EXPLORING MUSIC AND PIANO PLAYING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN: A PIANO TEACHER'S PEDAGOGICAL STORIES

by

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Abstract

The purpose of my inquiry is to learn more about how young children learn to play the piano through examining my own teaching practices.

By using autoethnography (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014; Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Richardson, 2000) – as a creative non-fictional form of storytelling – my intent is (1) to illustrate a number of new, emerging perspectives and practices in piano pedagogy for young children through creative non-fiction stories; (2) to learn more about how my lived experiences of be(com)ing a piano teacher-researcher inform that practice; and (3) to determine the importance and value of piano teachers' autoethnographies in the development of a piano pedagogy for young beginner learners and piano teacher education.

Throughout the dissertation, I also include a series of photographs and videos to convey my students' unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano. The mixed forms of visual, musical, and textual data capture how we have been exploring music and piano playing with one another. They are my metaphorical fragments of my life stories – of teaching, writing, and researching – concerning what it means to be with young children when exploring music and piano playing.

Lay Summary

In this dissertation, I share a collection of photographs, videos, and stories about my piano teaching and learning experiences with young children. They illustrate my learning journey in search for more joyful and meaningful ways of exploring music and piano playing with young beginner students. In writing about my everydayness as a piano teacher, I discuss the importance and value of piano teachers' pedagogical stories in the development of piano pedagogy for young children and piano teacher education.

Preface

This dissertation is original work by the author. The research was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) Certificate Number H15-00611. Portions of this dissertation can be found in the following publications:

(1) Some parts of the methodological discussions in '*Auto': Thinking of stories* are paraphrased from Gouzouasis, P., & Ryu, J. (2015). A pedagogical tale from the piano studio: Autoethnography in early childhood music education research. *Music Education Research*, *17*(4), 397-420.

(2) The opening poem, 'Beautiful noise,' in *'Ethno': Thinking with stories* is featured in LeBlanc, N., Davidson, S. F., Ryu, J., & Irwin, R. L. (2015). Becoming through a/r/tography, autobiography and stories in motion. *International Journal of Education through Art*, *11*(3), 355-374.

(3) The story "THAWZEN," in *'Ethno': Thinking with stories* appears in Ryu, J. (2017). Deweyan fragments: Erasure poetry, music, and a story. In P. Sameshima, K. James, C. Leggo, & A. Fidyk (Eds.), *Poetic inquiry III*: *Enchantment of place* (pp. 297-304). Whilmington, DE: Vernon Press.

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... **ii**

Lay Summary ..... **iii**

Preface ..... **iv**

Table of Contents ..... **v**

List of Photographs ..... **viii**

List of Videos ..... **x**

Acknowledgements ..... **xi**

Dedication ..... **xiii**

'AUTO': Thinking *of* stories **1**

Prelude: A 'beautiful noise' 2

Purpose of my inquiry 3

Before/after moving to Vancouver 4

Starting my doctoral studies at UBC 6

A need for piano teachers' stories 7

Encountering autoethnography 16

Exploring different forms of storytelling 18

Elements of phenomenological anecdotes 24

Codetta: Stories that follow 26

'ETHNO': Thinking *with* stories **29**

Seashells and one lost tooth 30

Reflecting on "Seashells and one lost tooth" 32

Old McDinosaurous 38

Reflecting on "Old McDinosaurous" 40
One more Mario please 47
Reflecting on "One more Mario please" 48
Shades of pink 56
Reflecting on "Shades of pink" 58
Eyeball song 64
Reflecting on "Eyeball song" 65
Rice crackers 70
Reflecting on "Rice crackers" 72
Music math 78
Reflecting on "Music math" 80
4:30pm 86
Reflecting on "4:30pm" 87
My way 94
Reflecting on "My way" 95
THAWZEN 100
Reflecting on "THAWZEN" 101
'GRAPHY': Thinking *about* stories 105
After a year of writing stories 106
Lesson 1: Sound exploration and play as an ever-present process 106
Lesson 2: Listening to children's unique, individual ways of playing the piano 110
Lesson 3: Piano teaching as improvisation 111
Lesson 4: The role of 'extra' musical learning in piano lessons 113

Lesson 5: The value of singing and movement in piano learning 120

Lesson 6: The role of a teacher in children's piano learning 124

Lesson 7: The impact of parent support in children's piano lessons..... 126

Lesson 8: Value of piano teachers' autoethnographies 131

Coda: 38+ ways of learning to play the piano 134

What *is* piano playing?..... 137

References.....140

List of Photographs

Photograph 1: Cecilia's seashells 31

Photograph 2: Jimmy's favorite book 39

Photograph 3: Jimmy hiding underneath the piano 41

Photograph 4: Jimmy's muisc notation 45

Photograph 5: Ken's Mario drawing 47

Photograph 6: Ken's music notation 52

Photograph 7: Sandy teaches Fuzzy to play piano..... 57

Photograph 8: Sandy's free drawing of pink circles 59

Photograph 9: Playing the piano with one finger..... 67

Photograph 10: Jack's chocolate, banana, and strawberry crayons..... 71

Photograph 11: Finding two black keys with a pink egg shaker 74

Photograph 12: Bella and her doll at the piano..... 77

Photograph 13: Timmy's music math 80

Photograph 14: Making a backward xylophone 85

Photograph 15: Sally's notebook of stories and poetry..... 89

Photograph 16: Invented music notation 96

Photograph 17: Music notation for "Halloweeny Bun" 98

Photograph 18: Kieran's 10,000 THAWZEN 101

Photograph 19: A little Budgie bird drawing as a reminder for the curved hand positions 109

Photograph 20: Playing a toy piano on the floor 113

Photograph 21: A secret hiding place built with instruments 114

Photograph 22: A flower from my student 118

Photograph 23: Marching to my piano playing 123

Photograph 24: A drawing of my student and me 125

Photograph 25: A drawing of my student happily playing the piano 128

Photograph 26: "I love piano" drawing 136

Photograph 27: "I love music" drawing 139

List of Videos

(LOCATED IN THE SUPPLEMTENTARY MATERIALS AND ERRATA COLLECTION)

Video 1: Improvising a 'Butterfly' music 3

Video 2: Using seashells as the 'instruments' 35

Video 3: Playing our music for the 'audience' 62

Video 4: Improvising our 'Baby Giraffe' music 93

Video 5: Playing with the 'other' instruments 120

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Dedication

For my mom and brother

‘AUTO’

THINKING *OF* STORIES

Prelude: A 'beautiful noise'

We are improvising again
One spontaneous splash of
creativity after another

Little fingers freely dancing
across the piano keys

Happily exploring
our sounding world

"Why do you like to improvise?"
"Because…"

With a great big smile,
"I can make b-e-a-u-t-i-ful noise…"[1]

In our piano lessons, my students and I like to improvise. We like to create our own music. Sometimes, we find inspirations from creating the sounds of our favorite animals. We play piano for the little chicks or butterflies, and forte for the big elephants or bears. Our fingers jump and bounce across the piano keys like the staccatos of the monkeys or kangaroos; or glide across the piano keys like the long legato hissing sounds of the snakes. When we create the sounds of our favorite animals, we add crescendos for the roaring lions or decrescendos for animals hiding away into the forest. Depending on the characteristics of the animals, we play allegro like the horses freely running across the fields or adagio like the big freshwater turtles. Sometimes, we mix all the sounds of our favorite animals like we are in a deep magical jungle.

Aside from our favorite animals, we also find inspirations from our favorite storybooks. As I read a story, my students happily create exciting sound effects on the piano. Sometimes, we

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[1] A poem based on a conversation with my five-year-old piano student (see LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015, p. 358).

even draw pictures to inspire musical ideas and 'notate' our piano improvisations. Other times, we just like to play and create music without referring to any particular ideas and stories. We simply play and let our musical ideas flow as we freely improvise across the piano keys.

Video 1: Improvising a 'Butterfly' music

Purpose of my inquiry

The purpose of my inquiry is to learn more about how young children learn to play the piano through examining my own teaching practices. In sharing my piano teaching and learning experiences, my intent is (1) to illustrate a number of new, emerging perspectives and practices in piano pedagogy for young children through creative non-fiction stories; (2) to learn more about how my lived experiences of be(com)ing a piano teacher-researcher inform that practice; and (3) to determine the importance and value of piano teachers' autoethnographies (Adams,

Jones, & Ellis, 2014; Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Richardson, 2000) – as a creative non-fictional form of storytelling – in the development of a piano pedagogy for young beginner learners and piano teacher education.

Before/after moving to Vancouver

As a piano teacher, I have been working with beginners to advanced students for over 17 years. However, it wasn't until when I moved to Vancouver about seven years ago that I started teaching piano for very young four- and five-year-old preschool children. Before moving to Vancouver, most of my students were either older, beginner to intermediate level students or advanced undergraduate students taking piano lessons as their secondary instrument. Almost all of my past students were also transferred from other piano teachers.

Thus, many of them had been taking piano lessons for at least a year or two before meeting with me. They brought their own piano books and music that they wanted to continue learning. Many of them were also very accustomed to the traditional, teacher-directed approach to learning piano. Anytime I tried to ask questions about the music, most of them had trouble sharing their thoughts, and were very uncomfortable having conversations in our lessons. They were more comfortable with focusing our attention to learning new notes and developing piano playing techniques. They expected me to tell them exactly what to work on and how to play their pieces. As a result, I was used to teaching in more traditional, teacher-directed lessons that they were more familiar with, and it became a common practice for me to simply focus our lessons to learning new repertoire and to go on from one grade performance level to the next as they had always done with their previous piano teachers.

However, that all changed when I came to Vancouver. Here, I could neither move from one piece to another nor from one piano method book to another. For the first time, most of the students in my studio were very young children who had never taken piano lessons before. I could no longer rely on their previous piano books and backgrounds in learning to play the piano. They had none. It was their very first time playing the piano. For most children, it was their first time experience with any kind of music making.

"We don't do music in our family," one parent said.

But, these young children were eager to learn everything about music and piano playing. Some of them had never even seen the real instrument before.

"Whoa, it's so big," a four-year-old student said in our first lesson.

Full of creativity, curiosity, and wonder for music and piano playing, my new young students came to see me week after week with endless questions, ideas, and excitement for everything that captured their imagination.

"What is this? What is that?" they would ask while pointing to various parts of the piano.

"What is this for?" they wondered while kicking the strange looking pedals.

"Guess what? Can I tell you something?" they would say.

And so, as an experienced piano teacher with no experience in working with young children, I started asking questions about my piano teaching practices that I had never taken time to reflect upon before. I felt like a new teacher.

At the time, I had no idea how to start with young students who had never taken lessons prior to meeting with me. I didn't know much about nursery rhymes and songs that they were singing in their preschools. Other then few pre-reading piano method books that usually started

with fingerings, numbers, and letter notes, I wasn't aware of any other pedagogical materials and music for preschool children who had yet to learn to read and write the alphabets.

As a result, in working with young children, I became aware of the importance and need for examining my piano teaching practices. After all these years of teaching, I needed to relearn teaching piano. For the first time, I started searching for new ways of exploring music and piano playing with young children.

Starting my doctoral studies at UBC

With many questions about piano pedagogy for preschool children, I began my doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia (UBC) to learn about music education research. Here, I started studying with my supervisor, an expert in the field of early childhood music education and arts-based research with extensive experience in the study of creative music teaching and strategies in contemporary learning contexts (Gouzouasis, 1991, 1992, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Gouzouasis, Henrey, & Belliveau, 2008; Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, & Gordon, 2013; Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002, 2008, 2009; Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Irwin, 2009; Gouzouasis & Regier, 2015).

As a pianist and piano teacher, I had no background in general music education and research. I never took any music education related courses in my undergraduate and masters' studies. As a piano performance major, most of my classes consisted of the weekly private lessons and master classes. Aside from the required introductory theory and history seminars, I took one year of a piano pedagogy class with my piano professor.

During those years, I was focused on performing, learning new repertoire, entering competitions and preparing for recitals. Although I started teaching piano lessons during my early undergraduate studies, I never took time to think about my piano teaching practice. I had no

specific philosophies about teaching and learning. I neither read nor studied any pedagogical theories and literature in music education.

However, everything I knew or thought I knew about piano teaching and learning changed during my doctoral studies. I started learning about early childhood music curricula and pedagogy, music and movement activities, and developmentally appropriate music teaching and learning practices.

In my graduate research seminars, I was also introduced to a variety of traditional and contemporary methodologies used in music and art education. I began reading and studying theoretical and philosophical works by various curricular scholars like John Dewey, Ted T. Aoki, Maxine Greene, and Paulo Freire. I started writing stories about my teaching experiences (see Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015), making video artworks of my piano improvisations (see LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015; Irwin, LeBlanc, Ryu, & Belliveau, 2018), and erasure poetry on Dewey's educational theories (see Ryu, 2017) to explore, examine, and reflect on my piano teaching and learning practices.

I had no idea of the importance and value of education research is for piano teachers. I never imagined how greatly my thinking and understanding about music and piano playing would be influenced and inspired by so many educators, researchers, and scholars in the fields of early childhood education, music education, arts education, and curricular studies.

I had much to learn.

A need for piano teachers' stories

In my first graduate music education research seminar, I learned that early childhood research in music and in general education has been dominated by quantitative, statistical analyses of children's experiences (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2012; Gouzouasis, Bakan,

Ryu, Ballam, Murphy, Ihnatovych, Virag, & Yanko, 2014; Gouzouasis & Ihnatovych, 2016; Kumashiro, 2012).

Similarly, I found that many of research articles on the topics of piano pedagogy were also heavily quantitative and they mostly focused on statistical analyses of performance related skills of piano playing (Brotz, 1992; Burnsed & Humphries, 1998; Frewen, 2010; Swinkin, 2015; Wagner, Piontek, & Teckhaus, 1973), music reading skill acquisition for piano (Emond & Comeau, 2012; Gudmundsdottir, 2010), a variety of cognitive and physical requirements of playing the piano (Carmichael, 2014), and the instructional effectiveness in the music studio (Barry & McArthur, 1994; Bugos & Lee, 2014; Costa-Giomi, Flowers, & Sasaki, 2005; Daniel & Bowden, 2013; Davidson & Scutt, 1999; Duke, 1999/2000; Duke Flowers, & Wolfe, 1997; Hendel, 1995; Kennell, 2002; Mackworth-Young, 1990; Rife, Shnek, Lauby, & Lapidus, 2001; Siebenaler, 1997; Speer, 1994; Steele, 2010).

Furthermore, although there are hundreds of professional and research articles on general topics of piano teaching and learning, very little research has been focused on the study of preschool piano learning and teaching (Ajero, 2011; Balodis, 2006, Berr, 2011; Briscoe, 2012; Brown, 2006; Campbell, 2005; Clark, 2010; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Guilmartin, 2000; Johnson, 2006; Kooistra, 2012, 2013; Lovison, 2011; Millares, 2012; Shor, 1989; Upitis, Brook, Abrami, & Varela, 2015; Zander, 2010).

In fact, there are very small number of studies that address instrumental teachers and teaching in general (Triantafyllaki, 2005, p. 838), and most research has concentrated on interactions of a single teacher working with a large group of students in a classroom environment (Iwaguchi, 2012; Miranda, 2000; Pike, 2013, 2014).

However, in the second semester of my graduate music education seminar, I started learning about more progressive music education research texts (i.e., see Green, 2008) and experimental writings outside of music education (i.e., see Ellis, 2004). Instead of continuing with a traditionalist review of music research practices, our class began reading Ellis's (2004) *Ethnographic I* to learn about autoethnography and autobiographical research methods. We also explored a wide range of what Richardson (2000) has termed "Creative Analytical Practices (CAP)," a variety of creative and artful research approaches such as performative ethnography, duoethnography, ethno-drama, poetic inquiry, arts-based inquiry, a/r/tography, and other experimental forms of inquiry.

As I started learning about many creative possibilities of writing and presenting research, I discovered that the use of stories as a research method is new in the fields of piano pedagogy and piano teacher education. Although a handful of scholars have started addressing the effects of piano instruction (Costa-Giomi, 2004; Hatta, 1989; Piro & Ortiz, 2009; Wig & Boyle, 1982), and the developmentally appropriateness of various piano method books (Ballard, 2007; Huang, 2007; Thomas-Lee, 2003), I was not able to find creative story writing approach to exploring, examining, and presenting research about piano pedagogy for young children (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015). Instead of teachers' accounts of their direct experiences of working with young children, most of the literature in piano pedagogy was about piano learning by mature adult students (Cooper, 2001; Jutras, 2006; Taylor, 2008, 2014; Wristen, 2006) or of piano students in higher education (Carey, Grant, McWilliam, & Taylor, 2013; Cremaschi, 2012; Daniel, 2004; Duke, Simmons, & Cash, 2009; Presland, 2005; Young, Burwell, & Pickup, 2003; Young, 2013).

The two notable exceptions are works by Shor (1989) and Kooistra (2012, 2013, 2016) on preschool piano pedagogy. In one of the rare, earliest examples of research published in a peer-reviewed journal titled, *Very young children and piano lessons*, Nadiva Shor (1989) shared a series of excerpts from her 'work diary' to illustrate her experiences of teaching piano to young children (p. 20). To describe examples of students' behaviors, manners, and ways of learning to play the piano, Shor included descriptions, notes, and conversations that she shared with learners to discuss various issues, challenges, and questions concerning their piano lessons. By using an experience-based approach to exploring piano pedagogy for young children, she wrote her lesson diary in a simple, descriptive style of vignettes and anecdotes. As such, Shor's account of her teaching experiences is one of the very few studies that offer a teacher's personal insights into piano lessons for preschool children.

More recently, Lauren Kooistra (2013) completed her doctoral dissertation by using her own lived experiences as a basis to examine piano pedagogy for young children. While most of the doctoral studies on preschool piano pedagogy are focused on the literature reviews of a variety of piano methods (Albergo, 1988; Ballard, 2007; Huang, 2007; Knerr, 2006; Lu, 2012; Sundell, 2012; Thomas-Lee, 2003), and life and works of piano pedagogues (Alkhasova, 2006; Bascom, 2012; Baskins, 1994; Beauchamp, 1994; Beres, 2003; Biggs, 2011; Choi, 2012; Ernst, 2012; Fast, 1997; Forester, 1997; Garvin, 1998; Hayase, 2006; Holland, 1996; Huang, 1994; Jacques, 2006; Jain, 2012; Kern, 1984; Lane, 2003; Schubert, 1992; von Arx, 2006; Wong, 2008), Kooistra drew from ethnographic and phenomenological techniques to conduct a qualitative study about her piano lessons that were designed on the principles of informal learning.

As a result, while the use of stories is very limited in the fields of piano pedagogy and piano teacher education research, I found many inspirations from other teacher-researchers who use stories as creative and pedagogic forms of research to examine their teaching and learning practices. For example, there are various collections of short stories written by elementary and secondary teachers who share their everyday life experiences in their classrooms (Alston, 2008; Craig, 2003; Graves, 1998; Jalongo, Isenberg, & Gerbracht, 1995; Jones, 1991; Mack-Kirschner, 2004; Meyer, 1996; Waldron, Collie, & Davies, 1999).

In those collections of stories, teachers described their everyday experiences with students as they explored various subjects, questions, and meanings. Meyer (1996) researched the literary lives of the teachers and students as frameworks to explore the power and importance of story in their own lives (p. xi). Graves (1998) wrote autobiographical tales about his personal and professional experiences to examine the nature of human learning. Power and Hubbard (1996) collected stories of failures from new and veteran teachers to discuss their difficulties and mistakes that led them to new insights and understanding about teaching and learning. In using teachers' stories as research, Jalongo, Isenberg, and Gerbracht (1995) provided a series of positive and negative personal narratives to examine their understandings of what it means to teach and learn (p. xvi).

Similarly, Miller (2005) brought forth stories from 15 experienced teachers to illustrate various teaching and learning situations. In her field-based inquiry, Craig (2003) referred to similar types of multiple collections of teachers' stories as "story constellations" (p. 10). In using the story constellations approach, which is a form of narrative inquiry (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that draws from multiple "clusters of stories" (Craig, 2003, p. 11), she examined the temporal, personal, social, and contextual qualities of teacher knowledge (pp. 11-12). Craig

also framed the study with a series of stories and metaphors to convey teachers' lived experiences (pp. 15-16).

In the field of early childhood education, 'learning stories,' which are a narrative form of learning assessment, has become one of the popular approaches to documenting children's learning processes (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012; Gouzouasis & Yanko, in press). In recognizing the value of *teachers as researchers*, Carr and Lee (2012) draw from everyday professional lives of educators to examine the ways in which adults and children tell and re-tell stories of their learning (p. 2). When composing learning stories, teachers use their narratives based on the photos, notes, and other various medium of documenting the teaching and learning experiences in the classrooms to reflect on the past and to plan for the future (p. 2). They highlight children's learning and add suggestions about the next steps that they might take to further develop their ideas, actions, and understandings (p. 34). Sometimes, teachers directly address the stories to the child or children as if they are in conversation with them. Other times, students write or dictate their own stories about their learning (p. 42). Many of the stories in the students' portfolios also include photographs of teachers and/or children in action, and/or students' projects in progress (p. 46).

Relatedly, the role of documenting children's learning is critical to the philosophy and pedagogy of Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012). Referred to as a *pedagogical documentation*, Reggio Emilia-inspired educators practice making children's learning "visible" (Dahlberg, 2012, p. 226) by documenting their explorations through various arts media (i.e., stories, photographs, videos). Pedagogical documentation has a central place in the discourse of their meaning making (p. 226). As a tool for assessment and evaluation, it calls upon teachers to take responsibilities for their actions and practice (p. 227). Based on the understanding that

teaching is a cooperative learning process, the practice of pedagogical documentation challenges teachers to engage in continuous scrutiny of their knowledge, practice, and ways of making connections with their students (pp. 228-229).

While there is a growing interest and number of studies that encourage and draw from teachers' experiences with their students, music teaching and learning stories (Nyland & Acker, 2012; Nyland, Acker, Ferris, & Deans, 2015; Nyland & Ferris, 2009; O'Neill, 2009, 2012), and Reggio-inspired music programs and studies (Bond, 2015; Crisp & Caldwell, 2007; Hanna, 2014, 2016; Matthews, 2000; Nyland, Acker, Ferris, & Deans, 2011; O'Hagin, 2007; Salmon, 2010; Smith, 2011; Vuckovic & Nyland, 2010; Yanko, 2015) are very nascent in the fields of music education, piano pedagogy, and piano teacher education.

Furthermore, while stories and storytelling have been used to serve various purposes and uses in narrative inquiry in music education (Barrett, 2009, 2010, 2016; Barrett & Stauffer, 2009; Blair, 2007; Bresler, 2006; Conway, 2003; McCarthy, 2007), autoethnographic and autobiographical studies are still limited (Bakan, 2014; Bartleet, 2009; Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; de Vries, 2000, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016; Holman Jones, 1998, 2007; Lee, 2005a, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008, 2009, 2010; manovski, 2014; Yanko, 2015).

However, one of the first scholars to use a variety of creative, autoethnographic forms of storied approaches to understanding music teaching and learning is Peter Gouzouasis (Gouzouasis, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011; Gouzouasis et al., 2008; Gouzouasis et al., 2013; Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Prendergast, Gouzouasis, Leggo, & Irwin, 2009). Although music education research has been dominated by positivistic epistemology and methodology, he has been writing stories about his teaching experiences for more then 15 years (Gouzouasis, 2000; Gouzouasis et al., 2014; Gouzouasis & Ihnatovych, 2016; Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002, 2008, 2009;

Gouzouasis & Nobbs-Theissen, 2015; Gouzouasis & Regier, 2015; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Lee & Gouzouasis, 2016, 2017).

In one of the earliest publications, he explored the dialogic relationship between a doctoral student and graduate supervisor by using personal narratives to examine their experiences with musicians during the teacher education program (Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002). Since then, he has been writing inquiries that unravel musicians' stories (Gouzouasis & Lee, 2008), including the role of supervisors in providing emotional support for graduate students during their academic studies (Gouzouasis & Lee, 2009).

