**Liz’s story**

**Liz** spent 37 years teaching music in secondary schools, before retiring in 2020.

In primary school, she wasn’t able to learn the recorder until she was in Year five. At seven years old (Years two to three), she used some of her birthday money to buy herself a recorder and accompanying music book. Liz taught herself notation and fingering patterns, ‘working it out’ from the book - ‘[she] didn’t find it difficult, it just made sense’. She later had the opportunity to learn the violin in Year five, with lessons provided by a ‘flourishing music service’. Liz was accepted into a grammar school for her secondary education and began to learn the clarinet there – an opportunity afforded as she had been identified as having ‘potential’ by her teachers. Instrumental lessons in school were all free of charge at this time. Liz participated in orchestras and wind bands through the local music service, which she regarded as being ‘really quite special’ – again, all free of charge. She also took up the piano during secondary school. Following this, Liz studied for a music degree in Liverpool, followed by a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Leeds. She started teaching in 1983 in the Northwest of England.

Throughout her music education in school, Liz benefitted from opportunities available that are no longer affordable. She wouldn’t have been able to participate if her parents would have had to pay. Liz joined the local church choir as a child, motivated by her sheer enjoyment of singing – ‘music is great’. Liz remembers learning the glockenspiel in primary school, but her musical learning developed mainly through teaching herself using her recorder book. Her parents bought her a ‘cheap violin’ to play, which cost an ‘awful lot of money at the time’, which was paid over time. Liz’s parents also bought her a clarinet through a school scheme, which again could be paid for over time. In secondary school, Liz remembers playing in a large wind band. Liz’s grammar school experience was more tied to academic tradition, compared with other secondary modern schools at the time.

Liz recalls: ‘the music education I received was so alien to the music lessons I was trying to deliver [as a teacher]’ - ‘we never played a single instrument’ during secondary classroom music, aside from singing at the end of each half term. She believes this approach was fine for those receiving lessons out of school, but if not, ‘you really got short changed’. ‘Classroom music was classical pieces and theory’. Liz made friends through her engagement in musical activities, including making friends from other schools who she had met at the music service. She remembers that her music teacher at secondary school didn’t like students going to the music centre, which ‘[she] always found rather strange’ – attributed to a potential ‘falling out’ – but Liz continued to go. Liz says: ‘my second home was the music centre’ – she helped out with the ‘little ones’, then played in the orchestra herself. Liz spent six days a week there – a way of life. Liz took piano, violin and clarinet graded exams - ‘I wasn’t a fan of scales, loved sight reading’. Liz needed to pass graded exams to be able to study music at university. She has fond memories of her piano teacher at university. After taking graded exams at her house, she was treated with chocolate cake.

Liz studied for O level and A level music. She felt ‘fine’ with the syllabus and content, as she ‘likes facts’. Liz was taught to compose using a formula – she didn’t listen or play it – ‘you did it by rules … and you produced something that got you the marks’. At university, she studied a classical-based music degree, which included counterpoint, harmony and theory. Following this, her PGCE consisted of one full term of school placement, sandwiched between university sessions. The approached encouraged on her PGCE course was ‘moving away a little bit from what [she]’d experienced’ – it was more practical, with inclusion of graphic scores and world music.

As a music teacher, Liz was employed by a small school in Northwest England, 1983. She was the only music teacher. Liz was trying to put her learning from her PGCE into practice, rather than to replicate the practice experienced herself as a pupil. Liz went on lots of Continuous Professional Development (CPD), at least once per term, hosted by local authorities, which were free of charge for schools (aside from cover costs). Liz reflects upon her engagement with Silver Burdette – Long Play records that came with a book, stemming from America. Liz also went on a course with June Tillman, ‘picking up lots of different things, different ways of doing things’. Liz was given a large amount of funding to buy the first electronic keyboard within the school music department, costing £250. This opened up more possibilities. Liz remembers going on a course about using tape recorders and loop pedals, and also attended GCSE training, which was necessary to assess her own GCSE pupils (and got paid for assessing own pupils). Liz identified that by her attending such development opportunities, her expertise benefited the school. She remembers this being a time of lots of changes happening in music education. Liz taught herself the guitar to use in the classroom. Her ethos was not ‘learning about, but learning through music’, ‘doing and creating’. The Head Teacher at this school was a musician, so the subject was supported within the school. Liz moved to central England in 1990 to take up a Head of Music job.

