Make Us VISIBLE

makeusvisible.org



Binny's Diwali Educator Guide

Exploring Culture and Tradition

Table of Contents

SECTION		PAGE
01	About the Book	2
02	About this Guide	8
03	Learning Goals	9
04	Before You Teach	10
05	Lesson at a Glance	11
06	Vocabulary Guide & Discussion Questions	12
07	Activity: Teach Me Something Meaningful	15
08	Extension Activities	19
09	Windows, Mirrors, & Sliding Glass Doors	23
10	Recommended Book Titles	25
11	Q&A with the Author & Illustrator	28
12	For Educators, By Educators	30
13	Standards	30

01 About the Book

Title: Binny's Diwali

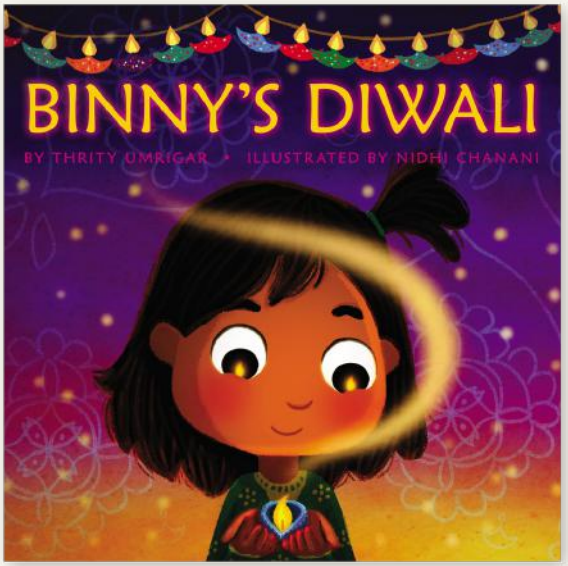
Author: Thrity Umrigar

Illustrator: Nidhi Chanani

Publisher: Scholastic Press

Genre: Children's Picture Book, Realistic Fiction

Recommended Grades: K - 5



Synopsis:

Binny prepares to share Diwali with her classmates. Through her classroom experience, readers learn about traditions that make the holiday meaningful to Binny and her family while exploring larger themes of cultural pride, identity, belonging, and community.

Grounded in a child's classroom experience, the story allows students to connect with Binny as a peer rather than viewing Diwali simply as a holiday to study. The book creates an opportunity for students to learn about one family's celebration of Diwali while considering how sharing meaningful parts of ourselves can help us understand one another more fully.

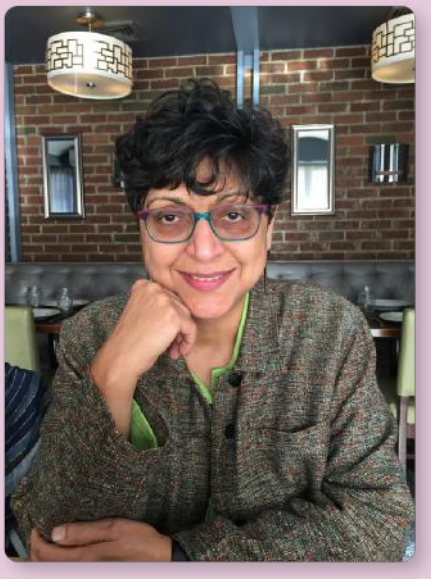
Themes:

- identity and belonging
- family traditions and cultural pride
- community
- cultural visibility
- curiosity across differences

Big Idea:

When students see both **mirrors** of their own identities and **windows** into the lives of others, classrooms become spaces where difference is understood, valued, and connected to belonging.

Go to pages 5-7 to learn more about **mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors**



About the Author

Thrity Umrigar is the best-selling author of novels, children's books, and a memoir. Thrity was born in Bombay, India, and came to the U.S. when she was 21. Accused by teachers and parents alike of being a daydreaming, head-in-the-clouds child, she grew up lost in the fictional worlds created by Steinbeck, Hemingway, Woolf and Faulkner. She would emerge long enough from these books to create her own fictional and poetic worlds.

Encouraged by her practical-minded parents to get an undergraduate degree in business, Thrity survived business school by creating a drama club and writing, directing, and acting in plays. Her first short stories, essays, and poems were published in national magazines and newspapers in India at age fifteen.

After earning a M.A. in journalism in the U.S., Thrity worked for several years as an award-winning reporter, columnist, and magazine writer. She also earned a Ph.D. in English. In 1999, Thrity won a one-year Nieman Fellowship to Harvard University, which is given to mid-career journalists.

While at Harvard, Thrity wrote her first novel, **Bombay Time**. In 2002, she accepted a teaching position at Case Western Reserve University, where she was named a Distinguished University Professor of English. Her articles have been published in national publications in the U.S.

Thrity is active on the national lecture circuit and has spoken at book festivals, universities, literary societies, civic and business organizations, and public libraries all across the country.





Images from @kidcongeniality



About the Illustrator

Born in Calcutta, raised in southern California, and now creating in the San Francisco Bay Area, Nidhi Chanani is an active and engaged storyteller.

Nidhi Chanani's creative practice centers on heartfelt storytelling through illustration—blending humor, emotion, and a touch of magic. From daily sketches to acclaimed graphic novels like **Pashmina** and picture books like **Strong**, her work is rooted in a desire to spread joy and foster connection.

