



Story Summary

It's Afghani schoolgirl Aria's first day back at school since her accident. She's excited, but she's also worried about sitting on the hard floor all day with her new prosthetic "helper-leg." Just as Aria feared, sitting on the floor is so uncomfortable that she can't think about learning at all. She knows that before the war changed many things in

Afghanistan, schools like hers had benches for students to sit at. If she had a bench, her leg would not hurt so much. The answer is obvious: she will gather materials, talk to *Kaka Najjar*, the carpenter in the old city, and learn to build a bench for herself.

ALA Schneider Family Book Award Honor Winner for Young Children

Picture book ages 5–8 | ISBN: 978-1-77278-222-6 | Pages: 32

THEMES

courage, resilience, agency, multiculturalism, feminism, community, resourcefulness

BISAC CODES

JUV039150 JUVENILE FICTION / Disabilities & Special Needs

JUV030020 JUVENILE FICTION / People & Places / Asia

JUV035000 JUVENILE FICTION / School & Education

JUV039140 JUVENILE FICTION / Social Themes / Self-Esteem & Self-Reliance

READING LEVEL

Lexile: AD690L | Fountas & Pinnell: L

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Social Studies: communities around the world, mapping; science: structures; character education; visual arts; health

Bahram Rahman was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and grew up during the civil war and the 1996–2001 Taliban regime. He earned a medical degree at Kabul Medical University and a master's degree in public policy at the University of Erfurt, Germany, while also working as an activist in Afghanistan in the areas of gender equality and youth political participation. Bahram came to Canada as a refugee in 2012, and today he is a senior policy advisor at the Ministry of Health in Ontario. His first picture book, *The Library Bus*, documents the barriers to education experienced by girls in war-torn countries and their resilience and ingenuity in overcoming them. It won the Middle East Book Award and was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award, among many other honors.

Peggy Collins is a graphic designer and an award-winning children's book author-illustrator with more than 35 titles to her name, including *Harley the Hero*, which is a finalist for the OLA Forest of Reading Blue Spruce Award, *Hungry for Math: Poems to Munch On*, *In the Snow*, and *In the Garden*. Peggy teaches animation at Loyalist College as well as illustration and drawing at St. Lawrence College. She has also written and illustrated for animated apps teaching math, indigenous history, and education. Peggy lives in Newburgh, Ontario with her two children.

Pair this book with:

The Library Bus by Bahram Rahman

Links for resources about landmines:

The Halo Trust www.halotrust.org

The United Nations Mine Action Service www.unmas.org

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS:

ACTIVITY	MAIN SUBJECT AREAS	SPECIFIC SKILLS
Read-Aloud	Comprehension	Activate prior knowledge Infer, predict, make connections
What Would <i>You</i> Paint?	Visual Arts Character Education	Create works that represent ideas Courage, peace, wisdom
Far-Away Neighbors	Social Studies	Communities around the world Mapping
Hurts and Helpers	Health Social Studies	Health and well-being Mapping Research skills
Building or Creating	Visual Arts Science	Creating 3-D art works Elements and principles of design Structures

THE READ-ALOUD

Learning expectations:

Students will:

- identify reading comprehension strategies (e.g. activate prior knowledge, infer, predict, make connections) and use them before, during, and after reading to understand the text

You Will Need

- *A Sky-Blue Bench*

How To:

Before Reading

Initiate a conversation with students about how it feels to return to school after being away. It could be after an illness, after a period of online learning because of school closures, or simply at the end of summer vacation or winter holidays. Students may report a combination of feelings of excitement and nervousness. Read the title of *A Sky-Blue Bench*. Show the front cover while reading the first part of the story summary from the front flap (up to the word “much”). Pause to allow students to formulate a prediction of how Aria might solve her problem. Read the dedication page.

During Reading

First spread: Read, allow students to comment. Discuss what might be meant by “helper-leg”.

Second spread: After reading, invite students to infer why Aria’s face is “burning” and to comment on what the body language of Aria’s various classmates might suggest (e.g. pity, gossip, friendship).

Third spread: How might Aria be feeling at the end of the day?

Fourth spread: Is Mama right? Can Aria get through this? I wonder what she’ll do! Do students recognize the book Babak is reading?

