

***Teaching Piano to Young Children Diagnosed with Autism
Spectrum Disorders***

***“A Study on 'First Steps of a Little Artist'
by Dr. Erman Turkili”***

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Introduction

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder(ASD) may experience difficulty in traditional piano teaching methods. Autism Spectrum Disorder is a condition characterized by difficulties in social and non-verbal communication, coupled with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior and interests. Children with learning disabilities, including ASD, in today's piano studios pose an exciting challenge for teachers. Addressing their needs requires the implementation of diverse teaching strategies to effectively connect with and involve these students. While it is encouraging to observe an increase in research on this topic in recent years, there remains a shortage of teaching methods specifically tailored to this subject.

Teachers should recognize that teaching piano to children with learning disabilities may necessitate a departure from traditional classroom methods. The difficulties these children encounter, such as challenges in understanding musical notation, should not be underestimated. In my research paper, I will evaluate the effectiveness of the method book "First Steps of A Little Artist" by Erman Türkili, specifically designed for young children and those with special needs like ASD. This book emphasizes teaching music through colors and symbols, avoiding reliance on traditional note names—a particularly challenging aspect for ASD students and its simplicity proves advantageous for students with autism, facilitating a smoother learning process without the need for traditional music theory knowledge.

I. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Music

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder of brain development, a construct characterized by impairments in social communication and interaction and the presence of repetitive and restricted behaviors, interests, and activities. ASD poses challenges in comprehending and interpreting the world and events happening in one's surroundings.

The core elements of music have the capacity to evoke emotional responses, and these reactions are intricately connected to complex auditory stimuli. This connection is notably observed in specific brain regions, particularly the left temporal lobe, responsible for semantic memory related to language, and intricately linked with the basal ganglia—a neurobiological structure crucial for procedural memory, essential in the context of playing music. In the case of children with autism engaging in music, the activity of the basal ganglia may trigger interconnected brain regions, potentially influencing auditory processing and memory. Although concrete evidence is still lacking, anecdotal reports from parents suggest that the repetitive nature of music can positively impact alleviating negative emotions associated with unpredictable situations. The familiarity developed through repeated exposure provides comfort to children with autism, who grapple with the unpredictability of the social world. This emotional comfort, arising from the repetitive nature of music, may activate interconnected brain areas, fostering receptivity to new experiences and facilitating ongoing learning processes. While further research is needed to establish a clear link, these observations shed light on the potential therapeutic benefits of music for children with autism, particularly in terms of emotional regulation and cognitive development. The effectiveness of guidelines for teaching music to individuals with autism can vary depending on their specific skills and needs, however, it is important to recognize that music holds significant importance as a potent therapeutic tool for various conditions.

The behaviorist theory, also known as "behaviorism," focuses on observable and measurable aspects of human behavior. In the context of High-Functioning Autism (HFA), maladaptive behavior is considered a result of either a failure to learn necessary adaptive behaviors, such as establishing satisfying relationships, or the acquisition of ineffective responses. This aligns with HFA students who may struggle to discern social cues, impacting their ability to learn

from experiences. As a piano teacher, it becomes crucial to comprehend the neurobiological and psychological aspects of the disorder.

II. How to Approach Children with Autism?

Understanding the physiological aspects of autism is crucial for teachers to tailor effective teaching methods. Children with autism often require special attention in various contexts, with one of the key considerations being the creation of a comfortable classroom setting. Establishing a predictable and stable environment, minimizing transitions, and providing advance notice of any changes in routines can enhance the comfort of students in their learning environment. This is particularly crucial for students with High-Functioning Autism (HFA), who may experience heightened anxiety. HFA students often encounter challenges in social situations, and participating in group music activities can be overwhelming, hindering their progress toward learning goals. To address this, music teachers should consider offering one-on-one music lessons. These private sessions provide a more comfortable and controlled environment for students with HFA, mitigating the social demands associated with public education. Private music lessons stand in contrast to the school scenario described by researchers in several ways. Typically, there are no peers present, allowing for more flexibility in lesson time and content. Potential distractions from ambient noise can be limited and controlled, and a sense of calm can be intentionally created and supported by a caring teacher.