Influenced by her identity, Chanani is committed to increasing representation of South Asian and LGBTQ+ communities in children's literature and visual storytelling. Through her characters and narratives, she creates inclusive, resonant stories that reflect diverse experiences while making space for underrepresented voices—with warmth, empathy, and imagination.

Nidhi Chanani was honored by the Obama Administration in 2012 as a Champion of Change. Her debut graphic novel **Pashmina** received starred reviews and multiple honors. Other graphic novels including **Jukebox**, **Shark Princess** and **Super Boba Café** have been recognized by the American Library Association (ALA) as great graphic novels for kids among other honors. Her picture book **Strong** won an ALA Stonewall Honor.

Chanani's work has been featured on PBS, CNN, BBC, NPR, and she has worked extensively with with Disney Parks.





Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors: Using Binny's Diwali in the Classroom

Through **Binny's Diwali**, students can find **mirrors** of their own experiences and **windows** into the experiences of others. The goal is not simply to learn about a holiday but to build a classroom where students understand that the traditions, stories, and identities we carry are worthy of being seen. All students have holidays they are excited about, and it's a gift to feel represented or to learn something new with a curious and open mind.



> All learners need reading experiences that allow them to see themselves reflected, explore perspectives different from their own, and step into the lived experiences of others.
>
> **Windows** invite students into worlds beyond their own.
>
> **Mirrors** affirm that who they are and where they come from belong in the classroom.
>
> Lessons can even become **sliding glass doors**, an invitation to step inside, explore, and feel a sense of belonging.
>
> **-BrainPOP Blog Post by Christine Dai**
> Make Us Visible NY Co-Director
> & Middle School Educator

Windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors was coined by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop

Just as importantly, books like **Binny's Diwali** help normalize the presence of a range of voices in everyday classroom life. When stories rooted in different cultures are woven naturally into literacy instruction, community building, and regular read alouds, they are less likely to feel like a "special topic" reserved for a particular month or holiday. Instead, they become part of the broader story of whose experiences, families, and traditions belong in school.

Go to **SECTION 9: WINDOWS, MIRRORS & SLIDING GLASS DOORS, P.23** for reflection questions to deepen your students' connection to these concepts

Devika's Mirror



K-5 Educator
Devika Ganapathy

For me, **Binny's Diwali** is a **mirror**. There is something powerful about teaching a story that reflects traditions, experiences, and pieces of an identity that feel familiar to me. That personal connection allows me to bring parts of myself naturally into the classroom, whether through a story, a memory, or simply being able to say, "This is familiar to me, too."

At the same time, I've taught **Binny's Diwali** in many different classroom communities, and I've learned that whether I am serving as a **mirror** or **window** depends on the students sitting in front of me. For some students, my experience and Binny's story reflect something familiar. For others, I may be helping open a window into a tradition or experience they have not encountered before.

That is part of why this book works so well in the classroom. It creates space for cultural specificity without requiring any student to become the spokesperson for their culture. As the teacher, I can model sharing something meaningful while also making it clear that my experience and Binny's represents **an** experience of Diwali, not **the** experience.

I want students to understand that seeing yourself reflected in a story matters but so does learning how to thoughtfully look through someone else's window. When both happen naturally in our classrooms, representation becomes less about a special lesson or designated month and more about whose stories we understand as simply belonging there.





Devika's students learn about the festive details of Diwali through art activities

Lauren's Window



K-5 Educator
Lauren Chen

For me, Binny's Diwali is a **window**.

As a teacher who doesn't celebrate Diwali, I see this read-aloud as a chance for me and my students to peek into one family's celebration in a way that is full of warmth, real detail, and joy. I've found that the best way for me to approach it is as a fellow learner rather than the expert in the room. It helps me to say out loud, "I'm learning, too, and here is what I found out," because it shows our students that curiosity and respect go together. And since I've been seen as the "other" in some spaces myself, I know how much it matters to be met with genuine interest instead of assumptions, and I want to make sure that every child in my classroom feels that, too.

Being intentional with this read-aloud starts with preparation. Before teaching it, I look into what Diwali means, how different South Asian families and regions celebrate it, and what words or customs appear in the story. As we read and discuss, I'm careful to frame Binny's story as one family's celebration rather than a full picture of all Diwali celebrations, and I make space for the deeper meaning behind the holiday, not just the lights and sweets.

Once students start connecting the story to their own lives, the **windows** can then turn into **sliding glass doors**! A student who celebrates Diwali might feel seen and proud, while classmates start asking thoughtful questions and notice what they have in common: family gatherings, special foods, and meaningful traditions. They notice the differences too, and that's part of the point. Over time, they learn that being curious about someone else's holiday takes nothing away from their own, and that real appreciation comes from listening, understanding, and respecting, not performing.

The first time I taught Binny's Diwali in a 1st grade classroom, my students were immediately enamored with the beautiful illustrations and vivid writing. They were eager to learn more about a holiday some had never encountered, and they quickly found joy in both the commonalities and differences between Diwali and their own celebrations. I hope your students do, too.



02 About this Guide

This discussion guide is designed to help educators explore **Binny's Diwali** with young readers. It can be used in classrooms, libraries, or at home, and is flexible enough to fit a single sitting or several shorter sessions.

