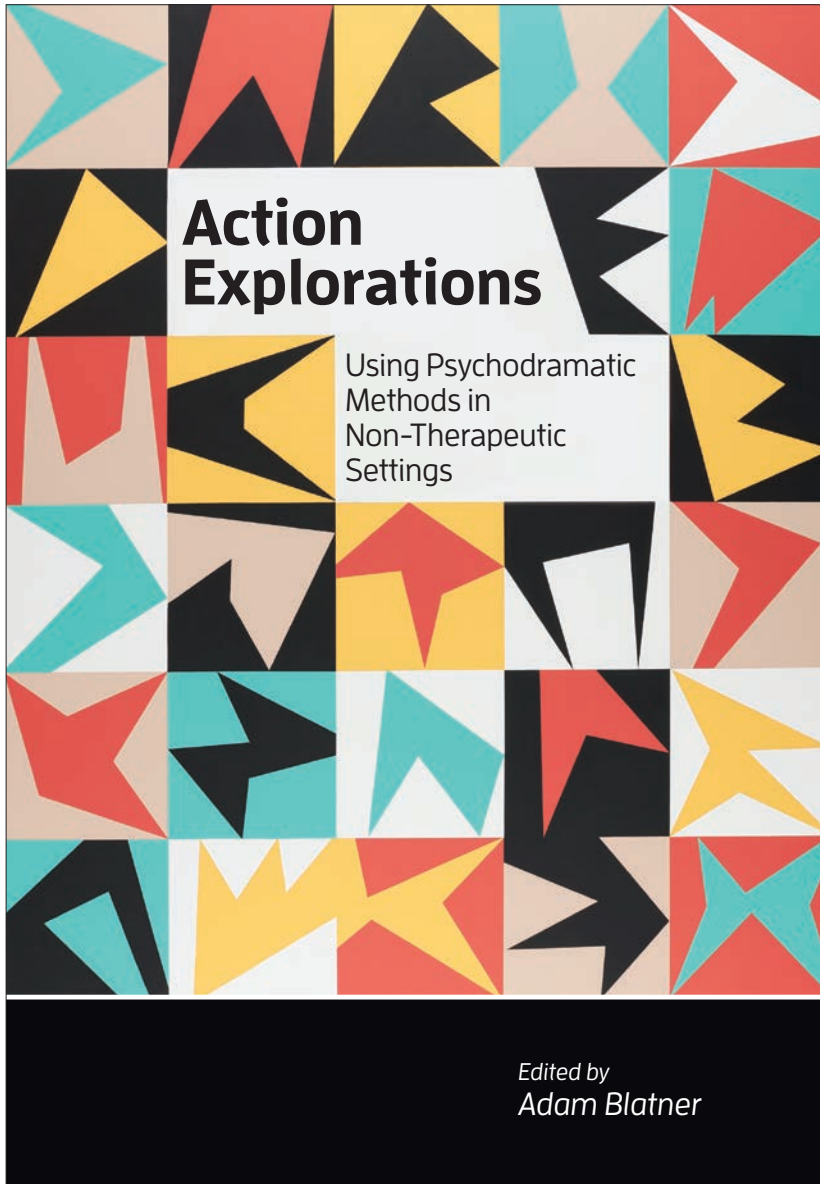


Catastrophe Years: Reinsuring for Resilience

Valerie Monti Holland

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Catastrophe Years: Reinsuring for Resilience

Valerie Monti Holland

2017 was a ‘catastrophe year’ in the global insurance industry. It recorded the second highest (2011 was number one) losses in history due to natural disasters. But the insurers had a back-up plan: ‘For all the gloom, the 2017 losses were also proof of the resilience of the reinsurance industry. Insurers have long spread catastrophe risk by taking out reinsurance policies.’¹

The phrase *catastrophe year* was introduced to me during a coaching session with an insurance professional who explained how proud he was that his team’s financial health had not suffered as a result of the catastrophe year that was 2017 due to careful and vigilant planning. It struck me as a useful metaphor for our personal resilience and I asked him how it might relate to his mental fitness. What sorts of ‘reinsurance’ do/might/can we take out to help us when things derail us as they inevitably will?

The insurance industry does not prepare for a crisis just prior to it; they foresee the possibility and contribute in small and significant ways to offset it. We do this with pensions and savings accounts for our personal finances, even with diets and exercise for our physical health. How can we also do it as a way of strengthening our mental fitness?

