

The Stories that Make Us: *exploring personal histories*

This resource is based on a project undertaken by **Iniva** and **A Space** which was commissioned and part-funded by **Newport Primary School**. The exercises included in this pack can be used in any setting: the classroom, parent/carer groups, creative therapy sessions or counselling/psychotherapy groups.

Newport School chose to share family histories and stories about places of origin and family / community histories through making quilt squares with artist **Aya Haidar**. Aya introduced key features from the history of quilt making including:

- **Social histories:** how cultures through the centuries have used quilt making to record stories and important events
- **Political histories:** how groups have used the concept of making a 'quilt' or a fabric 'banner' to lobby for social change

You can read more about this project entitled **A Place for Conversation** and view some of the quilt samples made by the Newport parents/carers and children on www.inivacreativelearning.org and on www.iniva.org

Research Task 1:

- If you are facilitating a workshop or a classroom project and choose to use the attached exercises as the starting point to making quilt squares, you may wish to research the cultural, political and social significance of quilt making across cultures and throughout history.

Research Task 2:

- Artist Aya Haidar often uses sewing and fabrics in her art practice. Her piece entitled **Peregrination** (2008) which is reproduced in the Iniva Creative Learning card set '**Who are you? Where are you going?**' is made out of shoes with maps embroidered on the inner soles. This can be understood to illustrate how we all embark on personal journeys in life that become part of our history. These 'journeys' might be known only to us or to our families just as the inner sole of the shoe can only be seen by the wearer when they are put on or taken off. Research Aya's art work online to see what themes she has explored in her art and how she makes it. You may also wish to research other artists who use fabric, sewing or soft materials.

Exercises

The exercises on the following pages include a general introduction to the theme of **The Stories that Make Us** as well as commentary and questions related to images from our emotional learning cards and suggested creative tasks. You can adapt the exercises and/ or use them as a way into exploring personal, family and/or collective journeys and shared histories.

Newport Primary School is a 4 form entry school in Leyton with a strong and action-led commitment to cultivating a creative and stimulating learning community for children, parents and staff. In a recent Ofsted Inspection (June 2013), the school was awarded Outstanding in every category. This reflects the passion of the whole school community for creatively thinking, reflecting, enquiring and learning from experience and from each other. The school values collaborative partnerships with external organisations where opportunities are provided for sharing, experimenting and enriching learning.

www.newportschool.org.uk

The Stories that Make Us

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME

Thinking about our childhood experiences and reflecting on our family's history helps us to understand more about what has shaped our identity. We discover what makes us 'us' and what makes our family feel like 'our' family. Most of us have heard stories about our early years and about our parents' and grandparents' lives. Or we have an idea of what kind of child we were and our own thoughts about our family's culture.

Many of us have a way of describing ourselves to our friends and in our own thoughts. For example, our 'story lines' may be primarily positive. We may feel that we 'belong' in our community and that we are settled and happy in our family life. Or the opposite – our main story line may be that we 'don't fit in' or that our family's culture is 'not welcomed' and that our family 'doesn't belong'. We're not always aware of the stories we tell ourselves so it is important to check in and listen to what our 'inner voice' is telling us.

Stories are important – when we tell someone about ourselves, we are giving words to our experiences. Our stories both reflect our view of ourselves and also shape who we are. We use the term 'stories' to describe our thoughts about ourselves and what we tell others as a way of reminding ourselves that stories are not 'facts' but the meanings we give to our life. We may think of our stories as 'true' however the stories we tell ourselves and each other can always be told from more than one perspective.

The exercises to follow use contemporary art works published in our emotional learning cards:

- ***What do you feel?***
- ***Who are you? Where are you going?*** and
- ***How do we live well with others?***

KEY AIMS

These exercises help students/ clients/ workshop participants to:

- become more aware of the stories they tell themselves
- reflect on the meaning of these stories
- review whether these stories are affirming or undermining
- change unhelpful 'internal scripts'

Who are you? What are your roots?

The first step towards building a picture in mind of who we are involves exploring our roots. We call our origins our roots because our history 'anchors' just like roots anchor trees and plants. Our origins give us a sense of an identity which, in turn, provides us with a sense of belonging. Roots represent our family, our language, culture, and country.

