

## Article

# How to Motivate Young Musicians to Persevere in Their Piano Studies — From a Psychological Needs Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper explores how piano teachers can support students' long-term motivation through the lens of basic psychological needs theory, focusing on autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Drawing on existing literature, it highlights that many young piano students drop out before reaching intermediate level, often due to unmet psychological needs. The study emphasizes the importance of fostering intrinsic motivation by addressing each need: supporting autonomy through student choice and interest, enhancing relatedness via positive teacher-student relationships, and building competence through goal-setting and constructive feedback. Teaching strategies such as adopting a student-centred approach, creating a supportive learning environment, and promoting a growth mindset are discussed. The paper argues that balanced satisfaction of these three psychological needs is crucial for sustaining students' engagement in piano learning. It concludes with implications for pedagogical practice and acknowledges limitations regarding the role of external factors such as peer and parental influence.

**Keywords:** psychological needs; piano education; student motivation; intrinsic motivation

## 1. Introduction

This paper builds on the theory of basic psychological needs proposed by Ryan and Deci [1]. The aim is to explore how piano teachers can meet the psychological needs of their students through their teaching behaviors. The aim is to explore how piano teachers can meet the psychological needs of their students through their teaching behaviors, ultimately developing students' intrinsic motivation to learn piano in the long term. Previous studies found that many piano students drop out before reaching the intermediate level [2]. The average age of dropout is around 12 years old [3]. In addition, piano teachers often focus more on the students' technical mastery of the piano than on their psychological needs [4]. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the motivation for long-term piano learning by focusing on the psychological needs of students. This is a psychological focus that has implications for piano education. Focusing on the relationship between basic psychological needs and long-term piano learning, this article discusses three basic psychological needs in piano learning: autonomy, relatedness and competence, and the impact of each of them on students' long-term piano learning. This is followed by a discussion of how piano teachers can improve their teaching strategies to address the different psychological needs. The three main teaching strategies will be the following: a student-centred classroom model to support autonomy, creating a supportive learning environment to support relatedness, and providing positive feedback and appropriate learning objectives to foster competence. Finally, the points made in the paper will be summarized.

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## **2. The Relationship Between Basic Psychological Needs and Long-Term Piano Study**

### *2.1. The Three Basic Psychological Needs in Piano Learning*

Basic psychological needs theory is used as the framework for this paper [1]. The theory suggests three basic human psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence. Of these, autonomy is the person's willingness to engage in learning activities according to their own volition. Competence is the self-identity of a person as a result of personal improvement in their abilities when engaging in activities. Relatedness is the sense of belonging that comes from being associated with others. These psychological needs also underlie the development of self-determination theory, which ultimately aims to internalize all types of motivation so that students are genuinely motivated to learn [5]. These psychological needs also underlie the development of self-determination theory, which ultimately aims to internalize all types of motivation so that students are genuinely motivated to learn [5].

Psychological needs theory is equally applicable in music learning. Much of the literature has found that students' satisfaction with psychological needs is related to their willingness to continue studying music [6-10]. This may be due to the fact that supporting psychological needs can promote intrinsic motivation in students [11]. Furthermore, much of the literature supports that intrinsic motivation may be the key to students' persistence in piano learning [2,8,11-15]. When students' psychological needs are met, they are more likely to enjoy and focus on music learning and are more likely to continue studying music in the long term [6-9,16]. This implies that satisfying students' psychological needs may be a prerequisite for sustained engagement in piano learning [10]. Therefore, students' psychological needs in piano learning deserve to be attended to.

It is noteworthy that the piano learning model is solidified with fixed learning content and assessment methods. For example, practice scales and graded exams. This leads to students constantly seeking achievement in their piano learning [17]. This also means that there is a greater need for competence in piano learning [17]. At the same time, the needs for autonomy and relatedness may be neglected. But in fact, the three psychological needs are interrelated [10,18,19]. That is, the need for competence can only be truly satisfied when autonomy and relatedness are also fulfilled [19]. Furthermore, students are more likely to persist in long-term learning in a learning environment where all three basic psychological needs can be met simultaneously [10]. Therefore, in piano learning, students' three psychological needs require balanced satisfaction [10,18,19].