Liz wanted to provide the ‘best possible experience of music’ in the classroom, which included practical lessons using musical instruments. Liz wanted to enable success so that pupils had a sense of achievement. When she had discovered that her school was disadvantaged for receiving instrumental lessons from the local music service, she raised this as an issue to ensure her school also received fair allocation. ‘Everything has always been about kids being included … trying to unlock doors for them’ in school. Liz invited many external musicians in to deliver music sessions to pupils. Attended monthly meetings for heads of music. Compared to now, Liz regards this as ‘quite an idyllic time’, but a lot of this has been ‘lost’ now. In later years, her teaching efforts were ‘thwarted’ due to funding issues, increased focus on assessment, and a lack of understanding about what Ofsted want from music in schools. Liz became assistant ‘timetabler’ in her school for eight years, where she found ‘much less flexibility as time went on’. Before, timetabling in school was built around the pupil, whereas this had become more controlled over time. Pupils were also told by senior staff to continue their music studies ‘outside of school’, rather than to continue inside school. This was to reduce option choice difficulties and clashes, promoting music as a subject for ‘just who can afford to do it’. Liz says: ‘It just cuts out those experiences for a whole realm of children, which to me is just so wrong’.

As a teacher, Liz became involved with a local university, supporting students on their placement. The students she was supporting initially were studying on a course that didn’t require formal music education qualifications. She welcomed the trainees into her classroom, ‘which [she] loved’. Liz included theory in her curriculum and practice, but integrated the components so that they were not taught in isolation.

When Liz first started teaching, it was important to her that pupils knew what the keys were on the keyboard, but over time, this shifted and became less important. Increased importance was placed on the shape of the music and melody and learning how to question and answer through listening activities. Liz also did half of a Master’s degree, gaining a Post Graduate Certificate in music education. A Year three module on the course was focused upon mentoring trainees, but Liz was unable to complete the module as she wasn’t able to have a trainee in school at that time. Liz learnt a lot through by completing two years of the course, looking at the music curriculum and curriculum planning.

In the third school that Liz moved to, she achieved funding for a class Samba kit, Apple macs and Djembes. She was successful in bidding for school funding as the music department had previously struggled prior to Liz joining, and it was an area for school development. However, a new Head Teacher joined after this, and changes were made. Years seven and eight art subjects were placed on a carousel timetable and no music was delivered to Year nine pupils. Instrumental lessons had to be paid for (and were not subsided, as they had been previously). This led to demise of the school orchestra. This was situated within the wider political context of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and league tables. The Key Stage Four (KS4) syllabus shifted from General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) to Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC). Liz remembers that ‘the music had dwindled down, they just cut it and cut it’. Liz introduced ukuleles and ‘just tried to pick out the best experiences for children that [they] could’ within the department. Liz ‘ditched a successful pentatonic improvisation unit’ in her lessons and narrowed the curriculum. A drama teacher was required to teach music due to changes in timetable, which had a further impact upon the music that could be facilitated. The pupils ‘loved the ukuleles’, but the Head Teacher was hesitant about their use and felt that they were ‘too young’ for KS4 who used them as part of their BTEC work. The assessment schedule was dictated as a whole school, despite not always aligning with the needs of the music department. There was a lot of pressure felt – ‘Ofsted want it this way, this is how it should be taught’ – coming from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Liz ‘had awful arguments with people about mini plenaries’ - they didn’t suit structure of music lessons. In the school, there was perceived discourse about what Ofsted wanted according to SLT, despite Liz having read Ofsted music documents that stated otherwise, for example about the requirements of having written evidence of marking and progress. Liz was also told to stop leading lessons from ‘behind the piano’, despite having musical relevance. There was a requirement for pupils to discover musical concepts for themselves, disregarding Liz’s musical expertise on such matters – ‘I’m doing what a music teacher would do’. Liz believed that some fundamental music concepts needed to be taught directly, and could not be ‘discovered’, for example, what an octave was.

