

2022

A South Asian Vice President Takes Office: A Middle School Teaching Opportunity

Julia Wilkins

Presbyterian College, jwilkins@presby.edu

Anneda Nettleton

Science Hill Independent School, Anneda.nettleton@sciencehill.kyschools.us

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scamle>



Part of the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wilkins, J. & Nettleton, A. (2022). A South Asian vice president takes office: A middle school teaching opportunity. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 148-152.

This Article is brought to you by the USC Aiken at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Published online: 1 March 2022
 © South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education

A South Asian Vice President Takes Office: A Middle School Teaching Opportunity

Dr. Julia Wilkins
 Presbyterian College
jwilkins@presby.edu

Anneda Nettleton
 Science Hill Independent School
Anneda.nettleton@sciencehill.kyschools.us

Abstract: Middle school students need to be aware of geopolitical issues that impact current events. The inauguration of a South Asian vice president demands awareness of South Asian geography and an understanding of the complexities of identity. In this article, we explain why the study of Asia, and in particular South Asia, is important, in both historical and contemporary contexts, and we provide lesson ideas for middle school students based on the Geography dimension of the C3 framework. The lesson activities are interdisciplinary and are intended to serve as resources for middle level teachers in any content area.

Keywords: geographical awareness, South Asia

Introduction

Racial and ethnic labeling is a common practice, but amidst the inauguration of the 46th President and Vice President of the United States, it became apparent how little people truly understand about these labels. Prior to Wednesday, January 20, 2021, Vice President Kamala Harris had been described by different media outlets in a variety of ways including: “black,” “African American,” “Indian American,” “Black and Indian American,” “Black-South Asian,” being of “African and Indian heritage,” “of Asian and black heritage,” “equally Indian and black,” “a black woman and an Indian woman,” and “a person of color.” The indecisiveness over how to capture Harris’ multiracial identity ended on Inauguration Day when Harris was consistently introduced as “South Asian” by different media outlets. While agreement over this term settled the confusion over how to refer to Harris, it presented a new problem: does the U.S. population have the geographical awareness to accurately interpret what the term “South Asian” means? Equally worth questioning: Are middle school teachers seizing the opportunity to increase students’ geographical awareness?

The Need for Accurate Historical and Geographical Knowledge

An accurate understanding of the terms used to describe diverse ethnic groups in the U.S. and around the world is a critical component of historical and geographical awareness. As outlined in “The Successful Middle School: This We Believe,” educators should ensure their curriculum, instruction, and assessment is embedded with instruction that is active, purposeful, and democratic; the complexity and relevance of America’s 46th Vice President creates opportunity for all three in the middle school classroom (Bishop et al., 2021).

Although Harris’ election was hailed as a breakthrough moment for women and minorities, there was confusion over which minority groups Harris belongs to. One second grade teacher in a popular Facebook group for educators wrote: “...we talked about how Kamala Harris was the first woman, black, and native vice president.” Clearly, this teacher interpreted the term “Indian” as meaning Harris was from North America’s indigenous population. Such a misunderstanding leads one to question the history that students learn in school about Christopher Columbus. Without access to accurate historical information, students are denied opportunities to understand the roots of complex and intersecting racial, ethnic, and cultural identities reflected in The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards.

The C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards aims to strengthen students’ knowledge about civics, economics, geography, and history (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], n.d.). Dimension 2 of the framework involves “Applying Disciplinary Tools and Concepts,” such as looking at one “probable cause” of the voyages of Columbus being his desire to obtain Asian riches by sailing westward. When looking at “multiple causes,” the framework provides the example of the Ottoman Empire’s expansion which disrupted trade routes that provided Western Europeans with access to Asia. One can quickly see how these topics can be related to the Geography subsection of Dimension 2, as starting in Kindergarten students should be “using maps, graphs, photographs, and other representations to describe places and the relationships and interactions that shape them” (NCSS, n.d., p. 41). By focusing on Columbus’ desire to find a new trade route to Asia, and engaging in map activities that trace his route to North America, middle school students will gain a deeper understanding of the difference between the people of Asia and North America indiscriminately referred to as “Indians.” In other words, understanding the terms used to refer to people’s racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, requires an understanding of geography.