About the Book provides background on the story, author Thrity Umrigar, illustrator Nidhi Chanani, and central themes, which is a helpful starting point before diving into reading and discussion.

Learning Goals outline student-facing instructional objectives that frame what readers should understand or be able to do by the end of the unit, and include a 45-50 minute sample lesson plan to guide instruction.

Discussion Questions are organized by **pre-**, **during**, and **post-reading**:

- **Pre-reading questions** activate thinking around culture and traditions (big and small, family and community-wide), encouraging students to make connections to their own lives
- **During reading questions** offer strategic stopping points paired with text-dependent questions to encourage students to investigate Binny's experiences
- **Post-reading questions** are higher-order, organized around the book's major themes of identity, visibility, and belonging

Feel free to pick and choose based on your group's age and attention span.

Words and Names to Know highlights key words and pronunciations from the text that may be new to readers. Consider pausing to discuss each as they appear in the text.

Activities, including **Printable Worksheets**, offer hands-on ways to extend the book's themes beyond discussion, such as drawing, writing, and reflective exercises. These work well as follow-up sessions or take-home extensions.

Expand the Learning provides additional resources, related titles, and ways to connect the book's themes to your community.

There is no single "right" way to move through this guide! You can read the book together first, then choose the sections and questions that best fit your group's needs, time, and comfort level.

03 Learning Goals

Learning Objectives

Students will explore themes of identity, belonging, family traditions, cultural pride, and community through **Binny's Diwali**. Students will consider how traditions can connect us to family, culture, and identity while practicing curiosity and respect toward experiences that may be different from their own.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify ways traditions can connect to family, culture, and identity
2. Describe how Binny feels about sharing Diwali with her classmates
3. Compare Binny's experiences and traditions with their own, noticing both similarities and differences
4. Practice responding to cultural differences with curiosity and respect
5. Reflect on how classrooms can become places where students feel seen, valued, and included

04 Before You Teach

1. Review Section 5: Lesson at a Glance
   P. 11
2. Familiarize yourself with discussion questions
   Section 6: Vocabulary Guide & Discussion Questions PP. 12-14
3. Familiarize yourself with vocabulary and pronunciation
4. Gather materials according to selected activity
   Section 7: Teach Me Something Meaningful & Section 8: Extension Activities PP. 15-22

Teacher Considerations

Present Binny's story as one experience of Diwali. Families may celebrate differently based on religion, region, culture, country, and family tradition.

Avoid asking one student to represent an entire community. A child who celebrates Diwali should not be expected or prompted to teach the class. They should share only if they independently choose to do so.

Do not require students to disclose personal traditions or identities. Always offer fictional, literary, or general alternatives.

Avoid framing unfamiliarity as a deficiency. Instead of describing a name, food, word, or tradition as "strange" or "hard," model language such as, "This is new to me, so I'm going to learn more about it."

Teach curiosity alongside boundaries. Students can be interested in another person's experience while also understanding that nobody owes them personal information.

Go beyond celebration. Diwali provides an entry point, but the larger goal is helping students think about identity, visibility, respect, and belonging.

05 Lesson at a Glance

Total Time: 45-50 minutes
Format: Read-aloud, discussion, and hands-on activity. Options for extension.

Suggested Sequence:

Launch (5 minutes)

- Invite students to think about and/or jot down something people might do repeatedly because it is meaningful to them
- Introduce the word **tradition**

Read Aloud & Discussion (20-25 minutes)

- Read **Binny's Diwali** aloud, pausing at selected moments to explore Binny's experience of sharing her family's Diwali traditions with her classmates, focusing on themes of identity, visibility, and belonging (see Discussion Questions on page 12 for suggested stopping points)

Activity (15-20 minutes)

Choose one classroom activity based on students' age/readiness

Suggested for Grades K-1

- Teach Me Something Meaningful (Drawing Only)
- Exploring Rangoli (Drawing Only)
- Classroom Puzzle Piece

Suggested for Grades 2-5

- Teach Me Something Meaningful (Drawing and Writing)
- Exploring Rangoli (Drawing and Writing)
- Classroom Puzzle Piece

Reflection (5 minutes)

- Return to the essential question: **What happens when we make room for everyone's stories in our classroom?**

Extensions

- See Extension Activities section (page 19) for further material

06 Vocabulary Guide & Discussion Questions

Key Vocabulary

- **Diwali (dih-VAH-lee)**: A festival celebrated by many people around the world, including Hindu, Jain, Sikh, and some Buddhist communities. Traditions and meanings vary across families and regions
- **Diya (DEE-yah)**: A small lamp, traditionally made from clay and filled with oil, often lit during Diwali
- **Rangoli (rahng-GOH-lee)**: Decorative designs created using materials such as colored powders, rice, flowers, or sand, often made near entrances and gathering spaces
- **Jalebi (juh-LEH-bee)**: a circular-shaped, deep-fried snack soaked in sweet syrup
- **Peda (puh-DAH)**: a sweet made of khoa cheese, sugar, and traditional flavoring like cardamom seeds prepared as a thick, semi-soft round ball
- **Tradition**: A practice, custom, or way of doing something that may be shared within a family or community over time
- **Identity**: The many qualities, experiences, communities, and relationships that help shape who we are
- **Belonging**: Feeling accepted, valued, and included in a group or community

TEACHER NOTE:

Diwali is celebrated in many different ways.