Artist **Sonia Boyce** has made a colourful pastel drawing which can be seen to convey this idea in a unique way. She has shown a woman holding up what looks like her family. This reminds us that we carry our family in our thoughts and our memories and this gives us a feeling of connection. (Sonia Boyce's image is included in the set of emotional learning cards entitled '**How do we live well with others?**')

EXPLORING YOUR ROOTS

- Where were you born?
- Where were your parents born?
- Do you have more than one country or culture of origin?
- What language do you speak at home?
- What food do you eat that might be particular to your family or your culture? What do you celebrate?
- What feelings do you associate with your country (or countries) of origin? (eg. What makes you proud of your cultural history? What confuses you about it? What don't you like about it?)
- What gives you a sense of connection to your country or countries of origin? If you are of mixed heritage, do you feel you 'belong' more to one country than another?

KEY WORDS

FEELING CONNECTED & POSITIVE	STILL FINDING OUR PLACE
Feeling Connected <i>Having meaningful contact with family & friends</i>	Lost connections <i>No longer in touch with some family &/or friends - do we need to renew connections? Make new connections?</i>
Feeling known + accepted <i>Having things in common</i>	Feeling 'invisible'+ 'not fitting in' <i>Feeling different/ feeling left out - how do we find our place?</i>
Feeling proud + confident about who we are <i>Having a positive sense of our history and our identity</i>	Feeling uncertain or confused about who we are <i>Having a painful or confusing sense of our history & our identity - how do we let go and move on?</i>

ART TASK: Make a picture that reflects some of the feelings listed above. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates what gives you a sense of connection, what connections you've lost or when you haven't fitted in.

Exploring Childhood

In our world today, many people come from families who have moved from one place to another perhaps more than once. Maybe these moves took place a few generations ago or perhaps our own parents left their country of birth or we have moved city or country. Sometimes parents each have their own culture of origin but share the same language. In other instances, the mother's culture and home language is very different from the father's. . Even if our heritage is linked to one nation, there may be family differences between our parents. Sometimes one parent will come from one part of the country and another from a different part. Or one may have grown up in the city and another in the countryside. Small differences may be less obvious but still feature in our family.

Being linked to more than one country through birth is usually called 'mixed heritage'. By attaching a knife and fork to the ends of chopsticks he is showing us how many families bring together two different cultures. **Anthony Key's** image entitled **Chopstick/ Knife Fork** communicates this idea to us in a very creative way. (This image is included in the set of cards entitled '**Who are we? Where are we going?**').

EXPLORING YOUR CHILDHOOD

If you or your parents' country of origin is different from yours:

- When did your family arrive where you live now?
- What was the move like for earlier generations in your family? (For example, did they come out of choice to join other family workers or because there was conflict or war in their own country? Was the move exciting or marked by losses? What have you, or your parents or ancestors, had to let go of or leave behind? (eg. people; places; home language; objects of personal / emotional value; customs etc)
- Why did your ancestors chose this part of the world to settle in?
- What is your favourite story about your ancestors' arrival (or your own) in the country/ city/ neighbourhood you now live in?
- What aspects of your cultural background have you continued to follow? What have you left behind? (eg. food, music, celebrations, traditions, customs etc)

If your family has its roots in the country/ city/ neighbourhood you now live in:

- Have previous generations always lived there?
- How have your ancestors moved, for example, from the countryside to the city?
- Have they always lived in a flat? A house?
- Do your relatives live close by?
- What feelings do you have about where you live?

KEY WORDS

ON-GOING SENSE OF BELONGING	STILL FINDING OUR PLACE
Feeling settled <i>Having roots where we live & liking our neighbourhood</i>	Feeling new or less settled <i>Still getting to know our neighbourhood & our community</i>
Feeling connected to our history <i>Knowing where our parents lived & learning about their culture</i>	Not sure about our history <i>Not knowing our parents' stories or much about their culture - how can we learn about their past?</i>
Feeling connected to family <i>Being able to keep in touch with close family members</i>	Missing family <i>Not able to stay in close contact with people we've left behind - why is this so and can we re-connect with them?</i>

ART TASK: Make a picture that reflects some of the feelings listed above using Anthony Key's image as inspiration. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates what gives you a sense of belonging or describe your experience of trying to find your place in your peer group or in your community.

Exploring Family

Every family is different and has different ways of doing things. Some families, for example, have one adult living at home while others might have both birth parents as well as grandparents and aunts or uncles and cousins. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to establish a family nor is there a 'better' kind of family. The most important thing is not whether the mother and the father both live at home or whether grandparents are around but what kind of relationships we have with the people we live with.

