

# Development as a Reflective and Reflexive Practitioner: Reflections of a Trainee Educational Psychologist

Ruth Adongo

Trainee Educational Psychologist, University of East London

In this reflective paper, a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) employs the Framework for Critically Reflective Educational Psychology (EP) Practice to reflect on two experiences within her placement practice. The self-reflective and self-reflexive process enabled the TEP to explore her personal and professional thoughts and feelings as she navigated the complexities of EP practice. An action plan guided by these reflections is provided which includes remaining committed to cultural competence, cultural humility, and the use of systemic thinking to support collaborative practice. A description of how the TEP used the reflective framework is provided as well as an evaluation of her experience of using it.

**Keywords:** anti-racism, reflective practice, reflexivity, reflective framework, trainee educational psychologist

## Introduction

An important part of professional Educational Psychology (EP) practice is the ability to critically review one's practice through reflection and self-reflexivity (Health and Care Professions Council, 2023). Reflection enables individuals to think about past experiences and how they affect future practice. Self-reflexivity enables individuals to look within the self and analyse how internal processes or characteristics that are specific to the individual can influence decisions. This paper seeks to critically reflect on the author's development as a year 2 trainee educational psychologist (TEP). A first-person writing style is used to convey the author's reflections, explore the learning throughout year 2 and share an action plan to inform their future practice.

## Models of Reflection

Development towards becoming a reflective practitioner can at times be a confusing and complex process. For many practitioners, the use of reflective models can provide scaffolding that aids the process by organising these experiences, thoughts and feelings into manageable categories which can then be reflected on. Historically, I have made use of Gibbs' Model of Reflection (Gibbs, 1988) and found the cyclical model a helpful way for me to categorise and make sense of my thoughts. Following feedback, which often pointed out the heavily descriptive nature of my reflections, I realised that to develop my skills as a reflective practitioner, I needed to engage in deeper analysis. Whilst Gibbs' framework has been of use to me during year 1, particularly when thinking about my 'next steps' or 'ways forward', I have found that

it has not been as useful when reflecting on the underlying influences impacting the more complex situations that I have experienced in my year 2 placement. The Framework for Critically Reflective EP Practice (Rowley et al., 2023) (Figure 1) was considered as a potentially more fitting model for my critical reflections on complex placement experiences.

## Overview of the Framework for Critical Reflection

The Framework for Critically Reflective EP Practice is described as a structured and explicit tool that aims to support trainee educational psychologists (TEPs) through the process of critical reflection. The critical element of the framework is its ability to prompt reflection on wider issues, uncover blind spots and support transformative learning and increased self-awareness, potentially informing future practice (Rowley et al., 2023). Although the framework includes a cyclical process, with three headings 'Theory into Practice', 'Relationships and Communication' and 'Emancipatory Reflection', the authors note that the framework can be used in a flexible way and users are encouraged to select the areas that are most salient to their practice experiences.

The next section will explore my reflections on two separate experiences on placement. A brief description of the event will be provided, followed by my personal reflections using internal talk and talk with others before a critical reflection using the framework. The pseudonyms Salema and Tolu are used within this paper. Both names do not resemble any similarities with any other places or people to which I refer to.



**Figure 1**

*A Framework for Critically Reflective EP Practice (Rowley et al., 2023)*

### Reflection 1 - The Case of Salema

#### Description of What Happened

Salema, a 13-year-old girl of Bangladeshi heritage, who had recently received a diagnosis of autism, was brought to my attention by the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) during a planning meeting. In the request for EP involvement, the SENCO outlined that he wanted me to conduct a standardised assessment that would confirm their concerns as they believed my report would provide evidence for them to apply for an *Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA)*. I wondered how useful the standardised assessment would be since the school had already completed their assessments and had confirmed that Salema had low attainment in most of her subjects. I suggested that perhaps there could be other ways of me supporting the school to support Salema however in the SENCO's view, a 'full cognitive assessment' was deemed to be the most helpful way forward.

