**Alison’s story**

**Alison** is a self-employed whole class music teacher, currently working across three primary schools, spanning three and a half days per week. The rest of her week is devoted to her ‘own music’. Alison is in her 30th year of working in music education. Prior to her current role, she worked for a city council for 25 years, until over 100 staff music and drama peripatetic staff were made redundant in 2017. Although some managers and staff chose to stay, most of the staff ‘went private’. Alison teaches children ranging from nursery to Year Six – ‘[she] like[s] the variety’.

At the age of 12, Alison borrowed her brother’s guitar. She learnt from an American folk book, although she didn’t realise the stylistic content at the time. After four years, she hadn’t really played in front of anyone – people were ‘astounded’ when she did. Her Mum taught her piano and music notation at home. She reflects that ‘being able to read notation has never been a hindrance to me’ – it enhanced her musical learning. Between the ages of 16 and 19, she received classical guitar lessons. Her Mum paid for this. ‘I love classical guitar’ but not other classical music, she says. Alison had free tuition on the flute in school in the 1970s. She failed her A level in music as it was ‘too classically based’. When she first started working for the music service, instrumental lessons were also free. After 1992, Local Authorities started to charge for such lessons – either for parents to pay or for schools to pay if they thought you were a ‘special case’. Alison tried to teach herself the piano as an adult, ‘but piano and me just don’t get on’, finding reading music for two hands particularly challenging. She recalls struggling through a Christmas carol on the piano in school as a music teacher, but it was ‘awful’, and she switched back to guitar after that.

Alison says ‘[she] felt [she] was not taught [classroom] music very well at school, and the last thing [she] wanted to become was a music teacher.’ She went to a school that ‘wasn’t very musical’, studied for a Certificate in Secondary Education (CSE) in music and achieved Grade One, and achieved Grade Eight in guitar. Alison primarily identifies as a folk musician. As a child, Alison ‘was more interested in popular music than classical music … but when [she] was in school, all that was considered proper music was classical.’ Alison was a self-taught folk guitar musician, but received classical guitar lessons whilst studying for A level, because ‘folk guitar was not acceptable’. Alison says that ‘A level is still very classically based, which is one thing I disagree with, but I don’t teach that end of the curriculum, so that’s someone else’s battle to fight’. After school, Alison wanted to be a singer and song writer, but that option was not financially feasible. Alison then trained to be a primary generalist teacher. She struggled in her first school of employment, so became a peripatetic guitar teacher for the council. Alison says: ‘I think they saw in me a bit of a teacher that I hadn’t really thought was there’. The National Curriculum had just come out, and General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE) music ‘looked more of an enticing subject to [her]’. As Alison was a qualified teacher, she was only one of a few who was ‘willing and able to teach whole classes’. Thus, she taught and led on this aspect, encouraging others to see that whole class can work just as well or better than with small groups which involved a cost to parents. Although she had ‘so many hoops to jump through and so many reviews’ to participate in for the council, the music service ‘came out better each time as schools want music and schools valued what [they] were doing’.

Alison became the regional representative for the Schools Music Association, now subsumed into the Independent Society of Musicians. She found this to be an interesting networking opportunity, where she met representatives from private and independent schools. Because of her qualifications and experience, Alison was often allocated the more ‘challenging schools’ in the area, but this networking opportunity was ‘eye-opening’ to learn about about the practice of other music teachers in different settings. At this time, Alison also participated in summer schools for music. In her management role at the music service, she has ‘done a lot of negotiating with Head Teachers and overseeing staff of various degrees of competency to do reviews’. She doesn’t ‘miss any of that’. She is now able to go back into ‘just teaching’ – ‘it’s fantastic’. At the time of her management role, she recalls ‘winging it far too many times’ due to other management pressures taking up her time. Alison used to run large-scale music events involving over 3000 pupils for the Local Authority, which were stressful but fun.

Alison enjoys Dalcroze Eurhythmics, which influences her Foundation and Key Stage One (KS1) practice. She has also ‘picked up a bit of Kodaly stuff’. Alison comments that ‘I’m not a devotee of one or the other’, ‘I’m very much a magpie and just steal whatever I think is going to work well.’ Her whole class instrumental teaching is often focused upon guitar or ukulele. She is not keen on recorders, and not so sure about steal pans – they lack logical stepwise movement for notes and she ‘can’t use them to enhance musical understanding quite easily’. Alison finds it most rewarding ‘where a child has suddenly got it’ and when children express enjoyment – ‘usually just the little things … the best moments’.