Yinka Shonibare's sculpture shows us what looks like a family from another planet. It reminds us of how we can all feel 'alien' or 'different' when we think our family, or we, don't fit in. However, in this sculpture, you'll see that one child looks like the mother-figure and the other like the father-figure. This may be showing us that they could be quite alike and that these could be important relationships. Relationships are meaningful if we can share things openly and feel we are accepted for who we are. (Yinka Shonibare's image is included in the set of emotional learning cards entitled '**What do you feel?**')

EXPLORING FAMILY

- What roles do mothers have in your culture or in your family background? What about fathers?
- Do these roles relate to being male or female?
- Do these roles make sense to you? If not what changes do you feel are important to make to the roles mothers and fathers have?
- Not every family has a mother and father as the adults living at home. Describe as many different family arrangements as you can.
- Describe what roles the oldest child might have as well as the middle and the youngest. What about only children?
- Describe why someone might feel like an 'alien' in their own family or as if their family was from 'another planet'.
- What is your favourite story about your family?

KEY WORDS

POSITIVE FAMILY EXPERIENCES	FAMILY CHALLENGES
Family roles are mutually supportive <i>Everyone has roles that work for them</i>	Family roles are out of balance <i>Some family members have more responsibilities or do more than others - why is this so and does it need to change?</i>
The family feels good about who they are <i>There are good family memories + stories to hold onto</i>	The family isn't in touch with their good parts <i>Not knowing the family's strengths and their positive stories & memories - can time be taken to discover and share these?</i>
The family fits in <i>The family has a community they feel part of and belong to</i>	The family isn't sure of its place <i>The family is still figuring out where they belong - how can this process be supported?</i>

ART TASK: Make a picture that reflects some of the feelings listed above using Yinka Shonibare's image of a family as inspiration. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates what makes family relationships and roles meaningful or your favourite family story.

Exploring Identity

We all have what is called an 'identity'. This term refers to what makes us who we are. It includes:

- our culture of origin and how this culture has shaped us
- the culture we live in as well as our peer group culture and how it influences us
- the impression our family's way of seeing the world and doing things has made on us
- the kind of person we want to be

Gonkar Gyatso's piece of art called *The Buddha in Our Times* has been created out of hundreds of tiny stickers representing characters or themes from popular culture. He may be showing us what it feels like to bring together an ancient religion and culture from the East with the contemporary culture of the West. Perhaps he is reminding us that we all have to find our own way to make different cultures fit together even if they are very different. (The Buddha in our Times is from the set of cards entitled *What do you feel?*)

EXPLORING IDENTITY

- Does your family practice a religion? If not, did your grandparents or any of your earlier ancestors do so? How might past or present religions influence how we see the world?
- If we do not follow a particular religion, we still develop life values. What are yours?
- What kinds of food do you like to eat? What country does this food represent?
- Do you and your family celebrate any special days? If so, what are they and where did they originate? If not, what would you like to celebrate?
- What do you enjoy doing on your own or with your friends? What interests do you share? What does this tell you about who you are?
- What clothes do you prefer to wear? Are you interested in fashion and if so, what do your fashion choices tell you about what you are? If not, what are you communicating to others? Following fashion or going our own way or ignoring it altogether are all communications.
- What are your unique skills or interests or personal qualities? How would others describe you?
- Give a description of yourself, highlighting what makes you 'you'.

KEY WORDS

POSITIVE SENSE OF SELF	WORKING ON OUR IDENTITY
We develop life values which may be based in our family's beliefs or culture <i>Our life values guide our choices</i>	We choose to develop our own life values <i>We explore our heritage & decide what we want to hold on to & what we will let go of</i>
We feel good about who we are <i>We know our strengths and work on our shortcomings</i>	We get to know ourselves <i>We look at ourselves honestly and identify what attitudes, ways of thinking and behaviour we need to work on</i>
We know what personal qualities are important <i>We have taken time to reflect on what is important to us and how to develop these qualities</i>	We are working out what is important to us <i>We develop an understanding of important personal qualities & try to cultivate them</i>

ART TASK: Make a self-portrait by drawing an outline of a face or a whole person. Now follow Gonkar Gyatso's example and fill it with words or symbols representing who you are. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates the kinds of experiences and personal histories which shape our identity.

Reflecting on how Identity Changes

Our identity doesn't develop in childhood and then stay fixed for the rest of our lives. The different experiences we have (both good and bad), the friends we make, the relationships we build and the life goals we set for ourselves all leave their imprint on our identity. As we move into later childhood years and then on into adolescence, we increasingly make our own choices. This might start with deciding what we want to wear, what kind of music we listen to or what we want to do in our free time.

