**‘From Lockdown To Listening and Learning’ by Jenny Mosley**

**Introduction**

Hello good people. I am writing this letter to you, still deep in lockdown, whilst many of you with deep anxiety, are back in schools. I have always said and written that all good teaching consists of all everyday acts of courage. What you are doing now, facing a completely different educational landscape, is a huge act of courage and, as always, I have such huge admiration for all of you. Many of you won’t ever have heard of me – hopefully some have. During this lockdown I have heard from nurseries and schools asking for help to get them back to some sort of “normal”. Looking back over my experiences, during 48 years in education, theoretically I should be in a good place to give additional help. I have been a practicing teacher who then took on additional studies in therapy so I could help rebuild some children’s self-esteem and help and support children and adults in distress. I later developed and, began teaching, a ‘Creative Arts As Therapy’, ‘Counselling in Groupwork’ and ‘Positive Relationships’ for a Masters in Education at Bristol University. Whilst I was also part-time teaching, I researched and developed a particular model I called Quality Circle Time and wrote endless books on the subject. Consequently, I have been asked to work, over the years, in various schools and communities suffering great trauma after tragedy has struck. I have worked internationally too, in many different cultures, to show how we can support each other. In between all of this, the bulk of my current work, up until a few months ago is very hands on. Every week, in some school somewhere, I am to be seen running circle times with challenging classes, organising activities with midday supervisors in hectic playgrounds, or motivating good-hearted, tired staff in a range of after-school meetings.

So, with all that in mind – what have I learnt? On my long lockdown walks I gave real thought to it all and decided, in the end, what we all need is very simple – but the act of giving it is not. We all need to be listened to in a warm, empathic relationship. There are very wise people, through the ages, who have written on empathy. It doesn’t matter who your own inspiration is, if you draw together all their writings, they would all share a common theme. One of my early ‘inspirers’ is Carl Rogers, the founder of person-centred humanistic psychology, who talks about the importance of true listening. To genuinely listen, we have to put aside our own feelings at that moment, suspend judgement, accept the person as they are and show genuine empathy without ruining the moment by giving advice. Research evidence reveals that a high degree of empathy in a relationship is possibly the most important factor in bringing about change and learning. Phew. Big problem. Since being at home, isolated with my adult daughter, my own, at times, heightened state of anxiety meant that when she was in the same state for different reasons – there was no listening. Just parallel tirades of anger. “Rubbish listener” was her verdict! So back to Rogers, what did he say? In some senses real listening can only be done by a person who is secure enough in herself / himself not to fear what the other person might bring to the listening space. So, firstly we need to look after ourselves before we can help others. I truly believe that we need a Personal Care Plan to refresh and re-energise ourselves at every level – spiritually, physically, intellectually, creatively and emotionally. If I have a life outside my work – I have more of myself to give to listening. Only if I’m kind to myself can I be kind to others – otherwise I get too drained and burnt out.

Many children coming into school are more stressed, anxious, angry, frightened and fragile than they have ever been. They will show their hurt and panic by moving into fight and flight. Flight means they can withdraw deeply – fight means they can flare up at any time, argue over everything, ignore rules and boundaries; in fact, push all your crumple buttons. And you could have a whole class like this. I could so easily (well, I did at home) get drawn into behaving like a child myself. The one who most needs you is the one who most repels you.

To be the person children need – I need to take my fright and fear elsewhere. In one of my great schools (see Watercliffe Meadow video slide on our presentation) – they practice ‘supervision’ without calling it that. This video gives the bare bones of what makes children safe and happy in school. When we first started there (before it became Watercliffe Meadow), children’s levels of distress and fear that they could not be emotionally ‘held’, meant they rampaged down corridors swearing, fighting and attacking property. Inch by inch they had to be made to feel heard, safe and valued. What you see on the video is that at the heart of what they did, was to set up timetabled listening systems, clear rules and highly-motivating rewards and consequences, creative and fun social times (i.e. outside break times) and extra weekly support for fragile and angry children **before** they got into trouble.

What they don’t show you in the film is that their first commitment is to listen to staff. If staff aren’t listened to, how can they listen to children? Each week all 87 staff have a morning circle time which can move into small circles and then end on Step 4 and 5 in a large circle. (See presentation for explanation of Five Steps).

Appraisal is basically a form of Bubble Time for staff. Each person has a buddy and one of their key pillars of discussion has to be how each of them are engaging with their Personal Care Plan which they call the SPICE plan. If then, anyone needs more support, senior management give extra supervision.

To make you feel safe, when the person’s need is greater than the listening you can give, we need to be able to know we can refer people on. It is paramount that we can pull together a list of all local support groups and charitable trusts and Local Authority support which your key person will hold for adults and children. I do remind staff not to forget to say to children both in Bubble Time and in Circle Time, “If ever you tell me something that worries me, I may have to get us some extra help”.

Recently a retired HMI and current honorary research fellow at London University – Trevor Higginbottom – who has also been associated with schools for many years, wrote, “After undertaking a recent research exercise in Watercliffe school …. This confirmed what I have felt for years. That this is a school with the truly remarkable ethos of love and very strong positive relationships between all members of its community. One dimension illustrates this well – an hour-long interview with a group of pupils from right across the school.”

There – it has been said. We can call it ‘therapeutic’ or ‘nurturing’ or give it many other words – but the ability to love through listening is paramount for a happy school. I am hoping this online training package contains nuggets of gold that will inspire you to think or study more … but meanwhile just reach out with compassion and love through genuine listening. When children return, I believe all good schools will aim to devote much of their time to Circle Time, PSHE and/or SEAL. Already, good schools are working on their ‘recovery curriculum’. This needs to be your key priority – as only when a team feels safe can they learn. Also, please remember lots of my games and activities are based on fun. It has been well researched how laughter is deeply healing. So maybe this package should have been titled “From Lockdown to Listening and Learning… and Laughter”. From my heart, I wish you all the luck and love in the world. Your warmth, wisdom and inner strength has never been so needed.