Encourage students to understand Binny's celebration as one family's experience rather than as a representation of every family who celebrates Diwali.

Discussion Questions

This section contains suggested discussion questions teachers can utilize throughout the read aloud to engage students in meaningful discussions surrounding key themes of **Binny's Diwali**.

A. Before Reading

Opening Questions

- **What are traditions?**
- **What makes a tradition meaningful?**

Invite students to think about something people might do repeatedly because it is meaningful to them.

Examples may include:

- a food or meal
- a song
- a place
- a phrase or saying
- a bedtime routine
- a celebration
- an activity done with family or friends

Teacher Framing

You might tell students:

> "Traditions can be big celebrations, but they can also be small things people do with the people they care about. Today we are going to meet Binny, who wants to share one of her family's traditions with her classmates."

Students should not be required to share personal or cultural information. They may speak generally, use an example from a book, or simply listen.

B. During Reading

Part 1: Notice Binny

Pause throughout the story to consider Binny's experience.

- What are you learning about Binny and her family?
- What details show that Diwali is meaningful to Binny?
- How does Binny seem to feel about sharing Diwali with her classmates?
- What do you notice about the way she talks about her traditions?
- Why might sharing something important to you feel both exciting and a little vulnerable?
- What do Binny's words, actions, or expressions tell us about how she is feeling?

Part 2: Notice the Classroom

Shift students' attention toward the classroom community and the ways Binny's classmates respond to her.

- What are Binny's classmates learning from her?
- How do the students respond when Binny shares something that may be unfamiliar to them?
- What does respectful curiosity look or sound like?
- What can we do when we hear a word, name, tradition, or idea that is new to us?
- How does the classroom change when Binny is given space to share this part of herself?

The final question invites students to think about what can happen when classroom communities make space for everyone.

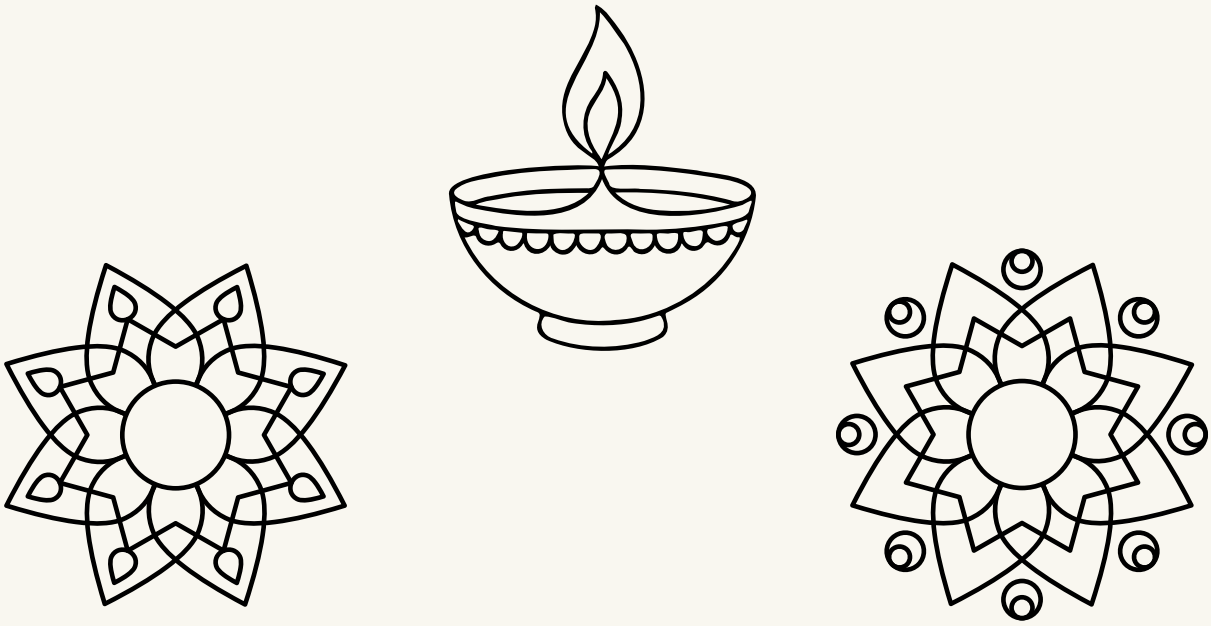
C. After Reading

Move from comprehension toward larger questions of identity, visibility, and belonging.

- Why do you think it was important to Binny to share Diwali with her classmates?
- How does it feel to share something important about yourself with others?
- How did Binny's story give her classmates a window into her experience?
- For some readers, how might Binny's story act as a mirror?
- What helped Binny feel that her traditions belonged in the classroom?
- What can we do when someone shares an experience or tradition that is unfamiliar to us?
- How can learning about one another help create a stronger classroom community?

Big Question:

What happens when we make room for everyone's stories in our classroom?



07 Activity: Teach Me Something Meaningful

Instructions

In **Teach Me Something Meaningful**, students choose one small thing they know, enjoy, or care about and teach it to a partner through a drawing, sentence, explanation, or demonstration.

