

METHODS OF TEACHING THE PIANO IN SPECIALIZED ART SCHOOLS

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ANNOTATION

In this article, the theoretical framework of developmental pedagogy is presented as a tool in studying and developing children's knowing within the piano. The domains of art focused on are piano, poetry and dance/aesthetic movement. Through empirical examples from a large-scale research project, we illustrate the tools of developmental pedagogy and show how this perspective contributes to our understanding of children's learning of piano, dance and poetry. More specifically, we will analyse: (a) the important role of the teacher in children's learning within the piano; (b) the importance of conversing when learning the piano; (c) what constitutes the knowledge, what we refer to as 'learning objects', to be appropriated within the three domains of art focused on; and (d) how to conceive of progression in children's knowing within the piano.

Keywords: piano, methods of teaching piano, music.

INTRODUCTION

The music subjects have always had a place in education for children in the early years. Teaching and learning for children in preschool, kindergarten and primary school have relied upon the creative subjects in making children aware of the world around them and of their own creative and artistic competences – even though emergent reading, writing and mathematics have lately been seen as more important. With a background in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, in the romantic pedagogical movement starting with Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel, the aesthetic was found to be just as important as logic and ethics as a base for learning. Although the concept of the aesthetic has now changed from sensory experience to knowledge about beauty, sublimity and art, the aesthetic subjects as we know them found their way into the very first attempts to establish formal education for children in the pre- and primary school age. Song, piano, painting, modelling, rhyme, verse, play and dance were as much part of the everyday routine as prayer, kitchen tasks and storytelling. There are several reasons for focusing on these particular art-forms. One reason is that while there is considerable research literature on children and visual art and piano, this is not the case with young children's learning of poetry and dance. Research on children and piano tends to focus either on the practices of piano experts or on schools with specialist piano profiles. In contrast, we have studied children's piano learning in ordinary, public, preschools and schools, since this is where most children encounter the pedagogy of these domains, that is, in pedagogical practices that are not specialised in these art-forms. This is an important difference between our research and much of the current research on children and piano. Another strand of research on children and piano looks at leisure-time activities involving piano. This is also fundamentally different from our pedagogical interest in children's learning in preschool and school. By 'pedagogy' we mean the practice through which someone is helped to learn something. The concept of 'developmental pedagogy' refers to the particular approach for developing children's skills and

knowledge in Early Childhood Education (ECE) as described below. This article is structured in the following way. Firstly, we will review the research literature on children and piano, poetry and dance. This review will clarify how our theoretical perspective differs from that of the majority of previous research in the field. Secondly, the theoretical framework of developmental pedagogy will be presented. We will clarify and exemplify those tools that are useful to analysts in the study of children's learning and to teachers in facilitating children's learning. Thirdly we will describe how we have worked in our project. The present article is not a report on the project, but is a description of how we have used the concepts of developmental pedagogy and, illustrated through empirical examples, some of the findings from each domain of art studied. Fourthly, in the empirical part of the article, we give examples of children's learning within our three domains. Finally, we discuss how the framework of developmental pedagogy and our empirical studies may contribute to children's learning within the piano.

The research fields, In this section we review the research literature on children's learning within piano, dance and poetry. The review ends in a summary clarification of what, in our view, is lacking in this literature.

Piano

In general, research on piano in early years education can be characterised in terms of research on 'piano for children' or research on 'children's piano'. Traditionally, research on songs for children has dominated and this research mirrors the strong adult influence on children's piano activities in preschool (Jordan-Decarbo and Nelson 2002). Research on children's piano cultures has, on the other hand, focused the ancient concept of 'mousiké'¹ as an important factor, in which a broad approach of piano is integrated with dance, movements, piano and play (Jordan-Decarbo and Nelson 2002). The starting-point in children's piano expressions and activities is also often assumed to be promoting their creativity.

Social issues on learning in piano have historically been conceptualised from different theoretical standpoints. Within this framework one distinction is made between 'vertical interaction' (between children/pupils and adult/teacher) and 'horizontal interaction' (among peers) (Olsson 2007). One social theme centres on children as active participants in their learning in collaboration with adults and other children (Holgensen 2002). Each participant influences the other. The concept of collaborative learning highlights the key impact that peer groups, family, teachers and other children have upon a child's interest in and knowledge of piano. Several studies have highlighted the importance of parental support in children's playing and piano activities (Cope 1999, 2005; Cope and Smith 1997; Davidson et al. 1996; Davidson, Howe and Sloboda 1997; Gembris and Davidson 2002; McPherson 2005; O'Neill 2002a, 2002b; Temmerman 2005) and how children develop their personal identity as piano. Creech and Hallam (2003) elaborate issues on interpersonal interactions by incorporating two similar concepts: control and responsiveness. The concept of control is linked to discussions of the actor's influence and autonomy during the processes of learning. Whose influence is weak or strong? Does the child have a small or large autonomy? Responsiveness is close to the concept of parental style. Creech and Hallam (2003) stress that it is the interaction itself that is important for the child's learning. In the interaction between the parent and the child you may find several layers such as the confirmation of the child's role in the interaction, the support of

the child's activities, the regulation to promote better performances, the feeling of togetherness and so forth. All these aspects strengthen the child's learning.

