

Development as a Reflective Practitioner: Race Reflections — First Case, Lasting Impact

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In this reflective piece, a trainee educational psychologist recounts a personal experience of being on placement as a Black woman in a predominantly White local authority (LA). To construct these reflections, established, reflective models have been used to provide a structure for which the reflections are modelled. This is followed by a political and historical overview of a predominantly White LA which seeks to establish a contextual background to the placement provider. As a means of illustrating the challenges faced and developing a personal model of reflection, an anonymised case study has been used. The reflective piece ends by outlining the opportunities that arose from the encountered challenges.

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Reflective Practice (RP) is defined as the process of learning through and from experiences with the aim of moving towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice (Boud et al., 1985). It is seen as an essential part of the trainee educational psychologist's (TEP) journey. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the regulatory body, has mandated that practitioner psychologists, and by extension trainee educational psychologist's, "be able to reflect and review practice" (Health and Care Professions Council, 2015, 11.1, p. 12). Moreover, RP is recognised as integral to the British Psychological Society (BPS) policy on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (British Psychological Society, 2012). As such, training and placement providers afford TEPs a variety of structured opportunities (including the use of VERP [video-enhanced reflective practice], peer support groups, weekly supervision, reflective diary, lectures and tutorials) to reflect on their learning and their use of learnt content in practice.

This reflective piece will utilise examples from a range of the aforementioned structured opportunities for RP to illustrate the gaining of new areas of insight. Firstly, it will outline the adopted psychological models for reflection to provide insight into my personal reflective style. Following this, it will use case examples to demonstrate how reflection has shaped and impacted my role within my work. These case examples will refer to the emotional impact the role has had on my development as a young, Black female in the profession and will also seek to demonstrate my awareness of the gap between theory and practice.

Models of Reflection

There are various approaches to guide reflection. Where Schön (1983) provides a framework, Gibbs (1988) provides

a model of the steps and stages in reflection.

Overview of Schön's Reflective Framework

Schön (1983) provides a framework for thinking that has two key parts. It separates reflection that happens during an event (reflection-in-action) from the reflection that takes place following an event (reflection-on-action). The purpose of reflection-in-action is to support one to understand what is happening in the experienter's process, decision-making and feelings as they happen. In contrast, reflection-on-action involves sifting through the details of a previous event to take into account new theoretical perspectives or information in conjunction with the experienter's actions and feelings (Learner Development Unit, University of Bradford, 2019).

Overview of Gibbs' Reflective Model

There are five stages within Gibbs' (1988) reflective model; they are as follows:

1. Description: What happened?
2. Feelings: What were you thinking and feeling?
3. Evaluation: What was good and bad about the experience?
4. Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation?
5. Action Plan: If it happened again, what would you do?

There is some overlap between the two. However, both the framework and model seek to support the experienter to learn from experience and theory, bringing both together to deepen understanding. Despite this overlap, they will be

utilised in this reflective piece, as they best allow me to communicate my own reflecting style. The next section of this piece will use the above framework and model along with one I have created to structure my reflections. Anonymised cases will be utilised to illustrate reflections within and on my own work, looking at the emotional, practice and theoretical journey I have been on.

A Black Woman in a Predominantly White Local Authority (LA)

Towards the end of my first year as a TEP, I learnt which LA the remaining years of my training would take place in. National data from the 2011 census reported that 83 per cent of the LA's population was White English (London Borough of Havering, 2015). This within itself stirred no feeling in me. However, having grown up not far from where my placement is, I was aware of its recent political position. The last local elections had seen UKIP receive the third-highest number of votes (London Borough of Havering, 2014). It is a place where 70 per cent of the electorate voted to leave during the Brexit referendum and anecdotal comments such as "We remember the old days People round here, they've seen it change so much, and they're not happy about it You can't just have, you know, open free-for-all. You can't just have every Tom, Dick or Harry coming" (Peck, 2018). These remarks coupled with myself being a Black woman and potentially being classified as a part of the change local people may have disliked meant my concerns began to increase. Feelings of apprehension and fear arose as I wondered how my race would be received by the CYP and families I would encounter. Although something I shared in supervision, my first piece of work within the LA, the case of a young person, who for the sake of anonymity we will call Tanya, quickly brought this contextual knowledge and the associated feelings of worry about being seen as an "other" to the fore.

