

Using the Emotional Learning Cards in School-based Therapy Sessions: Examples from work with young people

Jo Evans and **Tara Richards**, both [A Space](#) therapists share some examples from their work with young people which illustrate how they have used the Emotional Learning Cards in school-based therapy sessions.

All the clients' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

JO EVANS, A SPACE COUNSELLOR & PSYCHOTHERAPIST

How I use the cards

As a psychodynamically trained counsellor and psychotherapist, I use the emotional learning cards in my work in both primary and secondary schools. I leave the sets of cards out alongside other resources. Sometimes young people are curious about them and pick them up without my prompting. In such instances, I suggest they select a card which attracts their interest. I then invite them to tell me what they see and what the artist might have had in mind. This often opens up a conversation on themes that otherwise might not have arisen.

For many young people, it can feel less exposing to explore their past and present experiences through a more general discussion about the kinds of issues life can throw up for any of us. In such instances, I invite the young person to choose a card and talk about what the image might be conveying or what they think the artist might have had in mind. Keeping the focus off of the young person and talking about what the artist might be communicating via their work often makes it possible to discuss sensitive subjects more freely or naturally. If it seems useful, I sometimes suggest they turn over the card and read the back and then see where this takes us.

If the young person hasn't shown an interest in the boxed sets but is finding it hard to talk, as can frequently be the case when working with pupils who have little experience of self-reflection, I'll show them a few cards which I imagine might 'speak to them'. As I have read through all the cards myself and am familiar with the images and the general themes, it's usually easy to select cards in the session which might have a particular resonance for my client. Or if I have a client who I know is finding it a struggle to talk, I might pre-select images before the session starts and have these cards ready so that I can bring them out if I think it would be helpful to give them a place to start. Here are some examples of how I've used specific images.

Using the cards *Nigerian Woman Shopping* by Sokari Douglas Camp and *Untitled* by Chris Ofili in sessions with 'Nikita', a girl in mourning

I have been working long term with 'Nikita', a secondary school student who had come to live in the UK only a few months before we met for our first session. Nikita was to be reunited with her mother whom she'd last seen over 6 years ago. According to Nikita's recollection of events, the original separation from her mother was unexpected and abrupt: her mother had told her that she was going out shopping but never returned. Only later did Nikita find out that her mother had left for the UK. Only a few weeks after Nikita arrived in London, her mother died. She had not been told that her mother was very ill so this came as a considerable shock. Nikita was lost somewhere between what she'd left behind in her country of origin and her current life which was already marked by loss and where everything was new. Nikita was living with a father she didn't really know, going to a new school in an unfamiliar neighbourhood and had yet to make friends. Our work continues to focus on mourning the multiple losses she has experienced including the loss of her mother first as a 7 year old and then through her recent death as well as the loss of Nikita's home culture and her life in the country she'd left behind.

A few months into our work together, she showed some curiosity about the cards. The first image she picked - *Nigerian Woman Shopping* by Sokari Douglas Camp – was fleetingly registered, but very quickly dismissed. Perhaps it called to mind too powerfully and painfully Nikita's loss of her mother who had 'gone shopping' but in reality had flown to England leaving Nikita with her grandmother. The shock of the image might have been all the more potent because of the unconscious impact the jagged edges and metallic steel might have made on Nikita. Thinking about it from Nikita's perspective, the black-painted steel female/ 'mother' figure depicted could be construed as hard and hollow, the opposite of a warm, 'huggable', 'live' mother. This might have reminded Nikita that she hadn't had the chance to get to know her mother well and that, for her, her mother existed in crude outline only.

When looking at *Nigerian Woman Shopping*, we didn't refer to the comments and questions on the reverse of the card; for Nikita, the image represented something different altogether which was difficult for her to put into words. It seemed something about the 'frozen pose' of the woman, captured in a particular moment, might have been what drew Nikita to this image and could have called up a picture, suspended in time, of her mother on her way to the market, never to return.

However, in a later session, Nikita returned to the emotional learning cards and picked *Untitled* by Chris Ofili. She began drawing her own version of this portrait of a black woman, perhaps as an unconscious attempt to create a representation of her dead mother to hold in mind. This was a significant step for Nikita, marking a significant shift from the position of not being able to think about her mother at all because it was too painful to making a picture of a woman that could give concrete form and substance to the idea of a mother figure and all that this represents.

Both Nigerian Woman Shopping and Chris Ofili's image were extremely important for Nikita, not simply for their overt and unconscious or symbolic content, but because they represented aspects of Nikita's country of origin and home culture so she could easily feel a connection and a form of identification with them.

As a therapist working in a culturally diverse community, I feel it's vitally important to have available images by artists who represent different nations, varied backgrounds and a range of themes. The emotional learning cards meet this need in relevant and enriching ways.

