Integrating Comprehensive Musicianship into Group Piano Teaching: Exploring the Motivation of Young Beginners Through Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

Group piano instruction is increasingly implemented in early music education, yet its integration with comprehensive musicianship and the influence on young beginners' motivation have received limited attention. This study addresses this gap by investigating how integrating comprehensive musicianship in group teaching impacts learning motivation, using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) that was proposed by Deci and Ryan as a framework. SDT highlights three psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as the foundation of intrinsic motivation. A qualitative case study was conducted with four group piano teachers in Northern China who taught children aged 4 – 8, drawing on interviews and classroom observations. Findings showed that discovery learning and structured teaching enhanced autonomy; optimal challenges, feedback, and musical mastery supported competence. The group setting also promoted meaningful peer, teacher, and parent relationships, fulfilling relatedness needs. Together, these factors significantly boosted young students' motivation in group piano lessons. The study provides both theoretical and practical insights, showing that combining structured teaching with creative methods can create a rich and motivating learning environment for young beginners.

Keywords: comprehensive musicianship, group piano, Self-Determination Theory, young piano beginners

Introduction

Motivation plays an important role in piano learning, influencing not only the amount of time students dedicate to practice but also the depth of their engagement and the quality of their musical development. Learners' motivation determines their persistence, willingness to overcome challenges, and overall musical achievement (Hallam, 1998). However, conventional individual lesson models for elementary piano instruction have been criticised as over-emphasising technique proficiency, which may have impacted students' motivation. In contrast to this idea, group instruction that implements comprehensive musicianship principles and aims to provide a diverse and motivating learning environment for young beginners has become increasingly popular (Tang, 2016).

The motivational outcomes of learning in a group environment have been recognised by several studies (Morrison, 2023; Tsai, 2007). They found that a social environment that supports and motivates the students can be provided in a learning group. Morrison (2023: 5) states that "multiple levels of inspiration and ideas can be generated from a group with a wide variety of goals and experiences", which contributes to the learning motivation of pupils. Positive competition and cooperation in a group setting also promote learning motivation (Tsai, 2007).

In addition to the motivation outcomes, numerous studies (e.g., Fisher, 2010; Kim, 2000; Lowder, 1973; Pace, 1978) have identified that group piano instruction is beneficial when applying the elements of comprehensive musicianship. Comprehensive musicianship is essential in piano learning as it cultivates well-rounded, independent musicians capable of understanding, interpreting, and creating music beyond mere technical proficiency (McGuire, K., 2002). Contemporary piano teaching has also shifted emphasis from finger technique training to comprehensive musicianship activities such as singing, aural training, composition, etc. (Huang, 2007). While these studies did not specifically highlight the relationship between comprehensive musicianship and motivation, this present study seeks to explore this connection more directly.

To further explore the learning motivation of young beginners in group piano lessons that integrate comprehensive musicianship, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was employed as the theoretical framework. SDT is generally regarded as a comprehensive explanation of

motivation that examines more broadly "how internalised, or self-determined, the kinds of behaviour people show in social environments" (Evans, 2015: 66). This theory emphasises autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs influencing student motivation. The framework sheds light on how student relatedness, autonomy, and competence are influenced through the integration of group piano instruction and comprehensive musicianship.

Literature Review

i. Comprehensive Musicianship in Group Teaching

Group piano instruction naturally supports comprehensive musicianship due to its collaborative and multifaceted format. According to Willoughby (2021), comprehensive musicianship is a concept used to describe the interdisciplinary study of music by stressing the integration of all aspects of music learning and teaching. The philosophy of comprehensive musicianship emphasises that music education should not be limited to performance aspects such as repertoire learning and technique training, but should also integrate analysis and creation (Sundell, 2012). Numerous studies (Fisher, 2010; Kim, 2000; Lowder, 1973) supported the idea that group settings foster music literacy, critical listening, ensemble skills, and functional competencies like harmonisation and transposition, which are key elements of comprehensive musicianship.

Kim (2000) developed teaching strategies and materials to promote comprehensive musicianship in college piano majors through group instruction. He noted that both group instruction and comprehensive musicianship rely on discovery learning. Rather than passively receiving information, students explore and build understanding through structured, student-centred activities. In group settings, this process is supported by collaboration, allowing students to engage with the material beyond direct instruction. This aligns with Bruner's (1961) idea of discovery learning, which values hypothesis-making and critical thinking.

