

MAKING NEW FRIENDS: AN EXPERIENCE REPORT ON THE USE OF THE GROUP PIANO METHODOLOGY WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES FROM THE ASSOCIAZIONE NUOVI AMICI IN RECANATI (ITALY)

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Abstract

This study focuses on reflecting on the benefits and advantages of group piano teaching using the traditional American methodology for individuals with intellectual disabilities at the *Associazione Nuovo Amici* in Recanati, Macerata, Italy. The qualitative research was based on seven weekly in-person sessions held from January to February 2025, each lasting two hours, and was conducted through the development and application of a social behavior checklist for autism research, adapted by the author. The activities carried out during the sessions with the seven young participants from the institution were selected from various exercises in the textbook *Piano 101*, specifically designed for group piano lessons for teenage and adult beginners, aiming to create and nurture positive and meaningful musical and cultural memories for their human and social development. Based on a participant logbook structured by the author and collaborators from *Associazione Nuovi Amici*, who attended the sessions, it was possible to observe how the group piano teaching methodology positively impacted not only those who wished to learn specific musical contents, but especially in fostering creative, collaborative, and supportive behaviors – essential for a healthy life in a society that still segregates, labels, and marginalizes so many people.

Keywords: *Social collaboration, intellectual disability, group piano.*

1. Introduction

Music is a powerful tool for social inclusion, providing significant benefits that can improve anyone's quality of life, regardless of age. Gonçalves and Cunha (2018, p. 2) argue that it functions as a universal language, facilitating the understanding and expression of ideas and emotions, helping to create semiotic systems that give meaning to an individual's life. This study emerges from a practical group piano teaching experience using a methodology that asserts "music is for everyone," applied to seven young individuals at *Associazione Nuovi Amici* in Recanati, Italy.

The research addresses key guiding questions: How does the group piano methodology engage beginners? Do the proposed activities promote relaxation, fun, focus, self-listening, and listening to others? Do they enhance memory, motor coordination, and social interaction? Do they encourage emotional regulation and non-aggressive communication while stimulating dialogue and shared experiences?

The relevance of this study lies not only in promoting an emerging piano teaching methodology, but also in reinforcing the idea that musical learning is a human right, regardless of cognitive, motor, or social challenges. Full inclusion still faces significant barriers in many cultures, including Italy, where piano teaching remains traditionally conservative.

This research does not focus on the specific learning difficulties of individuals with intellectual disabilities, but examines how group piano methodology can be effective and democratic for beginners and how it can positively impact overall development. Thus, it seeks to demonstrate that music can be a vehicle for inclusion and personal growth, aligned with the belief that everyone has unique potential and limitations. This study contributes to the discussion on the importance of creating inclusive educational spaces where all can share experiences and learn collaboratively.

2. Starting with the piano

Rather than focusing on traditional music theory and notation, this work emphasizes creating a stimulating and playful environment where students can explore the piano keys intuitively, enjoyably, and relaxingly – particularly through improvisation and body percussion games, as advocated by Di Pangia (2020). This approach allows them to connect with their own musicality as well as their emotional and creative experiences.

Improvisation is central to this process, as it promotes personal expression and skill development, serving as a way to "reprogram" musical decision-making. It also fosters a collaborative environment where students express themselves without fear of mistakes, transforming errors into learning opportunities. This approach breaks the idea of competition, as noted by Maria Montessori, and instead encourages cooperation, creating an atmosphere of peace and solidarity – essential values in education.

Music, as a universal language, also plays a key role in peace education, as argued by Vygotsky, who saw language as a tool for organizing reality. Early musical practice should focus on exploration and discovery, prioritizing the experience of playing without the pressure of traditional notation. In the initial stages, traditional sheet music is replaced by pre-reading activities, where students interact with the keyboard playfully without needing theoretical knowledge. Methods such as reference keyboards and pentachord or interval-based exercises are introduced later.

Rhythm, another fundamental component, is taught through word association and body movement. Dalcroze argued that music should be taught through natural body movements, such as walking or dancing, enhancing rhythmic perception in an enjoyable and effective way. This work proposes that well-structured group piano practice, guided by the teacher, can be a powerful tool for musical learning that goes beyond technique, fostering discovery, cooperation, and individual expression.