Their partner practices listening with curiosity and respect using prompts such as:

- "I learned that…"
- "I'm curious about…"
- "I noticed…"
- "Thank you for teaching me about…"

Students then switch roles.

Reflection Questions

- What did it feel like when someone took an interest in something that mattered to you?
- What helped you feel listened to?
- What did your partner do that showed curiosity or respect?
- How is this similar to what Binny does when she shares Diwali with her class?
- What can we do to show care and respect when someone shares something new that is meaningful to them?

What This Activity Does

The goal is to build empathy, respectful curiosity, and a stronger sense of classroom belonging without requiring students to disclose anything deeply personal.

Printable worksheets are on the next pages and linked in the thumbnails below.

K-1 Suggested for Grades K-1


Name: _____ Date: _____

Teach Me Something Meaningful

STEP 1

Choose one thing you know, enjoy, or care about. This could be any hobby or activity, from basketball and snowboarding to singing and drawing, or coding and baking! Write it down on the line below.

One thing I know, enjoy, or care about is

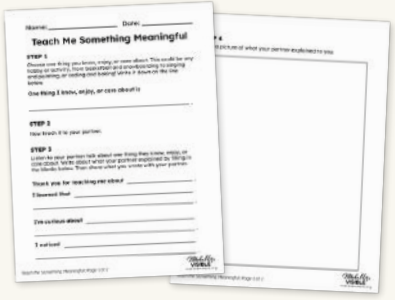
STEP 2

Now find it to your partner.

STEP 3

Listen as your partner talk about one thing they know, enjoy, or care about. Then draw a picture of what your partner explained.

2-5 Suggested for Grades 2-5


Name: _____ Date: _____

Teach Me Something Meaningful

STEP 1

Choose one thing you know, enjoy, or care about. This could be any hobby or activity, from basketball and snowboarding to singing and drawing, or coding and baking! Write it down on the line below.

One thing I know, enjoy, or care about is

STEP 2

Now find it to your partner.

STEP 3

Listen as your partner talk about one thing they know, enjoy, or care about. Write about what your partner explained in the blanks below. Then share what you wrote with your partner.

Thank you for teaching me about

I learned that

I'm curious about

I noticed

Name: _____ Date: _____

Teach Me Something Meaningful

STEP 1

Choose one thing you know, enjoy, or care about. This could be any hobby or activity, from basketball and snowboarding to singing and painting, or coding and baking! Write it down on the line below.

One thing I know, enjoy, or care about is

_____ .

STEP 2

Now teach it to your partner.

STEP 3

Listen to your partner talk about one thing they know, enjoy, or care about. Then draw a picture of what your partner explained.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Teach Me Something Meaningful

STEP 1

Choose one thing you know, enjoy, or care about. This could be any hobby or activity, from basketball and soccer to singing and painting, or coding and baking! Write it down on the line below.

One thing I know, enjoy, or care about is

_____ .

STEP 2

Now teach it to your partner.

STEP 3

Listen to your partner talk about one thing they know, enjoy, or care about. Write about what your partner explained by filling in the blanks below. Then share what you wrote with your partner.

Thank you for teaching me about _____ .

I learned that _____

_____ .

I'm curious about _____

_____ .

I noticed _____

_____ .

Make Us VISIBLE
makeusvisible.org

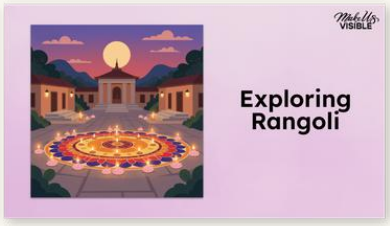
STEP 4

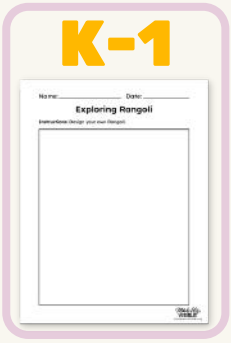
Draw a picture of what your partner explained to you.

Make Us VISIBLE
makeusvisible.org

08 Extension Activities

Art: Exploring Rangoli







Use the Google Slides presentation (linked left in thumbnail) to introduce students to examples of rangoli as an artistic and cultural tradition.

Invite students to notice: patterns, symmetry, shapes, repetition, color, natural materials

Students may then create their own pattern-inspired artwork. (Worksheets linked in thumbnails and provided in following pages.)

Teacher Note: Create your **rangoli** as an example. Also, the goal is to learn about the artistic tradition and its meaning rather than reducing rangoli to a generic holiday craft.

ELA: Windows and Mirrors Book Pairing

Pair **Binny's Diwali** with another story about identity, family, or belonging.

Students can compare:

- What does each character want others to understand about them?
- What parts of each story are mirrors for you?
- What parts are windows?
- How do the characters find belonging?

Classroom Community: Our Classroom Has Many Stories

Create a collaborative classroom display (optional title: **Our Classroom Has Many Stories**) where students can contribute something meaningful to them.

Contributions may include drawings, words, symbols, book connections, fictional examples, or personal reflections.

The emphasis should not be on categorizing students by culture. Instead, the display can show that every person brings experiences, interests, relationships, and traditions into the classroom.