Alison believes that whole class instrumental teaching ‘is excellent for beginners’. She says that ‘the problem is, the flute was the wrong instrument for me … too often you give a child a guitar … and they discover in about six months that ‘actually, this is not really for me’ … Making them plod on with it when they’re in a small group and their parents are paying for it, it just felt wrong’. In a whole class ‘you’ve got a bit of peer encouragement, and if feels more of a fun lesson’ – there’s a sense of ‘community, playing together, a fun thing’ – plus, you can ‘throw in lots of extra stuff’ for those who lose motivation, for example videos, theory, and singing rounds. ‘That first year on an instrument, [whole class] works better’. ‘It shows which children are very musical, and it shows which ones could pursue that instrument further … rather than ‘wasting time and money’ on small groups. It’s easier to give ‘good value to the school and give rounded music education for the children’. Alison states that: ‘the other thing I’m uncomfortable with is making a child do a lesson for a full school year beyond the point of which they’ve had enough, and you know they’re not going to make any more progress’ – the teacher has to ‘press on for the others in the group’, regardless.

Alison applies a different pedagogy for general music lessons and instrumental lessons. ‘Because they keep changing the curriculum [and policy] quite a bit, [Alison’s] biggest challenge is keeping up with what [she’s] supposed to be doing’. She says: ‘I’m more inclined to kind of do my own thing, just focus on the stuff that I know makes a big impact in the lessons.’ It’s ‘obvious’ which bits of the curriculum work well and which don’t. In some of the schools she teaches in, Key Stage Two (KS2) lessons have to link to general class topics, ‘but bringing in whatever seems relevant’, for example, she has taught music relating to the Anglo Saxons topic in Year Four, focusing on pulse, rhythm and notation. ‘You kind of settle into what a school likes and what you feel they want you to cover’. Unless pupils are playing an instrument, melodic notation ‘is really hard to teach’. It’s lacking relevance and some schools don’t have melodic instruments available to use.

Alison lost a lot of school work due to Covid and the subsequent lockdowns, but one school with a new Head requested more music – the school had a supportive ethos for music education. The amount of music education facilitated varies according to the various schools she teaches in, but schools often top up provision with a music teaching and learning platform, which is bought in and promoted by the council. Alison believes it is ‘not as helpful as what I was already doing’. She values other printed music resources, but believes it’s difficult for non-music specialists to deliver at KS2.

Alison says that her practice and views about music education have ‘definitely’ evolved over time, influenced by conference attendance and meeting other music educators. These experiences have ‘changed the way [she] do[es] things’, ‘whenever [she] pick[s] new things up’. ‘Covid made us totally rethink what we were doing’. During this time, she sent sing-along videos and video lessons to schools ‘mainly so they didn’t forget I was there’ – and videos could be sent home. Alison reflects upon her thoughts at this time: ‘‘How do I do this without instruments?’ made me rethink everything, how do I do this when the children in school are not allowed to sing?’. She encouraged children to make their own instruments at home that they could tap, shake and scrape, calling it a ‘multi-use guiro’. Many children at local schools were not engaging with schools during lockdown – so she is not sure of the level of engagement with her resources. Alison developed a ‘whole new bank of resources’ during this time that can still be drawn upon.

When asked about current policy Alison responds: ‘What is the current policy, because I haven’t got a clue?’ – ‘since I became self-employed, I pay less and less attention to what national requirements are. I ask schools what they want, and I do it.’ Alison does have to keep up with Early Years policy due to many recent changes and has newly redone the foundation curriculum for music with the support of a school. Alison comments that ‘I don’t quite have the drive to keep up with it anymore’. ‘When it was my job as a manager to know what was in this stuff, I was on top of it. But it changed so many times, and it was so often hoops to jump through that were ridiculous, I’d kind of had enough.’

Alison says: ‘I only scratch the surface of this because I only teach up to age 11, but I’m concerned, as I think everyone is, by what seems to be happening in secondary music, and that it’s almost being edged out, and if they can’t edge it out, then they make it elitist so they don’t have to spend so much money on it and parents have to pay for it’. Free lessons are ‘so important’ and it’s ‘distressing’ and ‘depressing’ that all of the creative subjects are being edged out. Alison’s hopes for the future of music education is that ‘the government don’t have so much control over what is being taught, because that’s what is having a really negative impact. Because every government wants to be seen as doing well, and therefore in terms of education, they’re making you jump through hoops, and education isn’t about that. It’s about them learning new skills and reaching their potential.’ It’s ‘totally arbitrary and political’ to expect pupils to reach the same standard. If this can’t happen, then the Department for Education (DfE) should be made up those with at least 10 years’ experience in education. The DfE should be led by ‘active practitioners assisted by people who have been there and done it … with all this experience they could pass on.’ But it won’t happen ‘any time soon’ due to the ‘political football’ being played at the moment. Alison believes that ‘the schools where the Head gets it and puts the emphasis on creative subjects, that’s where improvements are being made across the board.’ She feels that there is a ‘correlation between schools that have good music provision, always improving Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) results … that evidence is there, I’m sure it is.’