The Case of Tanya

Tanya, a girl in Year 7 of Black-Caribbean heritage, was raised to my attention following concerns about challenging behaviour. Although only in the October of her first academic year at secondary school and in possession of an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) — which placed her primary need under Communication and Interaction — the school's Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDCo) shared that the Head Teacher had said that should Tanya have one more incident, she would be permanently excluded. To date, Tanya had been excluded for wearing socks and tights together and refusing to respond to au-

thority figures when they told her to change immediately. The second incident that resulted in a fixed-term exclusion was when Tanya supported her sister in a lunchtime brawl with pupils whose parents had followed them home to tell them that they were not wanted in the school. It appeared that the SENDCo had called me in to support the school's understanding of Tanya's needs.

Whilst the SENDCo provided some insight into the school's position and the contextual history of Tanya's case, Tanya's mother forgot about the scheduled meeting and therefore did not attend the consultation. The SENDCo attributed this to mum presenting with learning needs of her own. To supplement the information gathered from consultation with the SENDCo, I observed Tanya in a lesson where no concerns had been raised, to get a picture of her when things were going well. I also decided to meet with Tanya to hear about the recent events from her perspective. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) using the Ideal-School Framework (Williams & Hanke, 2007) was employed to gain some insight into what school conditions Tanya felt would hinder her or allow her to thrive.

During our encounter, themes associated with lack of support, not feeling heard or believed, being the only Black female in her class, experiencing teachers who were racist, grumpy and nosey and feelings of not being equal amongst her peers emerged.

Description and Feelings

The stages of Description and Feelings are the first two in Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle. In my view, these stages sit well with Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action stage. Recent reflections have led me to realise that I remained trapped in the first two stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (see Appendix). With the cyclical dance between Description and Feelings, I developed a Personal Model of Reflection to demonstrate how I moved past stage two in Gibbs' cycle. The model incorporates Gibbs' and Schön's steps.

Personal Model of Reflection

A crucial element that appeared to be missing from the previously described and established models was the impact emotions have on reflection. Recent reflection-on-action has led me to realise that an increase in my emotional state kept me caught within the Description and Feeling stage; this is explained in the Personal Model of Reflection as a stage of Internal Talk (IT). This is the process of creating narratives

consciously or unconsciously using self-talk. IT then resulted in External Talk (ET).

ET involves translating thoughts created during IT into, tangible language. It can take place by conversing with another or writing informal thoughts down. It makes the IT explicit and tangible, therefore enabling the emotional state to decrease. ET enables one to enter the latter three stages of Gibbs' Cycle, which, in this model, is where Logical and Theoretical thought occurs.

Logical Thought is explained using theories associated with biopsychological theory around the amygdala and the flight–fight–freeze response (Rice & Hoffman, 2014). The Personal Reflection Model suggests that ET supports emotional regulation in that releasing internal emotions through language supports the emotion centre of the brain to reconnect to the Prefrontal cortex (PFC), which is associated with executive functions. From here, theoretical thinking can begin. It is only at this point that Analysis and Action Planning can occur. Figure 1 illustrates the Personal Reflection Model; this model will be used in this reflective piece.

My Internal Talk

Upon leaving the school gates following Tanya's case, I engaged in IT. I kept replaying Tanya's last words to me: "You do, believe me, don't you?" and the information the SENDCo shared with me. Tanya's experiences of injustice, feelings of victimisation and judgement because of her race left me angry, annoyed, upset and disgusted. The more I thought, the more elevated my emotions became. I was angry for Tanya and the social injustice she had experienced. I was annoyed that her mother did not show up to consultation to advocate for her, upset that an EHCP had not acted as a protective factor for her. I was also disgusted that the school would consider excluding Tanya when they had not taken her already identified needs into account. Tanya's lived experience had mirrored my fears about what I thought I would encounter whilst in the LA. The hypothetical had become a vicarious reality — I believed her.