As a way of stressing for more music teachers' autoethnographies, and the importance and value of stories in music education research (Gouzouasis et al., 2014), Gouzouasis has been using autoethnographic lens to reflect, question, and rethink music teaching and learning practices (Gouzouasis & Nobbs-Theissen, 2015). In theorizing autoethnography as a polydimensional form of research inquiry, he has also written stories from the perspective of teachers and young learners in classroom and studio music making contexts (Gouzouasis & Regier, 2015).

In addition to using autoethnographic tales to develop new ways of conceptualizing and writing about music pedagogy for the K-12 students, Gouzouasis presented autoethnography as a creative, didactic non-fiction to learn more about how young children learn to play the piano (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015). In another autoethnographic study, he revealed a sensitive, difficult story from another piano studio to examine the piano teacher-student relationships and socioemotional aspects of music learning (Gouzouasis & Ihnatovych, 2016). Most recently, he co-authored autoethnographic duets to reflect on tragedies and painful stories of music teachers and their students (Lee & Gouzouasis, 2016, 2017).

And so, in studying the emerging exploration of narrative inquiry, autobiography, autoethnography, and storied forms of research by scholars in the fields of early childhood education (Bernheimer, 2003; Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012; Diamond, 2008; Driscoll, 1995; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2011; Genishi, 1992; Stacey, 2008; Wien, 2008), teacher education (Beattie, 1995; 2000; 2004), and other various forms of arts-based inquiry (Gouzouasis, 2013; Gouzouasis et al., 2008; Gouzouasis et al., 2013; Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Leggo, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2012; Pelias, 1999; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009; Speedy, 2015; Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008; Spry, 2010), I have been inspired to tell my life stories of piano teaching and learning using similar approaches. Reflecting on their stories encouraged me to examine my lived experiences, questions, and ideas about exploring music and piano playing with young children. I started thinking about the value and need for piano teachers' stories.

A piano studio is a place with many stories. There are a great number of questions about piano teaching and learning that require in depth explorations and discussions. As Duke, Flowers, and Wolfe (1997) observed more than two decades ago, private piano lessons represent one of the main components of music education, and yet, such a widely popular form of music making and learning has not been the focus of many researchers and teachers (p. 51).

For those reasons, I believe that we need more music teaching and learning stories from piano teachers, and propose that piano teachers' autoethnographies – as forms of storytelling and story sharing – can be one of the ways in which we can bring more insights, understandings, and new ways of deeply thinking about piano pedagogy and piano teacher educational research.

Encountering autoethnography

Traditionally speaking, autoethnography is a form of non-fiction writing [i.e., the '*graphy'*] about the personal [i.e., the '*auto*,' the 'self'] and one's relationship to culture [i.e., the '*ethno'*]. As such, I focus on the life experiences of my teacher-self (i.e., 'auto') to examine the cultural and social context of young children's piano learning within one-to-one setting of a private studio (i.e., 'ethno').

However, while writing a paper three years ago with my advisor, he had a revelation about the multiple, contextualized meanings of the prefix 'auto.' In the Greek language, 'auto' means much more than self – depending on the conversational context it can also mean him, her, this, that, those, they, and other (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 403).

For me, that opened up a whole new way of thinking about various forms of storying the self (see Leggo, 1995, 1997, 2003). As the multiple meanings of 'auto' are fused with culture (i.e., 'ethno') and writing (i.e., 'graphy'), the notion of 'self' extends beyond the 'personal' as it forms a holistic, embodied, and relational perspective about and the ways in which the person (i.e., the piano teacher and student) both enacts and writes the story (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 403).

In other words, while I use a first-person voice to tell stories about my lived experiences as a piano teacher, the conversations and interactions that I have with my students, and the ways in which they inform my teaching calls for a relational approach to thinking about piano pedagogy. As I draw attention to particular emotions, objects, and experiences, my engagement and relationships with young children are deeply influenced by my being a part of a particular culture (p. 403). As an autoethnographic storyteller, I am an active member and partner in the creation, and re-creation of a story (p. 403).

With those ideas in mind, I seek to illustrate ‘essences’ and ‘meanings’ rather than ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30) of precise ‘facts’ (Ellis, 2004, p. 116). I embrace the notion that a ‘truthful’ account is more valuable than a ‘factual’ account of a situation or experience (Gouzouasis, 2008; Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009). I attempt to write evocatively and artfully about the personal, interpersonal, and intrapersonal experiences by using various approaches to open-ended, interpretive storytelling (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 6). I focus my stories on actions, dialogues, and emotions. I also place great emphasis on *epiphany*, which is one of the most important aspects of storytelling in autoethnography (Banks & Banks, 2000; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Couser, 1997; Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002; Pelias, 1999; Sparkes, 2002).

As a form of enlightened realization, an epiphany enables the individual to make an inference or develop a new, deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 7). In a story, an epiphany (or crisis) provides trouble and dramatic tension in which the events and characters in the plot revolve and move towards a resolution and/or explanation (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 88; Ellis, 2004, p. 32).

Furthermore, in stories about music making, the sound of music enables us to rethink epiphany as “epiphony” (Gouzouasis, 2013, p. 14), as the sound of music provides the impetus for dramatic tension in the plot of a story. The suffix, *phony* means *sound*, and musicians often make important discoveries about the self and others (i.e., music students, peers, and colleagues) through the acoustic experiences (Lee & Gouzouasis, 2016, p. 345). In my case, I learned about myself as a teacher and my students’ experiences of learning to play the piano through writing stories (i.e., epiphanies), as well as improvising music with young children (i.e., epiphonies). In this dissertation, I use autoethnographic story telling – through the *epiphany* and *epiphony* – to

(re)examine what it means to lead a meaningful life of piano teaching, and to learn to be(come) more reflective, reflexive (Etherington, 2004, 2007) piano teacher.

To examine, illustrate, and evoke my piano teaching and learning experiences, this dissertation includes a collection of ten stories about my piano teaching and learning epiphanies and epiphonies. I describe the events and situations in our lessons that moved and puzzled me. I recall moments, memories, and conversations that deeply resonated with me.

In that sense, autoethnography enables me to connect the 'self' with 'others' to make meaningful connections between the personal and people (Doty, 2010, p. 1048). By inviting readers to emerge themselves in the dialogue and read my stories as if they are the teacher in the story, I seek to communicate the "truth-likeness" or "verisimilitude" (Eisner, 1998, pp. 53-58).

From that dialogical perspective, the stories in this dissertation may be considered as more than merely a 'personal' story of one teacher's journey in learning. As I share my experiences of working with the beginner piano students, and how they changed my ideas and understandings about what really matters in piano lessons for young children, my hope is that other piano teachers will become more mindful of their life stories (see Leggo, 19995) in exploring music and piano playing with their students.

Exploring different forms of autoethnography

Autoethnography and storied approaches to research represented in this dissertation traces its lineage largely from ethnography, narrative theory, and other approaches to social science that were influenced by the 'crisis of representation' and the 'interpretive turn' in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Erickson, 2011; Reyna, 2010; Richardson, 1990, 1997, 2000; Sparkes, 2002). The interpretive turn opened radically different ways of knowing and communicating human experiences, and it challenged the existing traditional, un-reflexive

assumptions of 'truth' (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 401). In research studies, more attention turned to the importance and value of human stories, emotions, and relational, embodied experiences (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013, p. 29). Theorists and researchers began thinking of story as theory (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 129). They started theorizing that not only is the "personal the political, the personal is the grounding for theory" (Richardson, 2000, p. 927).

As a result, although autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sparkes, 2002), it has evolved into a hybrid research genre that may consist of a variety of "Creative Analytical Practices (CAP)" (Richardson, 2000, p. 9), which include a multitude of literary genres and writing styles (i.e., short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose, see Ellis, 2004, p. 38).

In *Creative Analytical Practice Ethnography* or *CAP Ethnography*, authors move beyond conventional social scientific writing by using a variety of creative, literary styles and techniques to (re)present their research as a way of inviting readers to emotionally "relive" the experiences with authors (Richardson, 2000, p. 11). In recreating lived experiences and evoking emotional responses through "evocative representations," those who practice CAP seek to attend to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, and blurred, personal experiences that call for transformational process of self-reflexivity and self-creation (p. 11).

For me, autoethnography, as a sub-genre of CAP practices, opened new possibilities to write and communicate in ways that could help more piano teachers, parents, and students. In framing and using creative storytelling as a method of inquiry, I could bring new insights and understandings about preschool piano pedagogy in ways that will be more accessible, engaging,

and informative for those who can use and benefit from my piano teaching and learning experiences.

To describe my epiphanies and epiphonies from my piano studio that have made strong impressions on me, the stories I write are in a style of "small stories" (Nutbrown, 2011) and "tales" (van Maanen, 1998/2011) that focus on particular teaching and learning moments and experiences. As such, they are reminiscent of short, impressionistic vignettes (i.e., incomplete or fragmentary texts that focus on one moment or impressions about a person, idea, place, or experience, see Ambler, 2012; Humphreys, 2005).

In my stories, I intentionally use a simple, nontechnical language, and avoid any dense, heavily citation-laden approach to writing, presenting, and interpreting research. I also write my stories in the present tense to draw the readers immediately into the experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 109).

According to Ellis (2004), a story as a literary genre follows specific conventions and techniques of storytelling: 1) people depicted as characters, 2) an epiphany or crisis to provide dramatic tension, 3) a temporal ordering of events, and 4) a point, moral or message to the story that evokes meanings and values to the crisis explored in the story (p. 32).

However, in the process of (re)writing my stories, I came to a realization that I needed a variety of ways of storytelling. Unlike the traditional literary genre, most of my stories had no chronological or temporal ordering of events. Instead, my stories had specific moments and experiences that were unique to a particular day or situation. Like the quick fire snapshots that form a series of photographs, I was creating a series of writing fragments that described, evoked, and illustrated my fleeting, improvisational experiences of exploring music and piano playing with young children. I didn't always have a beginning, middle, *and* ending to my stories. Rather,

I had snapshots of our everyday conversations, questions, ideas, and everything else that interested my students during our piano lessons.

For those reasons, I experimented with different forms of autoethnography. I searched for new ways of analyzing, understanding, and interpreting my teaching and learning experiences. I practiced creative approaches to thinking and writing about my everydayness as a piano teacher. As a result, my dissertation includes different styles of storytelling (i.e., closed, open-faced, seamless writing, and bricolage), and I have organized the stories according to the following three theoretical frameworks: 1) Thinking *of* stories; 2) Thinking *with* stories; and 3) Thinking *about* stories.

For the overall structure of the dissertation, I use the 'closed' form (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 203) of presenting autoethnographic inquiry by placing the methodological and theoretical discussions (i.e., *'Auto': Thinking of Stories*, and *'Graphy': Thinking about stories*) at the beginning and ending while placing the collection of stories about my piano teaching and learning in the middle section (i.e., *'Ethno': Thinking with stories*).

In a *closed* form of autoethnography, the authors use traditional, theoretical framings at the beginning and the ending to discuss, analyze, and reflect upon the stories (p. 203). For example, in *Final Negotiations*, Ellis (1995a) used the methodological and epistemological frames in the beginning of the book to describe her narrative and autoethnographic approaches, and then she included a story in the middle before returning to the earlier themes in the concluding sections (p. 203).[2] Instead of analyzing the content of the story, Ellis started a

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[2] In *Final Negotiations* (1995a) Ellis wrote about her personal tragedy, a story about coping with her partner's dying and death (see Bocher & Ellis, 2016, p. 37). This is one of the earliest autoethnographic works by Ellis. However, although she thought of her story as autoethnography, Ellis

conversation about her experiences by inviting the readers to make their own interpretations. As such, Ellis conceptualized the story to stand alone without a detailed analysis of its content. Rather then explicating her own meanings about the stories, she provided the readers with a theoretical discussion of the importance, value, and possibilities of using personal story as a form of research.

In the '*Auto'* and '*Graphy'* parts of the dissertation, I also adopt a literary style of *seamless writing* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 204). In that form, the authors mix the creative narrative with the citations and literature reviews as part of the story. No distinctive separation of the theoretical discussion and story is made in the writing.[3] Therefore, in the first and third parts of this dissertation I integrate a discussion of scholarly literature with reflective-reflexive narratives by combining my theories, philosophies, and approaches to piano pedagogy for young children with my personal stories of be(com)ing a piano teacher-researcher.

For my piano teaching and learning stories in the '*Ethno'* part of the dissertation, I use the 'open-faced' form of writing autoethnography. In an *open-faced* form, an author immediately begins with the story without any theoretical discussion, and places the analysis at the end to frame and conclude the main narrative (p. 203). As a result, authors first meet the readers *with* the story instead of immediately providing them with an explanation *about* the story (p. 219). By omitting the theoretical and methodological discussion at the beginning, readers are invited to

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referred to the term autoethnography only once in the book (p. 51). At that time, Bochner and Ellis were using the terminologies such as 'first-person accounts' and 'evocative narratives' to describe their autoethnographic writings (p. 51). Other examples that were in use to write personal narratives in the social science research during the 1990s include personal essay, socioautobiography, confessional tale, ethnographic autobiography, self-ethnography, or personal ethnography (p. 51).

[3] For examples of seamless writing, see Bochner (1997, 2014) and others (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Spry, 2011; Tamas, 2013; Durham, 2014).

experience the story from their own perspectives before the authors explain their analyses and interpretations of the meanings.

According to Arthur Frank (1995), when readers engage *with* a story, they can consider the ways in which the story relates to their lives and to find in that connection some meanings about their own lived and living experiences (p. 219). When readers think *with* a story, they take on the story, live in it, and experience it to reflect on their own lives (p. 124).

For Frank, there is a great difference between thinking *with* a story and thinking *about* a story. In thinking 'with' a story, the story stands alone without any references to analysis, interpretations or explanations (p. 23). In his words, "Thinking with stories takes the story as already complete; there is no going beyond it. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one's life" (p. 23). In other words, the readers are invited to "relive" (Richardson, 2000, p. 11) the experiences of the authors as they immerse themselves in the stories through their own perspectives, understandings, and memories. Rather then learning 'about' the stories, readers are invited to discover their own meanings. In thinking 'with' the stories, authors welcome them to make their own connections and interpretations in relation to what they find meaningful in their lives.

In contrast, thinking 'about' a story means that we reduce, analyze, and discuss the story to find larger categories, themes, patterns, or meanings (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 186; Ellis, 2004, pp. 194-197; Frank, 1995, p. 23). In that sense, authors make their attempts to go *beyond* the story. Therefore, thinking 'about' a story ultimately removes the readers from the story as the writers reflexively analyze it from a distance (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 219).

With those ideas in mind, I commence the next section of the dissertation with a story – with neither introductory nor theoretical discussions – to invite the readers to "re-live"

(Richardson, 2000, p. 11) and interact *with* my stories from their own perspectives, understandings, and experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 219).

With that consideration in mind, I also include a reflective-reflexive, personal narrative at the end of each story to discuss new reflexive insights and understandings that I have gained from writing stories about my experiences as a piano teacher. This way, readers can experience and formulate their own interpretations of the stories before reading about my thoughts, ideas, and learning outcomes that resulted from my journey in exploring music and piano playing with young children.

Finally, I reserve the more in depth scholarly, critical discussions 'about' the stories until the final part of the dissertation. Therein I move beyond the stories and reflections as I relate my personal teaching and learning experiences to the current literature in early childhood education, music education, and piano pedagogy for young children. In that concluding section, I also introduce the notion of *autoethnography as living pedagogy* to discuss the importance, value, and need for more piano teachers' autoethnographies.

Elements of phenomenological anecdotes

In addition to the different forms of autoethnography and literary techniques, my stories also include the elements from the anecdotal narratives as practiced in phenomenology. According to van Manen (2014), the narrative structure of the anecdote has the following characteristics.

(1) An anecdote is a very short and simple story.

(2) An anecdote usually describes a single incident.

(3) An anecdote begins close to the central moment of the experience.

(4) An anecdote includes important concrete details.

(5) An anecdote often contains several quotes (i.e., what was said, done, and so on).

(6) An anecdote closes quickly after the climax or when the incident has passed.

(7) An anecdote often has an effective or "punchy" last line: it creates punctum. (p. 252)

All of my piano teaching and learning stories that follow in the next section of the dissertation contain many of the structural elements of an anecdote (i.e., *'Ethno': Thinking with story*). My stories are very short and are written in a simple, fragmentary style. I focus on a single moment, memory or situation (i.e., 'incident') that changed my ways of teaching and thinking about piano pedagogy. I either start the story immediately to the experience that I am describing or very close to the epiphanies and epiphonies (i.e., 'central moment') that were meaningful for my students and myself. All the stories contain concrete details about our experiences, including conversations of what was said, done, and shared in our lessons. I end my stories abruptly or soon after the epiphany and/or epiphony (i.e., 'climax' or 'incident'). Most of the stories also end with the 'effective' or 'punchy' last line that is reminiscent of a punctum.

Literally meaning to "point or sting" (p. 252), a *punctum* serves to disturb our ways of thinking and understanding (p. 253). It moves us to reflect. It suggests new meanings – a different way of interpreting the phenomena. A punctum may also appear as a "surprise" (p. 253). Similarly, I often conclude my stories with a question, idea, or statement that draws attention to the surprising turn of the events. Sometimes, I abruptly end them with a surprise that calls for reflections. Other times, I leave them open-ended with many possibilities for interpretations.

In discussing the significance of anecdotal narrative in phenomenological research and writing, van Manen (1997/2016) explains that an anecdote has the following 'powers' to move the readers:

> (1) *to compel*: a story recruits our willing attention; (2) *to lead us to reflect*: a story tends to invite us to a reflective search for significance; (3) *to involve us personally*: one tends to search actively for the story tellers' meaning via one's own; (4) *to transform*: we may be touched, shaken, moved by story, it teaches us; (5) *to measure one's interpretive sense*: one's response to a story is a measure of one's deepened ability to make interpretive sense. (p. 121)

From those perspectives, the phenomenological approach to anecdote shares many common features with autoethnography. Both methodologies compel me to draw attention to my lived experiences, and call upon me to practice a reflective, reflexive search for meanings in our piano lessons. The creative approaches to writing stories and anecdotes could also invite the readers, and involve them personally as they in turn reflect on their own teaching and learning experiences.

Codetta: Stories that follow

From September 2015 to August 2016, I wrote daily journals about my piano teaching and learning. During the 12-month study, I used free writing to capture my most meaningful and memorable moments that happened on each day of our piano lessons. On some days, I wrote about my happy, fun experiences of playing the piano with my students. On other days, I wrote about some of the more difficult and challenging moments that we encountered in our lessons. I especially made notes of my doubts, questions, and concerns about my notions of how young children learn, as well as a number of perspectives and practices in piano pedagogy for young beginner students.

All the stories in the present dissertation written about my piano lessons are based on composites from generalizable experiences of young beginner students that I have taught over

the past 17 years. None of the stories that I present herein are about any one specific student, past or present, from my piano studio. My reasons for using the composite characters to describe children's experiences of learning to play the piano are twofold.

First, as I reflected and started writing stories about my piano teaching and learning experiences, the focus of my research shaped towards questioning my roles and practices as a piano teacher and their influences in children's experiences of learning to play the piano instead of systematically examining the piano learning process and development of any one specific student. While I sought to describe, express, and evoke a particular moment, situation, experience and memory from our lessons, I intentionally composed composite characters in my stories to capture the overall, generalizable characteristics and experiences of how I have been piano teaching and learning with young children.

Second, I used composite characters to protect the anonymity of my students. Although most of the stories share happy, joyful, and fun experiences of learning to play the piano, I also write about the difficult and challenging moments in our piano lessons. Because some of the stories describe personal views, behaviors, and personalities of my students and their parents, I created composite characters to avoid exposing the identity of any one specific student and/or parent in my stories.

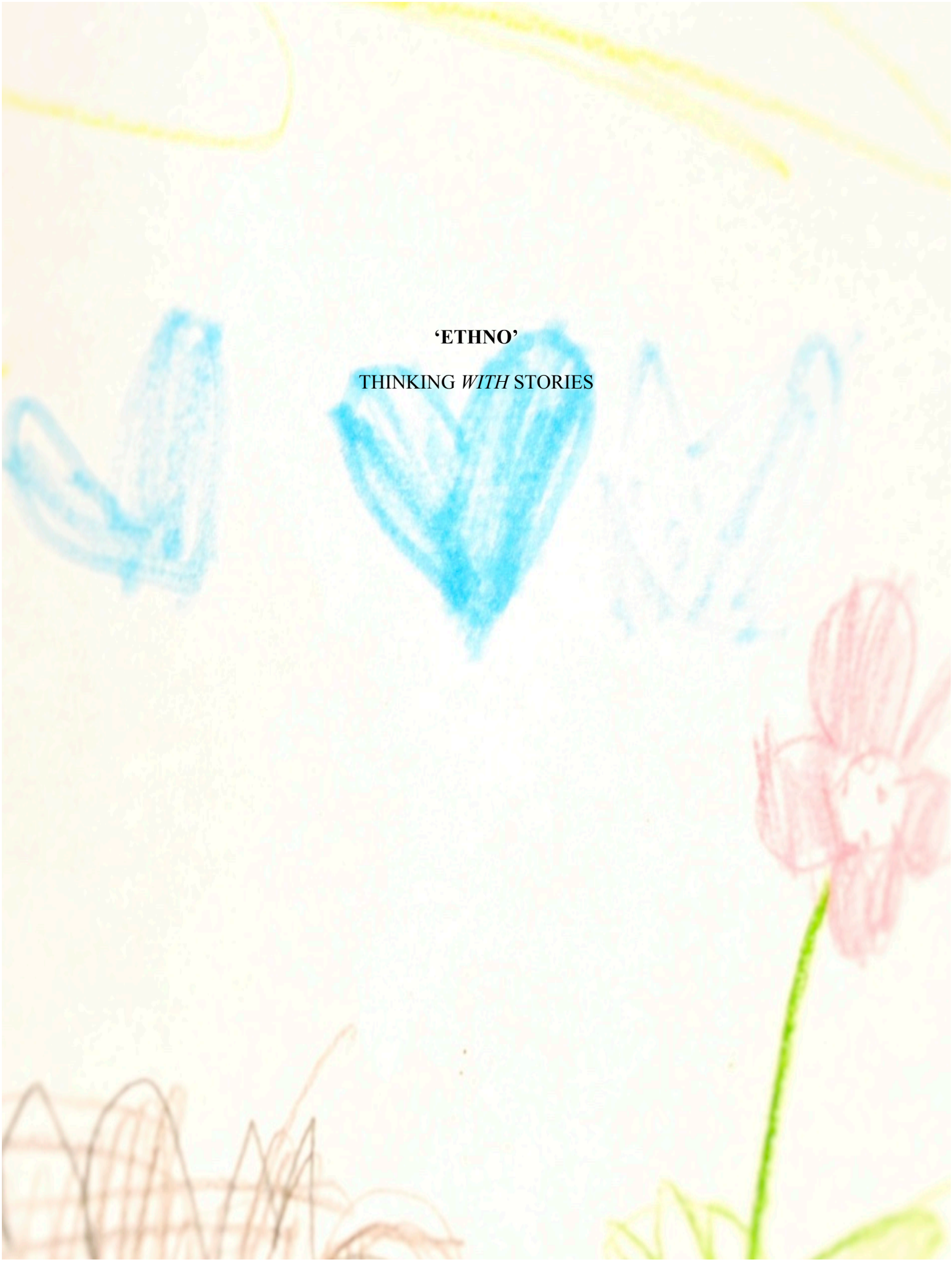
In addition to the daily journals, I kept a record of my students' questions, ideas, and gifts (i.e., drawings and objects) that they shared with me. I took photographs of their artworks, music notation or anything else that they were interested in exploring in our lessons. I also videotaped samples of our piano improvisations and conversations. I then used those textual, visual, audio, and musical data as inspirations to write a collection of short stories to explore, evoke, and illustrate how my students and I have been learning to play the piano with one another.