As a sociodramatist who works as a facilitator, trainer, coach, teacher and supervisor, I found the concept of reinsurance to guard against catastrophe years particularly helpful when thinking about people’s ability to cope and even thrive under pressure.

My portfolio is very broad and currently spans a spectrum of contexts from working on leadership skills with senior managers in the insurance industry

¹ *The Economist*, 2018: <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/01/11/natural-disasters-made-2017-a-year-of-record-insurance-losses>

to helping young people with disabilities choose the next step in their life's journey. Since qualifying as a sociodramatist from the MPV-SAM school in the UK, I've been fortunate enough to learn about a number of social systems from a variety of perspectives, *e.g.* for three years I delivered a bullying and victim awareness program in an adult male prison followed by seven years as part of a research center examining and evaluating criminal justice issues often commissioned by the Ministry of Justice. Moving from the role of Solo Practitioner to Research Team Member afforded me a richer understanding of the many roles in this part of the system that focuses on reducing re-offending.

Morenean methods have proven to be effective in helping people to better understand the system in which they are working, living and playing in order to gather and galvanize support, both internally and externally, for tougher times; in other words, people have become more resilient through using them in my experience.

Resilience is a word bandied about far and wide. The message that we all need it and should have it inspires an air of guilt when we don't demonstrate it. It's as if we haven't done our homework.

My introduction to resilience as a part of a framework necessary for taking responsibility for oneself began in 2013 when I was invited to be a part of an interdisciplinary research team (Probst, Boylan, Nelson and Martin) investigating the early careers of social workers, radiation therapists and mathematics teachers — three careers that experience a high percentage of departures from the field within the first 5 years. The university funding the research was questioning whether there was anything they could incorporate into the training that people received to help them become more robust in the field and sustain their careers for longer.

My role was to facilitate 3 focus groups: one for students, one for educators and finally an event that combined both groups. According to Probst, *et al* (2014):

Emergent themes indicate resilience is dependent on a complex interplay between individual and organizational (or situated) characteristics. The key concepts were:

- a. Transitions: new identity demands
- b. Organizational and systemic issues: being treated unfairly, team culture, difficult cases, feedback and support, and professional demands
- c. Personal characteristics: personal actions and personal qualities (accepting, confidence, forms of reflection, interpersonal skills, and positive psychology)
- d. Professionality: agency, commitment, moral purpose, and value.

Equating these four themes to Morenean methods, I would reframe them as:

- Transitions: new identity demands can be explored through role training
- Organizational and systemic issues — an opportunity to deploy sociometry
- Personal characteristics & Professionalism can be addressed through sociodrama and psychodrama

The conclusion stated:

“By addressing issues of resilience, course credibility is enhanced as a preparation for professional life, with a subsequent corollary of reduced attrition. The data from this study can be used to inform a creative curriculum to enhance professional resilience in students and early career professionals.”²

While a ‘creative curriculum’ may help, the forces encouraging people to leave these important and stressful occupations had their roots in socioeconomic reality.

The repercussions of the financial collapse on 2008 are still being felt worldwide and the forecast that it would take ten years to recover now seems conservative indeed. In the UK, austerity has been the selected approach for handling the crisis. Public services were stripped back and structural shifts such as the movement of Public Health from the National Health Service to local authorities and city councils meant that a focus on performance as measured by targets became the normative determination of success.

As an external practitioner working with the children and young people’s public health team in a city in northern England since 2000, I watched support grow for programs that promoted the increase in health outcomes with the apex occurring in 2008, the year of the crash. By that year, with colleagues from the Children & Young People’s Public Health (CYP) team, we had created a resource and an action methods-based training program for anyone working with children and young people. Hundreds of people learned how to deliver The Flower 125 Health Programme throughout our region. The program was thriving alongside Healthy Schools,³ a nationwide initiative designed to improve health standards and raise achievement of children and young people, setting minimum standards as goals for schools. Eventually Flower 125

2 Probst H., Boylan M., Nelson P., Martin R. (2014). Early career resilience: interdisciplinary insights to support professional education of Radiation Therapists. *Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences*, 45 (4), 390–398.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Healthy_Schools_Programme

was mainstreamed into Healthy Schools as a training resource that could be accessed by anyone in the city.