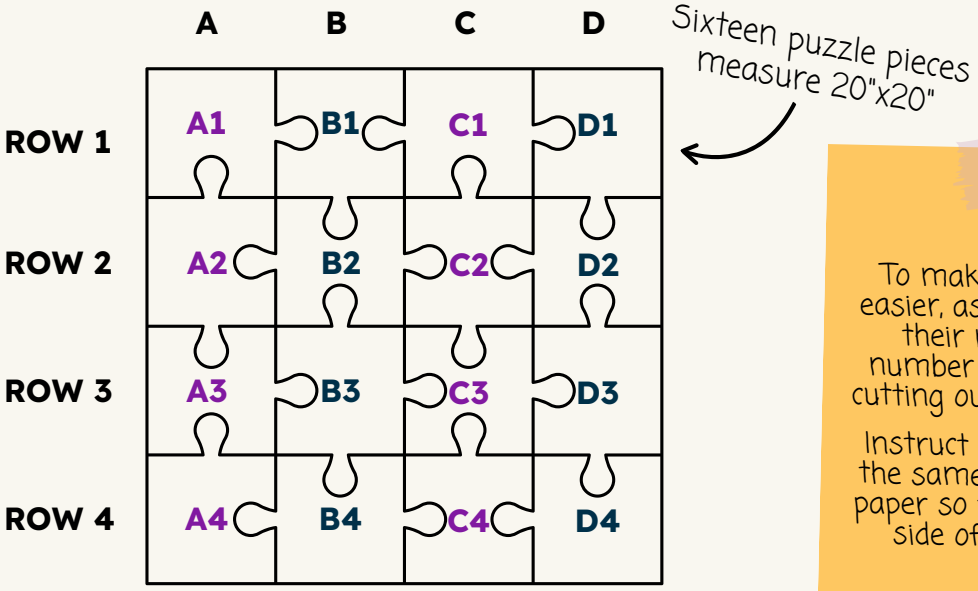
Classroom Community: Classroom Puzzle

Each student gets one puzzle piece that they design with drawings, words, symbols, book connections, fictional examples, or personal reflections.

Put the puzzle together to show the classroom community as a whole.

How To Make a Complete Puzzle

Print multiple sets of column B and C puzzle pieces so that every student gets one puzzle piece. For instance, if you have 1 teacher and 22 students in your class, print one copy of column A puzzle pieces, two copies of column B and C puzzle pieces, and 1 copy of column D puzzle pieces to have a total of 24 pieces. Invite other school staff (ie: principal, librarian, art teacher, custodian, etc) to participate if you have extra puzzle pieces.



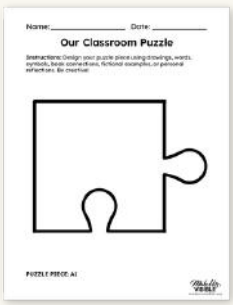
TIPS:

To make puzzle assembly easier, ask students to write their name and puzzle number on the back before cutting out their puzzle piece.

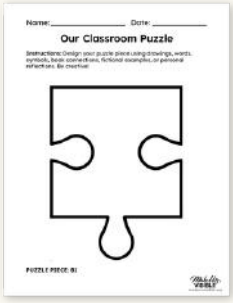
Instruct them to write it in the same orientation as the paper so that it's clear which side of the piece is "up."

Access printable worksheets by clicking the thumbnails below.

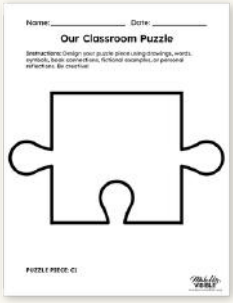
Column A



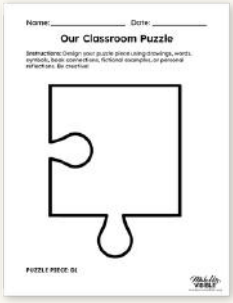
Column B



Column C



Column D



Name: _____ Date: _____

Exploring Rangoli

Instructions: Design your own rangoli.

Make Us VISIBLE
makeusvisible.org

Name: _____ Date: _____

Exploring Rangoli

STEP 1: Design your own rangoli.

STEP 2: Write about why you chose this pattern and why it is meaningful to you.

I chose this pattern because _____

_____

_____ .

This pattern is meaningful to me because _____

_____

_____ .

Make Us VISIBLE
makeusvisible.org

09 Windows, Mirrors, & Sliding Glass Doors

Binny's Diwali can offer different entry points depending on the students and educators in the room:



For some, the story may act as a **mirror**, reflecting familiar traditions, family experiences, or parts of their identity.



For others, it may serve as a **window,** offering a chance to learn about experiences that are new or less familiar.



With thoughtful discussion, the story can also become a **sliding glass door**, inviting students to move beyond simply observing another experience and toward deeper connection, empathy, and belonging.

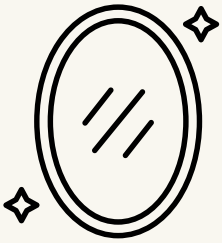
As you teach, consider not only how the story may function for your students, but also how it functions for you as the educator. A lesson does not need to be a **mirror** for a teacher in order to be taught meaningfully. What matters is approaching the text with curiosity, care, humility, and a willingness to learn alongside students.