Fifth spread: How has the illustrator helped the reader understand more about what it’s like to live with a “helper-leg”? What do you think about Aria’s solution?

Sixth spread: After the sentence “Girls don’t build benches,” ask, “Is that true?...Do some people believe it, though?”

Seventh and eighth spreads: Pause after reading, to allow students to absorb the richness of the illustrations.

Ninth spread: Briefly discuss the meanings of courage, peace, and wisdom.

Tenth to twelfth spreads: Read expressively.

Thirteenth spread: Point out the message on the blackboard. It is read right to left and says, “Welcome” in Farsi. Read the page. Do students know the word chador? If not, invite them to infer its meaning and to explain how both the author and illustrator have helped the reader to understand. Invite students to predict what might happen next.

Fourteenth spread: After reading, invite discussion.

Bahram Rahman, illus. Peggy Collins
A Sky-Blue Bench

After Reading

Discuss: How have the attitudes of Aria’s classmates changed from the beginning of the story to the end? (e.g. from pity and curiosity to mocking her efforts, then to admiration and respect)

Discuss the significance of the word “Welcome” on the thirteenth spread. Does Aria feel more welcome now than she did at the beginning of the story?

Read *The Library Bus* by Bahram Rahman

Discuss resilience, the capacity to recover from difficulties. This trait is revealed in both *A Sky-Blue Bench* and *The Library Bus*. When people are faced with huge challenges, resilience can help them get through it. They do what they need to do. For example, the people who burned the school furniture were doing what they needed to do to survive the winter. The girls who sat on a tarp on the floor were doing what they needed to do to get an education in the absence of furniture. Sitting on the floor was painful for Aria, so she did what she needed to do. Recently, the whole world has experienced a challenge in the form of a pandemic. What have your students needed to do differently? How have they shown resilience?

Learn about what is currently happening in Afghanistan, and how women and girls are showing resilience, self-organizing to help each other.



ACTIVITY I: WHAT WOULD YOU PAINT?

This is a simple art project that unlocks a conversation about the ideals of courage, peace, and wisdom.

Learning expectations:

Students will:

- create two-dimensional works of art that express feelings and ideas
- demonstrate an awareness of symbols encountered in their daily lives and in works of art

You Will Need

- *A Sky-Blue Bench*
- Chart paper and markers
- Other picture books with themes of courage, peace, and wisdom (e.g. **Courage:** *Hello, Dark* by Wai Mei Wong, *Brave Irene* by William Steig; **Peace:** *My Beautiful Birds* by Suzanne Del Rizzo; **Wisdom:** *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires, *The Empty Pot* by Demi)
- 8½" x 11" white paper
- 9" x 12" black construction paper
- White and blue tempera paint, brushes
- Writing paper

How To:

1. Discuss the ideas of courage, peace, and wisdom, and some traditional symbols associated with these ideas. For example, courage or bravery has been represented in various cultures by a bear, an arrow, a lion, or a dragon. Peace has been represented by a dove, an olive branch, a "peace sign," and an origami paper crane. Wisdom can be represented by a beaver, an owl, the aster flower, or King Solomon. Create a three-column chart by listing the various symbols under the headings *Courage*, *Peace*, and *Wisdom*.
2. Read some other picture books with themes of courage, peace, or wisdom and add icons from these books to your list of symbols.

3. Brainstorm with students items that represent courage, peace, or wisdom to them personally, and add their ideas to the chart.
4. Invite students to choose one of the symbols, or one that they've come up with on their own, and draw it using simple pencil lines on white paper. Demonstrate by drawing a bench (or an idea of your own), filling most of the page with it, pointing out how you are using as few lines as possible, with space in between to paint them later. Go over the pencil lines with a fine-point permanent black marker. Do the same with students' completed drawings.
5. Mix sky-blue tempera paint by stirring blue paint into white paint until the desired intensity is reached. Mix more than enough for all students, as it will be difficult to mix more of the exact same shade later if you run out. Demonstrate on your bench drawing how to carefully load your brush with just enough paint, and how to carefully paint all the spaces within the lines without crossing them.
6. Invite students to paint their drawings using the sky-blue paint.
7. Have students write a sentence explaining which ideal their painting represents and why. E.g., "My bike represents courage because I was brave when I rode it down the big hill."
8. Display suggestion: Frame the paintings by mounting them on black construction paper. Display them, along with the student sentences, the words *Courage*, *Peace*, and *Wisdom*, and this quote from *A Sky-Blue Bench*: "Sky-blue is the color of courage, peace and...wisdom."



