



***The Story of Lizzy Watson: The One that Got Away***

**Developed for the Mental Health Primer**

**Mental Health and Schools Together-NH (MAST-NH) Initiative**

Howard S. Muscott, Ed.D.

Eric Mann, LICSW

Student Character

- Lizzy Watson, Student

Family Characters

- Mr. and Mrs. Watson

Teacher Characters

- Mrs. Gerhardt, 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher at NH Elementary School
- Mr. Smith, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher at NH Elementary School
- Ms. Perry, 7<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher at Granite State Middle School
- Mr. Jones, 9<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher at Live Free or Die High School

Faculty Characters

- Mrs. Nelson, Middle School counselor
- Mr. Strickland, High School Principal

Peer Characters

- Sheila, Lizzy Watson's friend since middle school

## *The Story of Lizzy Watson: The One that Got Away*

### I. Introduction and Hook

Mr. Jones was the first to arrive at the team meeting scheduled for 2:30 on a perfect September day in New Hampshire. An experienced math teacher, Mr. Jones had taught at NH High for 22 years and had been involved in more than his fair share of conferences with parents and administrators about students who were about to drop out of school. Lizzy Watson was not the first 9<sup>th</sup> grader who didn't show up for classes her first month of high school and she probably wouldn't be the last. In a way, Mr. Jones prided himself on being able to tell in the first week of school who wasn't going to make it – and it had nothing to do with reading 'cum' files or listening to transition reports from the middle school. Sitting quietly, his thoughts turned to that first day of class when Lizzy walked in 10 minutes late and didn't say a word to him when he asked for her late pass – she just ignored him, flopped onto the only empty chair in the room, and put her head on her desk. When she wouldn't respond to him, Mr. Jones was worried about her. Over the next few days, Mr. Jones made several attempts to engage her. He tried to connect by talking to her between classes about her interests but the pattern continued. After a week of disengagement, he knew she wouldn't last long. Although he wanted to help and worried about her, he decided his efforts were hopeless. "I'm better off focusing my attention on teaching the other 29 students who are here to learn," he thought. But he didn't feel good about it.

### *Discussion Questions*

- 1. Can you recall situations where children leave you feeling hopeless and discouraged?*
- 2. Can you remember talking with a child and you just didn't know what to say next – didn't know what to do next?*
- 3. Have you ever experienced a student who made you feel exactly the way you would guess they were feeling?*

*4. If Mr. Smith knew that he was mirroring Lizzy's hopelessness, what else could he have said or done that may have helped him make a connection with her?*

## II. Unfolding of Background – First Grade

What if Mr. Jones knew more about Lizzy? What if he knew more about how her interests, achievements and experiences in elementary and middle school? What if he knew more about her world outside of school? Her friends? Her family? Might that have made a difference in what he thought about her or how he would have interacted with her? Would he still have felt that as a high school teacher it was too late and there was nothing he could do?

Had Mr. Jones known the whole story, he would have known the good and the bad. He would have known that in the first week of school in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, Lizzy's teacher Mrs. Gerhardt, had screened all her students for academics (as per district policy) and found that Lizzy was doing fine in her academic development – she knew how to count, knew her letters and had a vocabulary typical for a first grader. Lizzy, like other 1<sup>st</sup> graders, was also screened for vision and hearing by the school nurse that week and was doing fine there as well. Her pediatrician report said she had received all the necessary shots and was in good physical health. Like most elementary schools, Lizzy's school did not have a policy for screening students for social-emotional development so no one asked her teacher whether Lizzy had any risk factors for future behavioral problems. If they had, Mrs. Gerhardt certainly would have placed Lizzy high on her list of students she had concerns about -- her biggest concern being that Lizzy rarely smiled - even when she was praised for good work. She also noticed that Lizzy didn't seem to need her attention (or her peers' attention) the way other students did. Lizzy had a tendency to look down at the ground a lot and she spoke very quietly, almost in a whisper. Lizzy liked to stand on the sidelines during recess with two other girls rather than participate in the games. At lunch, these three quiet girls sat together. Mrs. Gerhardt's comment on Lizzy's 1<sup>st</sup> grade report card was, "Lizzy is a shy, but sweet girl. I'd like to see her participate more in class." Lizzy missed only a few days of school that year, all excused for illnesses.