Throughout the dissertation, I also include a series of digitally edited photographs to convey my students' life experiences of learning to play the piano. Like a *bricoleur* – who artfully mix a variety of art forms of writing with complex, abstract theoretical interpretations to convey their life experiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, pp. 209-210) – I mix creative storytelling with visual images and videos to enhance the "emotional moods" (Ellis, 2004, p. 215), as well as the pedagogical questions, meanings, and/or situations experienced in our piano lessons.

In addition, I have taken five still photos to direct the readers to the supplementary videos that accompany this dissertation. Just like the photographs, I edited the recordings to protect the anonymity of my students, and to draw focus on our piano playing. Those videos serve as samples of my epiphonies in making music and improvising with young children.

Finally, I herein share my stories about my everydayness as a piano teacher. In writing more creatively and artfully (Upitis, 1999) in ways that could be more accessible, engaging, and informative (Gouzouasis et al., 2014, p. 6), my hope is that I will be able to reach a wider audience (Richardson, 1990) in bringing more awareness to how young children learn to play the piano.

For me, my stories of piano teaching and learning are never ending stories. They are our living stories that have no predetermined conclusions or definitive learning outcomes. Rather, I explore, evoke, and share my learning journey, which is still in the process of becoming. They are my metaphorical fragments of my life stories – of teaching, writing, and researching – concerning what it means to be *with* young children when exploring music and piano playing together.



‘ETHNO’

THINKING *WITH* STORIES

Seashells and one lost tooth

Cecilia lost a tooth today.

"Two more to go," she smiles.

Today is a very special day for her. She is wearing a beautiful bright yellow cheetah print dress, and holding out an empty tooth necklace case that she wants to show me. She also brought in all the beautiful seashells she found at the beach in West Vancouver.

"These are for you!" she says as she reaches in for the seashells in her two little hand pockets. They are so pretty... in all different shades of white. White Smoke... Snow... Seashell White... Floral White... Linen... and Splashed White... so beautiful...

And when I ask her if she would like to create a song about her seashells or the missing tooth, she replies with sparkles in her eyes, "How about *both*?"

So Cecilia and I start improvising on the piano about how she lost a tooth today and how she found so many seashells in West Vancouver.

"Can I use the seashells as tiny drums?" she asks.

"Seashells can be our special little instruments," I reply with a smile.

And, as I place my hands on the piano ready to play, Cecilia places her seashells across the piano keys. When I try to match my playing to her seashells, she tries to match hers to mine. As I continue to improvise on the piano, Cecilia quietly plays along with her seashells. From time to time, she then comes back to the piano and happily twinkles along few notes on the treble keys.

And, when I ask her about the title for our music, she cries out, while showing off her proudly missing tooth, "A *fire* shell!"

Photograph 1: Cecilia's seashells

Reflecting on "Seashells and one lost tooth"

In the early stages of piano learning, my students and I spend most of our time making up our own music. However, as a classically trained pianist, improvisation has been a new practice for me. Before working with young students, I never thought of including any improvisational activities in my piano lessons and practice improvising myself as a musician (see LeBlanc et al., 2015). It wasn't until I started working with young children that I discovered the importance and value of improvisation in learning to play the piano.

With new beginner students, I could no longer move from one piece to another and from one piano method book to another. Unlike the older, experienced students, I could no longer simply continue with the music that they would have been learning to play before meeting with me.

"What do I do? How do I teach piano to young children playing for the very first time?" I kept thinking to myself.

"How do I start? How can I keep their 'attention' and 'interests' in piano playing? What music books can I use when they have yet to learn to read and write the alphabets? What songs can we play when they are not ready to play the piano with all of their ten fingers? How will I introduce music notation and staff reading for the first time? What can I do when my students only want to draw and play with the other instruments instead of playing the piano?"

Endless questions played in my mind.

For me, everything I knew or thought I knew about piano teaching changed. I felt like I was teaching piano for the very first time. I could no longer rely on the piano books and my students' past experiences in learning to play the piano. I now had to find new ways of

introducing music to my students. I had to start planning for our lessons. I needed to develop my own ways of exploring piano playing with young children.

And that is how I first began improvising with my students. I needed to teach piano differently. Without relying on the piano method books, I started exploring my students' ideas, interests, curiosities, and imagination about music and piano improvisations as inspirations for creating our own music. We began searching for new ways of making meaningful connections with what mattered in our lives to our piano learning process.

* * *

For Cecilia, the beautiful seashells inspired her piano playing. As soon as she walked into the studio, she asked me to close my eyes because she had a big 'surprise' for me. She then asked me to start guessing and shared little clues until she couldn't wait any longer to show me what she was hiding inside her two little pockets.

Like Cecilia, many of my students bring surprises for me. Sometimes, they pick a leaf or wild berries on their way to our lesson. Other times, they bring colorful bracelets or necklaces that they made with their friends. I have students who proudly keep me informed about their new Pokémon cards or the Lego sets that they are working on at home.

"Guess what? I have to tell you something," they like to say.

So, my students and I like to talk about all the things that they bring for me. They love to share stories about what happened at school or at home during the week. I learn about their fights in the playground, birthday parties, or the weekend trips that they are looking forward to. Everyday, they share their life stories with me. From week to week, they include me in their life discoveries. Depending on what happened on that day or during the week, we talk about many things that matter for us. Their ideas, stories, questions, and wonders are our inspirations. Our

everyday experiences inform our piano playing. Whenever there are little gifts and surprises, we use them as our special 'instruments' for our improvisations. We create music to tell stories about the 'surprises.' We tell stories to accompany our piano playing. Our music expresses all the things that bring us happiness, joy, and smiles in our lives.

* * *

As my students and I explore piano playing through creating our own music, I am learning that it is critical for me to continue finding new ways of connecting children's interests, questions, ideas, and curiosities to our music making. When we relate our life stories to our piano improvisations, I find that young students take more initiatives in directing their learning. In Cecilia's story, for example, as I invited her to create music about her lost tooth and the seashells, she immediately decided to play a song that included both of her stories. To my surprise, she then invited me to use the seashells as the 'tiny drums' to accompany our piano playing. During the lesson, it didn't even cross my mind to think of using the seashells as the 'instruments.' Rather, I was preoccupied in trying to think of ways of improvising our music about the seashells, and finding ways to encourage Cecilia to create seashell-like sounds on the piano. However, she had a completely different idea for us. Cecilia thought of the seashells as the 'instruments,' and started to discover new musical possibilities on her own. As I responded with enthusiasm and excitement for her ideas, she continued to suggest new ways of including the seashells as part of our piano playing.

At first, we took turns to 'play' the seashells while each of us continued to improvise on the piano. From time to time, Cecilia also spontaneously started to sing and make up new words to tell a story about her day at the beach. But, at times, she also stopped everything and started playing with the seashells without using them as instruments. As I improvised, she quietly stared

deeply into the seashells and sifted through them as if she was looking for a particular kind of a seashell. At one point, she even organized the seashells according to their colors and sizes, and asked me to continue playing the piano as she lined them up on top of my piano.

"Keep playing," she said.

"Don't stop!" she reminded me if my playing showed any signs of slowing down.

Video 2: Using seashells as the 'instruments'

* * *

During our lesson, Cecilia and I spent most of our time talking about the seashells and how she lost her tooth that day. While carrying on a long conversation with her, I was initially trying to figure out a way to connect her stories to our piano playing. What I didn't realize at the time was that when given opportunity, my students are more then capable of joining me in search for meaningful ways of connecting their everyday experiences to our piano learning.

Before working with young children, I kept thinking that I always had to find the ways to make the connections *for* my students. What I have learned from Cecilia is that I need to include my students in the ways in which we explore music and piano playing. Rather then trying to figure out everything on my own, and thinking that I can find all the meaningful ways that my students can connect with piano playing, I need to include them in the process of discovering their own unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano.

From writing about Cecilia's story, I also came to a realization that my attention has been too focused on what I should 'teach' in our lessons rather then attentively listening to my students' stories. As Cecilia was telling me about how she lost her tooth and all the seashells that she found at the beach, I was busy telling myself that I needed to find a way to connect her stories to our piano playing.

With young students, it is very natural for us to lead from one story to another, and continue carrying on our conversations without ever returning to the piano. But, every time this happens, I find myself conflicted because on the one hand, I want to be attentive and carry on the conversations with my students as long as we needed to, but on the other hand, I feel that I have the 'responsibilities' to (re)direct my students' attention to their piano playing.

In every lesson with each student, I find myself in what Dewey (1938) calls the "Either-Or" (p. 17) worlds of piano teaching. In one of the worlds, I practice being in presence with my

students as I listen, play, and be with my students' own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing. When they wish to tell me their stories, I listen. When they ask me their questions, I answer. In every lesson, my students and I carry on our piano playing as we move freely from one song to the next, from one question to another. We talk about everything that captures our imaginations. We share smiles, laughter, and stories that bring us happiness, joy, and fun in learning to play the piano.

In my other world of teaching, I question what it means to *be* piano teaching and learning *with* young children. I search for more meaningful ways of integrating their creativity, imagination, and play with the technical and expressive elements of learning to play the piano. I wonder about the 'right' and 'correct' piano techniques and the importance of developing strong music literacy (Gouzouasis, 1994).

As a way of finding a balance between my *Either-Or* worlds of piano teaching, I am learning to pedagogically respond to my students' interests, ideas, and questions.

In Cecilia's lesson, her seashells became our inspiration for our piano playing. As she was sharing her stories about her day, I was listening for the 'moment' to connect her stories to our piano playing. From Cecilia, I am encouraged to continue searching for more pedagogical moments in my students' own unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano.

For me, their weekly 'surprises' are my pedagogical gifts. They are my constant reminder that children's ideas, questions, curiosities, and life stories open new possibilities for our piano playing. They enrich our practices of learning to play the piano. They are our inspirations for (re)creating more meaningful piano learning experiences.

Old McDinosaurous

I met Jimmy about six months ago. He is six years old, and he loves to run. Every time I greet him in the waiting room, he is always ready to race me down the hall to our piano studio. But, as much as he loves to run, I think he enjoys the winning prize even more because if he wins the race, he can lock me out of the room.

Jimmy is a fast runner. He always wins the race. And, as soon as he enters the studio, he sits against the door so that I won't be able to open it. So I always start knocking, "Knock, knock, knock … Is Jimmy there?" I can hear him giggling as he pretends to ignore me. So I try it again.

"Knock, knock, knock… Where is Jimmy?"

He continues to pretend not to hear me. And more giggles follow. He loves that. He loves to pretend not to hear me. He loves to lock me out of the studio. He is little but he is determined. There is no way that I can open the door without Jimmy letting me in. I need to be invited. I need his permission.

I know what Jimmy is really waiting for. The only time he ever opens the door for me is if I promise him a story. He loves to read. He loves stories. So, every week, Jimmy races me to our piano studio and hides behind the door with a storybook in his hands. Every week, I'm always locked out of our studio until I make a promise to him that we will read a story together. Jimmy is always ready to wait as long as he needed to until I say the magic words.

"Knock, knock, knock… Is Jimmy there? It's time for our story. Where is Jimmy?"

And, as soon as he hears my promise, he happily climbs onto the piano bench ready to begin our piano lesson. With my promise, he is always ready to let me in.

Photograph 2: Jimmy's favorite book

Jimmy's favorite story is the *Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race*.[4] Even though we have read the same book many times, he always has new questions about the racing cars in the story. He always wants to know more about the *four big cars*, *Orange, Yellow, Green, and Blue*. He especially cheers for the *Little Red*. And when the race begins in the story, Jimmy happily creates the sound effects on the piano.

So, when I read, *"R-r-r!" said Orange, long and low,"* Jimmy plays the long R-r-rolling sounds on the lower keys of the piano.

When I read, *"Vroom!" said Yellow, ready to go,"* Jimmy plays the thunderous chords and freezes in ready position as he waits for the next line in the story.

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[4] All the italics in "Old McDinosaurous" are direct quotes taken from the Berenstain's (1987) storybook.

When I continue, *"Grrr!" said Green, big and mean,"* Jimmy cringes his face as he plays the fast tremolos.

But, when I start to read about the *Blue car*, Jimmy likes to beat me to the next line in the story. As he hurriedly places his two little fingers on the two black keys, Jimmy is ready to read about his favorite racing car himself.

As he whispers, *"Putt-putt-putt, said Little Red*," Jimmy begins to play the two black keys quietly. Just like the sounds of the *Little Red* trolling along the race track, he decides to play the two black keys three times.

So, as we continue to read, Jimmy playfully provides the music accompaniment for our story. When the cars went *over, under, around and through*, Jimmy's hands crosses over, under, and around the piano keys. When the cars *went up and down, down and around,* Jimmy jumps up and down from the low to the high notes. When the cars went *through the town*, he improvises the bustling noises of people walking around the streets.

And when the cars went through the *country scene*, it is time for Jimmy to play his own favorite versions of the Old McDonald song, the Old McDinosaurous.

Reflecting on "Old McDinosaurous"

The Old McDonald is a very special song for Jimmy. This is not only his favorite, but it is the only song that he ever wants to play on the piano. Jimmy is neither interested in learning to play the 'new' songs nor learning to read from the music books. He just wants to read the storybooks and play his variations of the Old McDinosaurous.

And so, whenever I tried to introduce new songs for Jimmy, he hid away from me to avoid playing the piano. For the first several weeks of our lessons, Jimmy spent most of the lesson time finding new places to hide in our studio. Sometimes, he went underneath the piano

and crawled his way into the corner of the room. Other times, he either hid behind the curtains or tried to squeeze himself behind the bookcase.

Photograph 3: Jimmy hiding underneath the piano

As he searched for new hiding places, he liked to warn me, “I’m going to disappear!”

At times, he even said, “I can’t play the piano because I’m not here!”

And, when he finally couldn’t find any more new places to hide in our studio, he came up with the idea of racing me down the hall so that he can sit behind the door to prevent me from coming into the studio.

During the weeks when Jimmy started to race me down the hall to lock me out of our studio, I was desperately trying to find ways of connecting with him. I kept asking myself: How can I help Jimmy to gain more interest in piano playing? What can I do to help spark his

curiosity about music? How might I be able to encourage more meaningful piano playing experiences?

But, after several weeks of playing his racing game, and having to spend most of our lesson time trying to convince Jimmy to open the door for me, I finally made a connection with him when I unexpectedly noticed that I was always interrupting his reading while he was waiting out in the lobby.

On that day, I realized that Jimmy never wanted to stop reading his storybooks when I came out to greet him for his piano lessons. On most of the days, he would just ignore me and kept on reading. Otherwise, he would run down the hall to lock me out of the room. And, whenever Jimmy's mother intervened and tried to take away his storybooks, the more distracted and distant he became in our piano lessons.

And so, I thought of the idea of inviting Jimmy to bring his favorite storybooks to our lessons. Because he wasn't interested in learning new songs and learning to read from the music books, I wanted to try using his favorite storybooks as inspirations for improvising our own music. To my surprise, when I asked if he wanted to bring in the books so that we can finish the story together, Jimmy immediately responded, "Really? Can I read this book with you?"

He loved the idea.

From that day on Jimmy always had a storybook ready in his hands before his lessons. He also stopped racing me down the hall.

However, I encountered another challenge. Although Jimmy was no longer locking me out of our studio, he only wanted to read his storybooks in our lessons. It took us another few more weeks before I was able to find new ways of connecting his storybooks to our piano

playing. He still wasn't interested in learning 'new' songs. He also didn't want to create his own music.

"No piano! More stories!" he said as he handed me the storybook that he picked out for the day.

* * *

In his favorite book, *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race*, there is a country scene with illustrated pictures of the farm animals. As Jimmy was reading, I was thinking that this was the moment when I could try introducing a melody for him. And, to my surprise, when I took the opportunity to play the Old McDonald as he read about the country scene, he immediately stopped reading, and cried out, "I know that song! That's Old McDonald!!!"

Although I have played it many times before, Jimmy never took any interest in the song until I related it to the story. Seeing his great excitement, I took this moment as another invitation to encourage him to try playing the song. And, when I suggested that we learn to play the Old McDonald to accompany the story as the three bears went through the country scene, he said, "Show me! Show me! How do I play it?"

For the first time, Jimmy expressed interest in playing the piano. He was curious about the Old McDonald. He kept urging me to 'teach' him the 'new' song.

Since that day, the storybooks became an important part of our lessons. The stories opened new possibilities for us. Reading stories in our lessons enabled us to find new connections with our piano playing. For Jimmy, story reading offered more meaningful ways of learning to play the piano. Every time we read *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race*, he happily played the Old McDonald, and over the next several weeks, he also started to improvise his own variations of the melody. In addition to the farm animals in the Old McDonald, we

added our own animal sounds to our music. Jimmy's new Old McDinosaurous is named after his favorite animal, the dinosaur.

While reading the storybooks and improvising sound effects on the piano, I continued to search for the 'moments' in our lessons to introduce new melodies for Jimmy. I was extremely careful about how and when I suggested the 'new' songs because I didn't want to lose his new interest in playing the piano. But, I knew that we couldn't always just read his favorite storybooks and make up our own songs in our lessons. He is expected to learn the 'real' piano music. I am expected to 'teach' him how to play the 'real' songs.

And, it was during those times when Jimmy and I were finally starting to make new connections with our piano playing that I found out about his mother's decision to discontinue our lessons. Because we were not learning to 'read' traditional music notation, and spending most of our time making up songs and reading storybooks, Jimmy's mother felt that he was not ready for the piano lessons. She said, "We'll come back in another year or two when Jimmy is able to better focus and concentrate. We'll wait until he is little older."

* * *

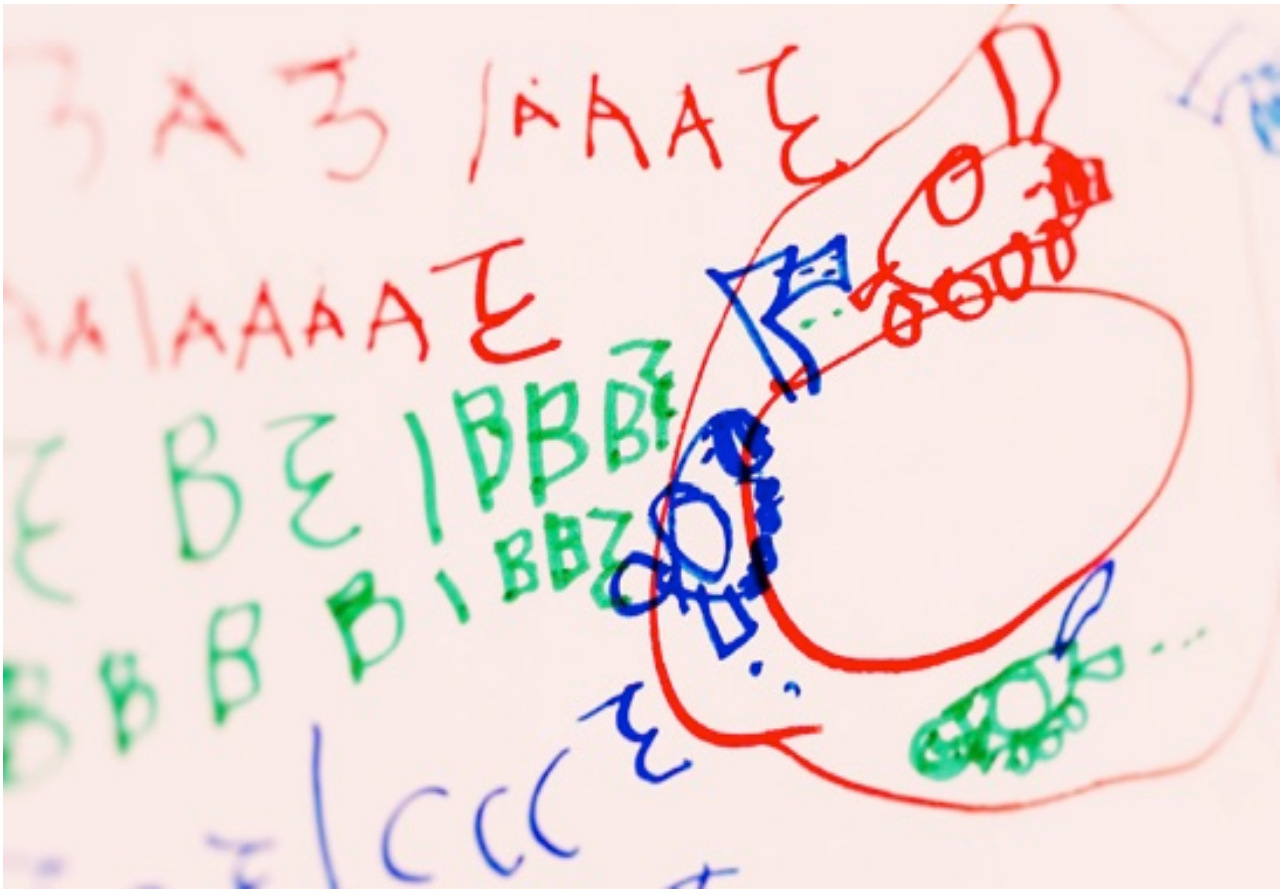
With Jimmy, I wanted to support his needs for the stories. Instead of insisting on 'teaching' him new melodies that I wanted him to learn, and to pressure him in learning to 'read' from the music books, I was searching for alternative ways of engaging his interest in learning to play the piano.

For us, one of the ways in which we were able to make more meaningful connection to piano playing was with the storybooks. When I related our piano playing to the stories that we were reading together, Jimmy became more interested in learning about the new melodies. He became more curious about piano playing. Towards the end of our term, he even wanted to learn

about the ‘real’ music notes, and when his mother decided to stop the lessons, we were just starting to explore our own ways of ‘notating’ the Old McDinosaurous.

“How do you write music?” he asked.

He also loved drawing pictures of the red, blue, and green cars from his favorite storybook. As he drew the three little cars and experimented with new ways of ‘writing’ his music, we learned about the music letters and rests. We carried on long conversations about his ‘notated’ music. He had many wonderful ideas. In one of the drawings, for example, he thought of the idea of writing his music letters in red, green and blue colors to match the melodies for each of the three cars in the story.



Photograph 4: Jimmy’s music notation

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When I think of Jimmy, I think of all the stories and creative piano playing that we shared with one another. I think of all those times when he ran down the hall to lock me out of the studio. It still brings smiles to my face when I think of all those days when I hopelessly tried to convince Jimmy to open the door for me.

It is true that Jimmy learned only the one 'real' song during the year. But when I consider how much he loved the stories and how they inspired his creativity and curiosity for piano playing, I now wish that I read him more stories instead of always trying to introduce 'new' songs for him. After all this time, I can still hear him shouting with great excitement, "Again! Again! Let's read it again!"

From Jimmy, I learned to trust my students' own ways of connecting with piano playing. He reminded me to have faith, courage, and patience in (re)discovering the unknown, endless ways of piano teaching and learning. He helped me to become more attentive to my children's needs, interests, and approaches to playing the piano.

In writing Jimmy's story, I started thinking about the pedagogical possibilities in the emergent, improvisational moments in my young learners' processes of exploring music and piano playing. Reflecting on his story also helped me to realize that it wasn't Jimmy who wasn't always ready for the piano lessons. It was me who wasn't always in presence with Jimmy. When he was locking me out of our studio, it wasn't him who wasn't ready to open the door. It was me who wasn't ready to recognize his needs, interests, and joy for learning to play the piano through storybooks.

One more Mario please

Ken is learning to play the Mario songs. As he draws each of the characters from the Super Mario Brothers game, he tries to play the notes from the opening theme of the song.

"Let me finish one more character," he says.

He is an artist. He loves to draw. He loves to introduce me to all of his awesome Mario characters. And, because he loves drawing, I posted large poster papers on the walls of our studio for him to freely draw his characters. Our walls in our piano studio are full of Ken's drawings. Every time I walk into the studio, Mario, Luigi, yellow and red Toads, princess Peach and Daisy, as well as the pink Birdo always happily greet me. Ken even has the big scary Bowser and Koopa smiling for me.

And, whenever I ask, "Who are you going to draw today?" – with a big smile on his face, Ken always likes to tell me, "Just wait 'til you see... You're going to love it!"