ACTIVITY 2: FAR-AWAY NEIGHBORS

As students explore far-away communities, they come to appreciate that humans everywhere have the same basic needs.

Learning Expectations

Students will:

- describe similarities and differences between their community and a community in a different region in the world (e.g., with respect to food, clothing, housing, beliefs, climate, flora and fauna, recreation, agricultural practices)
- identify the location of selected countries, cities, and/or towns around the world, and describe how their location and climate are related

You Will Need

- *A Sky-Blue Bench*
- Another book set in Afghanistan (e.g. *The Library Bus* by Bahram Rahman)
- Research sources, including internet and print
- A selection of books set in various global communities
- Graphic organizer “Comparing Communities” (included below)

How To:

1. Locate Afghanistan on a world map.
2. Count the kites in the illustrations of *A Sky-Blue Bench*. Why might the illustrator include so many kites, when there are no kites in the story? Research the prominence of kites in Afghan culture. Look for other items in the words and illustrations that help describe the culture to readers who might not know much about Afghanistan (e.g. note the Farsi alphabet chart next to the blackboard on the second spread). Record your findings.
3. Read another book set in Afghanistan (e.g. *The Library Bus* by Bahram Rahman). Record other things you learn about the culture.
4. Do research to learn more about Afghanistan’s culture and history, including cultural celebrations (e.g., New Year—in Afghanistan and Iran, the first day of spring, also called Nowruz, is the New Year).



5. Locate your own community on the same world map. Discuss how the locations of your community and of Afghanistan affect their respective climates (i.e., distance from the equator, proximity to mountains, large bodies of water or other geographic features).
6. Cooperatively with students, compare the culture(s) in your own community with that of Afghanistan, using the graphic organizer “Comparing Communities.” Highlight concepts that are common to all of humanity despite visible differences.
7. Read a variety of other books set in various communities around the world. Have each student choose one such community, research it, and repeat the “Comparing Communities” activity using their own community and the community they chose.



Bahram Rahman, illus. Peggy Collins
A Sky-Blue Bench

ACTIVITY 3: HURTS AND HELPERS

Teachers are encouraged to carefully select tasks from this activity that are most appropriate for their particular students.

Learning Expectations

Students will:

- demonstrate the ability to make connections that relate to health and well-being—how factors in the world around them affect their own and others’ health and well-being.
- analyze and construct simple maps to determine and illustrate patterns in the interrelationship between the location of some communities and human activities in those communities
- gather and organize information on global issues

You Will Need

- *A Sky-Blue Bench*
- Chart paper and markers, or equivalent
- Other picture books depicting child amputees and/or war zones (e.g. *A Good Trade* by Alma Fullerton, set in Uganda)
- World map
- Internet

How To:

1. Invite students to share what they know about prosthetic limbs. Record the ideas on an organizational device such as a KWL chart or a schema map [Schema Maps—An Alternative to the KWL Chart—Adventures of a Schoolmarm](http://www.adventuresofaschoolmarm.com/2016/09/schema-maps-alternative-to-kwl-chart.html) (<http://www.adventuresofaschoolmarm.com/2016/09/schema-maps-alternative-to-kwl-chart.html>).
2. Leaf through *A Sky-Blue Bench*, gleaning and recording both information and questions about Aria’s helper-leg that arise from the words and illustrations. E.g., What kind of accident might Aria have had? Aria was away from school for a long time, both in the hospital and at home. Aria is self-conscious about her helper-leg. Her classmates pity her and doubt her abilities. Changing between a sitting and a standing position is difficult. Sitting on a hard floor all day resulted in body aches. Aria removes her helper-leg at night. Aria’s disability does not

prevent her from walking around the city for hours, carrying lumber and a backpack full of hardware, nor from using carpenter tools.