### *Discussion Questions*

- 1. What do you think elementary teachers like Mrs. Gerhardt do to help children like Lizzy experience a sense of belonging?*
- 2. What do you think elementary teachers do to help children like Lizzy learn to engage socially with other children in the classroom?*
- 3. What impact, if any, has the emphasis on academic achievement and statewide testing had on elementary school teachers' ability to promote the social/emotional development of children? Are there other obstacles?*
- 4. Is it possible that elementary schools can redesign recess activities to promote social/emotional development or is that asking too much from the staff that supervises those activities?*

### III. Unfolding of Background – 5<sup>th</sup> Grade

If Mr. Jones had known more about Lizzy, he'd have also known that things changed dramatically over the next four years of elementary school. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Lizzy was rail thin and always looked tired. She never raised her hand in class, even when it was clear she knew the answer. She had learned to read and write and do math on pace with her peers, however, she only did the bare minimum of her work. Her 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mr. Smith, noticed that as work demands increased, the quality of her work began to decrease. Lizzy worked very slowly, often not completing assignments. The two friends she had in 1<sup>st</sup> grade began to pull away from her and over time they no longer had anything to do with her. Mr. Smith's report card comments were telling; "Lizzy is missing a lot of school and it's beginning to impact her performance. She appears to have no friends in class and prefers reading alone during free time or sitting by herself during recess."

What he didn't write on the report card was that he suspected her absences were for no real illness or legitimate reason. He wondered to himself why mom was 'enabling' her by keeping her home from school. In a 5<sup>th</sup> grade parent-teacher conference in April, Lizzy's mother and father expressed differing views when Mr. Smith brought up his concerns. Mom was very worried, saying that Lizzy never seems to really enjoy anything or talk with anyone. Dad was less worried, saying that, "Lizzy just likes to be left alone – just like me."

At this conference, Mrs. Watson asked if there was anything that the school could do to help her daughter – perhaps a friendship group or counseling. Mr. Smith replied that "those type of supports only occur for special education students and I don't believe Lizzy would qualify based on her intelligence and academic skills." Mr. Smith did think that Lizzy needed help, but believed that there was nothing more the school could do. Fifth grade ended without any real changes and things didn't improve in 6<sup>th</sup> grade either– if anything, things got worse. Lizzy was somehow able to get all the adults around her to feel exactly what she was feeling – helpless and hopeless.

### *Discussion Questions*

*If Lizzy had a broken leg, you'd know what was wrong; If there was a serious learning problem, You'd know what to do; If she was throwing chairs through the window, You'd know there was something really wrong; but, it seems that mental health issues aren't always clear cut or as visible as other types of issues Lizzy isn't really a behavior problem, she isn't presenting major academic problems. Perhaps it's just her temperament? Perhaps she's like her dad – a little different.*

- 1. Have you run across a student where your gut tells you something's wrong, but you're not sure what to do about it – you're not sure if you are over-reacting? Not sure if it really is a problem?*
- 2. Where would you turn to get information if you had concerns? Who would you go to if you wanted to talk through your concerns?*
- 3. What is the process within your school to get questions answered, get more information or just vent your thoughts?*
- 4. Do some students like Lizzy fall between the cracks in terms of qualifying for extra supports and services?*
- 5. Why is it so difficult to talk about students like Lizzy, particularly when they are very young?*

#### IV: Unfolding of Background – Middle School

Mr. Jones still would have only had a small part of the picture if he knew about her elementary school experience. There would be a great deal more for him to know if he was truly going to have a clearer picture of how Lizzy ended up with her head on the desk every day that first week of ninth grade. It may be important for him to know what happened in middle school.