We realized as a result of the feedback we received from regular review events that it was not the resource pack and the activities that we advocated but the model of delivery, the ‘how’, that was the most powerful. The model is simple to articulate (but perhaps not so simple to implement):

- Creating a safe enough environment in which young people can learn through a group agreement and clear boundaries outlining consequences of stepping outside of them
- Praise and positive feedback (verbal or through physical touch)
- The use of Icons (small cards with a picture on one side and the behavior and impact of that behavior written on the other) and small, tangible rewards
- Modeling pro-social behavior
- Ignoring petty behavior that is not a threat to the health and safety of an individual or the group

We found that when all of the elements of the model are followed, groups take more ownership and the health promotion work can take place more effectively. The model emerged as the most important factor of the program’s success: the two-day training is an action-based learning space where delegates experience the model and how it is effective by demonstrating the activities. In true Morenean spirit, we show and involve rather than tell.

Both the training and the program itself are built upon the use of action methods and creating the space for sharing and learning. Helping facilitators identify and develop the role of Positive Seeker is one of the principle aims of the training. It enables them to give out the icons, even to a young person who has been exhibiting less than desired participation for most of the session. It is the very act of looking for a reason to give an icon that nurtures the Positive Seeker role and helps the facilitator to reward—frequently, consistently and authentically. The young people, many of whom are rarely rewarded in home and school settings, eventually respond and want to earn more icons, possibly the tangible gifts and most predominantly and importantly, the praise of the facilitators.

While any young person can benefit from being a part of the program, it was those young people who are most deprived who inspired its start in 1998: 26% of 16-year olds smoked, 63% worried about their future and 59% about their health at that time. The housing estate where the first session took place offered nothing for the young people to do and nowhere to go.⁴ Flower 125 gave them attention, more attention than some of them had ever had in their lives.

4 *Flower 125 Health Programme Resource Pack*, 2nd edition

Some comments from the young people (feedback gathered by facilitators delivering the program in their settings):

- “I’ve learned more doing this than doing 4 years at secondary school.”
- “I have learned a lot about myself and others.”
- “I feel like I have been treated like a person.”
- “We have a laugh but learn things.”
- “You get a chance to share all your thoughts and opinions.”

Emotional health and wellbeing was a chapter in the first and second editions of the resource pack. With the third, we realized that the entire program fosters emotional health and wellbeing while addressing a variety of health topics and it became the underpinning aim.

However, as the economic situation worsens and the NHS fights for survival, we are finding that time has become as squeezed as money, if not more. We are nearing 1000 people who have been trained to use the Flower 125 Health Programme but so many would return to their setting and find they were unable to deliver.

Increasingly, alarmingly, we had been hearing from practitioners that they were not delivering the entire program. They did not have the space, the time, the resources to do anything but take pieces of the program and use them to augment their practice. Even more concerning was the clear understanding that while these educators were expected to deliver training that encouraged wellbeing, their own emotional health and wellbeing was suffering and that suffering is largely ignored.

This is more than an observation on our part. Teachers are leaving the profession at a much faster rate than ever before. The 2013 research may have been my awakening to the need to offer more to educators but the trend had been gathering force for some time. An article from Richard Adams in *The Guardian* in April 2018⁵ describes a frightening scenario:

More than 80% of respondents to a question circulated by the National Education Union (NEU) said that they were thinking about other careers because of the long hours now required of classroom teachers.

About 40% of those polled said they spent more than 21 hours a week working at home during evenings and weekends, to keep pace with the demands of their schools.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/apr/01/vast-majority-of-teachers-considered-quitting-in-past-year-poll>

The NEU survey's findings tallied with those of a similar poll by the country's other major teaching union, the NASUWT. It found 65% of respondents said they had seriously considered leaving the profession in the past 12 months.

Teachers said the heavy workload was putting a strain on their health as well as on their marriage or families.

"I don't know how I can change how I work, I don't know how long I can maintain it, and the impact that it's having on my family is horrific," one teacher said in answer to the survey.

Another responded: "We are not trusted to get on and do our job. We are accountable at every level, which creates more stress and paperwork. We are exhausted, and great teachers are being driven out of the profession."

Disheartened by this news and with it the demise of initiatives focused on health and wellbeing such as the Flower 125 Health Programme, we considered an approach that would address the needs of the educators themselves, using the principles, techniques and learning from Flower 125. After all, modeling was a critical part of the program. How could young people learn about health and wellbeing from people whose own health and wellbeing was in question? What messages were we sending?

The sociodramatic question emerged: "How can we help foster the resilience of educators to enable them to model health and wellbeing for their pupils?"

"They'll bite your hand off." This was the response from a manager in the multi-agency team that supports schools when I asked if one of the secondary schools with whom she worked might host the project and recruit participants for it.