Recent literature highlights a growing emphasis on eclectic teaching approaches in group music education, which facilitates comprehensive

musicianship. These approaches incorporate and adapt elements from various established pedagogical methods, such as Kodály's focus on singing and literacy, Dalcroze's emphasis on music and movement-based rhythmic training, and Orff's use of speech, percussion, and improvisation, to address the multifaceted nature of musical learning (Choksy et al., 2001). Studies indicated that eclectic teaching fosters a more comprehensive approach to developing musicianship, which connects aural skills, creativity, and musical understanding. For example, Mwanza (2017) and Bridges (1984) noted that eclectic methods are holistic, learner-centred, and participatory, which helps develop musical understanding and enthusiasm. Pike (2017) presented various eclectic strategies in her book *Dynamic Group Piano Teaching*, suggesting the importance to balance keyboard time with structured activities that allow children to explore, listen, improvise, and move to music. The author suggested that engaging in free movement activities helps students understand how to navigate long notes, different articulations, and musical phrases prior to applying these concepts at the piano. Similarly, studies indicated that incorporating movement into learning enhances learner' rhythmic precision, physical coordination, and expressive interpretation (Juntunen &Westerlund, 2001; Habron, 2016). Mabini (2024) further argued that eclectic methods, combining elements from the Kodály, Suzuki, Dalcroze, Orff, and Gordon methodologies, enable educators to create a comprehensive music education program that address diverse learning styles and promote long-term engagement. Together, these studies affirm the value of eclectic approaches in developing comprehensive musicianship in young learners.

As has been shown, the above literatures outlined the effectiveness and importance of integrating comprehensive musicianship and eclectic teaching approach into group piano lessons. However, while the literature implies the potential of group instruction to influence motivation through its discovery-based and musically rich environment, most existing research has focused on older learners or instructional strategies rather than young beginners and motivation factors, pointing to the need for further exploration in this area.

ii. Self-Determination Theory and Its Application in Music Education

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was first introduced by Deci and Ryan in 1985 in the field of behavioural science. In 2000, the theory was further applied to educational contexts to explain how individuals become intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Liu, 2016). Compared to earlier motivation theories such as expectancy-value theory, attribution theory, achievement goal theory, and self-efficacy theory, SDT offers a more unified explanation of motivation by integrating these different perspectives (Evans, 2015). The theory is based on the idea that humans have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (MacIntyre et al., 2018). When these needs are supported, individuals are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and engage more deeply in learning.

Autonomy, as defined in SDT, refers to a sense of personal choice, volition, and self-direction (Evans, 2015). Jang et al. (2010) found that autonomy-supportive teaching strategies, such as offering choice, acknowledging student perspectives, and minimising control, were strongly linked to higher student engagement, particularly when discovery learning methods were used. Discovery-based approaches, where students explore and construct knowledge through active engagement, are also effective for supporting autonomy, as they allow learners to take initiative and ownership of their learning (Bruner, 1961). In music educational settings, Chawke (2023) has indicated that learning by ear naturally entails discovery learning, as students use their aural skills and musical knowledge to independently identify notes and replicate what they hear. Kim (2000) also identified the importance of diecovery learning in both group teaching and comprehensive musicianship. However, as Evans (2015) pointed out, autonomy does not mean a lack of structure. Especially in cultures that value teacher authority, students can still feel autonomous when classroom routines are clear and meaningful, and when they respect the teacher's guidance.

Competence refers to the feeling of being effective and capable when facing learning challenges. This need is supported through structured tasks that are appropriately challenging, along with clear goals, feedback, and guidance (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In addition, McPherson and Renwick (2001) highlighted that students gain a stronger sense of competence when they engage in self-regulated practice

rather than depending solely on teacher guidance. Similarly, Bandura (1977) emphasised this kind of mastery experiences as a key source of self-efficacy. In music educational settings, Chawke (2023: 240) suggested that students can "improve their musical competence and confidence through creating engaging, suitably challenging, and well-organised activities, along with teaching effective practice strategies and learning methods". Moreover, feedback should be constructive and focused on improvement rather than judgment (Pike, 2017), so that students stay motivated and feel confident in their ability to succeed.

Relatedness involves feeling connected to others and having a sense of belonging. In the classroom, relatedness is closely tied to a student feeling that the teacher genuinely likes, respects, and values them (Bloom, 1985). When students feel respected and supported by their teachers and peers, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated (Creech & Hallam, 2003). In group settings, peer interaction enhances relatedness by providing emotional support and collaborative learning opportunities (Tsai, 2007). Parental involvement also plays a role in fostering relatedness. Research indicated that active parent-child interaction during lessons and at home enhances musical engagement and practice habits (Creech & Hallam, 2003; McPherson & Davidson, 2002; Liu, 2016).