Initially, I sought someone to talk to who would provide genuine empathy and understanding of the LA's context and the position of being a TEP. In this instance, a fellow trainee who also made up a minority within the profession was chosen as the person with whom I engaged in the stage of ET.

My External Talk

Reflecting on whom I chose to engage in ET with is supported by applying Tajfel's (1979) social psychology principle of In-Groups. I chose to reflect with someone who knew the geographical and demographic nature of the LA; who was a minority (although not in the same way as me) and someone with whom I felt safe to freely explore my emotions and thoughts in an uncensored way. I found that talking

to an equal whom I could identify with was helpful.

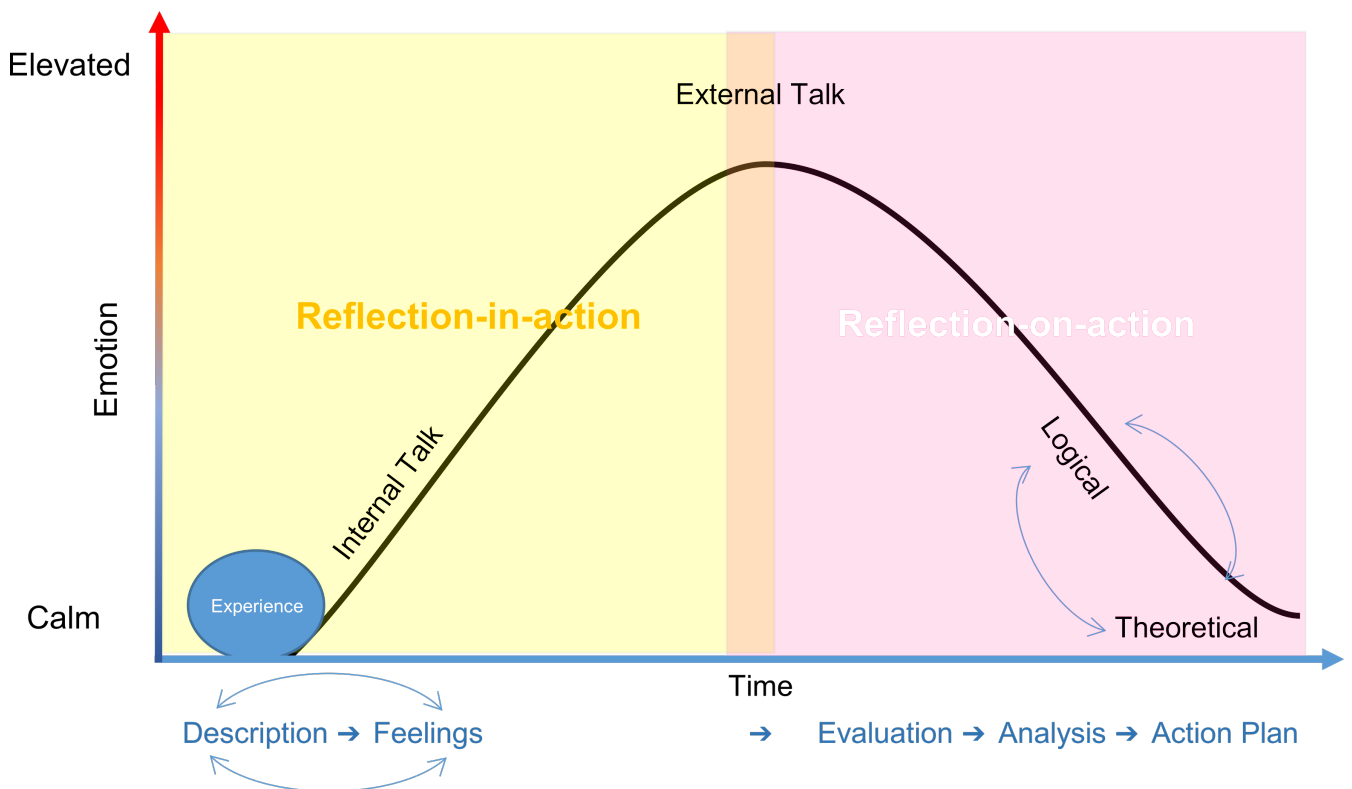
Hearing my own emotions during verbal ET with a peer allowed me to self-regulate my emotions, and my heart and my head to connect. With clearer thoughts, I could use my passion to fuel my commitment to processing Tanya's experience and writing her report. Peer supervision enabled me to identify that there were issues of social injustice in play. The absence of an advocate for Tanya and my acknowledgment of the over-identification with her case at the level of race helped me understand why I had become so frustrated and angered by her experience. It also reminded me that Black people can be positioned as the aggressors in situations (Thiem et al., 2019).