SCAMMLE

South
 Carolina
 Association
 for Middle
 Level
 Education

Gaps in Students' Geographical Awareness

Our review of students' knowledge about the countries of Asia illuminates students' limited geographical awareness. Survey results from the second author's fifth through eighth grade students (n=143) revealed that almost 50 percent of students thought of China and Japan when hearing the term "South Asia." Undergraduate college students (n=70) surveyed by the first author incorrectly named 15 countries as being in South Asia. Relating these misconceptions to the term "South Asian" used to capture Harris' Indian heritage, we found awareness about India particularly lacking, with only 15 percent of middle-school students and 21 percent of college students naming India as a country in South Asia.

Our findings regarding students' lack of geographical awareness are supported by nationwide assessment data. Results of the 2018 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that 75% of eighth graders scored at or below the "basic" level, reflecting a lack of foundational geographic concepts (The Nation's Report Card, 2021). And when the focus in schools is on acquiring 21st century skills, geographical knowledge has never been more important. The U.S. Department of Education's international strategy includes, "increasing global and cultural competencies of all U.S. students" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018, p. 3).

The Importance of Learning About South Asia

Assessment data indicate that students need more geographical knowledge, but one might ask: *why Asia?* Given that 60 percent of the world's population resides in Asia (Statista, 2021), teaching the disciplines of economics, civics, geography, and history cannot be adequately addressed if students do not have an understanding of Asia's influential history and global interconnectedness. Since the earliest civilizations in the Indus Valley, the Indian Ocean has served as an important conduit for the spread of goods, religion, and ideas. Today, the Indian Ocean continues to serve as a geopolitical bedrock for international trade (Pearson, 2003). In order to become a global citizen, students need to understand the rationale behind international policies and understand the impact of global decisions.

Many great civilizations, as well as several major world religions, emerged in Asia, providing insights into the enduring contributions of the past as well as global conflicts of the present. Today, the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are three of the world's most populous countries (United States Census Bureau, 2020), and are home to three of the world's largest Muslim populations (Diamant, 2019). Knowledge of religious conflicts in this region is critical for understanding current events. The fact that not a single middle-school or college student out of the 213 students we surveyed named Bangladesh as a country in South Asia indicates that they are likely unaware of Myanmar's genocide of the Rohingya people that has resulted in 1 million refugees fleeing to Bangladesh. Without

knowledge of human rights abuses, students will miss opportunities to develop the civic ideals needed to advocate for social justice.

We also cannot omit Asia's role in American history. In the 20th century, the United States' three major wars (i.e., World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War) were fought in Asia. U.S. troops were recently withdrawn from Afghanistan, where they had been fighting a war against terrorism with specific connections to South Asia due to Pakistan's role in supporting the Taliban (Hadid & Sattar, 2019). What reality do these situations create? Teaching social studies in the U.S., whether focusing on history, geography, economics, or religion, relies on studying Asia. Students also cannot study political science or civics without learning about the role of South Asians in the U.S. Indians are the fastest growing immigrant population in the U.S., which is already home to over 2.7 million Indian immigrants. This situation is not trivial given that Asian Americans turned out in record numbers for the 2020 Presidential election and helped secure Harris' place as the first South Asian vice president (Boykins, 2020).

Can we truly feel like we have done our job as middle school educators in preparing students for college, careers, and civic life if we do not devote time to teaching students about South Asia? According to Gupta (2021), "For a long time, South Asians - people from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, etc. - were put under Asian American" but it is now clear that "they merit a 'group name' of their own" (para 2). If we want our students to be globally competent then we need to provide them with the tools to interpret the term "South Asian" through a global lens. How do we do that? In this case, it requires ensuring that the study of South Asia's history, geography, and current events remain an intentional and ongoing focus in middle level education.

Taking the Next Steps in the Classroom

To assist teachers in embedding lessons that address South Asia and geography into the curriculum, we provide a table of lesson ideas and compelling questions based on state social studies standards. We have aligned the lesson topics and learning activities with NCSS Themes, as well as the Geography strand of the C3 Framework. For each lesson, we provide resources for teachers and students with the aim of contributing to a curriculum that is Challenging, Exploratory, Integrative, and Diverse, one of the 18 characteristics of "The Successful Middle School: This We Believe." In order to live in a globally interdependent world, students need to understand the political, economic, and cultural influences on trade, conflict, human rights, and global ecology. Through closer examination of these issues, students will recognize their rights and responsibilities as global citizens and develop the intellectual curiosity to question the meaning of the term "South Asian" and the significance for the U.S. of having a South Asian Vice President.