3. Read the Author's Note and sidebar at the back of *A Sky-Blue Bench*. Record any new learning on your organizational device.
4. Find illustrations showing child amputees in other picture books (e.g., *A Good Trade* by Alma Fullerton, set in Uganda). Locate current and former war zones on a world map.
5. Research land mines and UXO in current and former war zones, and their consequences.
6. Research organizations that work to solve these problems, such as www.halotrust.org and www.unmas.org.
7. Record new learning from your research on your organizational device.
8. Observe the International Day for Mine Awareness and Assistance in Mine Action on April 4.
9. Hold a fundraiser for an organization that works to eradicate land mines and UXO.
10. Discuss attitudes towards amputees and other people with disabilities. Often, people with disabilities earn admiration and respect by doing something remarkable, like Aria did (think of Terry Fox, Nick Vujicic, Helen Keller). How can we adjust our own attitudes and clear our minds of assumptions about people so that we accept and respect them right away?

ACTIVITY 4: BUILDING

After hearing of Aria's determination and ingenuity, students may be inspired to try their own creations.

Learning Expectations

Students will:

- create three-dimensional works of art that express feelings and ideas, or
- design and build a strong and stable structure that serves a purpose
- demonstrate an understanding of composition, using principles of design to create narrative art works or art works on a theme or topic
- use a variety of materials, tools, and techniques to respond to design challenges

Bahram Rahman, illus. Peggy Collins
A Sky-Blue Bench

You Will Need

- *A Sky-Blue Bench*
- Other books in which the protagonist embarks on a building project (examples below)
- Internet
- Adult volunteers
- Woodworking tools
- Various building materials and found objects, collected over a period of time
- Art supplies such as paint and brushes

How To:

1. Recruit adult volunteers and arrange to use a woodshop or borrow tools.
2. Collect donations of scrap building materials and other found items. Sort through the collection to make sure there are no safety hazards such as sharp metal edges.
3. Re-read *A Sky-Blue Bench*, inviting students to take note of the strategies Aria used to help her be successful in her building project (drawn plans, expert advice, special tools and materials, set up workstation, a helper, purpose, perseverance). Make a chart of these strategies.





4. Read other books in which the protagonist takes on a challenging building project. E.g. *Waiting for Sophie* by Sarah Ellis, *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires. Note strategies for success these protagonists use. Add any new strategies to your chart.
5. Research artists who use found objects in their art, like this 12-year-old boy: [The figurative sculptures of a 12-year-old found objects artist | The Kid Should See This](https://thekidshouldseethis.com/post/the-figurative-sculptures-of-a-12-year-old-found-objects-artist) (<https://thekidshouldseethis.com/post/the-figurative-sculptures-of-a-12-year-old-found-objects-artist>). This video teaches the elements and principles of design through found-object art [Found Object Art Lesson | Assemblage Art Tutorial - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CI268ZdswM) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CI268ZdswM>).
6. Discuss with students what types of projects might be suitable for your circumstances, perhaps a birdfeeder, birdhouse, or art sculpture.
7. Invite students to draw their plans. For something like a bird house, you might begin with a standard pattern and have students plan the embellishments.
8. Optional: If some of the found items could be made more suitable or decorative by spray-painting (e.g. bottle caps), do this ahead of time, outside, away from students.
9. Arrange a day to have adult volunteers, safety goggles, and tools available to help students cut wood pieces and put them together with wood glue, nails and/or screws. If allowed, acrylic paint sticks well to most materials, but students must cover up well or wear old clothes. Students can paint raw wood using tempera paint if the item will not be used outdoors. Embellishments can be added using glue or nails.
10. Hold an in-person or virtual art exhibition of the finished works.

This guide was created with
support from Ontario Creates



ONTARIO | ONTARIO
CREATES | CRÉATIF

Bibliography

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/language18currb.pdf>

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/social-studies-history-geography-2018.pdf>

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/scientec18currb.pdf>

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/arts18b09curr.pdf>

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/elementary/healthcurr18.pdf>

Name: _____

Comparing Communities

Compare your own community to a community in another part of the world, using this chart.

	My Community:	Another Community:
Distance from Equator	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Other geographic features	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Climate	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Language	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Food	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Clothing	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Housing	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Beliefs and Celebrations	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Plants & Animals in Nature	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Recreation	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
Agriculture	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____