Liz left the school in 2014 due to a ‘toxic situation’. By the end of her time in the school, she was teaching a variety of different subject due to budget cuts. Extracurricular music activities and concerts were not possible due to all of the cuts being made. Liz then moved to a secondary school that was in special measures. She stayed here for three years, but experienced a ‘big bugbear’ about written marking here, which was more about ‘keeping SLT happy’. Liz then moved to a final school before her retirement. She made improvements in each of the music departments during her time at each school, valuing more practical music-making. Prior to lockdown, Liz remembers being asked to do singing with all of Year seven in the school. This was ‘fantastic’ – it was great to have the freedom to sing for an hour.

Liz reflected upon policy: ‘in a way I’m glad I’m out of it, as I could see myself getting very angry and frustrated’. ‘When things went EBacc and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) focused, the arts got a real shoving out, and I think a lot of Heads … threw the baby out with the bathwater … it’s been a battle ever since and it’s still ongoing’. ‘The school where I spent 18 years doesn’t really have a music department anymore’ – it’s only just starting to get music back. ‘It’s got squeezed and squeezed’ due to reduced curriculum time and a lack of funding. ‘We’ve cut so much of it out and narrowed things down’. Liz has always worked in schools in non-affluent areas: ‘I benefitted from people putting music in my primary school, and I don’t see why it should only be something that the kids in the affluent areas get’. ‘If they’re not going to get that [musical] opportunity in school, then where does it come from?’ ‘We need to get a grip on the difference in contact hours between schools is huge’, for example, use of carousel structures and employment of music specialists. Liz also notes ‘a dichotomy between schools not valuing music as part of the wider curriculum that every child is entitled to, but still wanting their showcase on an open night or whatever else, and they don’t seem to make the link that if you don’t have it in that layering of classroom, they you’re not going to have anything to put in the window … because it all links together’. Primary music can be ‘hit and miss’, dependent upon the musical expertise and employment of specialists within the school. Liz raises a lack of continuity when whole class instrumental teaching is delivered for a term. She questions ‘what’s next? … Where do the instruments come from and who pays?’ In primary, ‘that’s where [music] needs to start and build through’. Liz advocates for a link to be forged between primary and secondary schools. She tried to establish links in own practice by inviting pupils from feeder primary for secondary music lesson, for example facilitating a drumming workshop.

Liz notes that there is now a lack of joined up thinking within local authorities. She has previously worked with an advisory music teacher and has acted as a mentor for the local authority – such roles often included providing an overview of what was happening and where the expertise was in the local area. ‘Things have now become very insular within the school’ and there is a lack of opportunities for CPD. There has been a loss of access through the loss of local authorities. Policy has swung from discovery-based learning to a knowledge-rich curriculum, ‘from one extreme to the other’. Liz feels that we need somewhere in the middle – ‘but there’s always somebody in the layer above who’s telling you ‘you’re doing it wrong’ when they know nothing about it’. ‘It’s the whole needing to writing in down on a spreadsheet’ and having to justify levels of attainment in music using concepts from outside of the subject area.

Liz’s most rewarding music education experiences include ‘that moment when you get [pupils] all together in the hall and they sing’; class samba, when ‘they’re no longer having to count, and they just feel it … particularly if it’s a child that’s struggled, and they’re just doing it … the look on their faces, it’s just magical’. Several ex-pupils have contacted Liz to say that they’re grateful of the experiences afforded to them through in school music, for example, support with instrumental lessons, putting on concerts – ‘and you think ‘yes, I made a difference there’’. Liz talks about her former pupils with pride, including a sound technician and those who have become music teachers themselves.

Liz’s saddest experience in music education was when she moved to a new school where another music teacher was already based. The other music teacher left the school in the Easter break after Liz had started, six weeks before GCSE coursework was due. Upon their departure, Liz had discovered that pupils had hardly completed any of their coursework. Liz then had six weeks to support three groups of pupils to produce two compositions and two performances each. This rushed completion of coursework impacting negatively on the achievement of pupils. Liz says: ‘I felt so devastated for those children … they’d been let down so badly.’