Encouraged by her reaction, we wrote a bid to fund the project, knowing that it would make it more attractive and feasible if the school did not need to find the money themselves. When we were awarded the funding, we planned the program with a senior staff member who was perfectly situated to help make it all happen. She was very keen as the rise of self-harm is an issue for many secondary schools, not only this high-performing school. This particular school also had several students who had attempted suicide in the past year, a growing trend nationally. These factors were key to the senior leader being open to addressing health and wellbeing at the staff level.

Additionally, the senior leader was passionate about making the group of 12 a combination of pastoral (support), teaching and administrative staff. As in so many organizations, people tended to work in silos, often with little understanding of (and sometimes a lack of respect for) those working in other

parts of the organizations. Our enthusiasm to work with staff in different roles was shared by the senior leader and her colleague with whom we planned the course. At that time, we saw this as a potential pilot for future work that might create spaces for stressed school staff—a form of reinsurance against the demands of an overburdened system.

I had asked a psychodrama psychotherapist, Sarah Morley, who had a background in teaching, if she would co-facilitate with me and together we planned to deliver six sessions over the autumn term (which is roughly 12 weeks in the UK mainstream school system). The hope was to introduce a framework for exploring the system, ideally to allow new perspectives and thinking with regard to it. “Using sociodrama in education is the core of what it is all about. When Moreno began his work in sociodrama, he hoped he would change the world into a more responsive, humane and compassionate society through the use of sociodrama techniques. Sociodrama gives us practice for exploring issues in any number of subject areas for every age, without fear of the consequences of a wrong answer . . .”⁶

We also planned ‘homework’—techniques from Flower¹²⁵ as well as simple strategies from resources such as the Human Givens manual on Dealing with Anxiety⁷—and we felt that having time in between to implement some of the methods and learn from them would be helpful.

As part of the preparation, I returned to the learning from the 2013 research project and heeded its advice to design a creative curriculum for the participants as we sought ways to ‘re-insure’ the educators against the often powerful forces of the school system.

Our private, working title for the project was ‘Oil Tanker Sinks—Teacher Not Involved’, a response to the overwhelming responsibility placed on the shoulders of school staff. In reality, the project was called ‘Supporting Ourselves, Supporting Each Other’.

The six sessions would last 90 minutes each, take place after school with a mixture of 12 participants from administrative, pastoral and teaching roles and would include the senior staff member who had accepted our offer and approved the plan:

1. Mapping out the system: helping people to recognize the bigger picture through sociometric mapping
2. Identifying Fear-Based Thinking: exploring the messages that school staff receive that lead to anxiety and stress in the workplace.
3. Mistakes and Failures: redefining school as a place where staff can experiment, learn and reflect.

⁶ Sternberg and Garcia, 2000

⁷ Griffin and Tyrrell, 2007

4. Trusting Ourselves and Each Other: fostering a healthier environment for everyone
5. The Pressure Cooker: keeping yourself sane in a pressured environment
6. Sustainable Strategies to Move Forward: evaluating and consolidating our learning and next steps

That was the plan. It was ambitious . . . and immediately altered 15 minutes into the first session.

The teaching staff who had been invited to attend by the senior leader were told (by whom we were never certain) that they were not ‘allowed’ to attend. The senior leader was also not permitted to participate in the course. She delivered this news in person after which we did not see her again. (We heard a few weeks later that she was on sick leave and before the end of the course, she had left the school for a position elsewhere.) We did not know a great deal about the executive leadership of this school other than the fact that it is an academy, as nearly every secondary school in the city is, a legacy of the coalition followed by the Conservative government educational policy.

The six people who showed up at the first session—a mixture of pastoral and administrative staff—did not understand that this was a group for them rather than a training to be given to the students. “They’ve never offered anything that was just for us” was one response that seemed to summarize the sentiments of everyone else.

We quickly pointed out that while this was a forum for them to bolster their own health and wellbeing, a majority of the techniques were from the Flower 125 Health Programme, a resource for use with students. By learning and practicing these techniques in this environment, they could more effectively employ them with their students. This seemed to help people to justify their participation.

The miscommunication meant a slower, more gentle warm up for the group. Warming up to a focus on themselves rather than the students was the most difficult. One person was so startled by this news that he was not able to engage and did not return to future sessions. Our intention to map out the system had to be shelved on that first meeting and we concentrated on building the group to create as safe a space as possible in the awkward circumstances.

