

# Piano Exploration for Young Children in an Informal Educational Setting

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Drawing on the philosophy of informal learning, this paper describes the design of a piano lesson framework intended for young children under the age of five. The focus of the design is on piano exploration and overall musical development, in an atmosphere conducive to young children's learning. The nature of the child and the nature of the teacher in such a setting is discussed, with emphasis on the collaborative relationship the child and teacher may develop when given the parameters of an informal educational space.

## **Introduction**

When I arrived at our first piano lesson, Ruby was 3.11 years old—the youngest child I had ever worked with in a piano lesson setting, and a sturdy little ball of energy. I had purposefully chosen to work with her due to her age, as I was interested in investigating what a piano lesson with a young child might look like when based on research in early childhood musical behavior, development, and learning within an informal educational setting. Traditional piano lesson models that involve sitting on a bench, putting the hands in a specific position, and reading from a book were impossibilities for Ruby, who flipped herself over the nearby couch every chance she got. Instead, I needed to design a lesson format that was musically and educationally valuable, as well as appropriate to Ruby's age and developmental needs.

## **Background**

Before working with Ruby, I had given piano lessons to a five-year-old child who was not developmentally ready to participate in the kinds of activities I was used to doing with my seven-year-old beginners. After adapting my teaching to the needs of the five-year-old, I wondered how I might further adapt my teaching for an even younger child. When Ruby's mother approached me about teaching her older seven-year-old daughter, I agreed, but asked if I could also teach Ruby. We embarked on a year of exploration, during which I videoed each lesson. Six lessons were isolated for transcription, which were then coded for emerging themes.

The lessons took place in Ruby's home. Her mother was always nearby, but she did not participate in our lesson time. On occasion, her mother would interject if she felt Ruby was misbehaving or that I needed an explanation of Ruby's actions or speech. Twice her mother and I engaged in an interview discussion regarding her perception of the lessons, focused on excerpts taken from the six isolated videotaped lessons.

Rather than inhibiting Ruby's childlike ways, I wanted to honor her by drawing on them to further her learning and musical development. According to Dunst et al. (2001), meaningful learning best occurs when the child is interested in the environment and feels capable of achieving the task. Further, Campbell (2007) makes clear that children's interest in music making is actually in the "process of participation" (889). In order to design a piano lesson setting where these criteria were met, I considered the nature of young children's everyday lives and the nature of young children's music making.

### **Nature of Everyday Life: Informal Settings**

Campbell's (2007) "process of participation" can be seen in children's informal everyday experiences outside of an educational setting. With freedom to initiate and participate as they please, informal experiences involve unstructured and child-directed episodes of extended play. Children decide what is interesting and meaningful to them, and focus their energy accordingly (Gluschkof 2002; Marsh & Young 2006). In the process of playful exploration, children "discover underlying patterns and rules that [enable] them to organize and make sense of their world" (Jambor 2000, 5), musically and otherwise. These spaces allow children to engage with music making in the ways that they are naturally drawn to it. Without expectation for specific responses from adults, children explore their generation of musical material. Without restrictions, children are free to make music in imaginative and original ways.

### **Nature of Children's Music Making**

The nature of young children's music making has been characterized in the literature as imaginative, generative, improvisatory, spontaneous (Barrett 2006; Campbell 2007; Welch 1998), and "woven into other ongoing activity" (Young 2003, 12). Their music making may happen in fragments or over prolonged periods, and often cannot be separated out as a stand-alone activity. Instead, the lines between speech and singing and between play and musical play are often difficult to define as children entwine music into wherever it is that their attention is drawn (Young 2003; Welch 1998).

The form of the music may be defined by adults as "noise," may contain melodic and rhythmic structure, or may fall somewhere in between. It may be original to the child, an imitation of a musical stimulus, or an elaboration on a model (Campbell 2007; Young 2003). According to Welch (1998), "musical behaviors change and develop rather than being immutably fixed" (33); hence, the changing elements of children's music making can be viewed as a significant part of their developmental process and not as evidence of musical incompetence. Barrett (2006) suggested that children are not interested in "'fixing' a musical idea through exact repetition" and that more important is their elaboration of musical material "to explore ideas and possibilities" (218). Musical development, then, might be looked at more realistically as "a spiraling, endlessly recursive process" (Bamberger 2006). Surprisingly, though the nature of all music making is a process of creation and re-creation, the re-working of musical material that children naturally engage in is often not allowed for in traditional lesson settings, where the songs in the book are the primary material and their successful completion is the goal.

