

# THE BRIDGE HOME: OPPORTUNITY COST By Padma Venkatraman

**LYNNE STOVER, JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY CENTER FOR ECONOMIC EDUCATION AND  
GIGI WOLF, FEDERAL RESERVE BANK of KANSAS CITY**

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**BOOK SYNOPSIS:** Eleven-year-old Viji and her sister Rukku find themselves homeless in the bustling streets of Chennai, India after escaping from a harmful family situation. As the story unfolds in the form of a letter from Viji to her sister, the girls learn how to navigate the realities of homelessness and poverty. They befriend two destitute boys who become their companions in survival. The determined children, along with their adopted dog, make a life for themselves on an abandoned bridge. They scavenge the city's trash heaps as a means of sustenance in their struggle against hunger and deprivation. It's Rukku's talent for beadwork that emerges as a beacon of hope providing the makeshift family with some hope of financial stability. The story delves into pressing social justice issues such as caste discrimination, child labor, and the pervasive grip of poverty, shedding light on the harsh realities faced by the unhoused and marginalized communities.

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## **LESSON DESCRIPTION:**

This lesson centers around choices faced by characters in the book, *The Bridge Home*, by Padma Venkatraman. Through the activities, students learn about the main characters, Viji and her sister Rukku, and the problems they encounter both in and out of their home in Chennai India. Students will put themselves in the sisters' shoes to evaluate given choices and identify the opportunity cost. Students will also rank various choices while participating in an interactive problem-solving group activity. Reading the book is optional for the lesson.

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**GRADE LEVEL:** 4-5

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**CONCEPTS:** Choice, opportunity cost, cost, benefit

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## **OBJECTIVES:**

Students will be able to:

- Identify the opportunity cost of choices.
  - Evaluate decisions made by others.
  - Consider choices they would make in a given situation.
  - Justify their own choices.
  - Prioritize items by importance.
  - Determine the costs and benefits of various choices.
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**TIME REQUIRED:** 30 minutes

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## **MATERIALS:**

- *The Bridge Home* by Padma Venkatraman [ISBN: 9781524738136] – optional
  - Visual 1: What Would You Choose?
  - Handout 1: Emergency Supply Cards (cut apart in advance)
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## **PREPARATION:**

- Copy Handout 1: Emergency Supply Cards on card stock and cut apart into eight separate cards.
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## PROCEDURE:

1. Display the cover of *The Bridge Home* by Padma Venkatraman.
2. Ask students if the cover gives them any hints about the characters in the story or where it might take place. (*Answers will vary, but may include: the characters are the four children and the dog running across the bridge; the characters may be in trouble because they are running, the story might take place outside; the story might be in another country because of the buildings in the background; etc.*)
3. Tell students that the story is told by an 11-year-old girl named Viji who lives in India.
4. Explain that Viji and her older sister, Rukku, run away from home because of a harmful family situation and have to make choices about what to take with them in a matter of minutes.
5. Define **choice** as a decision made between two or more possibilities.
6. When Viji and her sister made certain choices, there were things they had to leave behind, also called their opportunity cost.
7. Define **opportunity cost** as the next best thing given up when a choice is made or the second choice.
8. Display Visual 1: What Would You Choose?
9. Read aloud the information in the box on the top right.
10. Invite students to help you read or identify the items pictured on the left side.
11. Ask students the questions in the box on the bottom right as follows:
  - Would you choose the same items that Viji did?  
(*Answers will vary*)
  - If you had to leave two of these items behind, what would you choose and why?  
(*Answers will vary*)
  - What items might you choose instead?  
(*Answers will vary, but may include: pets, favorite games, good luck charms, extra clothes, etc.*)
  - What could be an opportunity cost of Viji and her sister choosing to be homeless?  
(*Answers will vary, but may include: staying at home with their parents; going to live with another relative or friends; living in a homeless shelter; going to the police for help; etc.*)

*Teacher's Note: Remind students as needed that there are no right or wrong answers. Allow a few students to answer each question, so the total time spent on this activity is no longer than about 7 minutes.*

12. Explain that there are benefits and costs to decisions the sisters made.
13. Define **benefits** as things favorable to a decision maker or the positive effect of a decision.
14. Define **costs** as things unfavorable to a decision maker or the negative effect of a decision.
15. Ask students what the benefits might be for choosing to bring money. (*Answers will vary, but may include: they could buy more items that they needed; they could use it for more food or clothes; they could use it for transportation to somewhere safe; etc.*)
16. Ask students if any of the items the sisters chose might have a cost or negative effect. (*Answers will vary, but may include: the sweets might cause cavities or make them sick; the money could be stolen; the bananas could rot or not last long; the doll or book might not have much value while they are homeless; etc.*)
17. Inform students they will now participate in an activity where they will work as a group to make choices.
18. Distribute Handout 1: Emergency Supply Cards, one card each to eight different students.
19. Instruct students with cards to come to the front of the class.
20. Ask each student holding a card to read their card and to show it to the class.
21. Explain that the cards represent items someone might choose in case of an emergency.
22. Inform card holders to continue showing their card so that the rest of the class can see it.
23. Ask students who are seated to say how they would rank each item on the cards by importance, with the most important item on their far left and the least important on their far right.
24. Tell students with cards to move to the right or left of each other depending on what their classmates suggest.