ET allowed my heart and head to connect and facilitated the ignition of my curiosity. It provided a space for me to wonder aloud. I wondered if Tanya had shared her experience to such lengths because she felt there was some unspoken understanding found in the race and gender we shared. Had my younger age made me appear more relatable? In the elements of identity that we shared, had she hoped that in telling me I would be able to make a difference? Did the use of drawing and talking take the pressure off the interaction and support her to explore and articulate her own experience and feelings?

Logical to Theoretical Thinking

Gibbs' Evaluation stage maps onto the Logical and Theoretical model of my personal reflection style. In freeing up the PFC for logical thought, I was able to step back objectively and identify my experience in line with psychological theory. Once in the logical phase, I was able to identify that I had been identifying with Tanya. I had convinced myself that the school as a system was prejudiced and therefore hindering Tanya's progress. In reality, it mirrored my fears of being based in an LA where I may experience prejudice and, therefore, not know how to navigate it — impacting on my TEP experience. Logical thought then carried into a theoretical understanding of thoughts and feelings about Tanya's case.

Psychodynamic theory of defence mechanisms (Rice & Hoffman, 2014) helped me develop a clearer awareness that the identification with Tanya had structured my understanding of Tanya's experience. In recognising the powerful identification, I was able to see that my response was also linked to the bio-psychological survival principle for fight–flight–freeze. In line with Siegel's (2010) Hand Model, my Pre Frontal Cortex had finished flipping its lid and "reconnected" with my amygdala, the emotion centre, through the process of external talk with a peer and therefore supporting me to engage in logical thinking. This reconnection supported me to contain my own emotions and think through what was emotionally mine and what belonged to Tanya and her situation. With the greater degree of clarity that offered, I was

Figure 1*Model of Personal Reflection*

able to raise the case on a descriptive and emotional level in supervision. This time, ET was used for evaluative purposes (Gibbs, 1988). In supervision, I addressed what was good and what was “bad” about the experience. Some of the identified evaluations and analyses are discussed — the bad has been reframed into learning points.

The Good and Reframed Bad in the Experience

Having processed my emotions but not yet written the psychological report, I brought the case of Tanya to placement supervision. My Supervisor acknowledged the contained emotions that I shared and that, perhaps, it was a good thing I was the (T)EP who met with Tanya. She reflected that the ethnic heritage Tanya and I shared may have enabled her to take a risk and be vocal about the injustices she felt she had experienced, and this points to the value and importance of a diverse profession. My Supervisor’s response allowed me to see that perhaps I was perceived as part of Tanya’s In-Group. In my practice, I was able to see that supervision was a safe place, not only in writing (via our supervision contract) but also in practice. It is a place for professional development where I can raise casework and also a safe place where I can raise the intersubjective and emotional involvement in prac-

tice.

Taking Tanya’s case to supervision prompted me to reflect that having Tanya as my very first case in this LA resulted in me having to deal with the worries I had constructed about being a Black woman in a predominantly White and potentially more right-wing LA. It was also acknowledged that as opposed to being reactive in my practice and on high alert about the perceived potential harm I could experience, I was now consciously aware of my worries and could be reflexive by acknowledging them before even engaging with a piece of casework. In essence, I could be more aware of the way my anxieties could both inform and misinform my practice. A lecture on systemic thinking which focused in part on the Social GRRRAACCEESSS (Burnham, 2018) also helped normalise my feelings.