Photograph 5: Ken's Mario drawing

But, today, Ken surprises me. Although I was expecting him to look for the colorful pencil crayons as soon as he walked into the studio, he didn't ask about the drawing. He didn't say, "I want to draw!"

Instead, for the very first time, he asks me, "Can I make my own music now?"

And, before I can respond, he corrects himself, "I want to *draw* my song."

He then picks up the rainbow colored pencil crayons from my desk and begins to 'draw' his music. On his page, I see some very large 'notes,' and there are some very tiny 'notes.'

When I ask him about the 'big' and the 'small' notes, Ken happily explains, "Big ones are loud and small ones are quiet."

When I ask him why some of the notes are higher then the others, he points to the different notes, and explains, "You play the top ones high and bottom ones low. Do you want to hear it?"

As I nod with big smiles on my face, he quickly clears all the crayons away from the keys and looks for the first note on the piano, "Let me show you. *My* song... s-o-u-n-d-s... like... this!"

And, just like the colorful moving 'notes' on the page, Ken's two small hands freely move up and down from the highest to the lowest keys, and then back up again from the lowest to the highest keys on the piano.

Then, suddenly, without any hesitation, he stops, and asks me while reaching over for another new set of colorful crayons, "Do you like my song?"

Reflecting on "One more Mario please"

Ken and I spend most of our piano lesson time drawing pictures and talking about all the characters that he loves to draw for me. As soon as he walks into the studio, he says, "Guess who I'm going to draw today?"

Sometimes, he asks for the colored pencil crayons. Other times, he looks for the drawing papers in my studio. What is important to Ken is that we always begin our lessons with drawing.

"Pictures first!" he reminds me.

He loves to tell me about all of his favorite characters, toys, and video games that he likes to play. Every week, he always has to draw everything that he wants to talk about with me.

"I want to show you!" he says.

As he is drawing, he likes to describe all the details about the characters and their stories. He especially enjoys explaining their special powers. From Ken, I learned about all the different types of Smurfs and how he wanted to be a Handy Smurf for the Halloween because he had all the cool tools.

"He can build anything you know," he smiled.

There are over 80 types of Smurfs in the TV cartoon series and in one of our lessons Ken insisted that he try listing all of their names.

"I want to see how many Smurfs I can remember!" he said.

There was no way of stopping him, and we ended up taking most of our lesson time coming up with 21 different names of the Smurfs before Ken finally gave up.

From Ken, I also learned about all the different characters in the Disney movies. Mickey Mouse was his favorite. He then moved on to the Toy Story. He knew everyone in the Monsters, Inc. He loved the Super Mario games.

In every lesson, Ken greeted me with great excitement to share his favorite characters from the movies, toys, and video games that he watched and played during the week. He never wanted to start with piano playing. Drawing always had to come first. Ken also didn't like any of

the songs from the music books. When I played the traditional children's songs like the *Twinkle Little Star* and *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, he said, "That's too easy! I don't like baby songs!"

He didn't like any of the 'easy' melodies in our piano books. He didn't want to learn the 'baby' songs. None of the five-finger melodies in our music books interested him.

And so, I decided to try using his favorite movies, games, and toys as inspirations for our piano playing. I started asking: "Does the Monsters have songs? Do they sing? What does the Mario music sound like? Do you know the melody for the Smurfs? Can you teach me how to sing the Toy Story?"

To my surprise, he knew all the theme songs of his favorite characters. He remembered all the words too. And, when I suggested that we try learning to play his favorite songs from the movies, games, and toys, Ken immediately replied, "Oh, I want to play Mario song!"

Since then, we have been learning to play the songs of his favorite characters. And, because Ken wasn't able to play with all of his five fingers and hands together, we started with only the few notes in the main themes, and learned the short melodies by rote. I focused on the part of the song that Ken liked the most, and simplified it for him so that he would be able to play the notes right away even with using only the one finger. We also sang the songs together and tried to figure out the notes together.

However, Ken never stopped drawing. He always had to draw first. But, Ken and I eventually came to an agreement that we would play one song for every drawing that he makes in our lessons.

"One drawing, one piano," he agreed.

For every song he learned, he drew a picture about the music. For every drawing he made, I introduced a new part of the song. From week to week, we went back and forth between

drawing and playing the piano, and although there were days when we spent more time on drawing, Ken nonetheless started to make effort to learn the notes of his favorite characters, toys, movies, and video games.

For over two years, that is how Ken and I have been learning to play the piano. The walls in my studio are filled with his drawings. We have a full collection of his favorites. Many of my students also recognize the characters in his drawings, and Ken's pictures often inspire them to learn the same songs. Many of my students say, "I want to learn Mario song too!"

"Can I play the Mickey Mouse?"

"How do you play the Smurf song?"

"Do you know Elsa's music from Frozen?"

Then, after all this time of drawing and learning the opening notes of the main themes, Ken suddenly took interest in making up his own music, and wanted to learn to 'write' his own songs. Although I have always tried to encourage more piano playing in our lessons, and constantly sought to connect his love for drawing with new piano music, this was the first time that he initiated the piano playing.

On that day, Ken wanted to make up his own songs as soon as he walked into the studio. He didn't ask for any drawings. He just wanted to start playing 'his' music. He didn't draw any characters that day. Instead, he spent the whole lesson time making up his own songs and drawing his own 'notes.' He also wanted to learn about the 'real' notes. For the first time, he even asked for the piano books.

"Can I see your piano book? I want to draw the notes!" he said.

And so, we opened up one of my pre-reading piano music books with notes and music letters. We learned about the 'real' names of the notes on the piano. We talked about the treble

and bass clefs. He asked about the dots in the repeat signs. We started drawing the quarter and half notes. From time to time, he added the happy faces, stars, and different shapes of circles, triangles, and diamonds. At the top of the page, he also drew his favorite red and white convertible cars from the cartoon, *Tom, The Tow Truck of Car City*.

As he was 'drawing' his music, Ken explained to me that the 'big' and the 'small' notes showed the dynamics.

"Big ones are loud and small ones are quiet," he said.

When I asked about all the different colors that he has chosen for his notes, he replied, "One color for one note!"

And, when I asked about the two multi-colored notes in the middle of the page, Ken explained, "You play many notes!"

Photograph 6: Ken's music notation

At first, I thought that he was randomly drawing the notes, and I had no idea that Ken was ascribing specific meanings to every color, shape, and placement of the notes and symbols. Although we still have days when we draw pictures that are 'unrelated' to piano playing, we also have days like the one I described in the story when Ken makes a direct connection between his drawings and music. In our lessons, drawing plays a critical role in our process of learning to play the piano. Ken loves to 'draw' his music. Drawing helps him to connect with piano playing. Music inspires his drawings.

* * *

In writing about Ken's story, I thought about the role of the mass mediated popular music (Campbell, 2010), and its influence on children's process of learning to play the piano. Most of the piano method books begin with traditional rhymes and melodies with finger numberings and letter names. It is common for beginner students to start playing the piano with songs such as the *Hot Cross Buns*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Old McDonald*, *Twinkle Little Stars*, and *Alouette*.

However, aside from those few 'familiar' children's songs, most of the piano books contain 'unfamiliar' five-finger melodies that focus on note reading and counting. Out of the dozens of songs that are included in most of the primary level piano books, my students can only recognize very few melodies. When songs that they are learning to play are unfamiliar to them, I find that young children quickly lose interest in playing the piano. They are not interested in just learning to 'read' the notes. Counting the beats and keeping time are meaningless for them. It is not easy for young students to keep a strict hand position and follow the fingerings in the piano books. Focusing only on the technical aspects of piano playing and note reading with songs that they are unfamiliar lead to frustrations and confusions.

For those reasons, I stopped assigning piano method books for young children in their early stages of learning to play the piano. Instead, I use a variety of piano books to find music that my students recognize and want to learn. We don't follow a specific method and do not limit ourselves to one single series of piano books. In the beginning, I teach the songs by rote by selecting a variety of music from various sources. Implementing that process, I discovered that when my students learn to play the songs that they already know and want to learn, they become more engaged and motivated to play the piano.

In Ken's case, his curiosity for the 'real' notes came from his engagement with 'drawing' his music. Although it took us many weeks before he started to make a direct connection with drawing and piano playing, it would not have been possible for us to discover any connection at all if we weren't able to take the necessary time to explore drawing in the early weeks of our piano lessons.

During the initial weeks when Ken and I started to spend most of our lesson time drawing and talking about his characters, I was concerned about how his parents may react and feel about our 'approach' to piano learning. I explained to Ken's parents about his love for drawing, and how I wanted to try connecting his pictures to piano playing. I also informed them that there are days when Ken only wants to draw and that we may not always be playing the piano in our lessons. I made sure to openly communicate and discuss any concerns that his parents may have about our ways of exploring music and piano playing through drawing.

Parents play a critical role in children's experiences of learning to play the piano. Their expectations, perceptions, and understandings about music and piano playing greatly influence our lessons. I have parents who ask for more teacher-directed approaches, and do not wish to engage in other creative activities (i.e., drawing, story reading, free improvisation etc.) that we

may be interested in exploring. I meet with many parents who feel that we're wasting our time if we are drawing, talking, and making up our own music. Unless all of the attention is focused on learning to 'read' from the music books and playing the 'real' songs, there are parents who become very discouraged about their child's progress in learning to play the piano.

Contrary to those perspectives, Ken's parents are very supportive of our approach to piano playing. They welcome my wish for encouraging Ken's piano playing through drawing. They are excited about how much Ken enjoys sharing his drawings with me and greatly appreciate my efforts in trying to help him learn all the songs of his favorite characters. With their full support, I am able to focus on Ken's interests, ideas, and drawings without any limitations and concerns for what we should and should not be working on in our lessons. Ken and I focus on freely improvising on the piano, and we are able to take the time to 'draw' our music without rushing to finish the various forms of notation.

Every week, he also tells me very long stories about all of his favorite characters, and in between our conversations and drawings we continue to learn new songs that relate to what interests him for that particular day of the lesson. Just last week, we were singing and learning to play the songs about his favorite superheroes. This week, he wanted to play the melody from the movie, *Finding Dory*. He loves Dory, a wide-eyed, blue tang fish that forgets everything in 10 seconds. And, as for next week, I have no idea what he will want to play on the piano. The possibilities are endless. He could be asking about anything from cartoon and movie songs to video games and soundtracks of favorite action heroes.

As for our 'drawings,' Ken has recently started to add music letters to his notations. He wants to learn to read and write the 'real' notes too. From time to time, we still have days when he only wants to draw and talk about his new favorite characters. However, Ken and I

nonetheless continue to search for new connections with our piano playing. Our lessons include everything that captivates him, and we always eventually find ourselves (re)turning back to our piano playing. Ken's moving interest, ideas, questions, stories, and all the creative ways of drawing and playing the piano are our constant inspirations and foundation for (re)creating more meaningful piano learning experiences.

Shades of pink

Sandy quietly holds my hand as we walk down the hall to our piano studio. As I whisper, "I'm happy to see you again," she quickly whispers back to me, "I'm happy to be here."

Sandy is four years old and likes to look for different shades of pink colored crayons during our piano lessons.

"I love pink," she always reminds me.

Sandy likes to draw her music with various colors of pink.

So, every week, I help her find new shades of pink colors like the coral pink, crimson, French rose, fuchsia or lavender pink. Sometimes, she wants a brighter pink and asks for the magenta or Persian rose. Other times, she looks for a softer amaranth pink.

But, today, Sandy doesn't ask for the colorful shades of pink crayons. To my surprise, she just wants to play her own piano music. As Sandy places her ten little fingers on the piano keys ready to play, she says, "Let's play *my* song today."

Delighted, I immediately start to improvise the background accompaniment for her to play along.

But, suddenly, without playing a single note, Sandy changes her mind.

"Where is Fuzzy?" she asks as she tries to stand up on the piano bench.

"*F-u-z-z-y*, where are you?" she calls for her.

As I help her to carefully look over the top of the piano, she reaches for the little bunny stuffed animal tucked away by the music books.

“Ah-ha! There you are!” she smiles.

“I’m going to teach you piano!”

So, today, instead of looking for the different shades of pink colored crayons, Sandy happily ‘teaches’ the little *Fuzzy* the opening melody of the *Bunny Foo Foo* all on her own.

Photograph 7: Sandy teaches Fuzzy to play piano

Reflecting on "Shades of pink"

Sandy loves all the stuffed animals in our piano studio. Prior to learning the *Bunny Foo Foo*, she learned to play the *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. Every time we play the song, she looks for the little stuffed lamb hiding between the piano books. We call her, our *Little Lammy*.

Sometimes, Sandy places the stuffed animals by the edge of the piano so that they can listen to our piano playing.

"Lammy will be audience," she likes to say.

Other times, she tries to play the melody by pressing down the arms and legs of the animals into the piano keys. She also loves to create her own music by making up new songs for each of the furry friends that we have in our studio. There are days when we play very fast and loud music for the lion and the bear. We play very slow and quiet songs for the turtle and the lamb. But, most of all, one of her very favorite stuffed animal is the bunny, and we always make up a very happy, lively, and jumpy music for our *Little Fuzzy*.

However, it took us a very long time before we started freely improvising on the piano. When we first started our lessons, all Sandy wanted to do was to draw endless variations of the pink colored circles.

"I love pink," she said.

"I want to draw you something," she always insisted.

Like Ken from my previous story, Sandy loves drawing. Every week, she asked for the pink colored crayons and papers. While drawing, she shared many stories about what happened on that day, and she liked to think of all the different colors of pink. With Sandy, anything that related to pink fascinated her.

Photograph 8: Sandy's free drawing of pink circles

* * *

With very young children, I often introduce short, simple melodies by using the stuffed animals as inspirations for engaging in conversations about the songs. When I first met Sandy, she was extremely shy, and every week, it took us a very long time to warm up to playing the piano. Whenever I played the new melodies for her, she would quietly hum along the words with me but she wasn't always willing to try the notes on the piano.

"I just want to listen," she said.

And so, for the first several weeks of our lessons, Sandy and I mostly sang together, and while I constantly invited her to join me anytime, I never insisted that we always play the piano in our lessons. Rather, during those early weeks, I spent more time talking with Sandy about all

the things that she liked and the different kinds of activities that she enjoyed in preschool and home. And, of all the things that she shared with me, I learned that Sandy loved to draw the most. Every week, she would always look around our room to see if there were any new pictures and drawings on the walls.

Sometimes, she asked, “That’s new. Who drew that one?” Other times, while pointing to the different artworks, she would say, “That wasn’t there before.”

It was very important for Sandy that we took our time to talk about all of her favorite drawings.

And, for many weeks, Sandy only drew the pink circles. No matter the size of the papers, she filled in all the white spaces with a variety of circling lines. As she talked about the various things that were on her mind, she furiously created layers of circles over and over again. She also used only the pink colored crayons.

“Just the pink ones,” she liked to say.

She loved that I had so many different kinds of pink crayons. And so, for the first several weeks of our lessons, we spent most of our lesson time learning about their names instead of playing the piano. Rather then ‘focusing’ our attention to playing new melodies, and learning the names of the piano keys and notes, our lessons were mostly spent on something else that were related to the color pink.

Then, in one of the lessons, I noticed that our *Little Lammy* had a pink nose. And that was the moment when I was finally able to connect Sandy’s love for the pink color with the *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.

“Sandy, look – Guess what color our *Little Lammy* has on her nose?” I asked with hopes of catching her attention.

"Pink," she joyfully exclaimed, and immediately stopped drawing and picked up the stuffed animal for a closer look.

"I didn't know her nose was pink!"

She was so happy.

On that day, Sandy nicknamed the stuff animal as our *Little Lammy*, and we used her pink nose to play the *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. We also changed the words to *Sandy Had a Little Lammy*. By the end of the lesson, our song transformed into a *Little Lammy Had a Pink Nose*.

Since then, Sandy has been learning to play many other simple melodies on the piano. She likes to think of new names for the stuffed animals, and enjoys changing the words in the songs. From time to time, she brings in her own favorite stuffed animals, toys, and dolls to introduce to me. At one time, she even brought in her little egg basket full of her favorite Disney princesses.

"Can you put them on top of the piano like last time?" she smiled as she carefully handed me over Ariel, Belle, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Tiana, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White one by one. At first, Sandy wanted them to be the 'audience.' Then, she wanted to learn all the Disney songs for each of the seven princesses. We also made our own songs about their stories. Our little stuffed animals became our inspirations for our piano playing.

And now, almost two years since she last drew the pink circles, we no longer need the stuffed animals to learn our piano songs. Although we still enjoy occasional drawings in our lessons, Sandy spends more time happily making up her own music, and has also been learning to read from the piano books as well. After all those months of making endless drawings of pink circles, and 'teaching' the stuffed animals how to play the melodies, Sandy became more

interested in learning new songs from her piano books. No more endless weeks of drawings. No more playing with the stuffed animals.

While it has been a long time since Sandy asked for the pink crayons, I still have them in my studio. And, just the other day, I found out that her favorite color has changed to purple. These days, she prefers to share her favorite bracelets, rings, and hairpins with beautiful purple flowers, and heart-shaped shiny gems. In between our piano playing, we mostly talk about the different types of gemstones, and names of flowers that we like.

And so, I am constantly in search for new repertoire that relate to Sandy's ever-changing interests, ideas, and curiosities. For our next lesson, I am looking for beautiful piano music inspired by gemstones and flowers.

Video 3: Playing our music for the 'audience'

* * *

In my studio, I have a themed collection of piano music based on different types of animals, monsters, robots, and fairy tales. My favorite is the nature theme, and I especially love the piano pieces that evoke the moon, stars, and a variety of weather related compositions (i.e., storm, rain, and wind). Most recently, I started a collection of piano music inspired by the snakes.

"The scarier the better," one of my students requested.

And so, we have been learning to play the various styles of music inspired by snakes for the past several weeks. So far, we learned to play the *Loch Ness Monster*, *Snake Dance*, and *Snake Charmer*. For our next lesson, I also have *The Snake* ready, a solo piano piece composed by a Canadian composer, Renée Christopher.

Since learning to find new connections with Sandy's love for the pink color and our *Little Lammy*, I started creating several themed collections of songs according to the ideas and interests of my students. Instead of only introducing the music that I needed to 'teach' from the series of piano method books, I now collect music by various composers and genres to meet children's changing preferences and interests. We learn from many piano books. We play songs that we like. We search for music that we want to learn.

From Sandy, I (re)learned the importance of integrating children's past and present experiences in learning to play the piano. Although we spent many weeks and months drawing, and 'playing' with the stuffed animals, those experiences made it possible for us to discover more meaningful connections to our piano playing.

What my students like and enjoy in their lives matter in our lessons. For us, learning to play the piano includes all the things that bring us happiness, smiles, and laughter. For Sandy, it was the endless circles of pink drawings that led us to finding new joy in learning to play the

Mary Had a Little Lamb. That connection brought us many more joyful melodies and memories of piano playing in our lives.

Eyeball song

Every week, I know Karla is waiting for me because I can see her golden curly hair swaying back and forth in front of the little window on my studio door. When she arrives for her piano lesson, she always checks to see if I'm in the room. But because she is not yet quite tall enough to look through the window on my studio door, Karla presses her ear against the door to see if she can hear me playing the piano. So, every week, her beautiful golden curly hair flows across the window on my studio door.

When I open the door, I see Karla smiling with her music bag on the floor. She has many music books – all handed down from her older sisters and cousins from long ago. They are wonderfully messy – all covered with colorful handwritings, notes, and pictures by her sisters, cousins, and their teachers.

But, Karla doesn't like the music books. Whenever I invite her to play a song from the books, she immediately throws them on the floor.

"I want to play *my* song," she says in a loud voice.

Even though Karla doesn't like to play the songs from the music books, she loves to play her own music. Her favorite is a very special piece called the *Eyeball*.

So, every week, Karla moves up and down the keys as fast as she can with using only the two index fingers. She likes to play from the lowest to the highest notes on the piano and loves to move up and down the keys until she runs out of energy. Aside from playing the notes as fast as possible, she also likes to play them all *forte* too.

But, most importantly, she likes to play the piano in the dark.

"It's time for my Eyeball song," she sings as she walks around the room while turning off all the lights. "Darker! Darker!" she reminds me, "The eyeball is falling out, and it's tumbling down! It can't see!"

Every week, I always look for new ways of covering up our studio door window to keep all the bright lights away. Whenever Karla plays her *Eyeball* song, we always need to be in complete darkness just like her eyeball tumbling down the piano keys.

Reflecting on "Eyeball song"

For the first several months of our lessons, Karla and I played the piano in the dark. At first, she was content to play the piano as long as we turned off all the lights in the studio. But then she started asking me to cover up our door window so that we could be in complete darkness.

"I can still see the keys – can you please stop the lights from the window?"

Every week, I needed to find new ways of covering up our studio door window to 'stop' the lights from coming into our room. Sometimes, I used our jackets to cover up the window. Other times, I used the large drawing papers and posters in my room. One day, we even borrowed the beautiful pashmina from Karla's mom to help us keep all the light out.

Over many weeks, I tried to find out what fascinated Karla about the darkness. I wanted to know why it was important for her to turn all the lights off in our studio. I was fascinated with Karla's great enthusiasm for her *Eyeball* song. I kept thinking to myself: What is this 'eyeball'? Why is it falling out? Why all the darkness? What is Karla thinking of when playing the *Eyeball* song? I also wondered if carrying on our lessons in the dark was the 'right' thing to do. While a part of me wanted to support Karla's wish for playing the piano in darkness, another side of me was searching for ways to change her mind.

But, every time I tried to keep the lights on in our studio, she pleaded, “No, no, no. Eyeball can’t see. No lights!”

There was no way of changing Karla’s mind about the lights. Nothing worked. No matter how much I tried to convince her, she refused. Just like her ‘eyeball,’ everyone had to be in complete darkness. Nobody was allowed to see. All lights had to be ‘stopped.’

And now, it has been more then four years since Karla started playing the piano. After all these years, I still don’t know what the ‘eyeball’ song might have meant for her during the first few months of our piano lessons. Whenever I asked Karla about it, she said, “It’s eyeball. It can’t see!”

I tried asking her why the ‘eyeball’ was falling down, and where it might have come from, but she never shared any details with me. She only whispered, “I don’t know. But we have to catch it. It’s getting away.”

I thought that Karla was either imaginatively making up the story about the ‘eyeball’ or that she was referring to something that has made a strong impression on her. I asked Karla’s mother about it but she also didn’t know where the idea might have come from. We tried to think of the movies, TV shows, and storybooks that Karla might have seen and read that could explain her fascination with the ‘eyeball,’ but we never could think of anything that connected to her story. Every week, all Karla wanted to play was the ‘eyeball’ song, and we never knew what might have intrigued her about the idea.

* * *

Like Karla, all of my students have their own unique, individual ways and ideas about how they want to ‘play’ the piano. And so, sometimes, we just play the piano with one finger. Other times, we like to smash into the keys with both of our fists, palms, and elbows. From time

to time, we experiment with flipping our hands upside down to play the piano backwards. There are days when we play the piano with our foreheads and noses too. At one time, we even thought of using the right arm underneath the left leg. The young ones always ask about playing the piano with their toes. For us, playing the piano in a choppy, Karate style is a lot of fun. Like Karla, many children also love to play the piano in the dark – but with their eyes closed.

Photograph 9: Playing the piano with one finger

There are many ‘new’ ways of playing the piano. For young beginner piano students, learning to play only the simple, traditional songs with one hand at a time in C-position is not always fun, playful, and inviting. Rather, they love to think of all the ‘new’ and ‘different’ ways that they can play the piano. There are endless possibilities. We try everything from one finger to the toes, including playing the piano with our pens, toys, dolls, and anything else that we can think of on the day of our lessons. For us, there are no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of piano playing. We always think of more ‘new’ ways of playing the piano.

* * *

For Karla, playing the piano in the dark was a very important part of our lessons. Although she had many piano books that were handed down from her older cousins and siblings, Karla was not interested in learning to play the piano from reading the notes. She loved creating her own music, and only wanted to play her songs. And so, for the first few months of our piano lessons, Karla’s mom and I quietly sat in the dark to listen to her piano playing. Sometimes, I joined her to improvise along with her. Other times, Karla just wanted to play on her own.