### *2.2. The Impact of Autonomy on Students' Long-Term Piano Learning*

The student's sense of control over the piano learning process affects their long-term engagement [20-22]. This is reflected in both the ability of students to express themselves and to make individual choices. In a piano learning culture, the piano teacher is more of a leading role in the lesson, continuously inputting ideas to the students [17,23,24]. Students may not have had the opportunity to present their ideas or may have been ignored when trying to present ideas [25]. This may lead to a lack of student autonomy and a gradual loss of motivation to learn. Therefore, piano teachers need to consider how to break away from the teacher-led model and provide more engaging lessons for their students [26].

Students' interest in learning piano affects their persistence in study [25, 27]. The importance of supporting students' interests is demonstrated by Renwick's observation of a 12-year-old girl [28]. The student behaved completely differently when learning the piece of music, she wanted to learn and the piece of music assigned by the teacher. When confronted with a piece she liked, she seemed to spend more time and use a variety of learning strategies purposefully to achieve better results. However, she seemed to lose the ability and motivation to learn when confronted with the repertoire assigned by her teacher. Clearly, students seem to be genuinely engaged in piano learning when their interest, an autonomous need, is supported. At the same time, this may allow the student to gain a

sense of competence and become more motivated to persist in piano study. In fact, interest may be the main reason for a child's persistence in learning, so the development of a child's interest in piano should probably be a necessary part of the piano classroom [25,27,29]. Therefore, as a teacher, one needs to think about how to enrich the learning experience of students in order to enhance their interest in piano learning.

In conclusion, the satisfaction of autonomy seems to be more predictive of students' long-term musical engagement [16]. Therefore, supporting students' autonomy in piano learning may be the first step towards improving the fixed piano learning model and facilitating students' long-term piano learning [16].

### *2.3. The Impact of Relatedness on Students' Long-Term Piano Learning*

Students' musical experiences influence the likelihood of learning piano in the long term [18]. The importance of teachers' personal characteristics in the early stages of piano education has been highlighted in the literature [10]. It may be that an approachable teacher makes students more relaxed and is more likely to allow students to focus on the content of their learning [25,30]. Also, the personal touch of the teacher may make the learning experience better for the students and increase their interest in learning piano [31,32]. A good musical experience for students may facilitate their long-term piano learning [18].

The sense of connection between the student and the teacher influences the student's willingness to persist in piano learning [33]. A higher sense of connectedness has been found to be associated with greater student involvement in music and may positively influence long-term participation, as revealed by a questionnaire administered to students in grades 3 to 6 [34]. This may be related to the students' sense of belonging. When students feel connected to their teachers, they feel the support provided by their teachers [35]. Students are more likely to have a positive attitude towards learning and to persist in their piano studies. Whereas if students are neglected, they will be more likely to feel bored and unhappy. These negative emotions may affect the student's engagement in piano learning. In other words, the teacher's association with the student can affect how they feel about learning piano, further affecting the student's long-term engagement [25].

### *2.4. The Impact of Competence on Students' Long-Term Piano Learning*

Students' perceptions of their musical ability affect persistence in piano [3]. Gerelus, Comeau, and Swirp found that students who dropped out of school rated their musical ability lower, as revealed by a comparison between students who continued with piano and those who discontinued it [3]. This may relate to their awareness of their lack of musical ability [18]. Students may have developed this perception because they believe that they are innately musically incompetent, or they may lack musical ability due to a lack of practice [2]. Therefore, it is necessary to make a distinction between "musical ability" and "musical competence" here. Previous research has categorized "musical ability" into two groups, those who are gifted and those who have gained ability through personal effort [36-38]. Students who believe that musical ability comes from talent are more likely to give up studying piano because they believe there is no room for future improvement [39,40]. However, students who believe that hard work can lead to achievement are able to gain a greater sense of competence from their progress and develop a desire to continue learning [39]. Clearly, whether students believe that musical ability can be continually improved through personal effort influences students' expectations of their long-term musical identity [8,40].

However, it has been found that while musical ability affects willingness to learn music, it may also still promote persistence in music studies if students' psychological needs are met [7]. This may be through the satisfaction of students' sense of competence,

which changes the perception that their talent determines their musical ability [7]. Therefore, teachers may need to help students enhance their sense of competence and develop a self-identity as musicians through a number of teaching strategies [40].