Juan Pablo Echeverri's series of photographs are all self-portraits taken at various stages in his life. You can see that he is presenting a different side to himself in each picture. This may be his way of showing us that none of us remain the same over time. We change both through choice and through changing circumstances.

REFLECTING ON HOW IDENTITY CHANGES

- What kind of child do you think you were? How would others describe you as a child?
- Some of us change a lot over the years. For example, if we are quiet and shy when younger, we might become more involved with friends or develop an active social life as we grow older. Others don't change as much. How would you describe yourself now? Is this different to how you were as a child? Does your family have a story they like to tell about you as a child?
- Life experiences change us. For example, if we have moved home, city or country, this will have contributed to how we have developed. Have you moved and if so how did you feel about the move? Did it change you or your family in any way? Has any other significant experience changed you?
- Everyone has different sides to their personality. For example, we might be talkative and outgoing with our friends but shy with people we don't know so well. Or we might get angry at home but nowhere else or vice versa. Name the feelings you feel comfortable showing. Now describe feelings or personality traits that most people don't want to admit to.
- Think about the people you spend time with or the friends you have. What do you have in common with them? What are your differences?
- What do the clothes you choose to wear, the music you like to listen to or what you like to do in your free time tell you about your identity?

KEY WORDS

KNOWING OURSELVES	EXPLORING OUR IDENTITY
We have a sense of our life map <i>We have heard stories about ourselves & know about our childhood</i>	We are developing our picture of ourselves <i>We are finding out about our childhood or learning about who we are now</i>
We know how we have changed <i>We can see how we have grown and developed</i>	We are exploring our development <i>We are looking at our milestones & seeing our progress</i>
We know we can make choices <i>We are aware of the choices we have and are able to think about their consequences</i>	We are learning about choices <i>We are learning how to make good choices & how our choices reflect life values + have consequences</i>

ART TASK: Follow Juan Pablo Echeverri's example and make a series of self-portraits representing yourself at different ages. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates how our identity changes over time.

Exploring the idea of 'National Identity'

Each country across the globe has its own language and culture. The cultural origins of a country are often reflected in food, music, poetry visual art, film and drama.

Although there are differences between countries, we also have similarities. **Wilfredo Prieto** created a photograph which features flags from around the world. However, all the flags are in black and white. This emphasises the 'sameness' we all share as global citizens and takes the focus off of national differences.

In contemporary society, increasingly large numbers of people migrate or move from one country to another. Many of us have more than one country which we think of as part of our heritage. Having one place which is seen as our 'home country' is less common. Instead we may have two or more countries we identify with. We may also be part of a group of people who all come from different places. We each find our own 'tribe', that is, the people who we have the most in common with regardless of where they come from. We get a sense of our shared identity from those we choose to spend our time with and with whom we identify most.

REFLECTING ON NATIONAL IDENTITIES

- Which country or countries do you have links with?
- What foods do you eat which might have their origins in other countries?
- Do you speak more than one language? Do your parents? Which language do you dream in?
- Can you think of a dance, song, musical instrument, poem or piece of art that is particular to a country with which you have links? If not, maybe you can research this and find out.
- Today, social media can seem like a kind of 'virtual world' where we can find people we have things in common with and create online communities. Do you belong to a community like this? What drew you to it?
- What do you like best about the country you are currently living in?
- Do you take holidays or visit relatives in other countries? What do you like best about those countries?

KEY WORDS

THINKING ABOUT CULTURAL/NATIONAL IDENTITY	EXPLORING OUR ROOTS
We get a sense of belonging from our heritage <i>We have heard stories about our parents' country or countries of origins</i>	We are developing a sense of belonging <i>We continue to find out more about our heritage</i>
We feel at peace with our identity <i>We enjoy our heritage & do not have conflicting feelings about it</i>	We are exploring our heritage <i>We have mixed feelings about some parts of our heritage & questions about our home culture's belief systems or ways of doing things</i>
Our circle of friends or acquaintances is varied <i>We enjoy differences & have friends or acquaintances from different cultural backgrounds</i>	Our circle is expanding <i>We are taking risks & moving outside of our 'comfort zone', making friends with people who are different from us</i>

ART TASK: Follow Wilfredo Prieto's example and make a series of flags representing your cultural heritage. Make up a flag to represent your friendship group or a group you'd like to belong to. Or make a more abstract image or simply tell a story that illustrates how our identity changes over time.