In another school, Liz had prepared a four-layer Christmas song with Year seven pupils. An Ofsted inspector had even observed and raved about the song rehearsals. However, Liz remembers the response of the Head Teacher: ‘I was hauled in after the concert and was told that my contribution, my choices of things were miserable, boring, old-fashioned … I was told off for not smiling whilst playing the piano’, despite focusing on conducting over 100 children at the concert. A pupils’ Father came up to Liz in tears at the end of the concert after watching his son perform on the ukulele, to thank her for making such a positive difference to his son in school. The Head Teacher had regarded the ukulele as being ‘humiliating’ for pupils to play in KS4. Liz found this experience to be ‘really hurtful at that time’, which later led to Liz leaving the school.

For the future of music education, Liz says: ‘I would like to see something in place that makes music education integral all the way through from early years right the way up, and it can’t be shoved to one side’. This would require increased funding and training. ‘We’re side-lining [music education]’. ‘I don’t think we’d get back to the heady days that I experienced in my early years of teaching … it shouldn’t just be for those who have the money to do it’. Liz also thinks that those within the discipline area need ‘to look at what and how we teach’ – it ‘needs to be varied and interesting. It should be ‘musics’’, and it ‘needs to be taught more holistically’. ‘The things that I learnt to teach that I didn’t experience myself are vast’, ‘there’s so much more out there’ – ‘so [it ought to be] wide ‘musics’’. Liz discusses a recent problem; the depleting numbers of students continuing to study music in school after Key Stage 3 (KS3) – we’re going to reach the point where there is a lack of music teachers, ‘we’re going to struggle to get staff’. Liz advocates for an increased need for musicians with no formal qualifications to become music teachers, which would require increased provision in Higher Education. ‘We seemed to have battled the last few years particularly, to deliver what we know is a quality classroom experience, it’s almost as if you’re having to fight it all the time’.

For the last three years of her teaching, Liz had a supportive Head Teacher. Her attitude had evolved over time: ‘I don’t care now because I’m nearly retiring, about whatever it is you say I’ve got to be doing. I just know I’m doing what I think I should be doing, what I know is right for these kids to provide what they need’. ‘So I was given free reign for the last three years really, it was fab’. ‘I think that there was a lot of positives we had that we’ve lost along the way, particularly music-wise.’ Liz acknowledged that there is far more choice and variety in the curriculum more recently, but most other aspects have been squeezed out. Liz also points out additional struggles that many schools are now facing in the current crisis, for example, the increased cost of heating, which has the potential to have further negative impact on the arts. ‘What is it that goes?’ – music education. Liz notes that ideas tend to go round in cycles in policy, for example, the current popularity of a ‘knowledge approach’ and cognitive psychology. After receiving CPD on these theories in a trust training session, Liz questioned ‘but we’ve always done that?!’. ‘I think a lot of these things that they’re now talking about, things that come naturally as you’re musicing … it’s logical, it’s what comes next, it’s how you do it, it’s how you structure things … maybe because we’re a different sort of a subject because of how music is and how you do it … it naturally lends yourself to doing all these things. You just do it.’ ‘I think that’s often the problem as well. Those in the layer above are not music people. I’ve not encountered that many music teachers who’ve gone higher up [to SLT] …They don’t understand how to observe music teaching and see what’s happening because they’re not musical so they can’t see it’. One observation by SLT was deemed inadequate and summed up by ‘the kids just bashed drums all lesson’, yet the class had ‘progressed from simple call and response to a five-layered textured section on the djembes’. Liz feels that a judgement is often being made by those without a musical background, which has the potential for them to ‘overlook what is happening’ and fail to ‘see how it develops pupils in the same way as a music teacher would’. A lack of music teacher progression to SLT ‘might be because we’re so involved with music, quite often you’re the only music teacher, [have the classroom and extracurricular activities to manage] and you just like doing music, and the further you go up the ladder, the further you move away from it.' ‘Musicians are more reluctant to give up that, perhaps’.