During my consultation with Salema's mother, she shared that she did not understand who I was, what my role was, and, although she had had a meeting with the SENCO to discuss her daughter's diagnosis, she did not understand what any of it meant. She explained that she thought there was '*something mentally wrong with Salema*' and noted that within the Bangladeshi community, any child that

receives '*these doctor letters and mental things*' are considered '*disabled and mentally ill*'.

Following this consultation, I observed Salema in class to gather a picture of the classroom environment and later met with her to gather her views. I used a combination of free talk and conversational tools to elicit Salema's feelings. The themes that emerged from the conversation were that Salema did not enjoy talking about her learning in school, generally she was happy in school but was finding navigating friendships confusing. When speaking about her home life, Salema expressed that she felt '*sad*' as she was not allowed to play outside with friends. Salema also shared her perception of herself as a learner; she explained that she believed that she was '*not smart*' because her brothers call her '*dumb*', especially since being diagnosed with autism.

Before leaving the school, I briefly met with the SENCO and shared my concerns surrounding Salema's mother appearing uncertain about EP involvement even though she had signed the request for EP involvement form. The SENCO explained that he did inform her however '*she just doesn't get it*'. I then shared concerns about some of the language that Salema explained was being used to describe her, to which the SENCO responded by saying, '*Yeah, this seems to be happening a lot by certain communities in school here because of how they see autism, I think. When shall we pencil in the cognitive assessment?*'

### **Exploration of my Personal Feelings Using Internal Talk**

When leaving the school, I felt angry, helpless, and frustrated. I tend to view myself as a person who operates with logical thinking and avoids dwelling on things, particularly when in professional settings, however I could not shake the feelings that I experienced and was becoming irritated that I still felt this way by the end of the day. Research acknowledges the ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983) that helping professionals may often experience and suggests a range of recommendations to support with managing this, including using support from colleagues (Karabanow, 1999), self-monitoring and using self-talk (Bondarenko et al., 2017).

Before being able to reflect with my colleagues, I felt the need to sit alone with these emotions and decided to engage in internal self-talk. I was able to write some of these initial feelings down. This process of internal dialogue helped me to name these feelings, own the feelings and give myself grace for feeling them. Crego et al. (2022), highlights the importance for health professionals to cultivate self-compassion to avoid burn out or compassion fatigue. Engaging in self-compassion can involve self-kindness and mindfulness (Neff, 2003).

### **Exploration of my Personal Feelings Using Reflection with Others**

Once I had taken time to reflect by myself, I decided that it would be helpful to now reflect with my colleagues. The TEP peer supervision group at my placement provided me with a safe and contained space to externalise my thoughts. The space helped me name some of the uncomfortable feelings out loud and in doing so, I realised that I was feeling a sense of injustice for Salema due to the language being used to describe her. Colleagues reminded me that my feelings were valid, and important. This validation calmed down my frustrations and enabled me to work towards reframing the negative connotations that I had ascribed to my feelings. I felt that this prepared me to engage in critical reflection.

### **Critical Reflections**

My critical reflections have been organised using the headings provided in the framework for critically reflective EP practice (Figure 1).

### **Theory into Practice**

Using the learning from university, including sessions on ‘Dynamic Assessment’, I realised that what had taken

place in my interaction with the SENCO was a difference in theoretical perspectives that influenced our worldviews. The SENCO appeared to be operating from a view based on the Theory of Intelligence (Binet, 1912) whereby he was viewing Salema’s needs as residing within her, requiring testing. This positivist viewpoint did not align with my postmodernist perspective which preferred an approach to learning based on Feuerstein (1991) that valued the Theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE). In my view, it was important to support Salema by finding out what she could do with mediated support. The learning from the Dynamic Assessment lecture had encouraged TEPs to use these approaches in our practice and I had intended to do so, however, in practice, it was proving difficult. Using supervision with my placement supervisor, I reflected on the challenges and pressures that schools are under and thought about certain legislation that continues to perpetuate this medical model of individual assessment (Department for Education, Department of Health, 2014). I realised that the SENCO was simply operating from what he knows and the legislation and guidance that govern work within Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). My frustrations were based on the thought of me completing the standardised tests and potentially maintaining the status quo. For example, perpetuating the prescriptive functions of the medical model instead of an inclusive social model of disability (Shakespeare & Watson, 1997).