Mrs. Nelson, the middle school guidance counselor, had taken notice of Lizzy early in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She had been alerted by the elementary school counselor to keep an out for Lizzy, but with so many students on her caseload, she couldn't follow up that year while Lizzy was still in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Lizzy's showed a steady decline in her academic performance throughout 6<sup>th</sup> grade and her teachers forwarded their concerns to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade team.

Knowing that Lizzy had had a tough academic year in sixth grade and had missed a lot of school, Mrs. Nelson was not at all surprised when Lizzy's 7<sup>th</sup> grade team invited her to a 'pre-referral' meeting about Lizzy in October. She had made a concerted effort to say hello to Lizzy every day in the hallways, but, the demands of her current caseload and hectic nature of the beginning of school precluded her from doing any more.

She clearly remembered the first conversation with Mrs. Watson at the pre-referral team meeting. Mrs. Watson seemed distant, sad, and worried -- she had the look of a person who seemed older than she probably was – she thought to herself that life must have been hard for Mrs. Watson. Ms. Perry was Lizzy's language arts and homeroom teacher and she was the first to speak at the meeting; "Lizzy's lack of work production has resulted in some problems. Lizzy does barely enough work to pass my class and her social studies class, but her grades have fallen to Fs in Math and Science. All her teachers are worried about her. In addition, we've noticed that Lizzy continues to be socially isolated from everyone – everyone except one friend (who everyone knew was Sheila)."

While she couldn't say anything out loud about Sheila because of confidentiality and FERPA requirements, the truth was that Sheila was a very troubled girl. Unlike Lizzy, Sheila freely talked with adults and seemed to enjoy 'freaking them out' by talking about body piercings and tattoos and 'partying.' Sheila liked the attention and was getting some through misbehavior – usually inappropriate language or comments or coming late to class. Sheila was very smart and was able to do all the work in class but often did not get her homework done.

Mrs. Perry wondered if the team had noticed that Lizzy had started to adopt some of "her friend's" behaviors. Like Sheila, Lizzy had started dressing more and more inappropriately. Mom indicated that it had been harder than usual to get Lizzy to do her homework and that she would make occasional "fresh" remarks to her at home. Her teachers indicated that this was happening at school as well. Lizzy had actually received 3 office discipline referrals for disrespect in the past month -- the first time she had ever gotten in real trouble in school since she always liked to fly 'under the radar.'

Mom then broke down and revealed that Lizzy secretly had begun superficially cutting herself –making small barely visible cuts in places on her body that were covered by clothing. "I'm at my wit's end," her mother began sobbing, "and I don't know what to do anymore. Some days I don't have the strength to force her to go to school, so sometimes I just write that she was sick that day." Lizzy's teachers did not quite know what to do in response to Mrs. Watson's outburst - they turned their heads to Mrs. Nelson – hoping she would know the right thing to say or do to alleviate the emotional intensity of the situation.

Mrs. Nelson took the cue and suggested that mom take Lizzy to the local mental health center for an evaluation and treatment. Mom thanked her for the suggestion and agreed she would follow-up that afternoon. Mrs. Watson kept repeating; "I've got to do something – things are out of hand – we need help." Later that month, Mrs. Nelson ran into Mrs. Watson at the grocery store and

asked how it was going – it was there that Mrs. Watson told her that she hadn't been able to get Lizzy to go to counseling and that the therapist at the MH center said there was nothing they could do if she couldn't get Lizzy to go.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Nelson also knew that the school team still hadn't referred Lizzy for a special education evaluation since they all felt Lizzy was capable, but just 'lazy.' They were certainly very worried about her 'cutting' but had thought the referral to the mental health center would address that. They didn't know that Lizzy never went to the mental health center till Mrs. Nelson reported her chance meeting with Mrs. Watson back to them. Lizzy's teachers and Mrs. Nelson were now all very worried about Lizzy but were also frustrated that her mom would not force her to get help and that the MH center would do nothing to help this child in need. They thought: "I guess there's nothing we can do about it."