Lesson Ideas

NCSS Theme: People, Places, and Environments C3 Framework: D2.Geo.2.6-8. Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions, and changes in their environmental characteristics. Compelling Question: How do environmental factors influence the way people live?		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources
Compare and contrast maps of the Indus River Valley civilization and the present day to determine the physical environment's geopolitical impact then and now.	Map activity: Annotate maps to compare and contrast physical features between the past and present. Research activity: Create a multimedia presentation to explain the geopolitical impact of the region's physical environment.	nationalgeographic.org/education Classroom Resources → Resource Library & Mapping History's Histories http://www.historyshistories.com/india-geography.html PBS - The Story of India http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia khanacademy.org Search: Ancient India
NCSS Theme: Production, Distribution, and Consumption C3 Framework: D2.Geo.4.6-8. Explain how cultural patterns and economic decisions influence environments and the daily lives of people in both nearby and distant places. Compelling Question: How does foreign trade impact a culture?		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources
Contextualize the Indian Ocean as the center of global exchanges within Eastern Hemisphere trade networks and appraise the current role of South Asia in the global economy.	Timeline activity: Create a timeline depicting goods traded across the Indian Ocean with infographics showing the growth of South Asia's economy over the last century. Literacy activity: Create an informational brochure to raise awareness of human rights issues related to global trade.	Timeline Maker: Sutori.com Khanacademy.org Search: "International Commerce, Snorkeling Camels, and The Indian Ocean Trade" globalization101.org Search: "Manufacturing: After the Bangladesh Factory Collapse" Indianoceanhistory.org 20th Century Globalization → Search: Trade
NCSS Theme: Culture C3 Framework: D2.Geo.7.3-5. Explain how cultural and environmental characteristics affect the distribution and movement of people, goods, and ideas. Compelling Questions: What is the relationship between geography and the need to trade? How do religious practices change societies?		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources
Describe the emergence of the Harappan Civilization and its major achievements.	Map activity: Create a map showing the Harappan Civilization's modern-day location. Art activity: Create a diorama of a Harappan village depicting four major achievements. Role-play activity: Simulate a trading event between Harappan villagers and the Mesopotamians.	artsandculture.google.com Search: Harappan Harrapa.com https://www.harappa.com/slideshows www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize Search: Indus Kiddle https://kids.kiddle.co/Indus_Valley_civilization

<p>Explain the development and impact of Hinduism and Buddhism on India.</p>	<p>Art/Literacy activity: Create a graffiti wall for each religion with images and phrases. Literacy activity: In pairs, adopt the role of a Hindu or Buddhist and exchange letters describing their beliefs, holy sites, and spread of the religion.</p>	<p>khanacademy.org Search: "Hinduism and Buddhism" Newsela.com Search: "The Origin of World Religions" Hinduism and Buddhism Lecture https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIu28WoPNCE</p>
<p align="center">NCSS Theme: Time, Continuity, and Change</p> <p>C3 Framework: D2.Geo.4.6-8. Explain how cultural patterns and economic decisions influence environments and the daily lives of people in both nearby and distant places. Compelling Question: In what ways do personal and cultural experiences shape perspectives?</p>		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources
<p>Analyze Western imperialism's impact in Asia and explain India's economic and political relationship with Britain.</p>	<p>Literacy activity: Create an anthology of diary entries from the perspectives of Indian people with differing views of British colonization. Research activity: Review maps and other primary and secondary sources to create a case study of the region before, during, and after the colonial period.</p>	<p>Stanford History Education Group https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/india-partition tv.pbslearningmedia.org Search: "East India Company in India" reconnectingasia.csis.org Search: "How Britain's Colonial Railways Transformed India"</p>
<p align="center">NCSS Theme: Civic Ideals and Practices</p> <p>C3 Framework: D2.Geo.6.6-8. Explain how the physical and human characteristics of places and regions are connected to human identities and cultures. Compelling Question: When should individuals fight for others' rights?</p>		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources
<p>Research South Asia's post-independence struggles, including the subcontinent's partitioning into India and Pakistan and human rights violations against Muslims in Kashmir and the Rohingya people in Myanmar.</p>	<p>Map activity: Annotate a map to compare and contrast South Asia before and after the partitioning. Research activity: Research conflicts over Kashmir and write an argumentative essay from the perspective of a modern day Indian, Kashmiri, or Pakistani. Literacy activity: Assume the role of a news reporter and create a Flipgrid detailing the plight of the Rohingya people.</p>	<p>Aljazeera.com Search: "How India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were formed" The Choices Program https://www.choices.edu/curriculum-unit/indian-independence-question-partition https://www.choices.edu/teaching-news-lesson/myanmar-and-the-rohingya</p>
<p align="center">NCSS Theme: Global Connections</p> <p>C3 Framework: D2.Geo.6.3-5. Describe how environmental and cultural characteristics influence population distribution in specific places or regions. Compelling Question: How do world population changes impact the geographic landscape?</p>		
Learning Objectives	Lesson Activities	Resources