### ***Relationships and Communication***

Learning from university including thinking about ‘engaging with diverse groups’ and ‘culturally responsive practice’, supported my reflections about my consultation with Salema’s mother. Understanding that people’s views will be influenced by their experiences, beliefs, and cultural practices made me understand where Salema’s mother’s comments were coming from. Instead of viewing her thinking surrounding Salema’s needs as fixed, I was able to reframe this as her not having all the information she needed to understand Salema’s needs. Teaching from a university session on ‘Using Narrative Approaches’ helped me provide tools to support Salema’s mother with sharing the family’s story, positioning her as the expert in their lives. This was important to remove potential power dynamics and avoid creating a space where I assume the role of an expert instead of the facilitator role. Reflecting on the relationship between Salema’s mother and the SENCO, I felt it was important to share Salema’s mother’s perspective with him. This was achieved during the final consultation which supported the SENCO to develop a clearer understanding that prompted consideration for more

opportunities that would create parent-school time e.g., coffee mornings.

### ***Emancipatory Reflection***

I found it helpful to use supervision on placement to reflect on moral principles and ethical practice. My supervisor and I reflected on my values and my duty to ethical practice. I was aware of my duty as an advocate for Salema, as she had given me her consent to share her views with the adults around her. In my view, Salema was using her autonomy by clarifying how she wanted the autism diagnosis to be defined, and I did not want to let her down. I also wanted to ensure that I was maintaining my commitment towards social justice by challenging the language and labels that were being placed on her. Language constructs meaning and therefore holds power to either uplift or shape and perpetuate ideologies (Fairclough, 2013). Whilst I understand that diagnostic labels can provide clarity and reassurance when understanding an individual's educational needs (Gillman et al., 2000, p.397), when incorrectly used they may create negative stereotypes that lead to stigmatisation. In Salema's case, the word '*dumb*', which had been used by her brothers to describe her, had made her feel '*upset*'. It has been suggested that the word '*dumb*' is often used as a dysphemistic metaphor (Gernsbacher et al., 2016) which may explain Salema's feelings. I felt it was important to support the system around Salema to not only understand the autism diagnosis but to also develop an awareness of ableist language (Bottema-Beutal, 2021). Together my supervisor and I generated scripts that I could use when I met with the SENCO to ignite his own reflectivity, encourage him to consider some wider systems work and use an empowering approach to explore Salema's learning. For example, '*What would further progress look like?*' and '*How can the school make things go better for the future?*' This proved helpful as the SENCO and I were able to negotiate some systems work with the whole school/parents, group level support and a dynamic assessment with Salema. The SENCO still wanted a standardised assessment, which did provide him with the confirmation that he was seeking, however I was pleased that we were also able to negotiate additional support.

My involvement in Salema's case uncovered the complexities within EP practice. Although it was clear that we all had different perspectives, which may have contributed towards the confusion, ultimately, we all had the same goal, which was to ensure we were creating a supportive environment for Salema. I believe that once this shared goal was established, we were able to move towards building on our shared understanding to collaboratively

think about ways forward for Salema.