Creativity has for many years been recognised as a human characteristic that can be developed through education (Sharp 2001). In different curricula one finds statements that school shall enable pupils to think creatively and solve problems in an innovative way. Early childhood is considered to be a crucial time for the development of creativity and the strong links between creativity and the piano has been put forward. Sharp (2001) stresses that the teacher encouragement of children's play is fundamental but also that creative programmes involving the piano are important for enhancing children's creative skills. Transferable effects of piano education from creativity to learning within other fields like mathematics and foreign language still need to be proven through research-based evaluations. Winner and Hetland (2000), in their meta-analysis of research on transfer from art activities to other subject specific learning, point out that it is important to make two distinctions in the interpretations of the results:

[I]f a positive effect is found, it is important to distinguish between two kinds of interpretations. Instruction in the piano might result in greater academic improvement than does direct academic instruction. This is one possibility. Or instruction in the piano, when integrated with academic instruction, might result in greater academic improvement than does academic instruction without the piano. This is a second possibility. We found far less evidence for the first of these conclusions than for the second, more plausible claim. (2000, 6)

This kind of reasoning construes the piano in domain-extrinsic terms, i.e., the piano are a means for developing capabilities outside the domains of the piano as such. In contrast, in our study, we focus on the development of domain-intrinsic knowing.

The dominating theoretical framework for studying children and piano is cognitive psychology. The essence of the psychology of piano has always been related to the development and acquisition of competencies of piano (Colwell and Richardson 2002; Hargreaves 1986). Research in this field centres around issues like instruction, motivation and achievement, self-regulation and creativity. All these issues have more or less a clear link to different kinds of development. How can development be promoted from the teacher's perspective and how does one frame the best development of the child's learning? All the theories connected to piano development involve not only psychological research on the individual's behaviour and learning per se, but also the influence of contexts and social dimensions. In the well-known spiral model of piano development by Swanwick and Tillman (1986) pianoal thinking embraces the four layers of materials, expression, form and value for discussing children's compositions. Gardner (1990) reduced the development within the piano to three steps: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Hargreaves and Galton (1992) make the distinction between general 'cognitive aesthetic development' and 'domain-specific developments' in which piano is divided into four categories: singing, pianoal representation, melodic perception and pianoal composition. Hence, in this line of research, attempts are made to map typical domain-specific traits within each category.

The major research on piano teaching and learning in early childhood is connected to contexts in which piano experts are involved. Moreover, there is a strong focus on a narrow pianoal approach, i.e., the aims and objectives involve capabilities strictly connected to pianoal skills and knowledge related mainly to performance.

The Suzuki Method

More than fifty years ago, Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki realized that children pick up their native language quickly and, that if children have the skill to acquire their native language, they have the skills necessary to become proficient on a musical instrument. According to Suzuki, every child has the potential to become well educated and every child can learn to play an instrument in the same way in which they learned a language. The Suzuki Method remains one of the most popular teaching methods today, and its main focus is on the child's environment. Things like memorization, group playing, and extensive listening to recordings are important aspects of the Suzuki Method, which critics claim contributes to poor sight reading ability and lack of expression. Regardless, it's heavily used today.

Bastien Piano Basics

The Bastien Piano Basics method is made up of five different skill levels: primer, for the youngest piano student, all the way through level four. Bastien is great for younger students, because it spends a lot of time explaining the fundamentals of music theory and piano play. The primer series is typically used for students ages five and six, and are filled with colorful illustrations and fun themes. Each level relies on three different books (theory, performance, and lesson) and each of the books correlates with each other. For example, page two of the theory book can be directly applied to page two of the performance book, so on and so forth. Teachers who prefer this method do so because everything is tied together, and their students will gain exposure to theory and performance in a way that makes sense to them.

Alfred Piano Method

This method gives you tons of options for teaching the piano—including a basic course and a prep course that have supplemental books (recital books, technique books, and notespellers) that coordinate with them. Plus, one of the best things about the Alfred Piano Method is that they have a series that's packed with colorful graphics that's perfect for kids, and one that's created with older students in mind. Piano teachers who teach students of all ages often prefer the Alfred method, as someone in their mid-30s who is playing for a child's book may feel a bit awkward. Another perk is that you'll only need one book at a time as you move through the series, and many of the books can be purchased with an optional CD. One downside to Alfred is the books move along quickly, and usually aren't recommended for children under the age of seven.

Faber & Faber Method

Faber & Faber covers a wide range of musical styles, with specific books dedicated to jazz, folk songs, and hymns. There's even entire books dedicated to composition, so if your student is particularly interested in eventually writing their own music, Faber & Faber may be a good method for them. Created by Nancy and Randall Faber, Faber & Faber is an approachable series for both young and old beginners to grow with. Concepts are easy to understand, and the books are full of helpful practice suggestions, including counting aloud and proper hand positions. Some teachers even claim that the order in which certain subjects are taught make the Faber & Faber method easier for students to grasp than some of the other methods listed.

Hal Leonard

Hal Leonard is the world's largest music print publisher and has been publishing and distributing sheet music for the past 60 years. The Hal Leonard method starts kids out with the basics of rhythms, before transitioning them to actually playing notes, and focuses on teaching students the basics of music theory before they even start learning scales. With realistic pacing, clear and concise presentation of concepts, and uncluttered pages, your piano students will never feel overwhelmed by what they're learning. Plus, since Hal Leonard is the world's largest print publisher, your students will never have to search very hard for their next lesson book.

In our conclusion, what is conspicuously absent in previous research on learning music, poetry and dance are empirical studies of how teachers work with these contents in pre- and primary school (in this case children aged 2–8 years old), and what the results are in terms of children's learning. More specifically, there is a lack of: (1) specific objects of learning (i.e., clear ideas about what capabilities or knowledge children are supposed to acquire); (2) dialogues and communication about what and how one goes about developing these skills and knowledge; and (3) the recognition and clarification of the important role of the teacher for young children's learning in the piano. In addition (4), we have emphasised the importance of focusing 'domain-intrinsic' learning, rather than simply viewing the piano as means for developing other 'domain-extrinsic' knowing.

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