## **The Lesson Framework in an Informal Educational Setting**

A traditional lesson setting was undesirable given Ruby's age and the characteristics of children's natural ways of making music in their everyday lives. Though I referred to our time together as a "piano lesson," this was meant only to reflect that we were being intentional about learning in a defined space. In essence, the lesson did not involve sitting on a bench, learning specific songs, or working on technique. The goal of each lesson was to explore both the piano and musical elements, in an atmosphere that reflected the principles of informal learning in everyday life.

Though informal learning experiences in everyday life typically occur outside of a classroom, the term "informal" can be applied also to intentional educational settings for young children. Gordon (2003) refers to an intentional informal educational setting as one where the musical culture and adult guidance within it is intentional, but the time itself is "based on and operate[s] in consequence to the natural sequential activities and responses of the child" (3). In such a setting, children are free to explore music within a musical culture and context without adult-directed expectation, but with adult mediation. Activities that are "enjoyable, intrinsically motivated, and controlled by the players" (Marsh & Young 2006, 289)—the very nature of informal everyday musical activity—defines this educational space.

Drawing on informal everyday experiences in the education of young children is valuable for their learning. In fact, Whitfield (2009) states that inflexible, competitive, extrinsically motivated and highly structured learning environments are inappropriate for developing the creativity of young children. Instead, environments that cultivate playful exploration help children to develop risk-taking behaviors that are necessary for life-long creativity, in that they become comfortable "with making a mistake" (Whitfield 2009, 158).

To provide Ruby with opportunities to engage in the process of recursive, spontaneous, and generative music making in an informal educational space, I prepared what I termed a "lesson framework" for each lesson, but allowed the lesson to unfold based on where her attention was drawn. Different from an "agenda" or a "lesson plan," the framework provided me with ideas of activities that I could initiate during the lesson if we needed material. The framework was flexible, based on her capacity for attention to each activity at any given moment. Her ideas during the lesson were considered valid contributions, and so the framework served merely as a guideline for what *could* take place. The framework consisted of material I considered important for Ruby to become familiar with, and consisted of two parts: 1) Piano Exploration and 2) Singing and Movement.

### **Piano Exploration**

Piano Exploration consisted of activities that allowed Ruby to "play" the piano, discovering the mechanics of the instrument without explicit direction or specific song material from me. In essence, this portion of the lesson was meant to informally explore the capabilities of the piano—its sound, technical aspects necessary for sound production, and physical parts. Activities included taking turns to play sounds that the non-player moved in response to, "improvising" together, having a conversation with our individual piano sounds, and bringing her stuffed

animals to the piano to have them play. In order to explore specific musical elements without overt direction, I used pictures that conveyed a sound, a story, or an expression. Animal pictures enabled us to explore dynamic levels and register placements ([see Video 1](#)).<sup>1</sup> Emotive pictures of clip art emoticons depicting a variety of facial expressions allowed Ruby to experiment with the pianistic touches necessary to produce the variety of expressions displayed. Pictures that suggested a story encouraged her to tell a story in sound, and allowed her to insert her own meaning. For instance, a picture of a plane inspired her to make glissando-like motions across the keyboard, followed by her interpretation of what a “Penn State plane” sounds like. Her thought processes regarding this involved the distinction between making sound, and her ability to make the motion without producing any sound at all ([see Video 2](#)).

## **Singing and Moving**

The most natural ways children make music are to sing and to move (Campbell 2007; Welch 1998), and development of musical behavior is rooted in these aspects of musicianship. Hence, the second part of the framework included songs in a variety of mode and meter that I introduced to Ruby, and movement was inseparable from the singing of the song. The ulterior motive of this part of the framework was to familiarize Ruby with a musical vocabulary, so that in future - when her piano lessons involve the learning of pre-composed songs—she might have a solid aural foundation. This part is crucial for a child of this age, since a musical environment and “exposure to the music of one’s culture does lead to implicit knowledge about its pitch and rhythmic structure” (Trainor & Corrigan 2010, 89). Gordon (2003) considered a musical environment comprised of a variety of meters and modes, and the opportunity to respond both kinesthetically and orally to the musical stimulus as necessary for the development of musical thought. Further, Campbell (2007) noted the importance of music in the child’s daily culture, as “the nature of children’s music, in particular the songs they sing, arises from their immersion within the soundscape of their immediate culture” (891).