In addition, students' musical achievement may also influence the willingness to learn in the long term [2,3]. This may be related to the form of emphasis on achievement in the piano learning culture [17]. Gerelus, Comeau, and Swirp found that after five years of the same piano study, a student who did not achieve as much as another student may be less willing to persist in piano study [3]. This may be an indication of a lack of competence. Interestingly, this may also be related to the "musical ability" mentioned earlier. That is, if a student is unable to achieve a level of achievement that matches the amount of time spent studying, they may also further perceive themselves as lacking musical ability [39,40]. In contrast, Costa-Giomi, Flowers, and Sasaki found that students were able to achieve a corresponding sense of accomplishment for each small piano learning task, which may have made their piano learning more sustainable [8]. This finding may also be an indication of students' increased sense of competence [10]. In conclusion, the amount of musical achievement students achieve in their piano learning may influence the persistence of their piano learning.

### **3. How Piano Teachers Can Develop Teaching Strategies That Support Psychological Needs**

#### *3.1. Meeting Students' Needs for Autonomy — A Student-Centred Teaching Model*

More dialogue between teachers and students gives students the opportunity to express their learning needs [4]. This may satisfy both autonomy and relatedness. During the teacher-student dialogue, students are able to reflect on their own learning process in response to the teacher's questions [4]. At the same time, students also have the opportunity to communicate with their teachers about their needs and preferences in piano learning, such as disinterest in those elements of learning, fear of receiving criticism, etc [4,25]. In short, dialogue between teachers and students provides opportunities for teachers and students to get to know each other. The teacher can truly understand the learning needs of the students through their expressions. At the same time, the teacher needs to acknowledge and respect the students' feelings and be brave enough to break his or her inherent perceptions as a teacher [23]. Therefore, in the piano teaching process, teachers focus more on students' ideas, care about students' feelings and may support students' autonomy [23,41].

This fosters musical interest and enhances the desire to learn piano [42]. This may allow students to take piano learning as an autonomous act. For students who are just starting to learn music, teachers need to guide them so that they can feel the joy of learning piano [4]. On the one hand, students' personal interests in music can be explored and incorporated into their piano learning to develop their enthusiasm for learning [26,43]. For example, if students are found to be quicker to learn piano theory, the teacher can integrate teaching and piano theory knowledge, which encourages students to discover their strengths. On the other hand, the teacher can lead the students through piano pieces in a way that interests them. This may increase students' interest in them. In this case, the teacher can help the students with situational imagery to stimulate their interest [44]. For example, treating the piano piece as a fairy tale and giving it a storyline for each passage promotes the pupils' understanding of the piece to increase their interest. For older students, teachers can teach about the context of the work, which can engage students' interest through the cultural appeal of the work itself [28].

Offering a wide choice of piano works may also support student autonomy [28]. When learning is optional, students can choose according to their preferences and develop their own musical interests [25]. However, teachers need to help students to get a proper understanding of the piano learning process and support their autonomy in a principled way — For example, if a student needs to learn to play scales, for example, if a student

needs to learn to play scales, then the teacher can provide the student with a number of different pieces to practice playing scales. In this case, the student can choose their own pieces to learn, but the teacher's requirements for the piano skills that students need to master will not be reduced [26]. Therefore, the optional piano repertoire provided by the teacher needs to take into account the students' individual interests and required skills, which can effectively support student autonomy [28,45,46].

### *3.2. Meeting Students' Needs for Relatedness — Creating a Supportive Learning Environment*

Positive teacher-student relationships may meet students' need for relatedness [47]. The teacher may respond to students in a friendly way through non-verbal behavioural expressions such as body language and facial expressions [48]. This may create a supportive learning environment that promotes a good musical experience and meets the student's sense of relatedness. Costa-Giomi, Flowers, and Sasaki found that by observing piano students who dropped out of school, the dropouts seemed to seek the teacher's approval more frequently during their piano lessons [8]. This may be an indication of seeking relevance and a sense of competence. The teacher's friendliness may satisfy the students' psychological need for relevance [4]. Therefore, when students present their learning outcomes, the teacher may express recognition of their learning through nods, approving glances, and expressions of appreciation. In this way students can believe that they are making progress with their efforts and are progressing to a better level [4]. Moreover, the enthusiasm shown by the teacher in the teaching process can also convince students that the teacher herself is enjoying the process [49]. This may allow students to be relaxed and actively engaged in the classroom. In short, the teacher's non-verbal behaviour may make students feel a sense of support provided by the teacher, which will make them more likely to engage with piano learning in the long term.