#### *Discussion Questions*

- 1. Have you ever been frustrated with breakdowns in communications between home, school and mental health providers?*
- 2. Does it seem that school is left holding the bag when you see home or outside agencies not doing their parts?*
- 3. Do you ever feel like giving up because others don't follow through?*
- 4. What do you guess could have happened for Lizzy if better communication systems were in place?*

## V. The High School Conference

Back at the meeting, Mr. Jones still knew nothing of the early struggles that Lizzy, her parents and her teachers had experienced. Getting bored, he looked at his watch. “It’s 2:30 he thought -- when is this meeting going to start.” Just then, Mr. Strickland, the high school principal, arrived with the rest of the team, including Lizzy’s mom. Mr. Strickland began the meeting, “We’re here to discuss Lizzy’s attendance or should I say lack thereof.”

As it turned out, Mr. Strickland’s pronouncement about her attendance was just the tip of the iceberg. It was much more than her lack of attendance that brought them together. Lizzy had now adopted the lifestyle of a fully non-engaged student. Her appearance had become more disheveled. She wore the same clothes for days. Lizzy was not clean – she often smelled of body odor and her hair was greasy and never groomed. Lizzy was skipping school on a regular basis, and was unengaged in class on those rare days when she did attend school. If continued, this pattern would surely result in her failing her classes and ultimately repeating the ninth grade. Her ‘cutting’ of her skin had become a common occurrence -- her language, when overheard, was replete with swears and drug or sexual innuendo -- her willingness to engage with any adults or in her school work was non-existent. In addition, during the first week of high school, Lizzy’s only friend Sheila had revealed thoughts of suicide to a counselor -- which had landed Sheila in a hospital for a week before she returned to school with no apparent change in her behavior. Lizzy was angry that Sheila’s counselor, “Ratted her out.” Lizzy had resolved not to ever share anything personal with adults in school again. She was just waiting to turn 16 so that she could drop out of school forever.

As some of Lizzy’s behavior was being discussed, Mrs. Watson could not control her emotions any more – but unlike at her middle school meeting, this time it came out with more anger than sadness; she lifted her head, flushed red and stated nervously, “I can’t believe this is happening. Things have been going downhill forever – ever since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade -- and the schools

haven't done anything about it. People keep telling me to get help; that Sheila's got problems -- but I don't know how to help her -- the school refused to give her any help at all -- no counseling, no tutoring. Why don't you try getting her to do her homework or getting her to go to school. I've tried every day for the last ten years! What do you expect my daughter to do when no one ever cares? She's given up -- and I give up too -- YOU aren't going to help her!" Mrs. Watson sunk back in her chair looking a little surprised and maybe a bit proud of herself. Mr. Jones sat back thinking, 'you've just got to be kidding me -- this lady has been enabling this kid for years and now it's our fault?', but he stayed silent -- years of experience in these type of meetings reminded him to stay quiet and just let it end -- then he could get back to work. Principal Strickland, however, was not about to let his school be blamed for what he saw as bad parenting resulting in an incorrigible child. "Mrs. Watson" he began, ...."

### *Discussion Questions*

*We all know where this meeting could go -- we've all felt blamed. It would be easy for this to end in a 'blame game' where no one wins*

- 1. What's a typical reaction to being blamed? How would you respond?*
- 2. What could be said or done that might end the blaming before it stops the problem-solving?*
- 3. What could Mr. Strickland say after Mrs. Watson spoke that would be supportive to his staff AND at the same time have helped the team to problem solve?*
- 4. Would knowing Lizzy's history make any difference in how this meeting could unfold?*
- 5. Is the school the only place we can look to for support for students like Lizzy and her family?*