## **In Practice in the Informal Setting**

Due to the informal nature of the setting, the boundaries between the two specified parts of the framework were theoretical and not always evident in actual practice. Our use of lesson time was flexible and spontaneous. Though I prepared a framework each week, the lesson did not flow in any anticipated order. There were no “sections” of the lesson corresponding to the sections of the lesson framework—instead, the lesson weaved in and out of singing, moving, and exploring the piano. We did not use a bench, so Ruby was free to be mobile as much as she wanted to be. Lacking inhibition, she would express whatever was on her mind, taking us from the piano to the open space of the room and back again. In fact, piano exploration was often blended seamlessly with singing and moving as one whole activity.

The material we sang and moved to became our repertoire at the piano. Though I did not explicitly “teach” her how to play each song, the songs were taken to the piano in a variety of ways. On one occasion, she asked me to play the song we were singing on the piano while she

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<sup>1</sup> Publication permission for use of all video found in this paper is granted by the parents.

ran around the room; on another, one of our songs became the “wake-up” song for her animals to come to the piano for their turn to play (see [Video 3](#)). On another lesson day, I arrived to find Ruby preoccupied with setting up her stuffed animals in a very specific way that she had in mind (see [Video 4](#)). Instead of interrupting her, I went to the piano and began to play a song we had sung and moved to in a previous lesson. Ruby’s response was to stop working with her animals in order to listen. She then asked me if she could “practice that.” She then played the song rhythmically on the piano while I sang the song. Though her actual pitches were in no way related to the song and her playing could be considered mere “banging,” there was intention and thought behind her contribution, evidenced by her mouthing of the words and her physical interaction with the rhythm. In her mind, she was playing the song. The anticipation of certain phrases was also evident in her body, and her approach to the piano—though not a “proper” hand position—incorporated her entire body.

This intentionally rhythmic but melodically inaccurate playing of songs was a common occurrence. On another occasion, Ruby “played” the traditional song *If You’re Happy and You Know It* by pumping the pedals with her hands. She assigned me specific roles of playing and singing, switching roles with me at one point so that I could play on the pedals while she played the keys. Though the actual melody was too complex for her to play, she engaged with the rhythm, discovered how the pedals work, and felt the keys obey her body’s commands. When she was finished, she walked proudly away from the piano as she announced, “Now I can play if you’re happy and you know it clap your hands!”

My function as the adult in the setting was to provide Ruby with a musical model—singing, moving, and playing the piano. I brought new songs and new ideas from my experience and knowledge as a musician, but my purpose was to participate in the musical play with her, following her wherever she took us. Lim and Chung (2008) suggested that the role of the adult is to be a participatory guide—a mediator of the child’s interaction with the musical material. As Ruby explored her own music making, I guided her through the process by responding to her ideas with my own musically informed ideas. I demonstrated how her music making might occur, and set up opportunities for her to contribute and continue her own ideas. By providing a model and valuing Ruby’s contributions, my presence in the setting echoed what Stamp (1993) referred to as “supportive and nurturing ‘company’” (262). Our time together was spent enjoying the process of music making, and did not feel like time spent teaching and learning, though I was constantly aware of shaping her musicianship through the model I provided.

I was also aware of valuing and responding to her contributions. I intentionally took the role of an “attuned adult” (Young 2003, 18), listening for Ruby’s ways of being musical, imitating her, extending what she’d done, allowing for her to extend her original thought in response. Young called for adults—when in musical interaction with young children—to listen, respond, comment, join, partner, and interact with children in their music making. Berger and Cooper (2003) found that when adults honored children’s contributions and encouraged their musical behaviors of any kind, children were more likely to continue in their exploratory play. Correction by adults concerned with “traditional” music over “unconventional” contributions resulted in extinguishing the children’s play, while verbal and non-verbal validation of the children’s contributions enhanced it.

The absence of correction in the setting allowed Ruby and I to engage in what I called “improvisation” without any parameters. As seen in [Video 5](#), her contribution to the interaction was atonal, and she most often used the flat of her hands to produce sound. In a more traditionally formal piano setting, I might have corrected her use of her hand and pointed her

toward tonal structures. Instead, I considered her free approach to the piano to be of more value, developing a sense of her larger muscle groups. This sense provides a foundation for later refinement of small muscle skill, and is rooted in a kinesthetic understanding of the whole body in relation to the keyboard (Csurgai-Schmitt 2002; Lister-Sink 2002). My participation with Ruby in her use of the entire range of the piano resulted in a rhythmically charged game, where—according to her rules—she was the only one who was allowed to play.