The goal is not for every student to connect to the story in the same way. The goal is to create space for students to see themselves, learn about others, and recognize that all of these stories belong in the classroom.

Reflection Questions

Use the following questions to guide students to explore how Binny's Diwali is a mirror, window, and sliding glass door for them.

Mirror

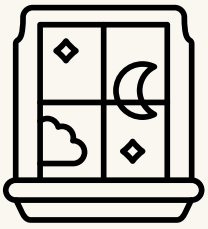


What in Binny's story reminds you of something in your own life?

Students might connect with:

- family celebrations
- being excited to share something
- feeling nervous about being different
- bringing something from home into school
- wanting others to understand something important to them

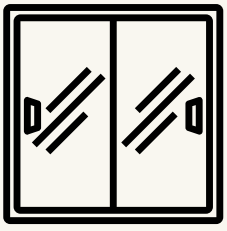
Window



What did Binny's story help you learn about an experience that may be different from your own?

Encourage students to notice similarities and differences with curiosity and respect, without treating one tradition or experience as the standard.

Sliding Glass Door

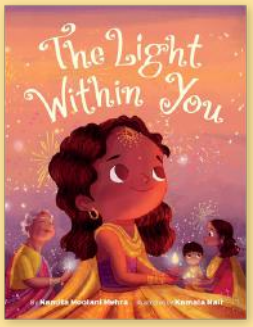


How might what you learned help you better understand or connect with someone else?

Students might suggest:

- asking respectful questions
- listening
- learning how to pronounce unfamiliar words
- trying again when they make a mistake
- showing interest without making assumptions
- making room for other people's experiences

10 Recommended Book Titles



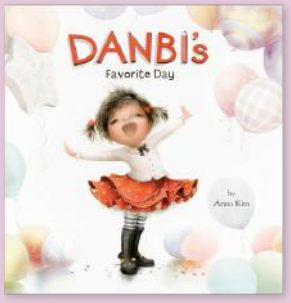
The Light Within You

Written by Namita Moolani Mehra;
Illustrated by Kamala Nair

Grades: PreK - 3

A story of Diwali, family connection, cultural heritage, and the symbolism of light.

Diya is excited to be going to India for Diwali. She'll get to spend time with Nani, her beloved grandma, who she hasn't seen since her family moved from India. Diya immediately feels at home with Nani, and as they celebrate Diwali together, Diya's heart soars. But all too soon, her trip will come to an end. Is there a way for Diya to take some of the light and magic of Diwali with her when she leaves?



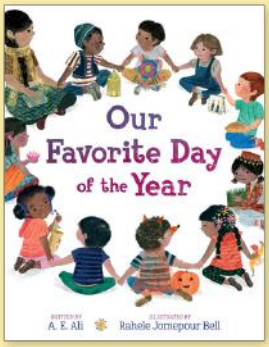
Danbi's Favorite Day

Written & Illustrated by Anna Kim

Grades: PreK - 2

A story to celebrate the power of creativity and the joy of coming together.

Thrilled to invite her friends to celebrate Children's Day as she did in Korea, she promises kites, tigers, and magic train rides. When the reality of a picnic behind her parents' deli falls short of her grand plans, Danbi must get creative to save the day.



Our Favorite Day of the Year

Written by A.E. Ali;
Illustrated by Rahele Jomepour Bell

Grades: PreK - 3

A story of friendship and celebrating differences.

Musa's feeling nervous about his first day of school. When he meets classmates Moisés, Mo, and Kevin, Musa isn't sure they'll have much in common. But over the course of the year, the four boys learn more about each other, the holidays they celebrate, their favorite foods, and what they like about school. The more they share with each other, the closer they become, until Musa can't imagine any better friends.

11 Q&A with the Author & Illustrator

Q&A with Author Thrity Umrigar



Q: What inspired you to tell Binny's story through the experience of sharing Diwali with her classmates?

Thrity: I wanted to write a book where a child was talking to other children. So many schools have show-and-tell days where students are urged to bring in artifacts from their own cultures and traditions to share with one another and it made sense to weave a book around this.

Q: What do you hope children who celebrate Diwali feel when they see Binny's experience reflected in the story?

Thrity: The most gratifying thing for me since the publication of this book is hearing from readers about how proud they were to be able to share their lived experiences with their classmates, how it made them feel less alone and isolated in their schools and neighborhoods. And this message has been reinforced by emails from teachers and parents, expressing their gratitude that this book exists because they notice how important it is for their students and children to see themselves reflected in a book. One father wrote and said that he bought numerous copies of the book to distribute to his daughter's classmates.

I hope teachers can emphasize that differences are things to be celebrated, not feared. They can also point out how much different religions and festivals have in common. Most are about the triumph of good over evil and the importance of kindness, community, joy, and love.

-Thrity Umrigar

Q: In many classrooms, students may not have teachers who share their cultural or racial identity. What role can books like Binny's Diwali play in helping students see their identities, families, and experiences reflected and valued at school? What would you want educators to keep in mind as they create that sense of representation and belonging?



Thrity: I think that representation really matters. It's important for children to see people who look like them, dress like them, come from similar families as them and eat food that they do, etc., to be reflected in stories and picture books. The most important thing educators can do is to make children feel valued and respected. So many minority students feel lonely or isolated or embarrassed by their differences. Educators play such an important leadership role in their communities and can help students feel supported and proud of their differences.