Recent research has begun applying SDT in piano education. For example, Evans (2015) highlighted the value of SDT in music learning, stressing that a social environment that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness promotes deeper engagement. Chawke (2023) confirmed the benefits of autonomy- and competence-supportive strategies in private piano teaching, while cautioning against the overuse of extrinsic rewards. Nevertheless, studies specifically examining SDT in the context of group piano education remain limited, indicating a need for further research in this area.

Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study is to investigate how the integration of group piano and comprehensive musicianship affects the motivation of young beginners, as outlined by Self-Determination Theory. As such, this study aims to contribute to the field of group piano teaching by examining the

teaching strategies and approaches that effectively enhance students'autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as identified in SDT. The research questions guiding this study are as follows: How can the integration of group piano and comprehensive musicianship influence young beginners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness based on the Self-Determination Theory?

Methodology

i. Research Design

This study aims to explore teachers' perspectives and issues on how comprehensive musicianship and group piano instruction motivate young beginners. A case study was chosen to gather data from four teachers (collective case study), using interviews and observations. The qualitative approach is suitable for this research as it provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. The study aims to provide rich descriptions and details, making it a valuable resource for understanding group teaching in a specific context.

ii. Sample Selection

The purposive sampling procedure was adopted for the study and the selection criteria for participants were: (1) To provide a comparison insight, the participant teachers must have been teaching both group and individual piano lessons; (2) The participants should have at least four years of teaching experience in both children's group and individual piano instruction; (3)The teachers should implement comprehensive musicianship in group piano teaching; (4) The selected teachers should come from different institutions and offer different teaching methods to avoid one-sidedness; (5) The participants are from Northern China. Following the criteria, four piano teachers have been purposefully selected for this study. Following is the basic information of the four participants, presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Basic information of participants.

Code Name	Age	Group Teaching Experience	Institution
T1	36	5 years	Independent studio in Beijing
T2	38	12 years	Independent studio in Shijiazhuang
T3	29	4 years	Independent studio in Xingtai
T4	31	4 years	Yamaha Music School in Shijiazhuang

iii. Semi-structured Interview

To gain an in-depth understanding of the four teachersperspectives on group piano instruction and related issues, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview guide has focused on two aspects: (1) understanding the teachers' fundamental perceptions and teaching approaches regarding the relationship between comprehensive musicianship and group instruction, and (2) understanding the piano teachers' perceptions regarding the motivation of young beginners. These two areas were examined through the framework of Self-Determination Theory, and the questions were organised around its three core dimensions: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This structure ensured that each teacher's responses addressed how their teaching practices related to students' psychological needs and motivational development.

iv. Class Observation

In this study, although interviews helped clarify each group piano teacher' s philosophy, it was difficult to assess how their beliefs were applied in practice or how students responded. Therefore, each teacher was observed for at least five one-hour lessons.

An observation matrix (see Table 2) has been designed before the observation to investigate from three different perspectives or lenses: (1) instructional approaches and group activities and students' reactions; (2) how the students are motivated by the instructional approaches and group activities; and (3) challenges and issues during the class time.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in China, some observations were conducted online. The observation period lasted from October 2021 to May 2022.

Table 2: Class observing matrix.

Section	**Observation focus**	**Notes / Examples**
Class info	Class name / Date / Time Class size / skill levels	_____ _____
Instructional approaches & activities	Teaching strategies (demonstration, explanation, guided practice) Activities (e.g. ensemble, aural exercises, group games) Teacher-student interactions (feedback, encouragement, questions) Student reactions (engagement, participation, responses)	_____ _____
Motivation indicator	Autonomy Competence Relatedness	_____ _____
Challenges & issues	_____ _____	_____ _____

v. Data Analysis

As both comprehensive musicianship and Self-Determination Theory have clear theoretical frameworks, a deductive thematic analysis would be more suitable for answering the research questions in this current study. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), in a deductive thematic analysis, the data is read, and themes are generated from the data using a pre-existing theory. Thus, deductive thematic analysis was used to analyse how these frameworks could be applied in group piano teaching for young beginners.

The research begins with transcribed, analysed, and coded interview data, organised by themes. After conducting interviews and observations, the researcher reviews the data and identifies key terms using colour-coded notes. The case record procedure organises all data to substantiate themes, ensuring a comprehensive primary resource package.

