illus. Nidhi Chanani (New York: Scholastic, 2021).
16. Raakhee Mirchandani, *Hair Twins*, illus. Holly Hatam (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2021).
17. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 131.
18. Supriya Kelkar, *Bindu’s Bindis*, illus. Parvati Pillai (New York: Union Square Kids, 2021).
19. Shelly Anand, *Laxmi’s Mooch*, illus. Nabi H. Ali (New York: Kokila, 2021).
20. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 131.
21. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*.
22. Aisha Saeed, *Bilal Cooks Daal*, illus. Anoocha Syed (New York: Salaam Reads, 2019).
23. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 28.
24. Muhammad, *Cultivating Genius*, 55.

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