## **Reflection 2 – The Case of Tolu**

### **Description of What Happened**

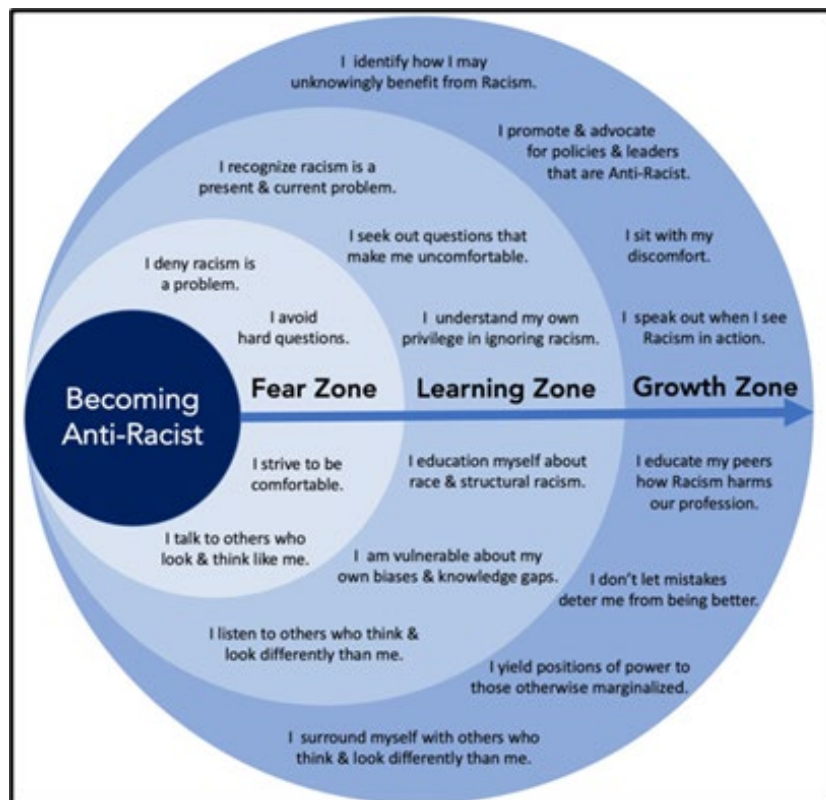
During a planning meeting, the SENCO presented a list of children with whom she wanted me to become involved. She arrived at the name of a year 5 girl that I have named Tolu, who was of Black African heritage, and suggested that I work with her. I asked the SENCO what her concerns were and what she hoped would change. These questions were motivated by my previous experiences, such as the case of Salema, which had led me to develop an appreciation for Constructionist Model of Informed and Reasoned Action (COMOIRA) (Gameson et al., 2003; Gameson & Rhydderch, 2017) as a model for clarifying key issues. The SENCO shared that Tolu had joined the school during the summer term and did not seem to fit in with other children in the school. She then explained that she wanted Tolu to make friends. I asked her what it was about the school or the other people that was maintaining Tolu having no friends. She then replied, '*Well she keeps saying that people are being racist to her, but I know that isn't true because this isn't a racist school and most of the children here are from an Asian background.*'

### **Exploration of my Personal Feelings Using Internal Talk**

Although the conversation ended with a clear next step that would provide support on a group level, I felt a sense of sadness as I left the school. In my head I found myself saying '*How does she know that Tolu isn't experiencing racism in the school?*', '*How can one come to such a conclusion without exploring it first?*'. These questions made me feel really sorry for Tolu. I wondered why I felt such a strong sense of sadness and asked myself, '*Why is this so important to you?*' and then answered my own question with, '*Well, it's because you are also Black*'.

### **Exploration of my Personal Feelings by Reflecting with Others**

Although research has outlined implications of ingroup membership such as stereotyping (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), it can also foster a sense of belonging which can provide group members with comfort and a sense of not feeling alone when presented with certain experiences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). To support with externalising my thoughts, I decided to reflect with a person who shared a similar racial/ethnic identity as me and worked within the EP field. I benefitted from the shared history and cultural bond



**Figure 2**

*The 'Becoming Anti-Racist: Fear, Learning, Growth' model*

*Note. This chart was adapted by Andrew M. Ibrahim MD, MSc from "Who Do I Want to Be During COVID-19?" chart (original author unknown)*

(Brondolo et al., 2009) as it made me feel comfortable to be candid and real about what I was feeling. Together we identified that I was feeling a strong sense of injustice for Tolu and a sense of guilt.