When selecting musical pieces for students with High-Functioning Autism (HFA), teachers must recognize that individuals with HFA often demonstrate a heightened awareness of their own emotions. Giving significance to children's choices and preferences can be a key strategy to maintain their excitement and attention during lessons. This personalized approach not

only respects their individuality but also enhances their engagement with the learning process.

Avoiding overloading and rushing the learning process for children is another important content. Instead, tailor educational tasks to align with what they are prepared to grasp, considering their readiness rather than adhering strictly to age or grade expectations. Pushing a child beyond their current readiness level can lead to increased error rates, the acquisition of undesirable habits, a potential aversion to the task, and heightened task avoidance. Also, teachers are encouraged to keep their markings to a minimum. By minimizing external markings, the focus is redirected to essential perceptual inputs, aiding in the organization of information.

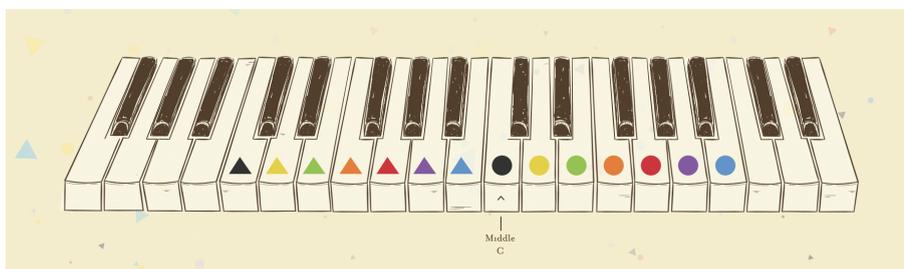
The performance of handicapped students is often impacted by low motivation, with external factors rather than personal effort being perceived as responsible for success and failure. Hence, it is crucial to incorporate immediate and concrete rewards into our lessons to address this challenge. Sharing the child's successes with their parents is essential, as the child's family serves as the primary influencer and motivator for internal motivation.

Without a deep understanding of the specific needs of students with Autism Spectrum (AS), music teachers may overlook appropriate strategies to assist these students effectively. To ensure success, teachers should tailor their approach, recognizing the unique challenges and strengths of each student with HFA.

III. Erman Türkili's "First Steps of a Little Artist"

Immature attention ability is a prevalent characteristic among children facing learning difficulties. Despite being easily captivated, these children often struggle to sustain attention to relevant stimuli. Recognizing their learning patterns akin to those of young children,

employing method books designed for younger ages can be advantageous. Integrating visual aids such as colors and shapes, particularly through the use of colors and stickers, proves instrumental in maintaining attention to critical aspects of tasks. By assigning distinct shapes or colors to each note, they can be easily distinguished from one another. This approach not only captures a child's attention but also establishes associations between each shape or color and its position on the staff. This strategic use of visual elements facilitates a smooth transition to conventional musical notation at a later stage. In this context, stickers play a pivotal role in Erman Turkili's method "First Steps of a Little Artist." The piano setup involves affixing colored stickers to each hand—using circles for the right hand and triangles for the left hand. These stickers, easily applicable and removable, are paired with specific notes through letters. This design facilitates immediate engagement with sound and rhythm, providing a user-friendly approach suitable for individuals.



Example 1: "First Steps of a Little Artist", Preparing the Piano

The book adopts a sequential approach, initiating the focus on the right hand and introducing a rhythmic sense with one beat per note. It progressively introduces other note values, expanding the key range. The peak of this progression involves mastering the use of all fingers in the right hand. The left hand's development mirrors the gradual approach taken with the right hand. The integration of both hands occurs gradually, introducing more challenging exercises and pieces for simultaneous practice. These preparatory exercises culminate in the final pieces, "Jingle Bells" and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," marking the point

where students are ready for their concert. It's worth noting that, until the end, the approach has not involved using traditional note names.