Using *In the House of My Father* by Donald Rodney with 'Ahmed', an adolescent who had lost his mother and had a troubled relationship with his father

Donald Rodney's *In the House of My Father* became part of my work with 'Ahmed', a teenager whose mother, like Nikita's, had also died but several years before we first met. Ahmed had been brought up by relatives and had come to the UK to live with his father for the first time as a young child on the cusp of adolescence. As with Nikita, many adjustments needed to be made. Ahmed had to build a relationship with his father, live in his father's 'space', learn English for the first time and get used to being a pupil in a large secondary school in the heart of an inner city borough.

Ahmed's relationship with his father became troubled when Ahmed entered his adolescent years. Through *In the House of My Father*, we were able to explore different themes relating to Ahmed's very painful past and present experiences. This included discussions around how one could understand one's own heritage with only one parent still alive. Questions we considered can be summed up as follows: *How does one internalise 'a sense of place in the world' if a mother is no longer living and it feels difficult to form a meaningful relationship with the father? ? In such a context, how might one's identity be shaped? What resources and internal histories can one draw on from within and without?* We also thought about the differences between what we call 'home' as opposed to the 'house' or 'the place' where we live.

Feeling trapped in a situation not of one's making and wanting to escape were important themes which also came to the surface in my work with Ahmed. However, I was able to open up the possibility of being able to see things from different perspectives. This came about from exploring Donald Rodney's photograph in more detail. We noted how, at first glance, it wasn't obvious that the 'house' is made from the artist's own skin which reminded us that our history is 'in our veins', that is to say, we carry our heritage and our parent's histories even if our parents are no longer alive. As well, we were able to think about learning to be comfortable in our own skin. We acknowledged that our 'sense of belonging' can at times feel very fragile but it is fluid, not fixed.

Having a photograph of a black hand holding a tiny, delicate house was important for Ahmed as he was able to unconsciously identify with the image. The themes highlighted on

the reverse of the card symbolically conveyed to Ahmed that he was not alone in wondering about what makes home 'home' and in struggling with aspects of his identity.

Using *I can't hear you* by Kate Walters with 'Ben', a young boy with a family history of trauma

Kate Walters' painting is one I am keeping in mind for use with 'Ben' a primary school boy with whom I've only recently started sessions. He has experienced various traumas in his life which are understandably too painful to bring to mind or to focus on in any explicit way. *I can't hear you* reminds me of how Ben literally or metaphorically covers his ears if he thinks I am going to say something that he can't bear to take in. However, I'm thinking that once the relationship with Ben has developed over time, it may be possible to introduce this card as an aspect of our work together. This could enable me to indirectly convey to Ben that I know about his history and I understand how painful it is to be reminded of it in any way. Acknowledging this through the use of Kate Walters' picture will perhaps help Ben realise that he is not alone in wanting to block out painful histories which, in turn, may ease the way towards more open dialogue about what kinds of experiences people want to shut out. Approaching the subject of a complex past from a distance like this can be a useful way to begin to 'thaw out' frozen feelings and slowly bring into consciousness what a client might wish to forget so that it can be processed.

TARA RICHARDS, A SPACE DRAMA THERAPIST

Using Joan Pablo Echeverri's *Miss fotojapon 1998-present* with 'Kayne', a teenager who had witnessed domestic violence

I introduced the emotional learning cards to 'Kayne', an adolescent who was referred to me because he had witnessed domestic violence. He chose **Joan Pablo Echeverri's *Miss fotojapon 1998-present*** which initiated discussion around the theme of having different sides to our personality. As I drama therapist, I often work with bringing internal experiences 'alive' in the 'here and now' of the session through using mask making, role play, storytelling and other narrative-based techniques.

Kayne identified four qualities that captured key aspects of how he saw himself, two positive and two painful. He personified them by calling them Mr Confident, Mr Nice, Mr Lonely, and Mr Confused. He then created a series of masks to represent these different aspects of his identity. This enabled him to verbalise what it was like when each 'character' 'took the lead', what each needed, what they each thought of the others and what kinds of conflicts or tensions arose between them. He held up the masks one by one, speaking in character about related experiences. For example, when in role as 'Mr Confident', Kayne told me 'I disappeared in year 7. I saw mom and dad fighting and it scared me.'

In the role I assigned myself as an interviewer, trying to get to know the different characters, I was able to ask 'Mr Confident' about what he had witnessed and to acknowledge how being present when his parents were in conflict had left him feeling vulnerable and frightened – the opposite of self-assured. I noted that 'Mr Confident' had lost touch with what made him 'him' but that his defining features were not gone forever.

We then looked at **Joan Pablo Echeverri's** image together and saw how it could represent the possibility of re-shaping parts of our identity. Kayne and I thought about what might enable 'Mr Confident' get back in contact with his positive and outgoing nature. Through this, I was able to help Kayne to see that what had happened in the past does not have to colour how we see ourselves in the present. He was able to understand how difficult experiences do not have to dent our confidence permanently. I made the observation that I could see Kayne's family life hadn't destroyed his ability to trust adults as he was willing to be open with me. I also noted that he was becoming more confident in his sessions with me, taking risks by talking about his past and showing me his more vulnerable parts. Using Echeverri's series of photographs helped Kayne to understand that all of us have different qualities and parts to ourselves which we re-work over time. This helped Kayne to re-discover 'Mr Confident' and bring back to life a part of himself which he had thought might never be revived.