Each session was structured to begin with a check in, warm up prior to an enactment usually in the form of a game (that they could use with their young people!) and then a sharing and processing to end. We delivered using a mixture of action methods such as continua, timelines to explore the future, sociometry to map the system of the school and sociodrama including role reversal and doubling to encourage empathy and hear alternative voices. These were the creative techniques we had planned to use; we just needed to be

flexible and spontaneous with the group and their warm up to these activities, ever mindful of the discomfort many still felt even into the third session.

The sculpture was particularly effective, as it entailed a gentle mode of movement and seemed different from traditional role play, the thought of which activated anxiety among most group members. Sculpting facilitates an embodied sharing of experience. It was powerful especially when the group demonstrated the conflict of home life and responsibilities versus work demands. 'Family Comes First' was one of the closing statements from the group. The implication was that this was not the culture of this school. There was a sense that they feel judged when they need to leave work for a problem at home and that they might be letting their colleagues down.

Another week, when we explored some continua related to our theme, Making Mistakes, the group seemed resistant and the progress in trust we felt we may have gained the week before was not immediately available. We were already aware that this group of people is harder on themselves than they are on others. There was still 'fear of the consequences of a wrong' (or too revealing?) point of view.

This was highlighted by the nervousness in the room when we asked how mistakes were tolerated by the school, asking them to stand on an imaginary line to indicate very tolerant or not at all. It emerged that according to this group of people, mistakes could mean serious harm, perhaps even death, for students who were suffering with their mental health. Tolerance of any mistake was equated with a lack of care and professionalism. Therefore, reframing mistakes, albeit less serious ones, was a necessary step in recognizing personal characteristics required to be a successful and resilient educator.

We mapped the system of the school putting 'Mary', a composite character we had invented with the group, at the center. The group was invited to place down objects or post-it notes to mark the different people in — as well as aspects of — Mary's environment. This also seemed to provoke resistance and perhaps trepidation that they might be seen to be criticizing or complaining. We finished with a brief vignette inspired by some of the pressures on Mary which became apparent from the mapping exercise.

People went on to talk about how fearful they were, especially if things erupted on a Friday and they were left to worry over the weekend. As there is no formal supervision (space for reflection as opposed to line management) for school staff, this made it alarmingly clear just what level of stress they could be under when they were meant to be decompressing from a week of work. This in turn had an impact on their loved ones with whom they might be spending leisure time instead of fretting about a troubled student.

Taking advantage of the time to play and think more creatively outside of the rigidity of the system was the most challenging for them. It was frivolous

to think of oneself; being tough and handling the most difficult cases was a badge of honor.

Additionally, this group seemed to expect to have less agency. Their positions in the school, while discrete and important, were nonetheless low in the hierarchy. Things were done to them rather than having the freedom of choosing one's own actions and taking responsibility for them. While they could control their interactions with the students on their case load, the rest of the system may have seemed beyond their control and outside of their remit.

They managed to get from one school holiday to the next with very little in between to lighten the load, offer relief or alleviate stress. Therefore, this course was completely outside of the culture and by the end of it, there was a sense that it was like a secret club—outside of hours, in a quiet part of the building, discovered by a select few.

Little wonder that so many people leave schools as indicated by The Guardian article (and other research). With no reserves in the 'bank', any catastrophe—even a minor one—would completely drain a person of any capital.

On the final session we created the Ideal School, an invented reality where anything was possible: school began at 10:00 after a coffee at their own café. They could select the first place they went each day whether it be a meditation room, small classes in academic subjects, a place to speak with someone if they had questions or just needed to unload. Half the group played the students and the other half were staff. We all revelled in this imaginary place that no one would dread on a Monday morning.

Sarah and I had envisioned that the handout with strategies for stress management which we gave out at the first session would be deployed in between the sessions. It was received rather tepidly, perhaps because the notion that they needed help of any sort was an embarrassment or a sign of weakness. We do know that people used the techniques:

“Thank you for your time and energy that you gave myself and my colleagues in last term's evening sessions. I was wondering if you had the 'script' for the relaxation practice that I could have please so that I can introduce it within the sessions with the children within the Intervention groups I run? We are spending 1hr on Relaxation next week; I have introduced them to the idea already and they have all asked if we could spend more time on it. The children are Y7 (12 year olds) and really enjoyed the quiet time within a busy day . . . one student even fell asleep the first time he tried it!”

One participant also shared that she used the breathing techniques for herself when things felt overwhelming. She would retreat into the staff toilet

to get some private space in order to breathe and found that just knowing she could do that made things more manageable.