Attending to students' individual differences is essential in creating a supportive learning environment [27,50]. Teachers can differentiate their teaching by focusing on students' learning processes, learning outcomes, learning environments and learning content to understand the strengths and needs of different students [27]. In addition, teachers can also record students' emotional needs through classroom observations and make adjustments in their attitudes to teaching different students [25,50]. For example, some students are more sensitive and may need more recognition and less negative comments. The teacher notices the difficulties and preferences of different students and responds accordingly. This may result in a better sense of the student's experience of learning piano and will more likely promote their long-term learning.

### *3.3. Meet Students' Needs for Competence — Provide Positive Feedback and Appropriate Learning Objectives*

A positive attitude of the teacher can help the student believe that he or she can succeed in piano studies, which is related to the child's sense of self-efficacy [51]. This is mainly reflected in the teacher's positive recognition of the student's learning outcomes and the expectation of betterment in the future [4,52]. Many studies have found that it is very important for teachers to give recognition to students [14,52]. The teacher expresses recognition of the student's efforts through a positive attitude towards the student's learning outcomes, which may promote the student's sense of self-identity [24]. At the same time, it may also convince students that "musical ability" can be acquired through hard work, enhancing the willingness to learn in the long term [25,36,53]. In the teaching process this may manifest itself in the form of sincere praise from the teacher when students complete a learning task. This allows students to feel that the results of their efforts are recognized, satisfying a sense of competence and making them more likely to persist in their learning.

In addition, when teachers make assessments, they may need to make suggestions in a positive way, expressing expectations for the future [4,27]. This also helps students to

increase their sense of competence while meeting the psychological need for relevance. In previous piano teaching, the teacher was always making new demands and making students aware of the errors in their practice results through negative comments [4,52]. But in fact, in piano learning, the teacher should emphasize more on the learning process than on the results [36]. The teacher can work with the student to conceptualise what might be achieved in the future through positive suggestions. For example, after a student has presented a piece, the teacher might suggest to the student, "I think the first part of this piece might need more practice, there are some performance errors here, but I'm sure that right away this piece will be more moving." In short, positive suggestions from the teacher may convince the student that he or she can achieve better after practice and will be more likely to study piano in the long term.

Helping students to set achievable goals may also help to increase their sense of competence [54,55]. In Jørgensen's questionnaire survey of undergraduate music students, it was found that instrumental music students of a similar age produced different musical achievements [56]. This may be due to differences in teacher instruction. 70% of these students reported that their previous instrumental music teachers did not help to set learning goals. This may have led to students being unclear about what they should focus on to improve their abilities and spending more time exploring on their own. In such cases, students may find it difficult to reach musical achievement more efficiently and tend to lose their sense of competence. Appropriate practice strategies by the teacher may therefore be important for the development of young musicians. In piano teaching, each lesson may require a very clear focus [4,52]. At the same time, the teacher can break down the large goal into smaller goals so that students can work through the whole goal step by step [8]. This helps students to focus on one goal over a period of time and achieve gradual growth in ability [4]. Students may be more intrinsically motivated to stick with piano when they find that they can gain personal competence by practising to a set goal [57-61].

#### **4. Conclusions and Implications**

In summary, a student's choice of long-term piano study is inextricably linked to psychological needs. The three psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness need to be met in a balanced way so that students will be more likely to persist in their piano studies. Among these, the student's sense of control and interest in the piano learning process, the student's sense of connection with the teacher and the student's musical experience, the student's correct perception of his or her musical ability and the musical achievements gained all influence the student's long-term piano participation. Therefore, piano teachers can also develop teaching strategies to fully address these aspects. Firstly, respect and encourage children to express themselves. At the same time, develop the student's interest in piano learning and offer a more varied choice of repertoire. Secondly, teachers need to be attentive to the individual needs of their students. Also, maintain a friendly attitude during lessons and create a supportive learning environment. Finally, teachers can improve students' self-efficacy through recognition and positive expectations, as well as helping students to set appropriate goals.

In addition, this paper has some limitations. In the analysis supporting students' need for relevance, only one group, teachers, was focused on, but in fact both parents and peers influence students' need for relevance. Therefore, the analysis may not be comprehensive. It is also important to note that Kingsford-Smith and Evans found, through longitudinal studies, that satisfaction with psychological needs at a single point in time influenced students' willingness to continue learning. However, if students are expected to study for the long term, a change in values may be required. Values may be a parallel concept to the intrinsic motivation mentioned in this paper, and both may mediate between satisfying students' psychological needs and long-term engagement. Therefore, additional research into values theory may make the analysis in this paper more scientific.

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