“Can you be audience with mom?” she used to say.

Now, after all those years of making up her own music, and playing the ‘eyeball’ song in the dark, Karla is happily learning to play the music from the piano books. Over the years, she has gradually taken interest in learning to play the ‘real’ notes, and although we still take time to improvise and make up our own songs, we have now moved beyond the piano books that have been handed down to us by her older cousins and siblings.

Karla also loves to perform. She has never missed a concert in all the years that I have known her. Every time, she flips through her piano books to find her favorite pieces, and enjoys participating in all of the performances.

* * *

In writing Karla's story, I am reminded of many other similar experiences that I had with young children in exploring their unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing. Whenever I found myself in situations where they didn't want to play from the piano books and insisted on 'their' own ways of playing the piano, I wondered about my roles as a piano teacher. What does it mean to teach and learn piano? What is piano playing? What is teaching? How are my students learning to play the piano through story reading, drawing, singing, and improvising their own songs?

During the months when Karla was only playing the 'eyeball' song in the dark, I wondered if I was really helping her to 'learn' to play the piano. I knew that she loved making up her own songs. She never wanted to stop. I also knew that she was having a lot of fun trying to play the piano in the dark. But, at the same time, I also kept thinking that there must be something more that I could do to encourage Karla to move forward from just playing the 'eyeball' song in our lessons. While listening to her 'eyeball' week after week, I felt conflicted about the appropriateness of our lessons. On the one hand, I felt that I needed to continue playing the 'eyeball' song in the dark as long as Karla wished to do so. No matter how long it was going to take, a part of me wanted to wait until she was ready to move forward. On the other hand, I felt anxious about just playing the 'eyeball' song in our lessons, and I couldn't help thinking that I needed to somehow change Karla's mind about playing the piano in the dark.

In writing about Karla's story, I am once again reminded of my *Either-Or* (Dewey, 1938) worlds of piano teaching. Did she 'learn' anything from playing the piano in the dark? What else could I have done to further encourage, support, and connect Karla's *Eyeball* song with her piano playing?

Although she is now happily moving from one piano book to the next, I still wonder about our early years of playing the piano in the dark. While Karla has long forgotten her one and the only *Eyeball* song, I still think about the pedagogical meanings, influences, and impressions that our lessons may have had on her early experiences of learning to play the piano.

Rice crackers

Jack and I are learning to play the *Hot cross bun* by naming all of his favorite snacks.

"What is hot cross bun?" he asks.

"Mmm, hot cross bun is like a warm yummy mini muffin with the shape of a cross drizzled on top," I explain.

"Oh, I don't like mini muffins," he replies without any hesitation. So, in hopes of regaining his interest, I ask again, "What is *your* favorite snack Jack?"

Without a second thought, he replies with excitement, "Rice crackers."

So I change the words, and sing the song again, "Rice crackers, rice crackers, yummy, yummy, rice crackers."

"I also like strawberry," he smiles.

"Spaghetti too," he goes on.

He also lets me know that it is very important to have lots of good meatballs in his spaghetti.

"How are we going to sing the word 'meatballs' for our three black keys?" I ask.

After a long pause, he cries out with great confidence, "Me-eat-balls!"

He then quickly reaches over for my crayons and starts to pick out the different colors for each of his favorite snacks. So I help him place all of the pink and red crayons for his strawberry. We then find the yellow colors for the spaghetti and brown colors for the meatballs.

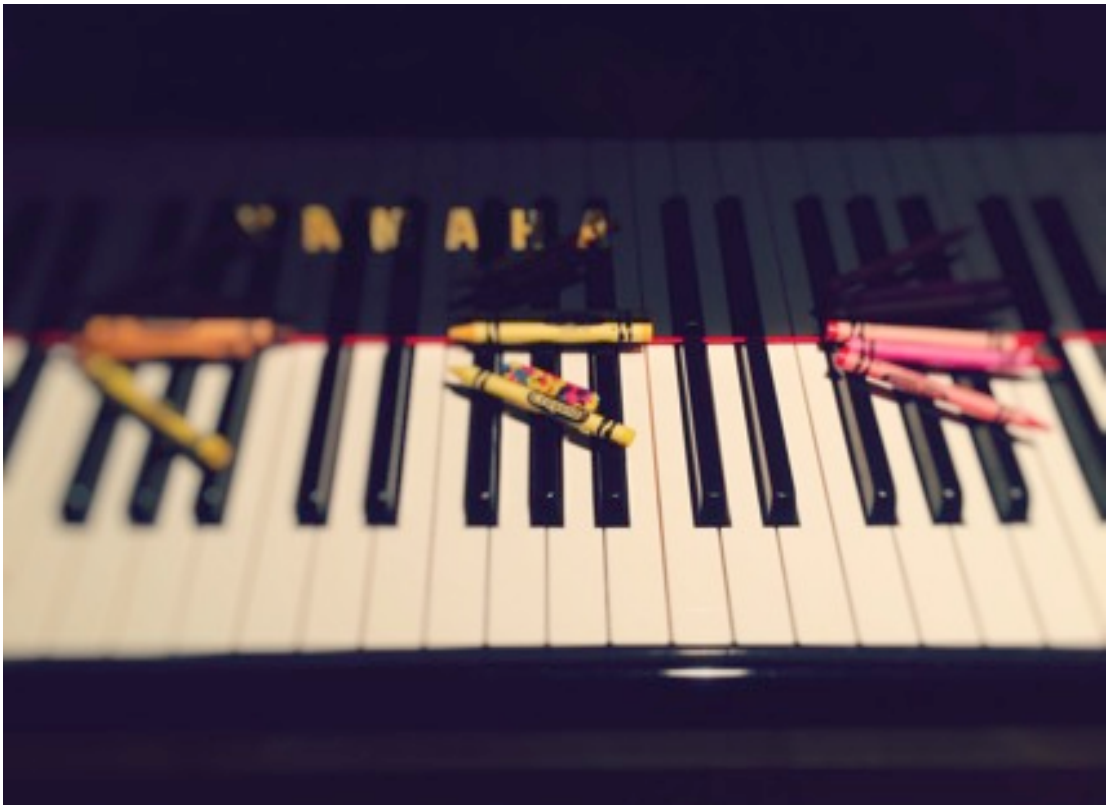
“I like bananas,” Jack shouts as he grabs the yellow crayons and places them on the three black keys. As we place the crayons on the new set of three black keys, we hum along and play the *Hot Cross Buns* melody with different types of Jack’s favorite snacks.

“Rice crackers ... Strawberries ... Spaghetti ... Me-eat-balls ... Bananas ...”

We continue to play our new *Hot cross buns* over and over again as Jack happily sings the names of his favorite snacks.

Then, just before finishing one of his new favorite snack songs, Jack suddenly stops, slowly slips down the piano bench on his own and whispers to me, “Now it’s time to go see Dad.”

Just like that, our piano lesson was over.



Photograph 10: Jack’s chocolate, banana, and strawberry crayons

Reflecting on "Rice crackers"

One of the first melodies that I introduce to young children is the *Hot Cross Buns*. I start by improvising on different white and black keys on the piano, and then I gradually invite them to help me identify different combinations of the two-and three-sets of black keys.

At first, we begin to play the piano with one finger, and then work our way towards using two and three fingers until we are finally ready to try playing the piano with all of our five fingers. Once we become comfortable playing hands separately, we then move on to the five-finger melodies using both hands at the same time. We nicknamed the hands together position as our 'double-double' way of playing the piano.

Hot Cross Buns is one of the three-finger melodies that we play until we are ready to move forward with the five-finger note songs. Until I met Jack, most of my students either recognized the tune or was happy to learn the notes.

However, Jack was different. As soon as I asked about the *Hot Cross Buns*, he immediately wasn't interested, and when he found out about the buns, he still didn't want to play the melody.

He kept saying, "I don't like mini muffins. No buns for me."

In that moment, I knew that Jack wasn't going to change his mind about the song unless I found another way to spark his curiosity.

Since then, I've been asking my students about their favorite snacks right from the start instead of 'teaching' the traditional *Hot Cross Buns*. Rather then using the original words, I use the names of their favorite snacks to play the song. And so, we now have many different versions of *Hot Cross Buns* according to the various types of snacks that we like. Sometimes, we sing, "Cheese pizza, cheese pizza, yummy, yummy, cheese pizza." Other times, it becomes,

"Chocolate, chocolate, yummy, yummy, chocolate." There are days when we sing lollipops, apple pie, and marshmallows. We also think of our favorite vegetables like the broccoli, carrot sticks, and potatoes.

When the names of our favorite snacks and food don't match the three-note rhythm, we create new versions of the melody to match our piano playing. Without using any technical and theoretical terms, we begin to explore the different types of rhythm by figuring out the number of syllables in the words. We like to think of new ways of playing our own versions of the *Hot Cross Buns*.

Although we first start with the three black keys, we eventually add more notes to the song by the end of our lesson. Without knowing the formal music terms, we even transpose the melody into different keys by starting on a variety of notes.

As a result, we have many names for our *Hot Cross Buns*. In one week, it is our *Candy Cane* song. In another week, it changes to the *Macaroni* song. If we don't want to use a particular name of the snack and food, there are days when we simply refer to it as our *Favorite Snack* song.

* * *

Jack inspired me to transform the *Hot Cross Buns* into a much more meaningful music for my students. Before meeting with him, I always used to 'teach' the song with the original words. I neither thought to change them nor considered other possibilities by asking for everyone's favorite snacks. At the time, I was just used to 'teaching' the music as I knew and learned from my past experiences. Although I always asked my students if they recognized and liked the music that I played for them, I never thought to change the words and create new versions of the melodies according to their individual interests and experiences. So, when Jack

immediately declined and showed no interest in learning to play the *Hot Cross Buns*, it took me by surprise, and the song has never been the same for everyone.

Furthermore, I also started using various objects and materials to help young children to differentiate between the two and three black keys. Sometimes, we place our stuffed animals onto the piano. Other times, we use the toys, jewelry (i.e., bracelets and rainbow looms), and Pokémon cards that children bring to the lessons. In Jack's case, we picked the crayons to show the different colors of his favorite snacks. Many of my students also like to use the various shades of egg shakers to find all the seven sets of two and three black keys on the piano. In one week, we use the pink eggs to identify all the two black keys. In another week, we change to the blue ones and the yellows to find all the groups of three black keys.

Photograph 11: Finding two black keys with a pink egg shaker

I also find that young children often change their minds about liking the song. In one week, they might be thrilled about the new melody that they are learning to play. In another week, the same music might have no interest for them. As a way of reviewing the songs that we learned together, and to build from what we explored in the previous lessons, I find myself always searching for new ways of retaining children's ever-changing interests and preferences for music. Not only am I using different approaches to introducing the songs to every child, I also need to find new ways of meeting the changing needs, wishes, and interests of the individual student from week to week.

Sometimes, there are days when they even change their minds about the music that they like and don't like within a single lesson as well. What may have sparked their interests at the beginning of our lesson may not always follow through to the end. In one moment, we might be happily playing the *Hot Cross Buns* over and over again. In another moment, we move on to something completely different, and when this happens, it takes us a very long time to return to the same song, if ever.

* * *

One of my students, Bella, loves to play the *Hot Cross Buns*, but in one of our lessons, she brought in her favorite dolls, and she wasn't interested in playing the piano anymore.

"Guess what? I brought my new friends today," she said.

There was no way of keeping her 'friends' in the music bag. Bella had to show me each one separately, and I knew that we would spend all of our lesson time talking about her doll if I wasn't able to find a way to make a connection with her new 'friends.'

On that day, Bella brought five of her 'friends,' and renamed one of them after me.

"This is Zoe, Sierra, Ania, Lana, and Elsa, and THIS one will be J-e-e-y-e-o-n!"

We smiled as she handed me over one of her Mermaid dolls with a long black hair.

And, as a way of inviting Bella to review one of the songs that we learned from the previous week, I asked, “Mmm, I think Zoe might be hungry. Would she like to hear Bella’s *Hot Cross Buns*?”

To my surprise, Bella immediately stopped playing with her dolls, and reached for the three black keys with great excitement, “Yes! Sierra is hungry too!”

Then, after playing it for Zoe and Sierra, Bella asked, “What about Elsa? She wants one too.”

So we played the *Hot Cross Buns* again for her princess Elsa from *Frozen*, and continued to play the melody over and over again until all of her five friends had a turn.

But, after playing the song for the fifth time, Bella decided to play a game where I had to guess which of her friends will be the next performer for our song.

“Now, close your eyes,” she said with a sneaky voice as she started hiding her friends away behind her back one by one. So, for the rest of the lesson, I was guessing the names of the dolls while Bella happily continued to play her *Hot Cross Buns* over and over again.

Photograph 12: Bella and her doll at the piano

* * *

I am always in search for new ways of keeping children's joy, wonder, and curiosity for the songs that we are learning to play together. To help find more meaningful connections to the music, I try to relate our piano playing to what matters in their everyday lives. I modify all the melodies to the individual students' interests, experiences, and ideas.

Each child responds to the music differently. I can never assume how they will react to the songs. For those reasons, my approaches to introducing the music and piano playing always need to change for every student. I constantly modify, adjust, and continue searching for ways of making new connections with each child, and for each song.

For us, the *Hot Cross Buns* is never the same.

Music math

Timmy likes math. He always works on his math homework while waiting for me in the lobby. So, as one of the ways of connecting his interest in math with his piano lessons, Timmy and I create our own 'music math' together.

He loves to add the quarter notes and half notes. If we need bigger numbers then four, we talk about how we can use the tied notes to create the longer notes. We have a nickname for our tied sign too, a *Smiley*. When we need to connect two or three notes together, Timmy asks for more smiley notes.

But when I give him a 'music math' like, "What is a quarter note plus a quarter note?" he cringes and tells me, "That's *way* too easy – a half note!"

He always asks for more tricky music math questions that need more smiley signs. Today, he even asks for the multiplication.

"I can also do quarter note times half note you know."

So, instead of playing the piano, Timmy and I spend our time creating new music math together. Each week, he always greets me by either reminding me, "Now it's time for music math," or "Can we do some music math now?"

He never forgets to ask about the music math. Timmy always let me know, "I want music math."

And, just like any other week, Timmy brings in his math homework for our lesson today, and asks me to help him create 'music math' that can add up to number five.

"Five is my favorite number," he says.

So I take this moment to talk with Timmy about how special the number five is in our *Twinkle Little Star* song.

"Really? Why?" he asks with great curiosity.

As I explain to Timmy that finding the fifth 'star' in our *Twinkle* melody is the hardest part of the whole song, and that once he finds the fifth star, all the other stars will be very easy to find, he immediately tries to find the fifth 'star' in the melody as he hums along.

"No helping, okay?" he reminds me as he carefully places his two little hands on the C position.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little 5th star, where are you?" he sings to himself.

And, just as I start singing along the 'star' notes with Timmy, he stops immediately, and reminds me yet again, "*H-e-y*, you're helping!"

Photograph 13: Timmy's music math

Reflecting on "Music math"

For the longest time, Timmy just wanted to work on the math questions with me in our lessons. By the time I greeted him outside the waiting room, he has already completed few pages of the math exercises. Sometimes, Timmy asks me to check his answers. Other times, he wants me to figure out the questions together. Every week, it always takes us awhile to make our way to the piano.

"Let's finish one more question," he said.

Even when we finally made our way to the piano studio, Timmy often wanted to continue working on his homework. He loved to tell me about the numbers, and everything else that related to math.

However, none of the songs that I tried to introduce to him really captivated him. Although Timmy was able to easily follow my directions and had no troubles learning the melodies by rote, he much preferred to solve more math questions. There were many days when we spent all of our lesson time completing his favorite math exercises. On those days, there was no way of changing his mind about putting his math homework away. It had to be done immediately.

"I must finish," he insisted.

But, after many weeks of failed attempts, I finally decided to introduce the rhythmic values of the music notes as a way of combining his love for math with our piano playing. Although I have always delayed using the traditional music notation in the early stages of piano learning, Timmy became an exception. Because of his strong interest in math, I introduced the note values and rhythmic beats in our lessons much sooner then I would have with my other beginner students.

And, to my surprise, as soon as I said, "You know, we need math for music. Music is like math making sounds," Timmy immediately stopped scribbling on his exercises, and asked with great excitement, "Really? Why is music like math?"

Since that day, all Timmy wanted to do was the 'music math.' Every week, he brought in several pages filled with the different combinations of note values. He loved making up his own 'music math.' At first, we started with adding the quarter and half notes together. Then, we eventually included the longer dotted half and whole notes. Over the weeks, Timmy even wanted to multiply the different notes. The total number of beats also grew. From just adding the two-quarter notes to create a half note, our 'music math' gradually exceeded a dozen of beats.

"How about we add two quarters, one half, and one whole notes, then multiply by half note, then add another whole and dotted whole notes, and take away three quarters?" Timmy would go on and on.

But, I was still in a dilemma. Although he no longer asked about the math homework from his afterschool classes, we were now only focusing on creating 'music math' in our lessons. Although Timmy reluctantly agreed to learn the melodies by rote from time to time, his attention always returned to his 'music math.' While he was thrilled to explore new rhythmic values and notes, Timmy still wasn't playing much of piano in our lessons.

As a result, his mother became very concerned and started asking, "How long will he be like this? When will he play more piano? Is he too young? Should we continue with lessons?"

I had no definitive answers for her. She wanted to know exactly how long it will be before Timmy could solely focus on learning to play the piano, and wondered if he was ready for piano lessons at all. In my mind, I was also struggling with the same questions. How long 'should' I continue with 'music math'? When will we be able to play 'more' piano music? As his mother wished, will we ever be able to just 'focus' on learning to play the piano? And, are there times when a child could really be 'too young' for piano lessons?

For me, a child can never be 'too young' to start exploring music and piano playing. But, it took me many years to come to this understanding. Over 17 years ago, there was a very young boy who came for a trial lesson, and while I don't remember the exact details of what happened on that day, what I do remember to this day is the devastating decision that I made about his readiness for the piano lessons.

The music school that I was teaching at the time had an electric keyboard for us to use, and I remember us playing around with the different sounds. Although I no longer remember

either his name or his face, the struggles that I felt on that day still remain with me. I had no idea what I was doing in the lesson. It was my very first time meeting with a very young student. It was also the first year of my piano teaching. I don't even remember if I played any songs for him on that day. I know for sure that I didn't sing because I only learned the importance of singing with children until I started my graduate studies five years ago.

But, what remains vivid in my memory is the traumatic advice that I gave to his mother. When she asked if he was 'too young' to study piano, I unknowingly replied, "Yes, I think so. He might be little too young for the piano lessons."

I would never think that about a student today. If I remember correctly, the boy was about five years old. But now, I consider my five-year-old students as the mature, older students. Since exploring music and piano playing with children as young as three-years-old, it is unimaginable for me to think that any of my four- and five-year-old students could be 'too young' to play the piano.

Whenever parents ask about their children's readiness for piano lessons, I now know that it's never about the students. When I said that a boy was 'too young' over a decade ago, it was not about him at all. It was me who wasn't 'ready' to explore music and piano playing with young children. It was me who was 'too young' to think that a child needed to wait until we could better concentrate and focus in learning to play the piano.

While I have forgotten most of the details about the first young student I met many years ago, he continues to remind me of the importance of my readiness as a teacher. He humbles me to continue learning. He inspires me to keep searching for more meaningful ways of discovering music and piano playing with my students.

For those reasons, I never give up on my students. Timmy is no exception. Although it took us many months of spending most of our lesson time working on his math homework, including 'music math,' I never gave up on trying to discover new ways of connecting with Timmy.

Nowadays, we are exploring different types of intervals, and he likes to find all the 'math' numbers for the melodic intervals in the songs that we are learning to play. He also loves to figure out the exact steps and skips in the melody.

* * *

Like Timmy, all of my students have their own unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano. Currently, I have a new student who has been taking lessons with me for the past three weeks. Sam is four years old, and he loves to 'break up' the xylophone in our studio. Just like how Timmy was only interested in working on his 'math music,' Sam is only interested in taking out all the xylophone bars so that we can put them back together again in the opposite direction. Instead of arranging the xylophone bars in order from the lowest to the highest notes, he wants them to go from the highest to the lowest notes.

"I want it backwards," he says.

So, for the past three weeks, we have been taking the xylophone apart by removing all the little bars carefully out of the small pin holes, and putting them back together again in Sam's way. When the 'new' xylophone is finally ready, he passionately tells me, "*My* xylophone sounds like this."

As for me, as we happily remake his one and only 'backward' xylophone over and over again, I find myself asking similar questions that I asked about Timmy's 'music math.' For how long will we continue to 'break up' the xylophones? How might I be able to help Sam find his

own ways of connecting with piano? How might I relate his ‘backward’ xylophone to piano playing? What kinds of piano learning experiences will be meaningful for Sam? What is piano teaching and learning?

Photograph 14: Making a backwards xylophone

4:30pm

The first thing Andy says to me as he walks into the studio is that he is stressed today. He has a science project due tomorrow and has yet to finish his homework.

"I have to end piano right at 4:30pm," he says as he checks the clock on the wall. He also tells me that he might even have to skip the soccer practice because he needs to finish the school project.

Then, suddenly, he decides to play the *Chopsticks*.

"Let's play my favorites," he eagerly says.

"Yes, please. I love to hear your favorite too," I encourage him.

But, to my surprise, when I invite him to play his favorite *Chopsticks* for our upcoming music concert, he declines without hesitation, "No thanks, they're too short."

"Too short?" I thought to myself.

Even when I ask him about his new favorite, the *Hello Drums*, one of his 'longer' compositions that we're learning to play, he declines yet again, "Nah, maybe I'll play in the concert when I can play something *a little more complex*."

"A little more complex?" Once more, his language surprises me.

Although it has been a long time since Andy first learned his favorite *Chopsticks*, he still loves to play it all the time. During the last two years that I've known him, he has never passed the opportunities to play the *Chopsticks* in our lessons.

"Let's play my favorite again," he likes to say.

Every time, he always happily hums along when playing his *Chopsticks*. He loves to play the *Hello Drums* too. He especially likes it when I accompany his playing with the little African hand drum.

"Can you be the drummer?" he ardently invites me.

So, every week, we happily play his old and new favorites over and over again. Even as he hurriedly packs up his music bag ready to go at 4:30pm, he changes his mind about finishing our lesson right on time.

"I think I'll play it once more before I go," he says as he drops his music bag back onto the floor.

Andy loves to play his *Chopsticks* that much.

Reflecting on "4:30pm"

When I think of my young students, I think of our joyous piano playing. Their stories, ideas, and questions matter to me. I wish to encourage their curiosities to ask questions, to wonder and to imagine possibilities about music. I want to join them in their search for meanings. I need to listen and be more attentive to their unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano.

However, there are parents who think differently. They feel that their children ask too many questions and have too many things to say. They are concerned that they are not able to play the piano 'properly' – with all the 'correct' hand positions and fingerings.

I meet many parents who ask for a more teacher-directed, technique-oriented, and grade-driven approach to piano instruction. They request that I teach the 'correct' hand positions, postures, and concentrate my lessons on working through the method books and learning to read music notation. I have parents who even sit in the lessons to check if we are counting the beats. They want to ensure that we are working on curving our fingers and that we are always learning more 'new' songs. They discipline their children to sit quietly and pay attention to me, *the* piano teacher. Those parents expect us to be ready for the next grade as fast as possible. They want

more piano exams. They demand results. At times, I have parents who even question *if* their children have a 'talent' for music, and *if* they 'should' continue to play the piano.

And, if we carried on conversations about what happened at school, and anything else that they felt were 'unrelated' to our piano lessons, there are parents who immediately interrupt us, and say, "Okay, now. That's enough. Let's get back to your piano playing."

From time to time, our piano improvisations also become concerns.

"Is that music?"

"Can you teach more 'real' songs?"

"When will my child be able to play the piano 'properly'?"

Above all, they worry that we're having too much 'fun' in our lessons. We are told, "Piano *should* be *serious*."