<p>Evaluate South Asia's population distributions and patterns (i.e., conditions driving migration and demographic change).</p>	<p>Map activity: Annotate a map to show how economic, environmental, and politically driven migration has impacted South Asia. Math activity: Design a chart, graph, or infographic to illustrate population trends in South Asia. Literacy activity: Create a Public Service Announcement about the causes and consequences of South Asia's population growth.</p>	<p>Worldometer https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/southern-asia-population History.org https://worldpopulationhistory.org https://www.esri.com World Geography → March of Time C3 Teachers https://c3teachers.org/inquiries/population-growth</p>
---	--	--

References

- Bishop, P. A. & Harrison, L. M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Columbus, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.
- Boykins, M. (2020, November 10). Asian Americans advancing: Justice reacts to historic Biden/Harris win. AAJC. <https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/press-release/asian-americans-advancing-justice-reacts-historic-bidenharris-win>
- Diamant, J. (2019, April 1). The countries with the 10 largest Christian populations and the 10 largest Muslim populations. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations>
- Gupta, A. (2021, February 1). 'Look mom. She looks like me.': A look into South Asian representation within the United States. The Daily Campus. <https://dailycampus.com/2021/02/01/look-mom-she-looks-like-me-a-look-into-south-asian-representation-within-the-united-states/>
- Hadid, D., & Sattar, A. (2019, August 30). The key role Pakistan is playing in U.S.-Taliban talks. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/30/754409450/the-key-role-pakistan-is-playing-in-u-s-taliban-talks>
- National Council for the Social Studies (n.d.). College, career, and civic life (c3) framework for social studies state standards. <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards/c3>
- The Nation's Report Card (2021). See how eighth-grade students performed in geography. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/geography/2018/>
- Pearson, M. N. (2003). *The Indian Ocean*. Routledge.
- Statista (2021). Distribution of the global population. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/237584/distribution-of-the-world-population-by-continent/>
- United States Census Bureau (2020, July 1). Ten most populous countries. <https://www.census.gov/popclock/print.php?component=counter>
- U.S. Department of Education (2018). Succeeding globally through international education and engagement. <https://sites.ed.gov/international/files/2018/11/Succeeding-Globally-Through-International-Education-and-Engagement-Update-2018.pdf>

About the Authors



Julia Wilkins is an Associate Professor of Education at Presbyterian College where she teaches middle level and secondary education courses. Like Kamala Harris, she is of South Asian ancestry, which led to her interest in this topic. Her research interests revolve around literacy, disabilities, and children's literature.

Anneda Nettleton is a veteran educator with over 18 years experience. Ms. Nettleton earned her B.S. in Middle Grades Education from Eastern Kentucky University. She later received her Master's degree in Library Media and her Rank 1 Literacy Specialist certification from University of the Cumberlands. She currently serves as a fifth grade teacher at Science Hill Independent School in Kentucky.



Recommended Citation (APA 7th ed.)

Wilkins, J. & Nettleton, A. (2022). A South Asian vice president takes office: A middle school teaching opportunity. *South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal*, 148-152.

This article is open access by the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE). It has undergone a double blind peer review process and was accepted for inclusion in the SCAMLE Journal.

Published online: 1 March 2022

© South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education