Example 2: *"First Steps of a Little Artist"*, Beethoven's Ode to Joy

In the book, the colors serve as symbols for keys, with heightened color intensity signifying increased proficiency in playing the corresponding notes. The incorporation of various teaching methods, including the innovative "Joker finger exercise," provides psychological benefits for students. This exercise introduces a unique approach, enabling students to use a finger of their choice for notes beyond the conventional five fingers. This technique not only diversifies playing methods but also empowers students by allowing them to make decisions about their finger choices, fostering a sense of autonomy and engagement in the learning process.

Theoretical aspects of music, including the introduction of rests and dissonant notes, are thoroughly covered in a way that actively engages students and promotes enjoyment in the lesson. The book incorporates an interactive exercise for introducing rests, where students clap and learn to count them. This activity serves a dual purpose by fostering both enjoyment and the development of analytical skills. After each rest, students quickly locate the next note

with the correct fingering, enhancing their understanding of musical concepts. Incorporating physical activities like clapping during lessons adds the benefit of minimizing anxiety, boredom, and inappropriate behavior.

The book's colorful illustrations play a significant role in capturing the attention of young learners. Serving as a valuable tool, these illustrations help re-engage concentration if it wavers. Through vibrant depictions, animals are introduced alongside different instruments, effectively connecting children to the world of music. The absence of quotations in the animal illustrations enhances the method's universal accessibility. Relying on visuals alone ensures that language barriers do not impede understanding, making it inclusive and easy for a diverse audience to connect with and enjoy. The combination of appealing visuals and informative content fosters an engaging and universally accessible learning environment for children.

Importantly, this teaching technique extends beyond traditional music educators, welcoming participation from parents, grandparents, special education teachers, and caregivers. What sets this method apart is its universal accessibility, ensuring that anyone, regardless of their familiarity with the English language, can easily comprehend and benefit from "First Steps of a Little Artist." The inclusion of "Teacher Tips" sections in the book provides explicit instructions for each topic, eliminating the necessity for a background in traditional music theory. This approach enhances the book's accessibility, enabling parents and educators without a musical background to utilize its content with minimal explanation. Consequently, families who may face financial constraints related to piano lessons can actively engage their children in music education independently.

Also, the easy and clear approach of "First Steps of a Little Artist" doesn't compromise the pace of the learning process; instead, it makes it enjoyable while maintaining efficiency in

terms of time. This method effectively covers all essential piano and music fundamentals, including hand coordination, 5-note patterns, and various rhythmic values. Notably, the innovation and distinctiveness of the book lie in its ability to teach these foundational concepts without delving into traditional music theory. By exclusively relying on colors, stickers, and shapes, the method provides a unique and innovative approach that sets it apart in the realm of music education.

IV. Background of the Method

Dr. Erman Turkili, born in 1984 in Adana, Turkey, began his musical journey at the age of 11, studying violin with Dania Kainova and chamber music with Slava Kainov at the Conservatory of Cukurova University. He demonstrated early excellence as a soloist with orchestras.

After completing his Bachelor's degree in Turkey, Dr. Turkili was awarded a Graduate Assistantship at Pittsburg State University, initiating his international pursuits. In the United States, he gained recognition as a recitalist and collaborated with orchestras, achieving notable success in competitions, including a selection as one of 52 candidates at the ASTA (American String Teachers Association). Following his Master's degree, Dr. Turkili became a Doctoral Assistant in Prof. Eliot Chapo's studio, teaching and establishing three studios in Florida. He developed an original teaching method and earned the title of Doctor of Music in 2011.

Dr. Turkili has performed globally as a soloist, recitalist, chamber musician, and orchestral player. His commitment to education is evident in teaching students of various ages, with a unique emphasis on introducing violin to children aged 3 to 7. In addition to his academic and musical pursuits, Dr. Turkili co-founded Alla Turca Kollektif with Sandra Sinsch and

Yusuf Yalçın. This ensemble, comprising 10 musicians, explores Eastern and Western Baroque repertoire, including undiscovered compositions. Based in Istanbul, Dr. Erman Türkili continues to perform globally. As an academic, he conducts research and regularly gives Master Classes and conferences in Turkey and Europe.