At the end of the first session we gave out reflection sheets to gather feedback. When we asked for them back at the beginning of the next session, the group seemed confused. They thought it was just for the end of the course. This was a clash of cultures indeed. Taking time to integrate any learning as we proceeded was a tenet of the Flower 125 team and each session is evaluated by both students and facilitators, both in the training and on the courses with young people. Time to think, for just a moment, is critical to stepping off the treadmill. No one says it better than Nancy Kline: “To take time to think is to gain time to live.”⁸ We claimed that time at the end of the sessions with short meditations. It is evaluative and reflective mechanisms that are much more likely to be squeezed out of a school timetable where time is even more rare than cash.

But it is those short, regular things that make the difference over time. The research on the effects of meditation practiced over a consistent period of time strongly point to the need to find even a little bit of space—in the staff loo if necessary!—and be with yourself. After this, you can be capable of going out there to be with everyone else in a role that you’ve made your own, even if it was assigned to you in the beginning. Introducing this concept as not being selfish but one that better prepares you for the task ahead and gives you the wherewithal to help others is the essence of Supporting Ourselves, Supporting Each Other. I’m not certain we articulated that as clearly, thus the need for reflection!

We cannot be sure what impact the program had, if any. In the end, we received two forms back from the 11 people who had participated, despite repeated requests. We expected about 6 given the level of energy and consistent attendance of the core group. We do know that by that last session in December, people were limping home to the finishing line of the term. They had expressed appreciation for the course repeatedly and described how they felt more relaxed upon leaving than they had entering the room. A more in-depth evaluation was not part of this culture.

It is one example, one short and contained piece of work in a complex and often chaotic system and I cannot draw any conclusions from it. For me, it asked far more questions than supplied answers: Where is the educational system headed? How much more can staff in schools handle? What impact will this have on the young people? What are we doing to reverse the trend of self-harm and suicide among young people?⁹

8 Kline, 1999

9 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-suicide>

We met incredibly dedicated and competent professionals who stepped far outside of their comfort zones to play and think for a short time. As the beginning of an intentional journey to foster resilience, it might have been a springboard. But the usefulness of one intervention that is not an accepted and encouraged part of a wider system may be a minor amusement or even a disruptive force. Having the inadequacies of a system on which people are dependent and are still a part of laid bare might exacerbate feelings of hopelessness or even lead people to despair. We know the methods are powerful and we must use them wisely and well.

Moreno's vision that sociodrama and its techniques can nurture compassion and creativity is one that I share. The gift of sociometry, seeing the bigger picture of an organization in which one is involved, allows the helicopter view that is so valuable in times of stress or busyness. It can offer insight and inspire or affirm action. And after looking at the situation from a meta-view, flying back into it, taking one's role up with renewed vigor can be the difference between loving one's path and barely participating as a protagonist in one's own life.

Through a career of more than two decades, I have found ways of caring for myself that have enabled me to weather the catastrophes of political upheaval and economic downturn. These are not event-based nor particularly time-consuming. They are short, regular practices that work for me: yoga, meditation, walking in nature, connecting to people. Sleeping and eating well are a conscious part of this and gratitude on a daily basis is *de rigueur*. Supervision is an absolute necessity for me—an advantage that those working in schools do not have.

I have been blessed. The work developing the Flower 125 Health Programme over the last 18 years has heightened the awareness of all aspects of health for me and this work has impacted on me in a such a way that often I can embody these principles and model them in my world. It is in these encounters with other worlds that I am able to learn about the trends, the movements and the pain that others suffer. It is understanding these that helps me to hold an appropriate, safe enough space for the work of others to start.

Valerie Monti Holland

Valerie Monti Holland is a facilitator, trainer, mentor and coach. Following her M.A. in Applied Theatre (University of Manchester) and a diploma in Sociodrama and Action Methods, Valerie has developed a portfolio working in the UK, the US and across Europe using these creative and dynamic methods to enable greater team cohesion, candid communication and embodied leadership development in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

As a co-founder of the Flower 125 Health Programme, she and the team have trained thousands of professionals who work with young people to nurture their emotional and physical well being. Training is available more widely—please see the website for information on how to bring this award-winning programme to your setting. (www.flower125.co.uk)

Valerie lives on the edge of the Peak District in England where she cycles, runs and walks balanced by a lifetime passion for yoga. She is the proud and grateful mother of a son and a daughter. Contact her at val@leftluggage training.co.uk

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