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25. Encourage discussion as different opinions are shared about which items are most to least important, allowing a couple students to express their rationale.
  26. Inform students that there are no right or wrong ways to rank the cards and that you will let the majority decide the final ranking.
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## CLOSURE:

27. Once all eight items are ranked by importance, ask students the following:
    - Why did you choose the first four items as most important?  
*(Answers will vary, but may include: they are necessary for survival; everyone needs them; they will help to get other items if needed, etc.)*
    - If you were homeless and lived on a bridge like the sisters in the book, would you rank the importance of these items differently? Why or why not?  
*(Answers will vary, but may include: items needed if someone is homeless would be different because they would need protection from the weather or from strangers, etc.)*
    - Was it easy or difficult to rank the items by importance as a large group? Why or why not?  
*(Answers will vary)*
    - Which item is the second most important?  
*(Answers will vary)*
  28. Explain that the second choice is the opportunity cost of choosing the first or most important item.
  29. Invite the students with cards to give them to you and to be seated.
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## ASSESSMENT:

30. Ask students the following:
    - Why is having an emergency kit a good idea?  
*(Answers will vary, but may include: it can save your life in an emergency; it is there if you ever need it; it can be helpful when there are natural disasters like fires or floods; it can help if you ever get stranded or need to leave somewhere in a hurry, etc.)*
    - What is it called when you decide between two alternatives or options?  
*(Answer: a choice)*
    - Do all decisions have costs or benefits? Why or why not?  
*(Answers will vary)*
    - What is an opportunity cost?  
*(Answer: the next best thing given up when a choice is made or the second choice)*
    - What choices do you make every day?  
*(Answers will vary, but may include: what to wear, what to play or do after school, who to talk to, what to eat, etc.)*
    - What is your opportunity cost for doing homework after school?  
*(Answers will vary, but may include: spending time with friends, going to the park, playing with siblings, practicing an instrument, playing video games, etc.)*
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## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

### ACTIVITY 1

- Remind students that all choices have costs (negatives) and benefits (positives).
- Divide students into small groups.
- Distribute a set of emergency supply cards from Handout 1 to each small group.

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- Ask students to pretend that the items on the emergency supply cards are what they decide to take with them if they have to leave home quickly.
- Instruct groups to work together to create a list of at least two costs and two benefits for each of the eight items on their emergency supply list.

*Teacher's Note: If needed, provide an example such as food can be heavy and take up space, but it can also help when you are hungry.*

## **ACTIVITY 2**

- As a class, discuss the importance of choosing the right carrying case to store and transport supplies.
- Create a class list with suggestions of transport options. (*Answers will vary, but may include: a canvas tote; a plastic tub; a plastic bag; etc.*)
- Discuss as a class a cost and a benefit for each suggestion.
- Have students vote on their top two choices based on a majority vote.
- Ask which of the top two choices is the opportunity cost. (*Answer will vary, but should be the second choice*)

*Teacher's Note: If needed, provide an example of a cost and a benefit, such as a plastic tub would keep things dry and help collect rain, but it is also more difficult to carry than a bag, etc.)*

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## **VOLUNTARY NATIONAL ECONOMIC STANDARDS:**

- **Content Standard 2 - Decision Making:** Students will understand that effective decision making requires comparing the additional costs of alternatives with the additional benefits. Many choices involve doing a little more or a little less of something: few choices are “all or nothing” decisions.









## **COMMON CORE CONTENT STANDARDS:**

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL 4, 5.1.B**  
Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles. (collegial discussions and decision-making)
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL 4, 5.1.C**  
Pose and respond to specific questions by making comments that contribute to the discussion and elaborate on the remarks of others.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL 4, 5.1.D**  
Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from the discussions.

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## VISUAL 1: WHAT WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

	<b>Sweets (Candy)</b>
	<b>Money (200 rupees)</b>
	<b>Clothes</b>
	<b>Wooden Doll</b>
	<b>Sheet and Towels</b>
	<b>Soap, Comb and Tooth Powder</b>
	<b>Bananas</b>
	<b>Favorite Book</b>

In the story *A Bridge Home*, Viji decides to leave home to keep her and her sister safe. They only have a few minutes to choose what to take with them and everything they take must be able to fit inside their backpacks. On the left are all the items Viji chose to take.

1. Would you choose the same items as Viji did?
2. If you had to leave two of these items behind, what would you choose? Why?
3. What items might you choose instead?
4. What could be an opportunity cost of choosing homelessness?



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## HANDOUT 1: EMERGENCY SUPPLY CARDS (PAGE 1 OF 2)

### FOOD

[in wrappers, jars, or cans]



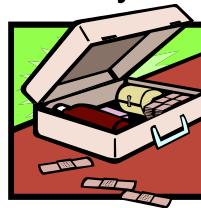
### BLANKET

[or towel]



### FIRST AID KIT

[including necessary daily medication]



### MONEY

[credit card, debit card, cash, and coins]



HANDOUT 1: EMERGENCY SUPPLY CARDS (PAGE 2 OF 2)

**CELL PHONE**

[with charger]



**TOILETRIES**

[toothpaste, soap, toilet paper]



**IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS**

[ID card, insurance card, bank information]



**CLOTHING**

[change of clothes, underwear, hat, and jacket]