In the genesis of his method book, Dr. Türkili reveals that the inspiration for its creation originated from an encounter with three-year-old Addison, whom he introduced to the violin during his doctoral studies at Florida State University. Faced with the challenge of teaching such a young learner, Dr. Türkili developed an innovative approach that associated strings with shapes and finger positions with colors, simplifying complex musical concepts. This unique method proved highly effective, prompting him to further refine and test it with numerous students over the years. The success and positive outcomes of this teaching approach laid the foundation for the development of his method book, reflecting a commitment to making music education accessible and engaging for learners of all ages.

“One day, a student’s younger sister, Addison, approached me and told me that she also wanted to play the violin. I replied, “You can certainly learn to play, but I don’t know how to teach you.”¹

Dr. Erman Türkili's approach to working with children with autism has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness, characterized by a thoughtful blend of inclusivity, structured progression, and creative engagement. Notably, the method's simplicity, integrating visual elements such as colored stickers and symbols, fosters an accessible and accommodating learning environment.

¹Wilson, “First Steps of A Little Artist.”

Through several pilot studies, it became evident that the method was not only suitable for its intended audience but also remarkably effective for children with special needs, particularly those with autism. Yankı Yazgan, a professor at Yale School of Medicine, conducted a confirmation study, affirming the method's efficacy with children with disabilities.

Subsequently, this demographic has become one of the targeted beneficiaries of the method, underscoring its adaptability and positive impact on diverse learning needs.

“Initially, I was unsure of how this book would work with children in special education. But in our pilot studies, we applied this teaching method to many kids in special education and with almost all of them, it was very easy for them to follow the colors and symbols. I believe that this book will help make learning an instrument much more accessible and feasible for anyone who wants to.”²

Certified music therapist and pedagogue Sandra Sinch, employed at the State Hospital for Forensic Psychiatry Saxony-Anhalt in Stendal, Germany, expresses that "First Steps of a Little Artist" fills a significant void in both music education and music therapy. In the context of forensic psychiatry, where the emphasis extends beyond treating psychiatric issues, this method addresses a unique need by providing a comprehensive and enriching approach to music education and therapy. The endorsement from a professional in the field underscores the method's effectiveness and relevance in diverse settings, including forensic psychiatry.

The emphasis on creative activities, such as composing and the Joker finger technique, not only fosters self-expression but also empowers children to actively participate in their learning. The repetitive nature of the approach has been observed to positively impact emotional states, providing comfort and familiarity. Moreover, the integration of various

² ibid.

learning modalities and the introduction of famous composers contribute to a holistic and enriching educational experience. Dr. Türkili's approach stands out for its ability to cater to the unique needs of children with autism, fostering a love for music and enhancing their overall well-being.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intersection of autism and piano instruction necessitates a thoughtful and individualized teaching approach. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) introduces unique challenges related to communication, sensory sensitivities, and social interaction, which directly influence the piano learning experience for individuals with autism. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is paramount for piano teachers to create an inclusive and effective educational environment.

Dr. Erman Türkili's innovative teaching methodology, as exemplified in his method book "First Steps of a Little Artist," stands out as a beacon in this context. Specifically designed for children with developmental disabilities, including autism, this approach emphasizes inclusivity, simplicity, and creative engagement. By systematically guiding learners through a progressive and accessible piano learning journey, Dr. Türkili's method aims to foster self-confidence and musical exploration.

This teaching approach's success is not only measured in musical proficiency but extends to its positive impact on emotional well-being, self-efficacy, and overall learning experiences for children with special needs, including those with High-Functioning Autism (HFA). By tailoring the teaching approach to the unique challenges and strengths of students with autism, Dr. Türkili's method exemplifies the transformative potential of customized methods in creating meaningful and positive musical experiences.

In essence, the thoughtful integration of autism awareness into piano instruction, coupled with innovative teaching methodologies, opens up new avenues for enriching musical education.

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