The rhythmic interaction of this game is an important feature of musical experience for young children, in that it develops ability “to organize their ideas in time, to anticipate, to infer what might come next” (Young 2003, 55). Tonal organization and anticipation is also built through recursive interaction. As in language development, having a musical conversation with children enables them to internalize structures embedded in the music of their culture. Musical conversations were typical during our lessons—instead of talking to her, I would sing to her in improvised melodic and harmonically functional patterns. This invited Ruby to sing in response, imitating my patterns or exploring her own melodic improvisation, while also exposing her to fundamental tonal patterns as part of a musical vocabulary.

For example, on one occasion, Ruby had her favorite stuffed animal Piper at the lesson ([see Video 6](#)). Nearby were the scarves that we typically used for dancing, but which we had also begun using to wrap each other in while singing “where is Lauren?” “where is Ruby?” On this day, Ruby spontaneously wrapped Piper up instead, and we played the “Where Is?” game with her. Our game evolved into a musical conversation, during which Ruby imitated my patterns and contributed her own. Drawing on her innate interest in Piper allowed us to have a musical experience that was meaningful. Musical conversations have the capability of turning any moment into a musical moment, no matter where the child’s interest is focused. Piper did not become a distraction from the learning - rather, Piper became a crucial part of the learning experience.

Furthermore, Ruby often had ideas of her own that superseded my ideas. For example, at the beginning of one lesson I watched her as she arranged her stuffed animals in a cat bed ([see Video 3](#)). I stood to the side, attempting to think of a way to use the animals in our piano playing. When I asked Ruby if we could bring them to the piano, however, she responded by singing *Wiggle Song* (Bolton 1999), with new words pertaining to the animals. Though I joined her in singing the song, I still wanted to bring the animals to the piano. When I took one over and Ruby stopped me by suggesting that we pretend the animals go to sleep, I resisted her idea—I wanted us to play the piano, and going to sleep seemed to be taking us away from my intent. Her full idea, however, involved my playing the piano to wake each animal up, at which point they would come over to the piano to play what they wanted to play. The result was that each animal came to the piano, and each animal had a very specific and individualized musical contribution to make. This activity lasted for most of the lesson, and Ruby—as the manipulator of each animal—was able to engage in musical thinking that was varied, in piano playing that required the full use of her arms in order to produce sound, and in an activity that captured her imagination.

Throughout these examples, my participatory stance—guided by Ruby’s leadership—allowed our focus to be on the process of the music making, and not on a desired goal or product. The process in and of itself was enjoyable because it was interactive, and built a relationship between us. The ideas that I brought to the lesson were often changed as we worked them out together. A song that I introduced might be given new lyrics by Ruby, which I would expand on.

Ruby might then attach a specific movement or response to that song and the song would evolve from the original idea into an entirely new game with new text that was meaningful only to us.

This co-construction can be seen in the evolution of the song *Wiggle Song* (Bolton 1999), which we referred to as “Touch your Nose” ([see Video 7](#)). I began the song as Ruby watched me, and spontaneously got up to move around the room while singing. Ruby, despite having heard the song before, did not join in the singing or moving. Instead, she offered the idea for me to play the song on the piano, which I had not done previously. My decision to “come and get” her was again spontaneous, as a response to the fact that she had moved away from me with an expectant look on her face. Although not a full “chase,” my idea resulted in a next step: she asked me to chase her during the “wiggle” part of the song. For each subsequent lesson, this song involved a chase during the “wiggle,” as if it was how the song was meant to be done.

Hence, the informal space allowed Ruby and I to engage in authentic communication, a valuable element of learning that cannot be overlooked when working with young children (Jambor 2000; Young 2003; Barrett 2006). Our relationship was one of mutual respect and discovery, nourished by an environment where we both knew we belonged. This allowed us to offer ideas without restriction, and resulted in our co-creating the activities that became central to our lessons. For instance, one day Ruby sat on the ground in the middle of the space and asked me to “scare her.” This was not a musical event—it required me to sneak up from behind, saying “boo” to scare her. We then switched places, and while I waited for her to scare me I began to sing a song I had introduced to her in a previous lesson. Ruby did not begin to incorporate the singing immediately when it was her turn to be scared, but—after a few repetitions—she sang a few snatches of the song while waiting for me to scare her. Thus, the game became a musical one to which we returned week after week.

