

The Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

Final Reports - 2018

GROUP-PIANO CO-LEARNING

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What is this research about?

The purpose of this project was co-learning about RPSM group-piano classes in the Jane and Finch locations. The objective of the research was to provide recommendations that would inform and support the content and delivery of RPSM's group-piano classes.

What did the researcher do?

The methodology for this co-learning included observations of classes, feedback from teachers, and a review of best practices from group-piano literature. In May 2018, the researcher observed a total of eight group-piano classes at three locations. The researcher also received data from the minutes/notes from RPSM group-piano teachers' meeting and attended the end-of-year recital in June 2018. The researcher then prepared a workshop for RPSM's professional development week. The title of the workshop was "Multilevel Group-Piano Classes: Content, Method, and Management"; it was held on September 6, 2019. The objective of the workshop was to enable participants to

1. explore management strategies
2. discuss repertoire for cooperative groups
3. explore arrangements of keyboards in group classes

What did the researcher find?

RPSM's group-piano program was well attended with four to six students per class. Teachers had resources such as books, instruments, and technical equipment which facilitated aural and collaborative activities. The researcher was interested in three elements.

- 1) Cooperative groups: types of activities and methods which promote keyboard skills.
- 2) Materials: repertoire for ensemble work for group-piano
- 3) Use of space: arranging the keyboards to facilitate group work

The researcher also observed two challenges of the group classes. The piano lab was mobile, therefore the teacher needs support and or extra time for setting up and pulling down the keyboard stations. The teacher also had no control over the conditions of the rooms; a more controlled environment that is conducive to learning is desirable.

What you need to know

Group-piano classes have been recognized as an established and effective means of providing a well-rounded music foundation for beginning piano students (Benedict, 1994; Bennett, 1972; Cheek, 1999; Enoch, 1974; Fairchild, 1996; Rowe, 1999; Thompson, 1932). There are two basic models of group-piano classes: in the first type there are only one or two keyboards for a group of students; the other type is a "piano lab" model in which each student has a keyboard. RPSM's group-piano classes are "piano labs." RPSM's 2017 program guide describes its group-piano course as one in which "students learn piano technique and basic music theory at their own pace in a group setting (up to 5 students in each class)." During the 2017-2018 school year, there were three advertised locations for group-piano classes in the Jane and Finch area.

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Participants in the follow-up workshop were mostly new to teaching group-piano. After a very lively workshop they expressed an interest in learning more about the following:

- strategies for teaching with limited resources (few pianos, no piano at home, etc.)
- demonstrations of a beginner lesson to get the students engaged
- common challenges of group-piano classes
- techniques and games for young group-piano students
- strategies for classroom management, especially children who are distracting the group

How can you use this research?

The data from this research can inform the teaching practice of group-piano teachers, will be used in workshops on group-piano classes, and provides future topics for further research.

About the researcher

Karen Headlam Cyrus is the research associate for the Helen Carswell Chair at York University. Her research interests include Pan-African children's music repertoires, group-piano pedagogy, community music practices, and intersections between musicianship and second language acquisition. Her exposition on repertoire development was recently published in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Music and Culture* (2019) and her research on community music-making in diasporic contexts has been published in *Carnival: Theory and Practice* (2013) and *MUSICultures* (2014). Her publications for music education include *Music for Big Ants and Little Ants* (1998) and *Caribbean Integrated Music* (2002, 2004). Karen co-founded and is the music director of *T.Mento*, a Toronto-based band that seeks to preserve the musical style of Jamaican mento music. She also gives master classes and workshops on group-piano pedagogy.

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Multi-level classes, group-piano pedagogy

About the Helen Carswell Chair in Community Engaged Research in the Arts

The Helen Carswell Chair represents a partnership between York University and Regent Park School of Music (RPSM). All faculty and graduate students of the university are encouraged to collaborate with RPSM on special projects that are aimed at improving community music programming and curriculum for children in the Jane and Finch neighborhood and beyond.