Q: Binny's story is rooted in one family's particular experience of Diwali while also opening broader conversations about identity and belonging. How can educators honor that specificity without treating one story as representative of an entire culture, and why is that distinction important?

Thrity: This is a great question. It takes a little extra effort, but it's so important for educators to point out that even while students are studying about one country and its customs, there are, of course, a thousand customs within each nation. They can give examples of how, within the U.S., we have so many different traditions and how some of them differ from region to region. And if they are studying about Diwali, as an example, they can point out that all Indians don't celebrate Diwali. Maybe they can bring in some information about holidays and festivals supported by Muslims or Parsis or Christians in India, for instance, and possibly teach students a little bit of geography and history while exposing them to a new culture.

Q: What did you most want young readers to understand about Diwali beyond the celebration itself?

Thrity: I want young readers to understand how big and beautiful and diverse this world is, filled with wonder and different traditions and religions and people. And how lucky we are as Americans to have all these different people living beside one another and being friends and classmates at school. I want them to learn to not just value and respect different cultures, but to actually celebrate them.

Images from @thrity_umrigar

Q&A with Illustrator Nidhi Chanani



Q: When you first read **Binny's Diwali**, what stood out to you as important to show visually?

Nidhi: Diwali is celebrated in a myriad of ways throughout India and also differently in the United States among Indian Americans. I wanted to do my best to properly represent both but focus on the story about an Indian American girl inviting everyone, regardless of their background, to celebrate with her.

Q: How did you think about color, light, and pattern when creating the feeling of Diwali throughout the book?

Nidhi: I've always had a strong sense of color that's heavily influenced by growing up in an Indian immigrant community in southern California. Bollywood also influences my artistic voice. I followed my instincts in creating vibrant pages full of intricate patterns and bold colors.

Q: What role do Binny's expressions, body language, and surroundings play in helping readers understand what she is feeling, even when those feelings are not directly stated in the text?

Nidhi: I illustrated the book when my daughter was around the age that Binny is in the story. I witnessed firsthand the joy, apprehension, and delight of a child sharing a holiday with a class of diverse students who may not know about Diwali. I believe Binny's expressions and body language communicated that arc.

> Diwali is celebrated differently by each family and each subculture within the diaspora. I represented what I know—from the **mithai** to the **rangoli**, and I hope that anyone who celebrates finds something in the pages that makes them feel seen.
>
> -Nidhi Chanani

Q: For teachers reading Binny's Diwali aloud, are there particular illustrations or details you hope they will pause on and invite students to notice more closely?



Nidhi: Visuals are read as much as words are by kids; they can be decoded and appreciated with the help of wonderful teachers. I love adding details—whether it's the names of the shops, decor in the classroom, kids' clothes, or different foods. Pointing out and exploring those details provide a great opportunity to pause and engage with the art.

Q: Representation in picture books is not only about who appears on the page, but also about how their world is shown. What did authentic representation mean to you while illustrating Binny's family, traditions, and community?

Nidhi: Binny is growing up here, in the United States. I wanted her classroom, teacher, and world to reflect that. I think authenticity is complicated, so rather than attempting to strive for a flat, universal experience, I thought about the specifics of Binny as a character and drew from that perspective.

Q: How did you approach illustrating the book in a way that could feel both familiar to some readers and welcoming to children who may be encountering Diwali for the first time?

Nidhi: While I drew this book I posted a reminder on my studio wall: make each page **SING DIWALI**. Art has the ability to welcome people in through light, color, levity, and harmony. Whether you celebrate Diwali or not, art can pull you in to any place, new, familiar, or imagined. That's what I love about it. Art draws you in without asking you for much. All you need to do is look.



Images from @nidhiart

12 For Educators, By Educators

This resource was developed by Make Us Visible's Education and Curriculum Team:
Devika Ganapathy, Lauren Chen, Grace Kim, and Kate Lee

Reviewed by K-12 educators and librarians:
Christine Dai, Michelle Kennedy, Colin Ng, True Pham, Radhika Patel, and Ethelyn Tumalad

Layout & Design:
Jamie Li

13 Standards

National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Thematic Strands:

I. Culture
IV. Individual Development and Identity
V. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
IX. Global Connections

Common Core ELA Standards:

1. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.1, RL.1.1, RL.2.1, RL.3.1:**
   Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
2. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.3, RL.1.3, RL.2.3, RL.3.3:**
   Identify and describe characters, their feelings, motivations, and responses to events.
3. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.7, RL.1.7, RL.2.7, RL.3.7:**
   Use illustrations and details in a story to describe characters, setting, and events.
4. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.1, SL.1.1, SL.2.1, SL.3.1:**
   Participate in collaborative conversations with peers and adults about grade-level topics and texts.
5. **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.2, SL.1.2, SL.2.2, SL.3.2:**
   Ask and answer questions about information presented orally or through read-alouds.
6. **CCCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.4, SL.1.4, SL.2.4, SL.3.4:**
   Describe people, places, things, events, and experiences with relevant details.

We’d love to hear from you!

Tell us about your experience using our Educator Guide:

Click here

Discover more educational resources at
makeusvisible.org/resources

Make Us VISIBLE

WHAT WE TEACH, WE MAKE VISIBLE