Using Franklyn Rodgers's photograph *At Last (Patrick Dyer), 19 October 1991* with an adolescent, 'Jason', whose father was dying

'Jason', a 15 year old boy was referred to me because his father was terminally ill. Jason and his dad had no contact with Jason's mother who had mental health issues and now lived in a different city. The loss Jason was facing was huge as he had no siblings and following his father's imminent death, he would be moving to live with relatives. Jason was unable to express his feelings verbally so I suggested he looked through the emotional learning cards from the set entitled '**How do you feel?**' and he picked out Franklyn Rodger's photograph. Having chosen this image, Jason was unable to say anything about it. I then asked if he could make a sound relating to the image. Jason inhaled and held his breath in before letting it out in sharp, short staccato-like beats. To me, it conveyed a sense of fear, shock or panic. Jason loved music and he had the school's agreement to bring his guitar with him to our sessions as his music was very important to him. I asked Jason if he could translate the sound he'd just made into a note. Starting with a lone note and building from there, Jason was able to compose a piece of music which he called *'Hearing the News: Two Weeks to Live'*.

Having played the piece for me and voicing how it felt for him to hear the shocking news that his dad wouldn't live much longer, Jason told me that he would like his father to know what he thought of him before he passed away. Jason decided to compose a second piece for his father which he subsequently played for him at the hospice. This paved the way for Jason to

be able to tell his father how important he'd been for him and how much he would miss him. When Jason's father passed away, Jason played this same piece at the funeral and was also able to give a short speech about his feelings for his dad. **Franklyn Rodgers's photograph *At Last*** was the starting point for Jason, enabling him to discover first music and then words to articulate his loving feelings for his father and his overwhelming sadness at losing him. Playing his song at the funeral and acknowledging publically his feelings for his father allowed Jason to say goodbye in a way that was meaningful for him.

Using Otobong Nkanga's *Social Consequences I: Encroaching Barricade, 2009* with 'Jamil', a teenager who had witnessed domestic violence

It was decided that Jamil, a pupil who had witnessed domestic violence, would be offered sessions with me as he had seen a counsellor in primary school but had not been able to express his feelings about the parental conflict he had been exposed to as a child. I invited Jamil to select an emotional learning card from '*Who are you? Where are you going?*'. He chose **Otobong Nkanga's *Social Consequences I: Encroaching Barricade, 2009***. This opened up a discussion about safe and unsafe spaces which, in turn, led to playing with the small figures I had in my box of resources. He created scenarios featuring two warring sides. The figure he identified as representing himself took up the role as the sole guard on the border between two territories entrenched in conflict. This figure was on 24 hour patrol.

I was able to make the link between the guard and the real Jamil, noting that the only way Jamil could feel safe was if he was hyper vigilant, always looking out for signs of potential conflict. I said that children were not responsible for conflicts which broke out between adults and that even adults who fought had other, more loving sides to them. We thought together about supportive adults Jamil had known or who were in his life currently and that perhaps it was possible to trust that adults could manage themselves while also holding his needs in mind. Jamil was then able to add other figures to his toy scene, positioning them to stand alongside the guard, offering support. Eventually Jamil was able to give the guard time off and leave the border to be safely managed by the other figures.

As these scenarios unfolded over time, Jamil was able to process his memories of what he'd witnessed as a younger child, partly through symbolic play and partly through hearing me put aspects of his experience into words. Gradually, Jamil relaxed a little more and was able to let go of feeling he was the only one responsible for being on the look-out. He grew more confident and was able to believe that most adults could be trusted to have his best interests in mind. Jamil accessed important play through starting with **Otobong Nkanga's painting *Social Consequences I*** which captured significant features of his own experience. Seeing the picture on the card conveyed to Jamil that others understood what it might feel like to imagine home was unsafe territory. This helped him to take the first step towards imaginative play and to begin to make sense of his earlier experiences.



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About Iniva Creative Learning

Iniva Creative Learning is a not-for-profit partnership between A Space (arts and therapy service, Hackney) and Iniva (the Institute of International Visual Arts). We share a commitment to producing art-based resources and delivering initiatives which promote emotional learning, personal development and psychological growth.

Emotional Learning Cards

It is now widely recognised that well-being in every part of life depends on successfully building understanding, insight and emotional resilience. **A Space** and **Iniva** have been co-publishing **Emotional Learning Cards since 2008** and they now occupy a leading position in the growing fields of **emotional learning and psychological therapies**.

Each boxed set of Emotional Learning Cards includes 20 cards:

- **On the front:** visually rich images of a contemporary artwork by a variety of culturally diverse and emerging artists known for their engagement in social or political enquiry.
- **On the back:** open questions and discussion prompts around the theme 'What do you feel?', 'Who are you? Where are you going?' and 'How do we live well with others?' for group or one-to-one use.

Suggestions for using the cards in different contexts such as school, home, gallery workshops and individual or group therapy settings are offered in a **fold-out leaflet**.