At one time, a parent of a 5-year-old even said to me, "Life is *not* about having *fun*."

Although it has been many years, I also remember the day when one of my students was reading a book while waiting for me out in the lobby, and as soon as I came out to pick him up for his lesson his father called out, "Time for piano! Jeeyeon is waiting. Let's go, now. Hurry, hurry. Time is money!"

Even when parents are not with us in our piano lessons, many of my young students are still very conscious about 'wasting' our piano time. Some children constantly check the clock, and although they wish to share more stories, drawings, and anything else that they like to bring to our lessons, many of them are vey reluctant to do so.

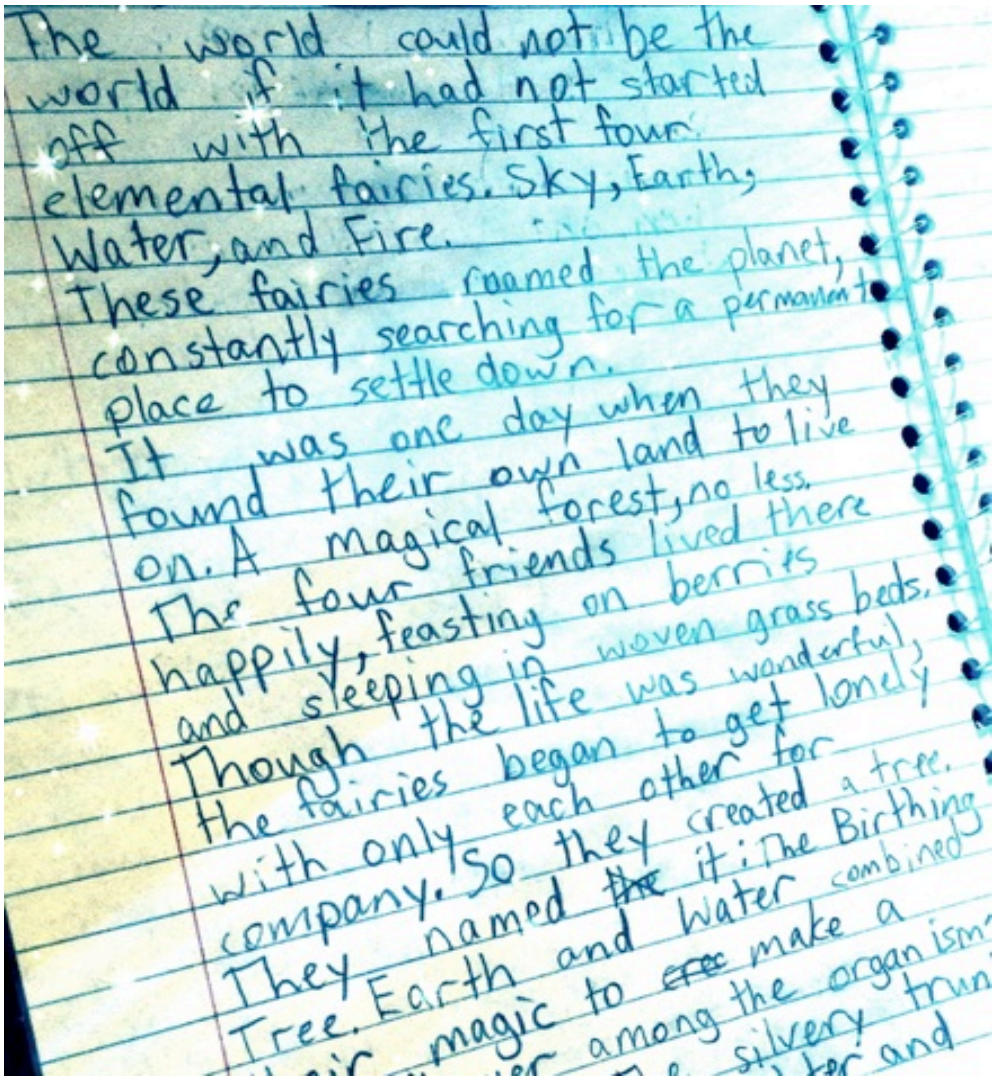
Sally, for example, loves to share her writing with me. She keeps a notebook full of stories and poems. Sometimes, she has drawings to accompany her writing. But, whenever I ask about her notebook, she says, "I want to read this one but I have to read it fast!"

Sally explains that we can't take too much time with her stories and poems.

"It's our piano time," she tells me.

While quickly flipping through her pages to find something that she wants to share with me, she reminds me again, "I can only read one page because my mom will be mad. She doesn't want me to waste my piano lesson time."

And, as she packs up her notebook and music books at the end of our lesson, Sally with a concerned look asks me to promise, "Don't tell my mom about my story, okay?"



Photograph 15: Sally's notebook of stories and poetry

* * *

In our piano lessons, we are ‘expected’ to learn to ‘play’ the piano. We are asked to read the ‘real’ notes. We are told that we ‘should’ be learning more difficult, complex, and longer songs. Like Andy, I meet many young children who worry that their songs might be too short and too easy to play in the concerts. Sometimes, they even think that their playing is not good enough.

“My friend is in grade eight piano, what grade am I in?” many ask me.

They constantly compare themselves with others. They want to know if they can be in the same piano ‘levels’ and ‘grades’ as their friends.

With children whose parents request that I ‘focus’ our lesson to learning to read and play from the piano method books, piano improvisations and other creative activities that we like to integrate in our piano playing gradually fades away. I have students who are now working through the endless series of piano method books. We devote our time to reading the ‘black dots’ on the music page. For some of my students, it has been a very long time since we last improvised together. No time for that anymore.

However, not all of my students are able to meet the expectations of their parents. While they are pressured to finish the higher levels and piano exams as soon as possible, many struggle to keep up with their demands.

For those reasons, I have students who either need to choose their piano pieces months in advance just to be able to play in the recitals or select their five piano exam pieces to work on for the entire year. Instead of sharing the music that they love and enjoy playing, we have to start ‘preparing’ for the recitals and exams with pieces that are more ‘complex’ and ‘longer.’

"Don't pick something that sounds too easy," I heard one parent commenting to the child when I asked which song we might like to play in our upcoming concert.

As for the exams, we spend all of our time trying to learn the pieces as quickly as possible, and then we do the same for the next level. For us, there is no time to explore and play a variety of genres and styles, especially the movie themes and popular music that young students love to play.

"Play the fun music after the exam," they tell us.

To be able to include those students who need longer time to learn more 'difficult' pieces, I have to carefully choose the music to ensure their 'success' in the performances. We need time to learn the pieces 'correctly.' We need time to prepare ourselves 'properly.' Every term throughout the year, we always have to have at least one recital song 'ready' and 'polished.'

And, yes, young children are able to learn all the 'correct' notes. They can also count and add expressive elements, such as dynamics. I know we can do this. But, it breaks my heart to see them counting so 'perfectly.' Every time they play a 'wrong' note, it saddens me to hear their quiet sighs. When I watch them go up on the stage to carefully play all the notes, I can't help feeling a sense of loss knowing that they are holding themselves back to avoid the 'mistakes.' Instead of their true, colorful, expressive, improvisatory playing, they try so hard to play it by the notation as it is 'written' in the music score. No more 'fooling around' in the lessons. No more of goofy, silly, and funny piano playing.

"Piano is serious."

"Time for more practice."

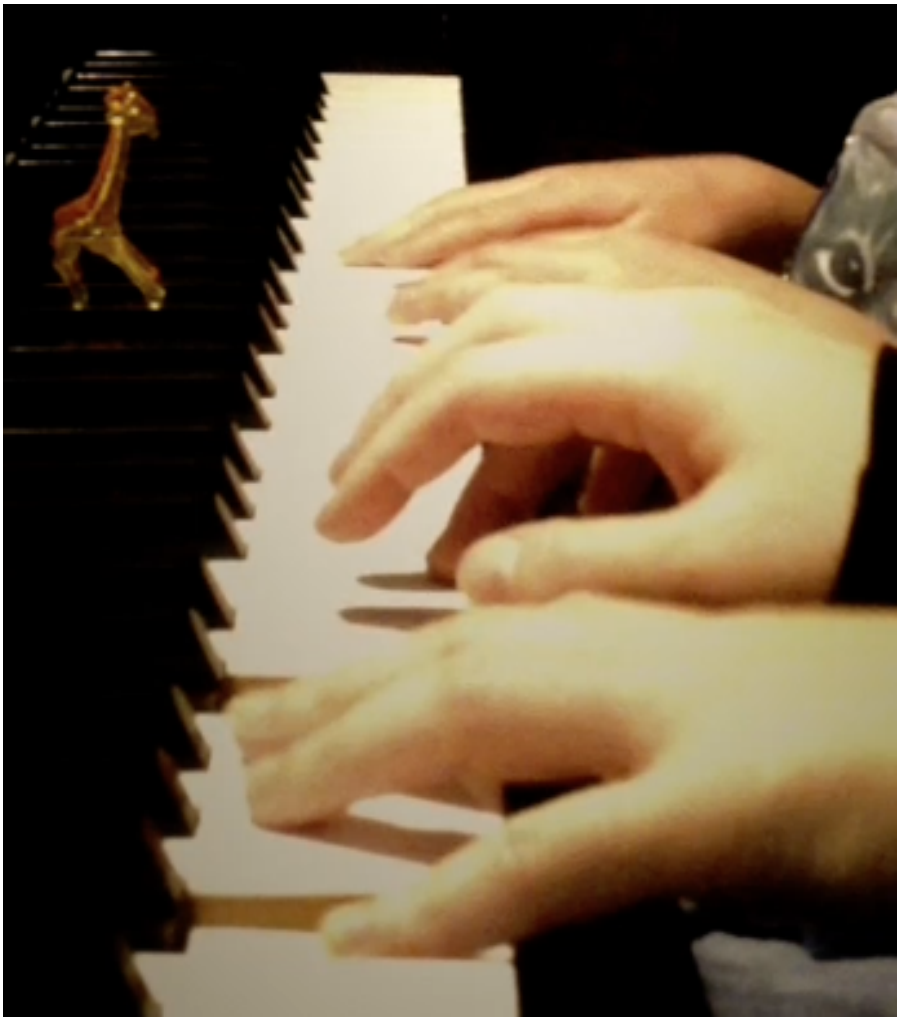
That's what we've been told.

* * *

When I think about Andy and all my other students who no longer improvise and create artworks about their music, I wish we could have lingered a little longer in their ways of exploring music and piano playing. I wish that we could have continued to dance across the piano keys without worrying about the 'wrong' notes, rhythm, and timing – a way of playing the piano freely with imagination, creativity, and wonder.

Writing about Andy and other children who worry about what they 'should' and 'ought' to do in lessons move me to keep searching for what it means to teach and learn piano.

My students lead me to continue asking myself: What if teachers could focus their piano pedagogy on children's creative, musical ideas? What if teachers and parents openly discussed about children's own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing? What if we reconsidered the true meanings, possibilities, and experiences of learning to play the piano? What if we can be more open to exploring our students' love for sharing their stories, drawing, poetry writing, dancing, singing, improvising, and anything else that capture their curiosities and imagination? What if we could practice more child-centered, emergent approach to piano pedagogy, a way of knowing through music that could create more meaningful music making and piano playing? What if teachers and parents embraced an (un)planned, improvisational approach to piano teaching and learning that encourages, supports, and values young children's own ways of exploring music and piano playing? What if there could be more smiles, laughter, and 'play' in our lessons?



Video 4: Improvising our ‘Baby Giraffe’ music

My way

Tyler likes to punch the piano, beat up the bench, scream his lungs out, and, above all, he loves to scare me with his piano playing.

This week, he is learning to play the *Monster March* for his Halloween concert, and he insists that he plays the whole piece while standing up.

"I don't need the bench," he says as he pushes it away from the piano.

He always has his own 'style' of playing the piano.

Most of all, Tyler likes to play everything the opposite from what is written on the music score.

"I want to play it my way!" he insists.

When there is a dynamic marking for *forte*, he plays it *piano*. When he sees a dynamic marking for *piano*, he purposefully plays it as loud as he can. Any *legato* melody turns into jumpy *staccato* notes. Any longer notes become as short as possible.

And, the short notes? Well, he likes to stretch them out, and he holds them for a very long time until the notes eventually stop resonating.

"I'm doing the *extra* stuff, but in *my* way," he likes to remind me.

Every week, Tyler adds the 'extra' musical ideas, and we talk about how there are so much more than just the 'notes' in our music.

But, he always has his own ways of adding the 'extra' musical ideas.

Moreover, each time Tyler plays something wonderfully extravagant, like screaming out his notes while crashing into the bass keys of the piano, he loves to check for my reactions.

"Was it scary enough? Are you surprised?"

He asks every time.

Reflecting on "My way"

My young beginner students learn to read traditional music notation by composing their own simple melodies. Although we talk about the notes, and learn their technical names, I delay any theoretical explanations and formal music notation until they can play many dozens of melodies by rote, improvise freely on their own, and express interest in learning to read from the piano books. For those reasons, unless specifically requested by the parents and/or students, I wait to introduce any piano method books. In the mean time, we learn all the songs by rote through listening, imitation, and improvisation.

However, although we avoid 'reading' the traditional notations right away, I do have music scores readily available in my studio, and we often listen to the music while following the notes along the page. Just like a parent reading a bedtime story to a child who has yet to learn to read the words in the storybooks, I point along the notes in our music books as we listen and hum along the songs.

When we are ready to begin exploring music reading and writing, I invite my students to create their own simple melodies instead of using the piano method books. Rather then 'teaching' them to 'read' unfamiliar melodies, we use the notation as means to express our own musical ideas. At first, we try to 'notate' our melodies through using the numbers, letters, and any other visual symbols to represent our sounds. We like to add pictures and drawings to illustrate our music as well.

In addition to 'notating' our own music, we also try to figure out how to 'write' the notes for all the songs that we have previously learned to play. We think of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Twinkle Little Star*, and any other melodies that we enjoy playing. One of our favorites is the *Hot Cross Buns*.

Photograph 16: Invented music notation

* * *

Similar to Tyler in the story, many of my other students like to modify their songs to make the new variations. For example, my student, Jessica wanted to make the original happy *Hot Cross Buns* in C Major into a scarier version for Halloween. And so, I took this opportunity to introduce the minor key for the first time.

Without using any technical terms, I played the melody in C Minor, and she immediately responded, "Oh, that sounds more like Halloweeny!"

In that lesson, we explored the differences between the major and minor keys, and talked about the one particular black key (i.e., the E-flat) that we needed for the 'special' effect.

"Let's call it the *Halloweeny Bun*," she said with great excitement.

To create an even scarier version, we played our *Halloweeny Bun* in the lowest keys on the piano. Jessica also thought of the idea of writing her music letters in the orange and black.

"Let's use Halloweeny colors," she cheerfully said while searching through my pencil crayons.

Finally, once she completed 'notating' her new *Halloweeny Bun* in C Minor with three flats, the 'little b's' as we nick named it, Jessica drew a picture of her favorite stuffed animal.

As she hummed along her new *Holloweeny Bun* while picking out the crayons, she explained, "This is for my kitty, *Pink Bow*. She has many black spots, and likes to listen when I play the piano."

Photograph 17: Music notation for “Halloweeny Bun”

* * *

Like Jessica and many of my other young students, Tyler has been learning to ‘read’ the ‘real’ notes the same way. We first started with playing the melodies by rote and improvising on the piano. But, ever since we started to play from the piano books, he has taken interest in changing everything from what is written on the music score. Instead of ‘following’ the directions and notations indicated by the composers, Tyler only wants to play the songs in ‘his’ ways. Sometimes, he changes the rhythm. Other times, he either adds or omits the notes. Tyler also likes to make up his own words.

Every week, we think of many different ways of reinterpreting the music. However, what Tyler loves the most is to play everything as ‘backwards.’

Most recently, he also started playing all of his music as fast as possible. The more he likes the songs, the faster he plays them. We also never 'polish' the pieces. Whenever I invite him to think about the 'extra' musical ideas like the dynamics, rhythm, and expressions that are notated in the music, he replies, "Why? Why do I *have* to do that?"

I agree. Why do we always have to just follow the music score? Why do we always only try to figure out what the composers are trying to express? What do the music notes even mean? What about our ideas and our 'ways' of playing the piano?

And, what if Tyler just wants to play everything as opposites from the written music? What if he continues to play everything fast? Why can't Tyler play the piano without sitting on the bench? And what's 'wrong' with playing everything 'backwards'?

For me, it is important that I listen to Tyler play his favorite pieces in his 'own' ways. I encourage him to play everything 'differently.' I don't 'correct' his dynamics, tempo, articulation and rhythm. I embrace 'his' ways of understanding music. I welcome 'his' interpretations of the music.

Whenever he says, "That's my way," I smile and acknowledge 'his' creative efforts in making his own meaningful ways of connecting with piano playing.

Every time I ask about *if* and *when* he might like to include the composers' 'extra' musical ideas, with a big smile on his face, Tyler always reminds me, "Sure, one day!"

And so, I go on week after week, patiently waiting for that one day.

Until that day, we let ourselves be.

Together, week after week, we wait for his day.

We wait for *his* time.

THAWZEN[5]

After playing the *Monsieur Mouse*, Kieran decides to add his own extra notes to the melody and begins to draw multiple sized circles of notes on the music. His extra wobbly notes grow bigger and smaller like the *crescendo* and *decrescendo* dynamic signs.

As he squeezes in the last little extra note on the edge of the page, I ask with a smile, "Kieran, what is the name of your new song?"

With no hesitation, he replies, "One thousand notes!"

Above the crescendo of circling notes, Kieran then begins to spell the name of his new song in two enlightening ways: "10000 THAWZEN."

And, when I ask Kieran about the one extra zero in his number, he reassures me that there is no extra zero in his one thousand.

In that moment, I realized that *my* ten thousand was *his* one thousand with the extra zero. *My* learned ways of understanding the world wasn't going to be *his* new ways of being in the world.

So instead of 'teaching' Kieran about the ways of *others* before him, I celebrate his ways of seeing, writing, and sounding his own *self*. I partake in his THAWZEN ways of learning, THAWZEN ways of knowing, and THAWZEN ways of being. I listen, embrace, and linger in our shared THAWZEN moments.

Amidst his THAWZEN circling extra notes, with kind, quiet smiles of trust and patience, I remain in Kieran's world of THAWZEN possibilities.

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[5] See Ryu, J. (2017).

Photograph 18: Kieran's 10,000 THAWZEN

Reflecting on "THAWZEN"

From Kieran, I learned that I should never assume what I know to be true from my own experiences to speak truth for my students. In that moment when Kieran 'corrected' me that there was no extra zero in his number, I had two choices.

On the one hand, I thought of correcting his 'mistake,' and to 'teach' him that there are only three zeros in a thousand. On the other hand, I wanted to keep Kieran's way of writing his number with an extra zero, and concentrate more on what he had to say about his music rather then focusing on 'fixing' the technicalities.

In that moment, however, what mattered most for me was for Kieran to know how much I loved his idea of the one thousand notes. If I had kept trying to 'correct' his extra zero, all our attention would have been focused on what was 'wrong' with his number. He probably would not have continued to share his story about his new song. He also might not have spent the rest of the lesson trying to play all those thousand notes. Rather, we would have simply ended our piano playing with a memory of the 'correct' number of zeros.

Whenever I find myself in situations where I'm unsure of what might be the best thing I can do for my students, I ask myself: What will they remember from our piano lessons? In years to come, will they think of all the 'correct' notes that they are learning to play? Will that matter to them at all? Or will they remember the stories, conversations, and all the new music that they created and loved to play? What memories and experiences will remain meaningful for them?

For me, I wanted Kieran to remember the day he played his song with one thousand notes. In that moment, it didn't matter that we had one extra zero in the number. For him, what was important on that day was that he wanted to play a song with all the thousand notes.

It was me who became distracted with the extra zero. My attention kept turning to the 'mistake.'

And so, I am learning to listen, notice, and take kind care of all the shared moments with my students. They move me to have compassion for their unique, individual ways of being, understanding and knowing. They humble me to see, hear, and experience music and piano playing through their eyes, ears, hearts, and minds.

But how long can Kieran and I remain in his world of THAWZEN? How can we learn to be true to ourselves while also learning to embrace the world of others? How can we keep our true sense of spirit without losing our creativity, imagination, and wonder?

* * *

Just like Kieran needed to include the extra zero in his number, all of my students need their own space and time to explore, experiment, and make meaningful sense of their ways of being in the world. Everyone has their ideas and ways of understanding and interpreting their everyday experiences. Music and piano playing are no exception.

For us, there are many moments in our piano lessons when we find ourselves in similar situations. Whereas Kieran insisted that there are four zeros in his number, I have other students who have tried to make the notes longer by extending their value of the beats beyond what they were 'supposed' to be.

Children have many wonderful, musical ideas. Until I started exploring music and piano playing with young students, I never thought to ask what they thought of all the strange looking symbols in the music books. Now, I see, hear, and understand music notation differently. They taught me to see a treble clef like a snake – with a dot as its head and a body with a long, swirly line. The two eighth notes remind us of a swing set. We think of a caterpillar walking along when we play a group of four eighth notes. For us, the quarter note looks like a pole with a head under the ground.

Instead of asking for my students' ideas and trying to find out how they viewed and thought of the music that they are learning to play, I used to either simply 'teach' the names and beats for each of the notes or explain the symbols without relating them meaningfully to their everyday lived and living experiences.

Kieran, and all my other young students remind me everyday that there are endless ways of learning to play the piano. They help me to keep an open mind about music and piano playing. They inspire me to continue searching for new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, and

understanding our musical selves. They give me hopes to believe in our own unique, individual ways of being with music and piano playing.

With my students, I am learning to trust the unknown beauties and possibilities in teaching and learning. For me, be(com)ing a piano teacher is an ever-present, living process that continuously moves towards (re)discovering and (re)creating musically meaningful, pedagogical, and joyful piano playing moments with my students.

When I think of my students, I am reminded of my great responsibility as a teacher. To my students, what I say matters. They are listening. What I do matters. They are watching. What I think and feel matters. They are reflecting on my every thought and action. Young children remind me that every moment I share with them matter.