### Critical Reflections

My critical reflections have been organised using the headings provided in The Framework for Critically Reflective EP Practice.

### Relationships and Communication

Further reflection on Blackness made me realise that some unconscious processing was taking place. Due to my own experiences and the experiences of many people in my life, I was engaging in a process of transference. During the interaction with the SENCO, these historical feelings emerged, so although this was about Tolu, in some sense it was also about me and every Black person in my life.

Thinking back to a supervision session with my placement supervisor where we discussed communicating in uncomfortable conversations, I was reminded of the idea

of adopting a curious approach. Utilising principles of attunement learnt from my Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) (Kennedy et al., 2015) sessions, I facilitated a dialogue which was non-confrontational and non-judgemental but still discussed the importance of being an actively anti-racist school. Although I was upset by her comment, I felt that a relational approach would support this dialogue. I was mindful of taking care to avoid making her feel blamed or chastised by me. Creating an environment that was safe and relaxed helped us to think about just the general culture of the school, which led to her sharing that she feels that new students from different backgrounds tend to have a tough time connecting with others in the school. By the end of the consultation, we had agreed for me to support the school on a group level by using a narrative approach to develop belonging and connection amongst a group of girls (including Tolu), instead of just individually working with Tolu. I hoped that the collaborative nature of the strengths-based narrative approach would enable the group to share their stories, develop an awareness of the diversity within their school and foster social inclusion (White & Epston, 1990).

### **Emancipatory Reflection**

Within my placement service, there have been two training sessions delivered by external organisations that have provided teaching and learning opportunities regarding being committed towards anti-racist practice. I found this training valuable as it broadened my knowledge of how racism can appear systemically and reminded me of my duty to anti-racist practice. To supplement this training, the team were assigned to anti-racist discussion groups to continue reflections. As a small group, we have met to reflect on the training and used the *Becoming Anti-Racist: Fear, Learning, Growth Model* (Ibrahim, 2020, Figure 2), to reflect on our anti-racist journey. During our reflections, I shared my experience with Tolu and noted that I felt that I sat comfortably in the 'Learning Zone' as at times I can feel scared to call out racism, particularly when it is covert or when it is from people who are in leadership positions. It was refreshing to hear reflections from group members who shared the same sentiment or others who had overcome such feelings. My feelings were reframed from feeling like, 'You are letting people down by not speaking up,' to 'You care a lot and want to make sure your using correct responses when challenging racism.'

Tolu's case highlighted the importance of anti-racist practice within the EP profession. The experience also uncovered the significant emotional labour needed to navigate, challenge, and dismantle systemic racism. On a personal level, it is my view that I will always feel a sense of responsibility due to my racial identity, however the reframing experience has reminded me that exercising self-compassion is vital. Through psychoeducation and research, I have continued to support schools to understand the nuances of racism and how it may present in everyday school life. This has led to powerful reflections and renewed commitments towards racial justice and inclusivity.

### **Summary of TEP Reflection**

In reflecting on these two experiences, I have recognised that there are skills that I bring which are supporting my practice. My interpersonal skills have enabled me to use a relational approach when working with children and young people, families, and professionals. I believe this has supported me to create safe spaces, build trust that has allowed conversations, which can sometimes be difficult, to take place. My placement experience has enabled me to work with people from a range of different groups and my ability to use cultural competence has supported me to explore differences in a respectful, non-judgemental, and curious way with genuine interest.

Being a Black woman, I am naturally aware of and alert to oppressive situations and I think this helps me ignite my passion and commitment towards promoting equitable opportunities for all. My negotiation skills are developing, and I believe with further support from placement supervision, attending work discussion groups and learning from colleagues at university, I will develop more confidence in this area.