Burnham (2018) developed the acronym “social graces” to reflect characteristics of difference in power, values and lifestyle, invisible and visible, voiced and unvoiced. The “social graces” represent gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality, and can be aids for reflection during therapy or supervision. They helped me understand how important it is to be aware of,

sensitive to and competent in working with issues of social difference. It is because of this reflexivity that the graph's line (see Figure 1) at the point of the Theoretical label on the Personal Reflection Model does not hit zero on the X-axis — we are never truly neutral. An important learning point was the way my orientation to my work is informed and misinformed by intersubjective emotional factors. I think this may be generally true of all aspects of professional practice, but this important first case drew out for me the ethnic and cultural dimensions inherent in the processes I reflected upon. It seems that factors of which we are aware, but also implicit factors that escape our awareness, do nevertheless inform our professional orientation (e.g., Sukhera & Watling, 2018; Westerberg, 2016).

Action Plan

Since experiencing the case of Tanya, I have had cases that have resonated with me on a personal level or triggered an emotive response within me. I continue to use IT to explore my emotions and identify which social GGR-RRAAACCEEESSS they connect with. ET is used to contain my awareness of myself alongside my thinking in the case in a psychological way. Bringing the case to someone who knows me well or with whom I can identify continues to be useful in supporting me to regulate my emotions. Below are some other steps I take to be a more effective practitioner.

Supervision with my placement supervisor is something I continue to use to prepare for casework. Casework reflection is now a standing item on my supervision agenda within placement. In addition, my supervision contract has been amended to reflect the Social GRRRRAAACCEEESSS which I feel could impact my work. Planning in supervision has also helped me communicate clear expectations with schools.

Improving my Consultation Skills

Tanya being my first case allowed me to step back and see the limitations and power of consultation. With Tanya's SENDCo, I was not prepared to enhance her problem-solving capacity and empower her. To develop my skills, my helping question during VERP sessions has been about thickening the consultation, and I have asked my supervisor to observe me in consultation. (Not only has this strengthened my consultation skills, but it has also prompted me to bring along physical resources to enhance my consultation with CYP for their empowerment.)

Closing Reflections

Although this reflective piece is centred on one case, it continues to be a case that has a lasting impact on the practitioner I am and strive to be. The case of Tanya has enabled me to generate a Personal Model of Reflection that

demonstrates how I learn from experience and theory to develop a deeper understanding of myself as a practitioner so that the espoused and ideal me can sit more congruently. The generation of this model and reflection upon the experiences throughout training and practice has also enabled me to normalise the fact that I have my own feelings, which have driven me to adequately prepare for the variety of roles I play within my practice. It has also helped me identify the magic in and power in my race. In meeting CYP who can identify with me, and I with them, I am able to acknowledge the gateway that is created through unspoken shared understanding. Although it can sometimes mean there is an overestimation of the racial and cultural similarities between myself and a client, which I have to explore and clarify, race, its complexities and not taking it for granted has helped me to build a rapport that can enrich a visit. I take comfort in the knowledge that I take any steps necessary to ensure that my role is one of a facilitator and joint problem solver who uses passion and psychology to advocate for social justice for all clients. Informal reflection-on-action with colleagues, supervision, supervisor observation, VERP and tangible resources to communicate and apply psychology — are all tools I use in the effort to work towards improving my skills within my practice. Reflection has also guided me to strive to continue to create an environment for all CYP to demonstrate their full potential by communicating their views and feel safe to be fallible and engage in assessment.

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Appendix
Descriptions and Feelings During Reflection-in-Action

Source	Reflection-in-Action		
	SENDCo	Pupil	TEP
Description: What happened	Initial Information Gather and Consultation	CYP shared her experiences	Telephone conversation
Feeling	Frustrated at the sense of injustice imposed by school and other parents	The experiences of not feeling heard triggered empathy	Guilt at projecting my own fears about racism onto the case