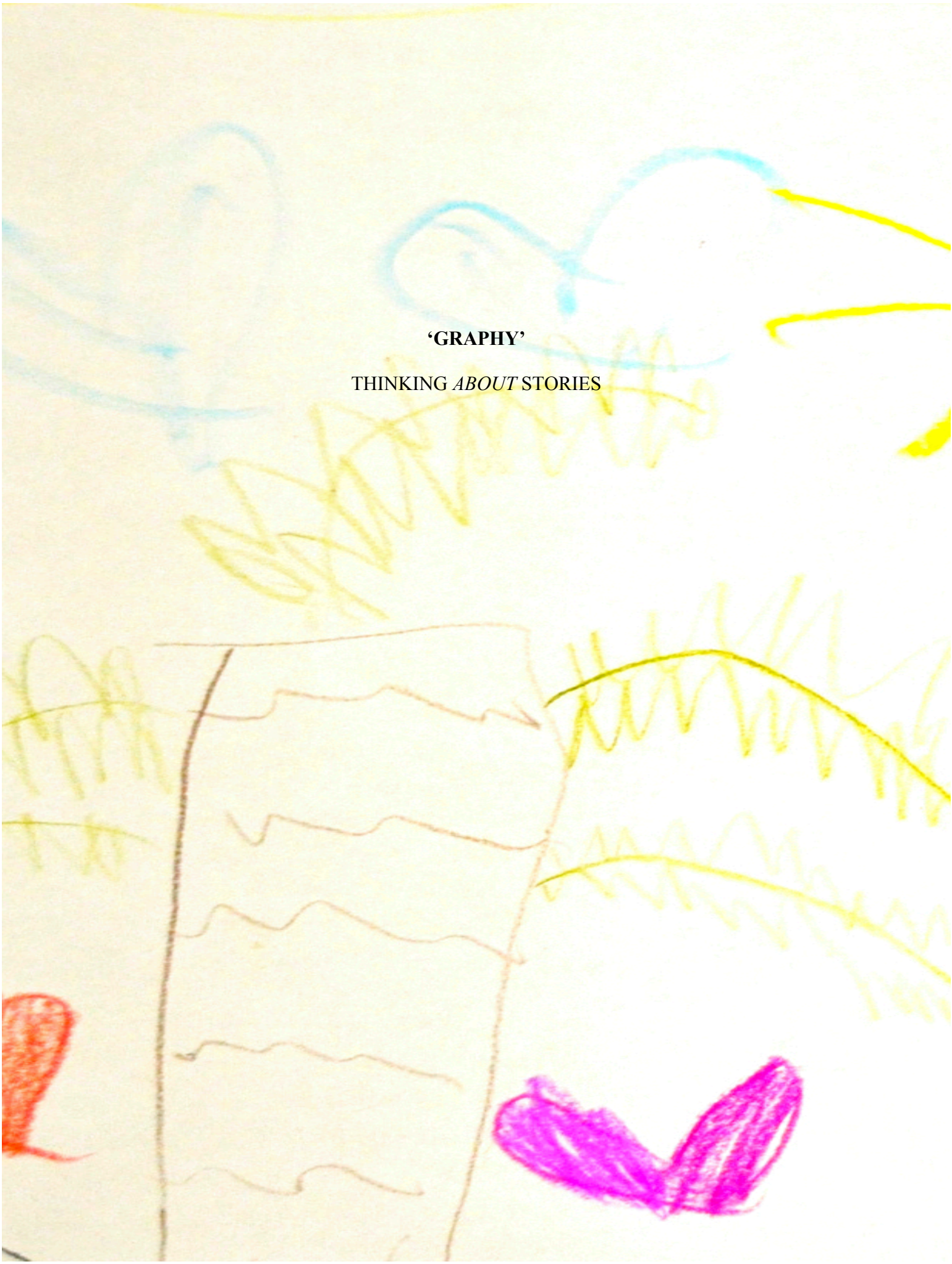
Every thought, story and question is meaningful. That I welcome, encourage, and believe in their own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing matters.

My students teach me to be attentive, to question, to ask and to listen in new ways. I am grateful for their colorful, imaginative stories, drawings, piano playing, and everything else that they wish to share with me.

I know that they are always listening.

They remember our moments.

They are my inspirations.



‘GRAPHY’

THINKING *ABOUT* STORIES

After a year of writing stories

For a year, I wrote stories about my piano teaching and learning experiences with young children. I focused on what matters most, for my students and myself, in our piano lessons. I sought to learn more about how piano teachers' autoethnographies could inform and contribute to the development of piano pedagogy for young beginner learners and piano teacher education.

So, what do the stories about my piano teaching and learning convey about how children learn to play the piano? What kind of new insights and understandings could my experiences of be(com)ing a piano teacher-researcher offer to other piano teachers, caregivers, and parents about preschool piano pedagogy?

In this concluding chapter of the dissertation, I summarize and discuss a collection of eight 'lessons' that I have learned from examining my piano teaching practices. I integrate a variety of metaphorical, theoretical, and pedagogical concepts with a review of relevant scholarly literature to share my piano teaching ideas, experiences, and learning outcomes that have resulted from my autoethnographic inquiry.

Lesson 1: Sound exploration and play as an ever-present process

In *Experience and education* (1938), Dewey defines education as a continuation of growth in an "ever-present process" (p. 50). I am deeply drawn to his ways of thinking about education and the ways in which he brings awareness to our present experiences because I agree with the notion that "music is, for young children, primarily the discovery of sound" (Moorhead & Pond, 1941, p. 17). Children love to 'play' with sound. For them, music is an integral, natural, and inseparable part of their lives, and they need to explore and play with music, as well as to pursue their own musical interests, curiosities, and purposes (Addison, 1991; Reichling, 1997; Singer & Singer, 1990; Swanwick, 1988; Vygotsky, 2004).

Based on my experiences of exploring music and piano playing, I believe that the basis for musical growth of young piano learners also needs to begin with sound exploration. By focusing on freely moving interests, ideas, and questions, we can foster children's creativity, imagination, and wonder for music and piano playing. When they engage in creative thinking and have fun playing the piano as a tool for self-expression, music making and piano playing can become more meaningful, expressive, and positive learning experiences (Mackworth-Young, 1990).

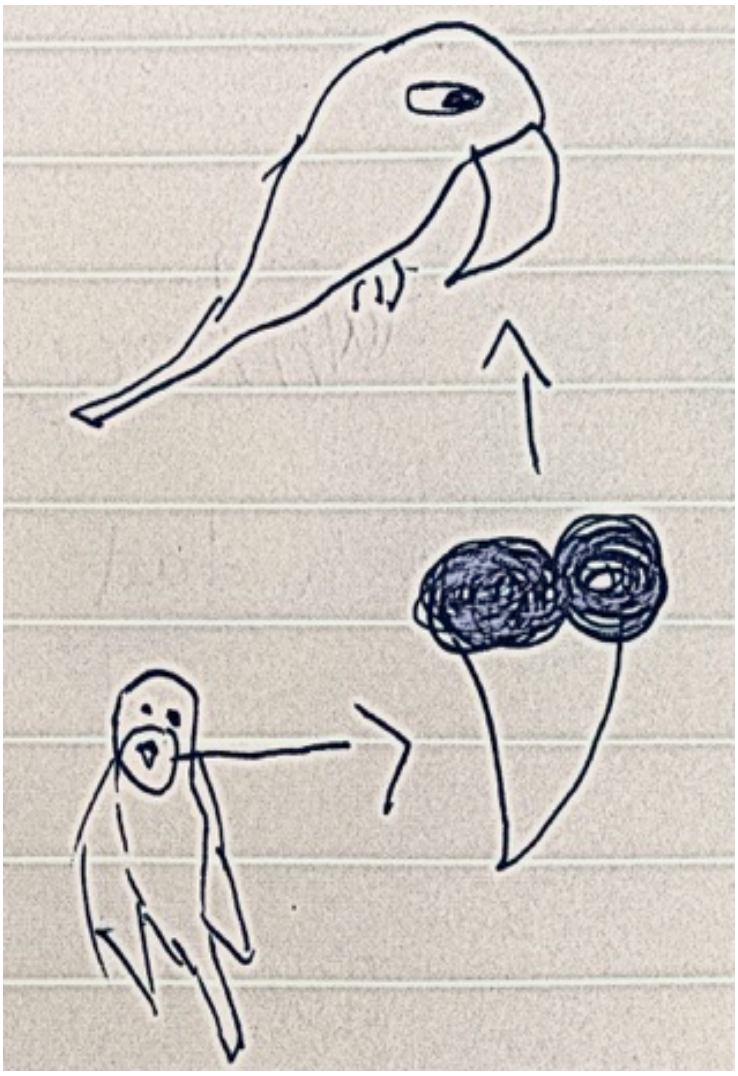
For young children, exploring music and piano playing requires more creativity, imagination, and freedom followed by a focus on the technical aspects of learning to play the instrument. Their questions and ideas about music and piano playing are wonderfully colorful, imaginative, and creative. They imagine pink and purple piano keys. They wish that the rhythm egg shakers were chocolate eggs. For them, a nicely curved hand position looks like a little Budgie bird. Those 'other' ideas, conversations, questions, activities, and everything else that capture young children's imaginations and wonder about what matters in their lives are important, valuable, and critical expressions of how they experience music making and piano playing.

To my students, every thought, story, and question is meaningful. For them, sound exploration and piano playing is an ever-present process. Their present ideas, questions, and life experiences *is* what matters in our lessons.

For those reasons, instead of solely teaching the technical aspects of reading and piano playing skills (Dilkes, 1998; Kanellopoulos, 1999), I focus my piano lessons on evoking the true spirit of the word 'play'—'pleien,' an old Dutch word, meaning 'to dance, leap for joy, rejoice, be glad' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 974).

Just as a child naturally experiences a 'babbling' stage in language and music learning (Brown, 1987; Goelman, Andersen, Anderson, Gouzouasis, Kendrick, Kindler, Porath, & Koh, 2003; Gouzouasis, 1992; Holahan, 1984, 1987), we need time and encouragement to enable young children to freely explore, experiment, and create "music babble" (Gouzouasis, 1991, p. 49; Gouzouasis, 1992, p. 16) in their early stages of learning to play the piano. Piano learning for young children requires as much unstructured free play that includes, supports, and nurtures their ever-changing interests, ideas, and needs in exploring music and piano playing. Through drawing, stories, conversations, singing, improvisations, and everything else that capture their imagination, children can explore, play, and express their ideas, emotions, and music that are meaningful to them and their experiences. Creating music-babble through piano playing are our moments of self-exploration and play, a developmentally critical stage that is invaluable to children's piano learning process.

In other words, at an early age, children learn to *play* the piano, not *study* the piano (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 406). By fostering a student's curiosity, creativity, and love for sound exploration, piano playing, and making music together, play, and imagination can become an integral part of the learning experiences (Berger & Cooper, 2003; Erickson, 1950; Frost, 1985; Goelman et al. 2003; Latta, 2013; Littleton, 1989; Parten, 1932; Singer & Singer, 1990; Stamou, 2001a; Swanwick, 1988; Vygotsky, 2004).



Photograph 19: A little Budgie bird drawing as a reminder for our curved hand positions

Lesson 2: Listening to children's unique, individual ways of playing the piano

As Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2006) say, "Every child has real-world experiences, and ideas become meaningful as a result of the events that happen in particular ways to each individual" (p. 22). In other words, the particularity of the ways in which we encounter, interact, and experience music and piano playing greatly affects children's piano learning processes.

Although the development of strong music literacy (Gouzouasis, 1994) and techniques are important aspect of the piano lessons, I found that valuing what children had to say, what they wanted to do, or how they thought about music and piano playing are more critical to their piano learning experiences. In our lessons, it is not always possible for us to be playing the piano at all times. My students have many things to say. They have endless questions. They have stories that need to be shared. They have ideas that require exploration.

Our lessons cannot be only about the music and piano playing. Our conversations need to move beyond the 'topics' and 'lessons' that I have in mind for them. That is why I give my students my full, undivided attention to what they have to say, feel, and think about all the things that capture their curiosities, interests, and wonder. No matter what I may have 'prepared' and 'planned' for the day, I give precedence to what children wish to share with me at any given time. I remind myself that listening to my students is as important as listening to them play the piano.

Moreover, building a relation of care and trust for one another takes time (Noddings, 2012, p. 774), and part of this process needs to include all the things that my students may wish to share with me. The stories that they want to tell, the little 'gifts' that they bring, and all the questions, ideas, and unique, individual ways of playing the piano call for my caring attention, response, and enthusiasm. How teachers and parents think, feel, and respond to their expressed

needs, interests, and ideas matter to young children. That is why it is critical that we have the willingness to sincerely accept our students' ways of being, and to place great value in enabling them to grow and develop at their own paces (Hua, 2012, p. 70).

With those ideas in mind, I place great importance and value on a *listening pedagogy* (Clark & Moss, 2001; Egan, 2009; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Hua, 2012; Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 2001, 2003) in exploring music and piano playing with young children. In describing one of the 14 facets of listening as a pedagogical practice, Rinaldi (2001) explains that listening is the "basis for any learning relationship" (p. 3). As a teacher, that idea suggests that one of the true pedagogical ways of being with my students begins with listening to one another (see Davies, 2014). I need to recognize beauty in all the things that capture my students' interests, curiosities, and wonder for piano playing. The ways in which I listen, react, respond, and value all the things that are meaningful for them will greatly shape and influence their attitudes, understandings, and appreciation for music and piano playing.

Also, the process of music making and piano playing needs to be co-constructed. Listening to each other, both musically and verbally, plays a critical role in young children's experiences of learning to play the piano. In acknowledging children as an active participant and contributor in their own learning (Dewey, 1938, p. 72), I practice teaching as a collaborative act, a give-and-take process whereby both teachers and students become co-learners through sharing their life experiences with one another.

Lesson 3: Piano teaching as improvisation

There are many 'moments' in our lessons when I need to put aside the assumed responsibilities of 'teaching' music and piano playing. In being with young children, my lesson 'planning' doesn't always work out in the ways that I imagined or hoped for. The process of

teaching the piano needs flexibility and spontaneity because children always have their own ways of exploring music and piano playing. They bring stories, ideas, and questions that do not necessarily relate to piano playing. No matter how much I 'prepare' and 'plan' for the lessons, I always need to adjust, change, and respond to their immediate interests, questions, and ways of 'being' in any given moment.

For those reasons, I practice piano pedagogy as an "interstice, an invitation, and an improvisation that explores being in the world" (Meyer, 2010, p. 96). Just as Aoki (1990/2004) envisioned a "curriculum improvisation" (p. 369) for educators and curriculum planners, I also started thinking of possibilities for a *pedagogical improvisation* in my approaches to exploring music and piano playing with young children.

As a *piano teacher-improviser*, I can be mindful of the ongoing life and experiences of my students as we explore music and piano playing together. By practicing a *planned* improvisational approach, as opposed to the "planless improvisation" (Dewey, 1938, p. 28) – in teaching and learning that encourages children's own unique, individual ways of playing the piano – I am learning to negotiate between their ideas, thinking, and ways of piano playing with the composers' musical languages as represented in the printed scores (see Young, 2005, p. 282). By fostering my students' "critico-creative thinking" (Greene, 1984, p. 127) skills as musicians, I wish to help them become more conscious of their own thoughts, performance, and interpretations about music.

To engender more confidence in their capacities and to trust themselves as learners, thinkers, and creators (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 275), I introduce piano playing in a way that invites young children to critically engage in a dialogue about their own ways of imagining music. In sharing a reflective dialogical practice with my students (Freire, 1970/2005), I guide

them to create and make conscious, interpretive decisions about their own ways of understanding music. I encourage them to actively listen and voice their own creative and musical interpretations about the music that they play. By enabling them to have confidence and freedom to express their own creativity, imagination, and critical thinking, I entrust the improvisational process of approaching piano teaching and learning as an "act of creation and re-creation" (p. 89).

Lesson 4: The role of 'extra' musical learning in piano lessons

My young piano students constantly move around in our studio space. Sometimes, they sit on the floor to play with a toy piano, a xylophone, or a little African hand drum. Other times, they walk around in our room to ask questions about all the drawings on the walls. There are also days when they like to hide underneath the piano or behind the curtains. One time, we even built a fortress with all the instruments in our room to create a very special, secret hiding place.

Photograph 20: Playing a toy piano on the floor

Photograph 21: A secret hiding place built with instruments

The space and time wherein children learn to play the piano extends beyond the instrument. Children need ownership over the space and time where they engage with music making, and I learned that providing opportunities for establishing their own unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano needed to be prioritized over the lesson plans and requirements. Young students need to move around the piano studio to explore various musical activities and experiences. For them, learning to play the piano requires space and time for them to freely explore their ideas, questions, and interests that spontaneously emerge in the lessons.

As a result, our lessons include much more then simply learning to play the notes, reading music notation, and developing strong piano playing techniques. Playing with a toy piano, making a secret hiding place with the instruments, drawing, sharing stories, and carrying on conversations about everything else that matter at any given moment are all natural part of the piano learning process.

* * *

I respect all of my students' contributions whether they are directly, indirectly, or completely (un)related to music and piano playing. I take time with all the conversations and the 'extra' musical exploration in our lessons (see Neelly, 2001, p. 36). I keep in mind that what may seemingly have nothing to do with music and piano playing may in fact be a great deal to do with the child's reality, and developing a sense of well-being through respect and empathy (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 14). I understand that providing children with flexible options in the ways in which they use the space for music making, including the possibilities for temporarily removing themselves from the lesson activities could greatly benefit their natural learning process of exploring with musical materials (see Kooistra, 2013, p. 269).

However, what a piano teacher or a parent may think is meaningful in piano lessons often overshadows children's interests, curiosities, and their own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 10). In my experiences, many of the non-piano related activities – or 'extra musical' learning (i.e., knowledge and meanings gained through sharing stories, questions, conversations, and drawings) – that takes place at a young child's piano lesson were not always valued and encouraged.

In contrast, according to the literature in the sociology of childhood (Barrett, 2003; Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002), valuing and validating the child's ideas, their conversations about life and piano playing, and their musical expressions are considered equally important. As Griffin (2011) explains, "Children are important informants who open the window for adults to see that childhood is both a social and cultural construction" (p. 6). In other words, a piano lesson for a young child is as much a social experience as it is a musical experience (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 14). As such, I agree with Iorio (2006) in that the "voices of children [is] a space where imagination can thrive" (p. 281).

In addition, many researchers recognize children's abilities to learn at a greater length and depth in subjects that interested them over a long period of time (Berger & Cooper, 2003; Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, Hamby, Raab, & McLean, 2001; Elkind, 2007; Kooistra, 2013; Louis, 2009; Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010; Stinson, 2002; Tinworth, 1997). I, too, found that my young students richly invested in their own ideas when given the time and opportunity. They engaged more meaningfully with piano playing especially when our music connected to their interests, curiosities, and life experiences.

As Berger and Cooper (2003) observed, my students also enjoy returning to the same 'play' over the many weeks (and months) when they are engaged in topics and activities that

fascinate them. As described in my piano teaching and learning stories in the earlier section of the dissertation, in the first few months of their lessons some of my students needed to draw pictures of all the characters that they liked from the movies and cartoons, including all of their favorite dolls and toys. Other students had to spend many months reading the storybooks, working on 'music math,' or playing the piano in the dark. In my studio, there are students who always insist that they only play the two or three of their favorite pieces, and there are others who never want to repeat the same song ever again.

However, children's ideas evolve with complexity when given time, space, and opportunities to explore, invest, and direct their learning (Kooistra, 2013, p. 277). It is important for young children to move back and forth between piano playing and anything else that capture their interests, curiosities, and questions. It is very common for young children to make quick changes and transitions from one activity to another (Campbell, 2010; Dewey, 1902; Kooistra, 2013).

For us, piano playing is not always continuous. Many times, we need to stop in between the notes to talk about all the things that they wish to share with me. Often times, there are days when we don't even play the song from the beginning to the end. We simply move on to another piece or to a different activity without ever finishing what we started. After playing few notes of a melody, we might talk about what happened on the day at the school or playground.

Sometimes, my students interrupt their piano playing to tell me how much they like my sparkling earrings or a ring that I have on for the day. Other times, they show me their new wiggly teeth or a flower that they picked on their way to our piano lesson.

Photograph 22: A flower from my student

However, what may appear as quick transitions or changes in children's attention spans, behaviors, and activities may in fact be connected to their own purposes and meanings (Kooistra, 2013, p. 274). In other words, as music teachers (and parents), we are not always perceptive of the 'extra' musical learning because we may not think of the overall experience of learning to play the piano as an unfolding story (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 10).

From writing stories about my piano teaching, I also realized that I was often unaware of the story arc that threaded my students' behaviors, and, as a result, I recognized that I have at times mistakenly redirected their attention and participation away from their self-initiated activities due to my misunderstanding of what may have been going on (see Kooistra, 2013).

When having conversations, drawing pictures, or engaging in any other 'extra' musical activities in our lessons, I found that my mind was often preoccupied with trying to constantly relate my students' moving interests, questions, ideas, stories, and drawings back to the music and piano playing. As a result, I became aware that there were times when I falsely interrupted or redirected children's questions, ideas, and stories in my efforts to avert their attention from what they wanted to explore and talk about in the moment.

But, as Elkind (2007) noted, it is vitally important to support and encourage all the self-directed activities by my students (pp. 92-93). Although those activities may at times appear to be meaningless and/or unrelated to piano playing, they may have a greater purpose, significance, and meanings for young children (pp. 92-93).

For those reasons, I am learning to attend to the present moment, and to embrace the flow of our piano lessons (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 11). When my students tell me their stories, I listen wholeheartedly. When they ask me questions, I encourage them to explore many possibilities. When they move away from the piano to search for the other instruments or to start drawing, I take these moments as opportunities for new discoveries. I remind myself that whatever that my students may wish to share with me at the time is when it matters deeply.

What may seem 'irrelevant' and 'distractive' in one moment could incite new ideas, directions, and possibilities that I couldn't have imagined. My students teach me that there are many ways to learn to play the piano. They humble me with their creative and imaginative ways of thinking about music and piano playing.

Video 5: Playing with the 'other' instruments

Lesson 5: The value of singing and movement in piano learning

The role of the bodily movements in music making and piano playing is another important aspect of the learning process. There is an extensive body of literature on the importance of the movement in early childhood music education, and many educators and researchers consider children's bodily responses to be inseparable from their musical experiences (Andress, 1973, 1980, 1989, 1991, 1998; Boorman, 1969, 1973; Burton, 2000; Campbell, 1998, 2007, 2010; Custodero, 2005; Flohr & Persellin, 2011; Gordon, 2003; Gouzouasis, 1991, 1992; Gray & Percival, 1962; Jordan-DeCarbo & Galliford, 2011; Joyce, 1973; Marsh & Young, 2006; Metz, 1989; Moorehead & Pond, 1941; Temmerman, 2000; Valerio, Reynolds, Bolton, Taggart, & Gordon, 1998; Weikert, 1987/2000, 1989, 1997, 2003a, 2003b; Young, 2003).

I first learned about the important connection between music and movement from taking the early childhood music education courses, and elementary music curriculum and pedagogy seminars during my doctoral studies (see Gouzouasis, 2003). In those classes, I was introduced to creative music and movement activities, singing and dancing games, and the basics of various approaches to teaching music in the elementary school from a holistic, experiential process oriented pedagogy that emphasizes the elements of speech, rhythm, movement, dance, and song.

In all the years that I was teaching piano, I never considered the importance of singing and movement activities in piano lessons. Before I started my graduate studies, I wasn't aware of the value and significance of experiential approaches to piano teaching and learning. When introducing new music, we either listened to the recordings or I would play the pieces for my students. We then started to 'read' the notes one hand at a time until my students were ready to try playing the piece hands together. While we talked a lot 'about' the music and its possible meanings through analyzing the score (see Byrne, 2005), I never used to integrate any singing and movement activities.

Since learning about the music and movement activities for the preschool and elementary classroom, my students and I have been exploring music and piano playing through singing, chanting, movement, listening, and improvisation. In the beginning stages of piano playing, we no longer use a series of piano method books.

Rather, we first learn to sing and play the melodies by rote. While we sing and play we feel the steady beat. Instead of focusing our attention to 'reading' the notes, and trying to play the piano immediately, we make more efforts to audiate the music (see Gordon, 2003). I also encourage them to make up new words, improvise with a variety of melodic and rhythmic patterns, including movements and dances to match our piano playing. As a result, we have

many versions of *Hot Cross Buns*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, *Twinkle Little Star*, and all the other songs that we like to play. For us, there are endless variations in the ways in which we explore, understand, and interpret music.

My teaching practices have become more enriched through singing, dancing, moving, chanting, and improvising with my students while also integrating other arts (i.e., drawing and story reading/writing) into our exploration of music and piano playing. We now move beyond the keys on the piano in our lessons. We enjoy mixing piano learning with many possibilities.

As we happily sing our songs, move to the rhythm, read and write stories, and make drawings about the music that we are learning to sing and play (see Kenney, 2009), my students and I are always in search for more creative, artful, meaningful, and playful ways of connecting with music and piano playing. We are learning to expand our piano playing experiences through movement, stories, drawings (see Han, 2016; Elkoshi, 2002; Southcott & Cosaitis, 2015), invented notation (see Barrett, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2004; Gromko, 1994; Upitis, 1990, 1992), improvisation, and composition (see Barrett, 2006; Burnard, 2000; Dilkes, 1998; Kratus, 1991; Stamou, 2001a), as well as anything else that captivate our imagination, creativity, wonder, and love for playing the piano.

Photograph 23: Marching to my piano playing

Lesson 6: The role of a teacher in children's piano learning

For young children, forming a lifelong bond with piano playing is not only a process that occurs *in* and *through* the music – it is formed *in*, *with*, and *through* the piano teacher. Thus, as a piano teacher, I play a critical role in my students' experiences of exploring music and piano playing (Davidson, Moore, Sloboda, & Howe, 1998; Howe & Sloboda, 1991; Marsh & Craven, 1991).