3. Origins of group piano and method philosophy

The concept of group piano instruction dates back to the 19th century, notably with German musician Bernhard Logier (1777-1846), who believed theory and harmony should be learned directly at the keyboard. While the methodology spread across Europe, it gained traction in the United States in the late 19th century, particularly through Calvin Brainerd Cady's proposal to integrate it into American schools. Cady viewed group teaching as an effective way to develop musicality, critical listening, and musical knowledge by combining instrumental practice, music appreciation, movement, and creativity.

Campitelli and Mendes (2021, p. 2) report that group piano's introduction in American schools was propelled by educators like Thaddeus Giddings and Otto Miessner. In 1925, Columbia University adopted the methodology for higher education, and in 1956, Robert Pace systematized one of the first textbooks on the subject, *Piano for Classroom Music*. Throughout the 20th century, pedagogues like James Lyke, Richard Chronister, and Frances Clark advanced this field. Today, educators such as Lisa Zdechlik (University of Arizona) continue exploring its transformative potential.

A key distinction of group piano is its collaborative, non-competitive learning atmosphere, where students strive for collective beauty and harmony rather than individual perfection. The facilitator must embrace Montessori's principle that love is the most vital force in human development. Thus, all participants – regardless of limitations – can contribute to the group, fostering self-confidence and collective growth.

This methodology transcends musical practice: it nurtures affective communication, conflict resolution, and improves auditory and rhythmic perception. The focus shifts from competition to mutual growth, harmonizing differences to play "in sync" collaboratively.

4. Objectives

This study aims to examine the benefits of group piano instruction via traditional American methodology for beginners, by stimulating the creation of positive, meaningful musical and cultural memories not only for human development, but also for awakening creative, collaborative, and supportive behaviors.

5. Methods

The group piano classes at Associazione Nuovi Amici began on January 13, 2025, at 5 PM, at the association's headquarters. During the first four weeks, the initial focus was observing participants' interaction with the instrument, based on a checklist adapted by the author and used in the research with autistic children, "*Tu, Io e Il Robot*" (You, Me, and the Robot), conducted by Università di Macerata,

Clementoni, and the institution Omphalos in the Marche Region, Italy. Not only the interest in the keyboard but also the behavior during the proposed activities were analyzed. Out of the seven participants, only one showed reluctance to explore the piano, frequently expressing feelings of fear and discomfort.

The lesson structure was designed to balance movement and rest, focus and relaxation, creating a routine to help beginners feel comfortable in the musical environment. Additionally, visual aids—or alternative communication tools—were used, including drawings created by students from the Music Education course at Università di Macerata in December 2024. These visual resources, combined with auditory communication, are essential for beginner students, who often need complementary visual stimuli.

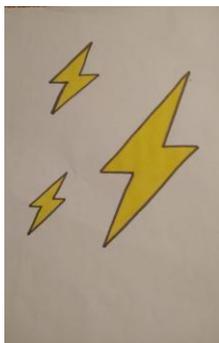
Understanding that each student has a unique way of learning, a flexible approach was adopted, recognizing that the same proposed activity might not be performed identically by everyone. The strategy was personalized according to each participant's needs, aiming to provide creative alternatives to overcome learning barriers.

6. Discussion

Drawings such as lightning bolts were used to signal moments requiring attention. To indicate when students should remain seated during practice, a drawing of a clock was placed on the table, with the instruction that they should not stand up while the symbol was active – this helped create a more inclusive learning environment, respecting each participant's individual needs.

One of the biggest challenges for beginners is keeping a steady pulse in a song or musical piece. To reinforce the idea that we were in a collaborative setting where everyone should "walk hand in hand" at the same tempo, a drawing of a heart was raised whenever someone tended to play faster or slower than the rest of the group. These visual cues were only used until the fourth week, as by the fifth week, all participants were able to make eye contact with the teacher and understand verbal instructions without the need for drawings.

Figure 1. Non-verbal communication.



Movement attention



Heart of the Music



Time to practice

Rhythmic games involving each person's name and words were very helpful for this understanding, as were choreographies using clapping, foot stomping, and spins. These activities were carried out in the middle of the class or when the facilitator noticed signs of fatigue in the group. For beginners, the ideal is to hold shorter classes – 40 minutes long, twice a week – but since the participants lived in different cities, logistical reasons led to the classes being condensed into a single day.

The first suggested activity was drawing their right and left hands, which they could freely color, including numbering the fingers. Except for one participant who initially struggled to approach the piano, everyone else identified him/herself with the proposed task, remaining relaxed, in a playful mood, and attentive to the instructions. They also gave positive feedback through facial expressions and verbal responses.