## **Roles of the Teacher and Student**

My role in the setting as the teacher was not to overtly teach Ruby specific items or to expect specific responses. My role was to provide an experience for her—an experience guided by my own musical expertise, but led by Ruby’s interests. Holding knowledge of a larger musical world, I focused on equipping, facilitating, and shaping Ruby’s journey of musical discovery, while participating in my own journey of discovery. I found that I needed to act in humility, setting aside my knowledge and embracing a spirit of newness and wonder in order to be an informal play-er along with Ruby. I needed to set aside my plans and my ideas, trusting that Ruby’s ideas were valuable—even more valuable than mine were.

Ruby’s role was to direct the lesson according to where her interests fell. Activities sometimes lasted for prolonged periods, others for less than a minute. Ruby communicated to me what she was confident in, and what she wanted to know by what she did. She was willing to explore because the environment was safe for her to express her unique person.

The collaborative relationship that developed between us was reliant on each of us making significant contributions in spontaneous reaction to the other. We worked together to construct musical situations that were meaningful to us, but would not be obvious to an outsider. The longer that we worked together, the more there were specific activities that became standard, for which Ruby would ask by name. These favorites were played over and over again, contributing to an overall sense of well-being and positive rapport. The relationship was dependent on the sense of trust and mutual enjoyment that was enabled by the informal setting.

## **Challenges and Benefits**

While I found my work with Ruby to be a rewarding experience, there were unexpected challenges that emerged. It was at times a struggle to determine where the line was between her freedom to direct the setting and my control as the adult in the room. Although I wanted the lesson space to be informal, I often found myself trying to impose on her more formal expectations. My inner dialogue as the lesson was spinning out often had to do with the tension of previous expectations I had about the role of a child and the role of a teacher in an educational setting. This was also a challenge for Ruby's mother, who wanted her child to be well behaved and found it difficult not to intervene when Ruby's tendency was to lie on the floor with her feet in the air or hang upside down over the couch. The mother's open and honest conversations with me during our interviews revealed that it was difficult for her to not look for a specific product, such as an ability to play specific songs on the piano, even though she heartily believed in the organic philosophy of the lessons.

Despite the challenges, the benefits of such a setting and the impact on music learning are multiple. Immersion into a musical culture enables development of auditory processing, as well as nurtures the foundations of musical vocabulary (Trainor & Corrigall 2010). The allowance for free play enables the child to explore, which is a key component of compositional processes, and enables children to develop an internal logic of musical patterns (Welch 1998). It also allows the child to gain experience with the piano - its sounds, touches, and mechanics - without drawing attention to consequences for "wrong" playing. Free play enables the child to engage with the instrument organically, in the whole-body way that young children tend to approach all things. The informal setting sets a platform for creative processes to occur, where the necessary elements of repetition, re-working, and elaboration are a natural part of the setting (Barrett 2006; Burnard 2007). The freedom of the setting allows the child to attend to her own interests, furthering intrinsic motivation and inhibiting passivity. Finally, the presence of and interaction with a knowledgeable adult provides the child with a modeled understanding of musical processes and a precedent for musical interaction that can drive their individual and private music making, as well as their music making with others (Welch 1998; Barrett 2006).

Engaging with young children in an informal setting is also beneficial for those teaching such children. From my experience with Ruby, I learned that if children are distracted by something other than music in the setting, the most effective means of engaging them is to act as they might act: playing with music in an exploratory fashion. Instead of telling them to participate, I can invite them into the play with my own actions of playful music making. I learned that following children's ideas often leads to more meaningful musical moments than if I insist on doing what I have in mind. I also learned to expect co-construction to occur, and to allow more time and space for it to happen as the lesson unfolds.

## **Conclusion**

According to Campbell (2007), children engage in music consistent with the "adult, sibling, peer, and mediated influences they have known" (881). Informal environments allow those influences



to occur in ways that are unobtrusive to the child's natural inclinations toward being musical. The setting allows focus on the process of music making, while the child observes a model that is believable, normal, desirable, and valuable. The child strives to incorporate the model, without realizing that the striving is occurring. Learning occurs as the child changes her interactions with music, following a pathway that is both pre-determined according to cultural traditions and self-determined according to innate interest.

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