My students' experiences of learning to play the piano are greatly influenced and supported by the type of relationship that I develop with them. My ways of 'being with' young children has the capacities to motivate or discourage their curiosities, joy, and growth in exploring music and piano playing. The choices that I make of the learning materials and repertoire (Duke et al., 1997; Renwick & McPherson, 2002; Sloboda & Davidson, 1996), including my verbal and gestural behaviors (Duke & Henninger, 1998, 2002; Simones, Schroeder, & Rodger, 2015) in our lessons greatly impact their piano learning experiences.

In fact, in a study that investigated the role of key characteristics of teachers in the development of students' musical abilities, Davidson et al. (1998) discovered that the students who had higher achievement and greater success in acquiring musical skills viewed their teachers as more "friendly, chatty, and relaxed" (p. 155) than the students who decided to give up on their music lessons (p. 156). Their findings support earlier studies, which confirmed that successful music learners regarded their teachers as warm and friendly individuals, and that a teacher's personal characteristics played a critical role in their learning processes (see Howe & Sloboda, 1991; Davidson et al., 1998; Sosniak, 1985).

Based on my teaching experiences and the research literature on the importance of the characteristics of music teachers on the learning progress of young instrumentalists, I place a

high priority on creating a relaxed, friendly, and pedagogically caring relationship with my students (Davidson et al., 1998, p. 156). I seek to provide creative learning spaces and situations wherein my students can be encouraged to freely direct their own piano playing.

As a teacher, I keep in mind that there can be no singular approach to piano teaching and learning that will work for all children because each student has his/her own ways of learning (Bartel & Cameron, 2007; Gordon, 2003; Hannon & Trainor, 2007; Kooistra, 2013; Welch, 1998; Young, 2003). In each lesson, every moment calls for individuality, creativity, imagination, and flexibility for all the different ways in which children can learn about music and piano playing. There is no one 'correct' or 'right' way of playing the piano. No two piano learning experiences are ever the same. Rather, piano teaching and learning is an ongoing process of shared meaning making.

Photograph 24: A drawing of my student (right) and me (left)

Lesson 7: The impact of parent support in children's piano lessons

Establishing a pedagogically caring teacher-student connection is not enough in fully supporting a child's musical journey. In the early stages of piano learning, parents also play a critical role in nurturing their experiences of exploring music and piano playing (Macmillan, 2004; Stamou, 2001b; Upitis, Abrami, Brook, & King, 2017).

In a study that analyzed the teacher-student-parent interactions in instrumental learning, Creech (2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012) confirmed that the reciprocity among all teachers, students, and parents produced the most effective teaching and learning results (2012, p. 392). In that study, the highest music attainment levels were found with teachers and parents who were "receptive, caring, and yet supportive of autonomous learning" (p. 392).

Based on those findings, Creech concluded that a "teacher-student-parent partnership" (p. 329) is key to successful teaching and learning in one-to-one instrumental lessons, and that both teachers *and* parents need to work together in maintaining "reciprocal communication, mutual respect, and child-centered goals" (p. 392).

In my experiences, I have been working with two different types of relationships with my students' parents. On the one hand, I have parents who fully support our own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing. With them, I feel that we have a trusting, "harmonious" (p. 392) relationship wherein I can openly communicate with the parents about everything that concerns our lessons. They place great trust and faith in their children's creativity, imagination, and curiosities about music and all the things that they wish to explore with me as invaluable aspects of our piano teaching and learning.

With those parents, I feel encouraged to explore, experiment, and take time with everything that is (un)related to piano playing as we move freely from one idea and activity to

another. They recognize the importance and value of nurturing teachers' and students' conversations and explorations – through piano improvisation, story reading, and drawing – that may seem unfocused, distracted or irrelevant to music as a natural process of learning to play the piano. They engage with their children's interests, questions, and stories, and actively seek involvement and collaboration with me to bring more joy, happiness, and appreciation for music and piano playing.

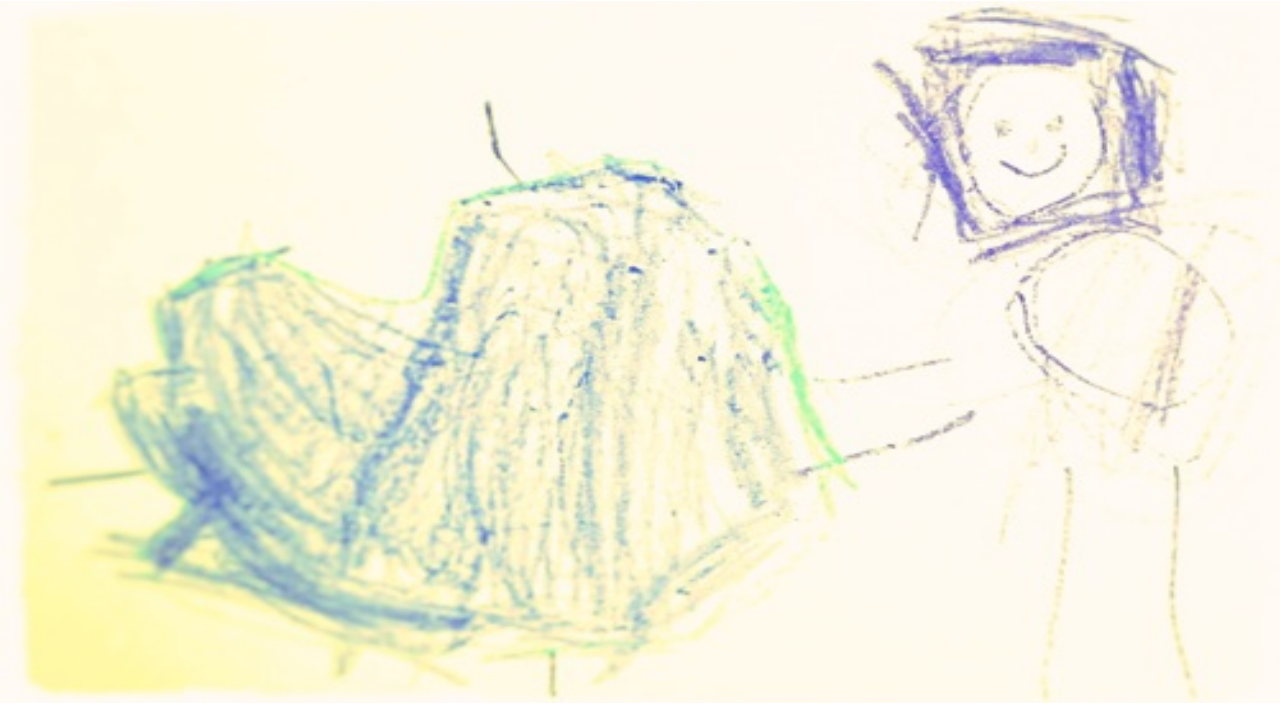
On the other hand, I also work with parents who have very different ideas, goals, and purposes of piano learning. While I may have a strong connection and trusting relationship with their children, I feel disconnected and pressured by those parents who insist on more teacher-centered, traditional approaches to piano lessons. They want faster results in their children's development of piano playing techniques and music reading skills. They feel that we are wasting our time if we are not playing the piano for the full lesson. Whenever we spend our time talking, sharing stories, or anything else that doesn't seem to directly concern music and piano playing, they interrupt their children and demand that we refocus on 'learning' to play the piano.

Because of those parents, some of my students have no choice but to concentrate all of their attention to the limited number of repertoire that is required by the exam. There is no time to explore a variety of genres and styles of music. We are expected to learn the pieces as fast as possible so that we can move on to the next level.

At times, I also meet parents who even discourage their children's improvised piano playing. They regard our improvisations as unnecessary. For them, music that we create and improvise on the piano is just 'noise,' and they view it as improper and distracting. When we play the piano very loudly, they cringe their faces, and ask that we learn to play the piano more 'properly.' When we spend time making up new melodies, they tell us that we are 'fooling

around too much,' and that we should focus on learning to play more 'real' piano music. They never ask about whether or not their children are enjoying the lessons. Instead of thinking about the children's lifelong learning and love for music and piano playing, they are more concerned about developing stronger technical skills and achieving higher performance grades. They place more value in seeing the immediate 'results' and 'effects' of their lessons. All they want to know is if, and when, they can be ready for more piano exams.

However, while some of the parents may think of our conversations and piano improvisations as interruptions and disturbances to our lessons, they are an important aspect of learning to play the piano for young children. What parents may hear as random 'noise,' children cherish it as their creations. Noise may startle or irritate adults, but young children happily crave it and thrive in it. For them, noise is something quite wonderful and desirable. Noise makes their happy notes. When improvising freely on the piano, it is their time for joyful music.



Photograph 25: A drawing of my student happily playing the piano

* * *

Children love to create '*b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l*' noise. They enjoy sharing their own music. Noise is something that they are very proud of. It is part of who they *are*, how they *feel*, and how they *express* themselves through piano playing. For young students, noise is play. It is an exploration, and an adventure. It is a journey of sound discovery. Most of all, noise is fun – *a lot of fun* for young children.

In that sense, noise is a perception. It is a biased personal point of view. Many children hear, understand, and express piano playing very differently from the expectations, assumptions, and ideals of their parents. While some parents may dismiss their children's music-making and sound exploration as 'too much noise,' free play is vital in creating a learning environment that encourages and supports musical development (Barrett, 2016, p. 51). Unfortunately, I feel that many of my young piano learners are being denied of the opportunities to play freely with musical materials and sound exploration (Addison, 1991, p. 212).

Similarly, de Vries (2007) also found that the parents who participated in his study viewed their children's free musical play as irrelevant and incidental. In writing data as poetry, he explored a variety of music opportunities that parents provided for them at home. In one of the research poems titled, *Noise*, he focused on the importance of free musical play for children, especially the significance and value of the parent-child relationship in their musical development (p. 25). In discussing about the poems with the parents, de Vries learned that they initially viewed their children's music making as disruptive 'noise' (p. 25). For them, it was "non-music" (p. 25).

However, after reexamining their initial reactions and views, those parents eventually came to a realization that from their children's perspectives it was much more than just 'noise,'

and that their free play was an important process of exploring music (p. 25). Although it took them some time to finally recognize the value and significance of their children's 'noise'/'music' making, they came to a conclusion that their support and encouragement played a vital role in children's musical exploration and development (p. 25). As one of the parents stated, "[I]t's not just noise... It just takes a while to realize this, to really listen" (p. 25).

Based on my experiences and research literature, the ways in which teachers and parents participate in children's music making heavily influence their experiences of learning to play the piano. Establishing and maintaining open, trusting, and supportive relationships with my students *and* their parents have become one of my priorities in developing more meaningful and positive piano teaching and learning experiences.

According to Macmillan (2004), parental involvement varies from family to family (p. 309). Although her study could not fully support the earlier evidence from Howe and Sloboda (1991), wherein more parental involvement demonstrated higher student achievement, a teacher's encouragement of parental support nonetheless indicated positive outcomes in making a contribution to a child's progress on learning to play a musical instrument (p. 310).

Encouraged by their findings, I am learning to collaborate with all parents in fostering more creativity, enjoyment, and confidence in my students' own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing. Instead of viewing children's musical play as undesirable 'noise' making, I invite them to reconsider freely moving stories, ideas, and questions that come from students to be a rich source of inspiration and foundation for new ways of imaging, understanding, and making connections with piano playing. I constantly reach out to those parents who are reluctant and unsure about the value and significance of children's playful ways of exploring music and piano playing. In echoing de Vries (2007), I make every effort to help

them see, hear, and understand that children's improvisations, free piano play, and all the 'extra' musical learning in our lessons are "only noise if [they] want [them] to be noise" (p. 24).

Lesson 8: Value of piano teachers' autoethnographies

For Bochner and Ellis (2016), autoethnography is a way of life that calls for a continuous process of search into one's "being and meaning" (p. 69). An autoethnographic way of living calls upon me to commit to everyday practices of teaching, researching, and writing. An autoethnographic living cultivates awareness of who I am as a piano teacher, and who I have yet to be (Greene, 1984, p. 123).

Writing my life stories of piano teaching created openness, curiosities, and possibilities to all the things that my students wished to share with me. The creative process of writing about my life as a piano teacher enabled me to live meaningful moments, and to think of more meaningful ways of inviting my students to participate in their own musical learning. It moved me to "dialogue about what is it to be human, to grow, to *be*" (Greene, 1977, p. 123).

In writing stories, I gained renewed sense of wonder, respect, and appreciation for my students' "wonderful ideas" (Duckworth, 2001, p. 181) about their own ways of learning to play the piano. Thinking about our piano lessons encouraged me to be more mindful of each child's freely moving stories, ideas, and questions. It inspired me to continue researching for more ways of imagining, understanding, and making connections with music and piano playing. In writing my piano teaching and learning stories, I examined who I *am* and who I can *be* as a piano teacher. I found a pedagogic space, place, and time for me to reflect on my questions, ideas, and hopes for creating more meaningful piano learning experiences for my students.

In the creative process of writing my stories, I began rediscovering my commitments to the continuous process of piano teaching and learning. Engaging in an autoethnographic inquiry

enabled me to approach piano teaching with more "attentiveness, care, and openness to possibility" (Custodero, 2005, p. 51) that includes all aspects of being in pedagogical presence with my students (Hill, 2006; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

Autoethnography for me is an ongoing pedagogical process of discovery. It inspires me to lead creative, artful ways of practicing one's musical being and meaning. By writing creatively about my questions, ideas, and aspirations as a piano teacher, I am becoming more aware of the improvisatory, fleeting moments that I share with my young students.

Writing draws my attention to the beauties in our everyday moments that we share with one another. It helps me to find more space, time, and place for me to explore, reflect, and practice more artful ways of piano teaching. Writing about my everydayness as a piano teacher encourages me to continue asking more questions about what it means to be a piano teacher. It moves me closer to the "presence of the beingness of teaching" (Aoki, 1992/2004, p. 191).

Based on those experiences, I propose the notion of *autoethnography as living pedagogy* (Aoki, 2003/2004; Banks & Banks, 2000; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 407). For me, writing about my piano teaching and learning has been a pedagogical journey because engaging in the process of writing the *self* and the *other* teaches me about my students, as well as about myself as a piano teacher. It invites me to draw my attention to the shared moments with my students. It calls upon me to be mindful of my piano teaching and learning. It encourages me to question, reflect upon, and seek for more creative, educative (Dewey, 1938) ways of thinking about music and piano playing.

Writing stories about my experiences as a piano teacher inspires me to continue learning, and to become more mindful of my own biased views and approaches to teaching piano, as well as how young children experience piano playing. In examining my teaching practices through

story writing, I am constantly regaining new understandings about my own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. It challenges me to continue seeking new pedagogical ways of bringing more meaningful piano playing and learning for young children.

Autoethnography is didactic in a way that it teaches us about the learners while also teaching us about ourselves as teachers and teacher-learners (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 408). Stories advance and enhance empathetic forms of understanding (Eisner, 1997, p. 264), and they possess the potential to enable piano teachers to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences. In sharing their lived experiences through creative forms of storytelling, piano teachers may be able to develop a highly descriptive and evocative praxis (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 408).

Sharing piano teachers' autoethnographies can inspire us to question, evoke, and bring insights to new, creative ways of teaching and learning piano. When I reflect upon my experiences with my students through stories, it provokes me to ask questions about the nature of music for a young child. It engages me in a reflective-reflexive process that leads me to think about what it means to play the piano, what it means to learn music as a young child, how young children acquire basic music skills (i.e., singing, moving to a steady beat), and what are developmentally appropriate teaching and learning strategies for beginning piano with young children. Writing stories lead me to new ways of considering and learning possibilities to those questions.

For those reasons, I wish to invite other piano teachers to consider sharing their piano teaching and learning stories. Like Jordan (2002) – who sought to connect with other musicians through storytelling – I aspire to connect with other piano teachers through pedagogical autoethnographies (Banks & Banks, 2000; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015).

In writing about our experiences as piano teachers, we can begin a new journey toward practicing more meaningfully pedagogical ways of exploring music and piano playing with our students. In examining our lives as piano teachers, we can gain a renewed sense of questioning, curiosity, and wonder for teaching, writing, researching, and piano playing.

Through stories, we can evoke nuanced understandings of the complex relationships and teaching/learning processes that occur in our piano lessons. In examining our everydayness with young children, we can create pedagogic communities of reflective, reflexive, piano teacher-researchers. By reflecting on who we are as teachers, our relationships to our students and their parents, we can engage, shape, and transform technique-oriented and grade-driven piano methods and approaches into more student-oriented, self-directed, creative journeys (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015, p. 411). We can learn to teach with newness and beauty, a quality of awareness for children's own unique, individual ways of learning to play the piano.

Coda: 38+ ways of learning to play the piano

In closing this final chapter of my dissertation, I return to my students' ways exploring music and piano playing. As Dewey (1938) said, "No two [students] are exactly alike" (p. 56). What they wish to play, create, and learn matters in our lessons. How they want to explore music and piano playing need to direct our learning. All children have their own ideas about what matters in their lives. They all have their ways of playing the piano. Every child is unique in the ways they think, experience, and learn.

With those ideas in mind, I wish to encourage other piano teachers to consider placing value and importance of listening to our students. I hope that some of my piano teaching and learning stories will inspire others to nurture, support, and celebrate children's stories, ideas, and interests about music, including everything else that brings them joy and happiness in life. In

honoring their ideas, questions, and ways of playing the piano with open mind and heart, I believe that we can nurture more beautiful, playful, and meaningful piano learning experiences for our students.

In writing about our everydayness with our students, we can join the ongoing conversations about what it means to teach and learn. By focusing on children's curiosities, questions, and wonder about music and life, we can commit to piano pedagogy that calls upon teachers and students to be attentive, to question, to ask, and to listen in new ways.

In welcoming our students' willingness to share what is important and meaningful in their lives with us, we can place trust in their own unique, individual ways of exploring music and piano playing. In developing a deeper awareness of all the possibilities in children's ideas, questions, and curiosities, we can learn alongside our students as we embrace teaching and learning as a reciprocal, emergent process (Custodero, 2005, p. 47).

With our students, we can share music and piano playing as an ever-present living practice, a joyful part of our life journeys.

Photograph 26: ‘I love piano’ drawing

What *is* piano playing?

For Kieran, piano is about music math with sounding numbers.

For Zoe, piano playing is about letting it go.

For Ashley, piano is time for play.

For Hael, music brings close friends together.

For Lysander, music keeps going and going.

For Jahan, learning to play the piano is so easy.

For Cameron, music is quiet stillness.

For Joy, piano is always inviting.

For Chelsea, piano learning is about happy don't-know(s) and not-sure(s).

For Tony, making music should always be like the Monster Boogie.

For Lily, music happens when her little brother begins his bouncy dance.

For Emilia, piano is about singing and dancing with her tiny little ballerina fingers.

For Kenny, piano playing is something that he can do all on his own.

For Julie, piano is fun only when accompanied by a guitar.

For Sarah, music is everything she loves.

For Minu, playing the piano is about making beautiful noise.

For Jenny, piano is flowing with happiness.

For Anthony, piano learning is about doing your best and never ever giving up.

For Jamie, piano play needs to be filled with endless *Yay*'s.

For Alexandra, music reminds her of all the Winx fairies with magical powers.

For Roman, piano play includes Mario, Luigi, and all other little mushroom Toads.

For Markus, music is everywhere.

For Valeria, piano playing is full of laughter and flying fingers.

For Sammy, music is filled with blue monkeys.

For Josie, piano playing is shining shyness.

For Chloe, music is filled with I-love-you's, kisses and hugs.

For Charlotte, playing the piano is happy, fun playtime with her little sister.

For Raina, music is poetry made up of colorful musical haiku.

For Katy, the process of learning to play the piano is full of untold, never ending stories.

For Kathleen, music is full of sounding mystery.

For Lilian, piano playing is about sharing our songs with the little *Fuzzy*.

For Brenda, piano lesson is a great way to begin her weekend.

For Ben, piano brings endless smiles.

For Jessica, playing the piano is something that she likes to do everyday.

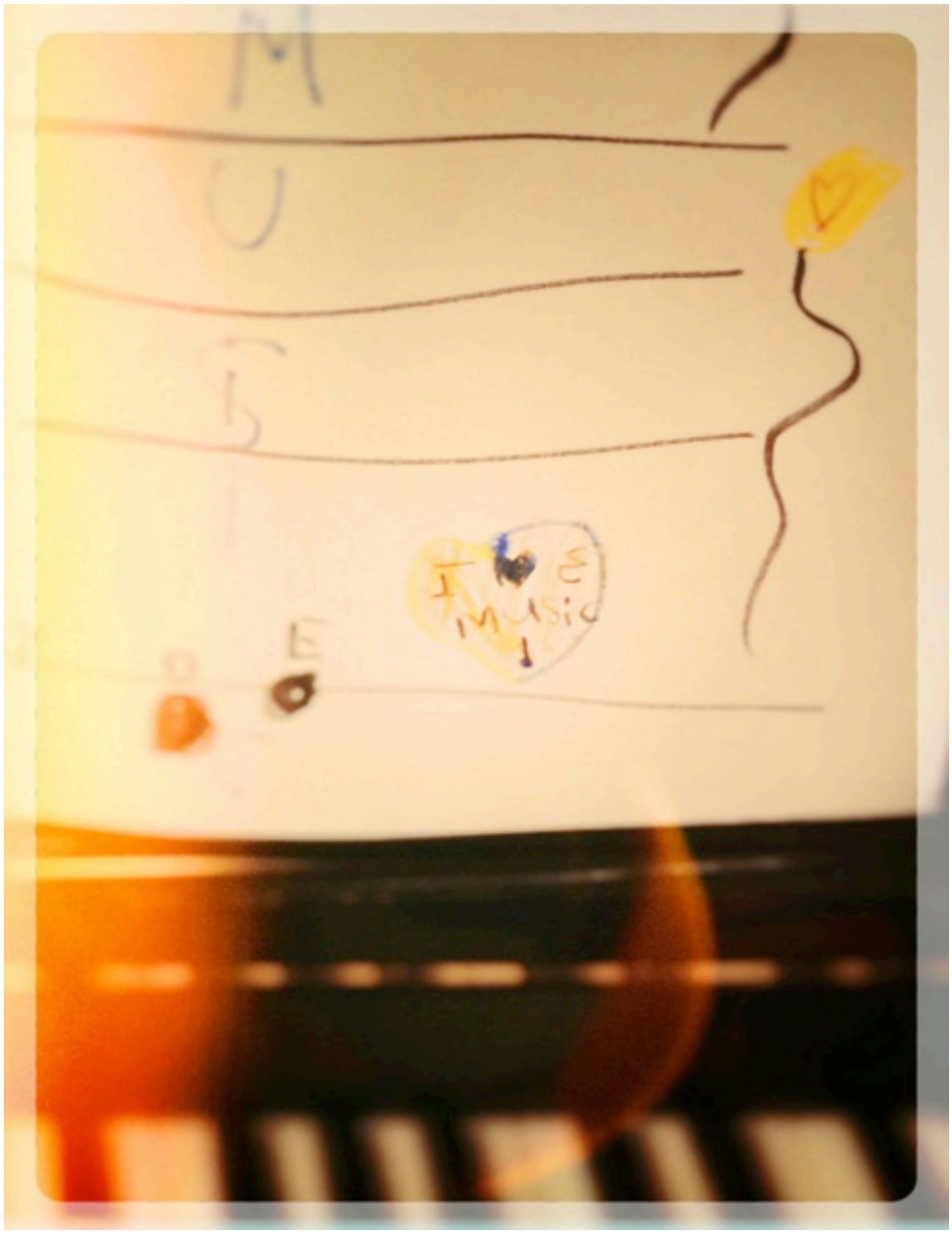
For Joe, making up new songs brings new dreams.

For Emily, piano time is quiet nocturne over and over again.

For Kay, music is always bubbling fun.

And, for...

Piano playing *is*...



Photograph 27: ‘I love music’ drawing

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