### **TEP Growth and Action Plan**

Since my work with Tolu and Salema, I have encountered a range of work that has conjured up similar thoughts and feelings. I realise that the nature of EP practice will always be complex and at times emotive. To support me, I plan on continuing my process of reflection and self-reflexivity. Taking time to have my internal talk will be helpful for me to manage my immediate feelings safely. I have valued the support from colleagues and plan to continue to access this and actively engage in peer and 1:1 supervision to ensure I can listen to alternative perspectives that bring to surface unconscious processing that I may not be aware of. Continuing to engage in university learning, recommended reading and training will support me to develop my knowledge to ensure I am using evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence.

Self-reflexivity is now incorporated in my placement supervision, where I use frameworks such as Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2012) to explore my identity and how they impact service users ensuring that non-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice is adopted. I aim to also remain up to date on literature and research that is relevant to my practice, particularly around cultural competence and cultural humility (Hook et al., 2017). When working with schools I hope to prioritise consultation underpinned by systemic thinking which seeks to explore the development of repetitive patterns in social contexts and their connections to belief systems (Burnham, 1986). I have identified COMOIRA (Gameson et al., 2003; Gameson & Rhydderch, 2017) as a fitting model to guide my consultations. As well as being underpinned by social constructionism, COMOIRA works well with systemic thinking and works towards co-construction of shared understanding. COMOIRA has also supported me to reframe questions to schools in terms of what they want to change, who will facilitate the change and how the change will be evaluated. It is important to ensure the consultant-consultee relationship is equal in power avoiding a hierarchical approach. It may be helpful for me to introduce the space using phrases such as, 'this is a space for us to put our heads together,' and 'you all know X better than me'. Additionally, these phrases will support me to keep

‘humble consulting’ at the forefront of my mind throughout the consultations enabling me to paradoxically embrace the humility of not-knowing (Schein, 2016, p.58).

### Application of the Framework for Critical Reflection in EP Practice

When applying this framework, I found it helpful to identify the domains that were most relevant to my situation. I began with the ‘Theory in Practice’ column and worked through the prompts within that domain. Since previous TEPs (Rowley et al., 2023) had mentioned the risk of bias from avoiding specific areas, I decided to reflect on all the prompts and only concentrate on the ones that were relevant. For each prompt I developed questions to guide my thinking (Appendix A). The questions enabled me to ensure that my reflections were relevant to the actual prompt and allowed me to note down my thoughts and group them together. At times some of the questions led to more questions, which I think was my way of deepening my thoughts. Once I had finished, I then moved on to the ‘Relationships and Communication’ domain and followed the same process as previously described before moving on to the final domain ‘Emancipatory Reflection’ and again following the same process.

I valued the flexibility of the framework as it enabled me to use it in a way that worked and made sense to me. There are several prompts provided which are likely to generate a lot of reflections. This may appear intimidating and make the process slightly overwhelming, however, I found it helpful to colour code the domains and my reflections using the corresponding colours (Appendix B). This helped me organise my responses clearly and allowed me to build on my thoughts and make connections across all three domains. This was particularly beneficial when I began to develop my action plan.

A key strength of the framework is its ability to act as a spur to deep thought and provide a helpful foundation for self-interrogation for practice. Since then, I have used the framework prior to starting a piece of work to think about areas to explore with school staff and parents, making sure I cover all the blind spots. This has been an effective way of using this framework for planning/guiding my work.

The key terms glossary provided allowed me to clarify the terms to ensure that I had a shared understanding of them. In my view, this is a key tool that TEPs would appreciate as we are developing our skills and competence and at times there is a need to be reassured that we are on the right track.

The framework is a valuable resource to deepen thought and discussion particularly as a TEP developing my

reflective skills. I think this would also be an important resource for EPs to use to reflect with others. Some may find it beneficial to have a guide or a range of examples for how it has been used in different situations. Overall, I found the process to be empowering and refreshing. I welcomed the depth of critical thought that it provided me and aim to continue to use the framework throughout and beyond my training. I would encourage other TEPs and EPs to utilise the framework and share how they have made use of it.