After finishing their drawings, colorful stickers with finger numbers were placed on the participants' hands—a moment they greatly enjoyed—to help them begin associating their own hands with the drawings.

Figure 2. Right and left hands with finger numbers.



The first piece taught was an exercise on the black keys, adapted from the book *Piano 101*. The sheet music was modified by the facilitator, with letters assigned to finger numbers to help students distinguish long and short notes – without using traditional rhythmic notation. Students explored the piece by singing, clapping, and choreographing movements, with the command "statue" signaling held notes. During keyboard practice, though not all used the correct fingers, half the participants focused on the black keys, and two executed the activity accurately by the second lesson. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with expressions of enjoyment, relaxation, and happiness.

One participant initially resisted, even attempting to leave the class, but this attitude shifted in the second lesson thanks to the facilitator's emotional support. Communication improved, and she began engaging attentively in subsequent sessions. Each lesson included a recap of prior content to reinforce memorization, with significant progress emerging by the fourth week.

By the end of the second session, the black-key activity was completed. Pieces should remain short for beginners' limited focus, though repetition can extend engagement. The second part of the piece was also shared through lyrics. After playing the full piece, students reflected on its character, describing it as "joyful"—a perception reinforced by drawings of the sun, warm colors, oceans, and flowers, plus a mini colorful umbrella added to amplify the mood.

While discussing the concept of a "happy day," one participant asked, "What would a 'sad day' sound like?" Through analogies like rain and melancholy, the group built emotional references. Collective reflection—via verbal/non-verbal communication, dance, singing, and choreography—strengthened musical and social bonds, fostering collaboration over time.

Conflicts emerged in the first month: overlapping conversations or solo practice attempts. Headphones weren't used, as this was an introductory experience with shared keyboards. By week five, individual mediation sessions helped regulate emotions during disputes.

In week three, pairs played simultaneously with the facilitator before full-group play, teaching students to appreciate peers' efforts and give positive feedback. For those without keyboards at home, hand-position diagrams were created. After three weeks, all began taking keyboards home, with many self-initiating practice and improvisation.

Week four introduced the C major position (one finger per white key), using a clock-face diagram (without hands) to associate notes with fingers.

Creative strategies flourished: note-name stickers on keys, musical hopscotch (stepping on note-labeled mats while singing), and physical/vocal/instrumental interplay. By week five, individual moments with the facilitator deepened emotional bonds – e.g., a distracted student motivated by stickers of his interests (food, soccer team *Juventus*), improving his coordination and focus.

Group practice grew more dynamic, including a violinist who enriched the collaborative environment. Initially reluctant to follow the piano method individually, he engaged eagerly when playing with peers. Parents noted marked improvements in their children's coordination and engagement. In just seven weeks, progress was evident: the distracted student, aided by alternating *Juventus*-colored stickers, mastered note positions. Group cohesion strengthened, and students gained confidence in ensemble playing.

The method also improved rhythmic pulse, attention, and peer bonding, fostering a positive learning environment.

Adaptability was key – e.g., practicing silently on unplugged keyboards to imagine sounds while coordinating on black keys. The project's success led to its expansion. One mother shared emotionally that her child, through the piano, was overcoming a fear of animals. The group piano methodology proved effective in nurturing musical skills, emotional growth, and social integration for beginner participants.

7. Conclusion

Educators must move beyond deficit-based perspectives, embracing inclusive approaches that prioritize relational pedagogy and belonging.

At *Nuovi Amici*, activities were social experiences as much as musical ones. Despite technical challenges, participants uniquely contributed to the "musical work," proving that differences create the most beautiful harmonies. Disabilities do not limit the freedom to dream. The group piano methodology—centered on behavior and interpersonal relationships—enhanced emotional regulation, social interaction, motor skills, creativity, and cognitive development.

The experience with the group piano methodology alongside the *Nuovi Amici* led us to the conclusion that the results of the philosophy behind the method are significant, especially regarding behavior, from the very first lessons. It contributes positively to psychological and emotional regulation, adherence to rules and routines, interaction with others and with the group, respect for different viewpoints and opinions, improvement of motor coordination, conflict resolution skills, and the development of an attitude of sharing and collaboration within and with the context in which the participant is inserted.

In the end, the collective performance of the piece, with everyone participating inclusively, conveyed the message that everyone is equally important. The exchange of gestures, smiles, and hugs highlighted the power of unity and the positive impact of feeling part of a group.

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