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## Appendix A

### Prompt questions for case reflection (Salema)

#### Theory into practice

What factors are contributing/ maintaining this situation/ impacting how I am making sense of this situation?

Are there any theories that I can use to help me understand what has happened?

What does research say about this situation?

Are my worldviews, values or beliefs influencing my decisions in this situation? If so, what are they and how have they influenced me?

Can I identify worldviews, values or beliefs of those involved and their influences?

Looking at the wider system, are there things at play that appear beyond mine or those involved' s control? e.g. policies, guidances.

Action plan questions: Now that I know this, how would I use this, how can I use it to help me in this situation?

#### Relationships and communication

Are there any other experiences that might be contributing to my emotions? Where have I seen a similar situation play out in my life or the life of somebody else, I know?

What psychological theories can I employ to explain my feelings, or the feelings of others involved?

In terms of the interactions between those involved, what did I notice?

How are we positioning ourselves and each other? Was this helpful?

Are there tools, resources that I have learnt to support me to facilitate a positive interaction?

Action plan questions: Now that I know this, how would I use this, how can I use it to help me in this situation?

#### Emancipatory reflection

Which ethical guidelines and moral principles are guiding my practice? Are there any that are not reflected in my practice in this situation that should be? Did I communicate the principles underpinning my decisions with all those involved? Would this have helped?

Looking at the wider system, are there things at play that are helping or hindering professional moral principles?

How are our social characteristics (gender, race, ethnicity, age, class etc) influencing this situation?

Action plan questions: Now that I know this, how would I use this, how can I use it to help me in this situation?

## Appendix B

### Reflection notes (Salema)

Cultural competence: How is Autism perceived within my own culture. How is it perceived in Salema's mother's culture? How do I feel about this? Why do I feel this? Unconscious processing – my own feelings surrounding injustice.

Think about the teaching at university about this topic, 'engaging with diverse groups' and 'culturally responsive practice'.

Thinking about the system, how are we all relating? Relational process!  
Me and Salema's mother  
Me and the SENCO  
Salema's mother and the SENCO  
Me.  
Salema's mother and the SENCO.  
What could be happening across these interactions?

Positioning theory.  
How am I poisoning myself or being positioned? (I'm not expert but I feel Salema's mother views me as the expert. How do I feel about that? (Frustrated but I do understand)  
How do we relate?  
What is the common goal of all those involved. – we all want the best for Salema.

Ethical practice and moral principles - What is guiding my decisions and reactions? Advocating for Salema and respecting Salema's autonomy especially after gathering her voice.

#### A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE EP PRACTICE

Positivist vs Post-modernist – Is this influencing me/SENCO? Standardised assessments vs dynamic assessment. Theory of Intelligence (Binet, 1912) vs Theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) Feuerstein (1991)

What does research say about this? Remember MLE training and MLE Interest Group discussion on placement (practice-based evidence). The schools in the borough are still becoming familiar with this. It takes time.

Critical psychology  
Increase in SEN and applications for EHCNAs. Schools in the borough seem to be used to this model. Perhaps this is driving the SENCO's priorities for my involvement.



Social justice  
Anti-oppressive practice. Language constructs meaning therefore the use of words such as 'dumb' feels unjust especially as Salema has explained it makes her feel upset to be described in this was.

Action plan:  
How will I use my reflections to help this situation?  
Discuss in supervision.

- Theory into practice –**
- Take an eco-systemic approach.
  - Support SENCO to understand the value in dynamic assessments.
- Relationships and communication**
- Use VERP, caring and compassion approach.
  - Co-construct/co-production. Systemic thinking (Use COMOIRA)
- Emancipatory**
- Child-centred, ensure Salema's voice is evident.
  - Psychoeducation for the school/parents about Autism.
  - Signposting to relevant services.