In writing the research findings, the data from the four teachers' interviews was coded with T1, T2, T3, and T4. The observation data were coded with the teacher's code, followed by a capital O and the observation number because there were five observations for each participant (e.g., T1, O3).

Findings and Discussion

The overall findings of the study are consolidated in Table 3.

Table 3: Themes and sub-themes of young piano beginners' motivation.

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Autonomy	Discovery learning environment	Utilising eclectic approaches and group activities for comprehensive musicianship; Encouraging self-reflection and active problem-solving; Linking to prior knowledge
	Systematic teaching structure	Ensuring a consistent pace among students; Independence within the structure; The balance between structure and freedom

Competence	Optimal challenges, positive feedback, and reward systems	Group activities and performances; Realistic positive feedback; Competence-based reward framing
	Musical mastery through independent learning	The reciprocal relationship between group teaching, comprehensive musicianship and independent learning; Analysing music Independently; Correcting independently; Listening and comparison with peers
Relatedness	Peer relationships	Lively group activities and games; Learn from each other; Cooperative learning
	Student-teacher relationships	Informal teacher roles; Autonomy-supportive instruction; Participatory teaching
	Student-parent relationships	Parent-child interaction

i. Autonomy

In Self-Determination Theory, autonomy is defined as the sense of self and arises with feelings of volition, choice and being the cause of one's behaviour (Evans, 2015). Autonomy is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation in learners, especially in early musical development. However, traditional one-to-one piano instruction, particularly in China, tends to be teacher-centred and directive, offering limited space for student choice and independence (Young et al., 2003). In contrast, the group piano instruction in this study, combined with comprehensive musicianship, created a more autonomy-supportive environment. It encouraged discovery learning and allowed students to develop independence within a structured setting.

a. Discovery Learning Environment

The results indicated that discovery learning was a consistent strategy across all four teachers' lessons. Instead of relying solely on demonstration and explanation, participants guided students to explore musical concepts

through active engagement. Core elements of comprehensive musicianship (i.e., analysis, performance, and creation) were embedded in group tasks, drawing from approaches such as Kodály, Dalcroze, and Orff. Together, these methods supported a student-centred environment that encouraged exploration rather than passive learning.

For example, T2 used group drumming to teach rhythmic patterns, helping one struggling student improve through peer modelling instead of direct correction (T2, O3). This allowed the student to internalise the rhythm naturally. Moreover, instead of starting with notation, teachers allowed students to experience sound physically and aurally before attaching abstract symbols. For example, T1 and T4 introduced pitch through singing and echo games before asking students to read the notes. T3 also used body percussion and movement games to help students feel and understand rhythm. Students practised rhythms through movement before playing them on the keyboard (T3, O3). This approach helped students build aural and kinaesthetic understanding first, which made the transition to notation smoother and more meaningful.

In addition to group activities, participants encouraged self-reflection and active thinking. In one lesson, a student transposed a tune from C major to G major. Instead of just praising her, T1 asked, "How did you transpose so perfectly?" The student explained her strategy, using intervallic relationships and finger direction, while peers listened attentively (T1, O5). T1 turned praise into a group learning moment, encouraging students to think critically and reflect on their processes.

Discovery learning also appeared when teachers helped students connect new material to what they had already learned. T1 and T2 often asked students to identify and circle recurring pitch patterns. In another example, T3 required students to improvise an ostinato before learning a new piece, allowing them to choose familiar rhythms (T3, O4). These strategies engaged students in creating and understanding the music, supporting autonomy by letting them connect ideas and experiment.

b. Systematic Teaching Structure

While discovery learning was promoted, the learning environment was also highly structured. The group lessons followed organised routines that

helped maintain a consistent pace. This structure did not restrict autonomy; instead, it supported it by giving students the clarity to work independently.

For example, the structure of learning new repertoire in T1 and T4's classes is shown in Table 4. T1's students started by writing time signatures, tapping rhythms, and then sight-reading. T4's students listened and sang before playing and reading. Although the methods differed, both structures were easy to follow, allowing students to complete tasks without constant teacher intervention. This predictability helped them feel confident and capable, supporting both autonomy and competence.

Table 4: Different learning structures.

T1's class	T4's class
1. Write down the number of meters in all measures. Align the number and note accordingly. 2. Tap the rhythm using both hands while counting meters aloud. 3. Sight-read and play the phrase while counting meters aloud.	1. Teacher plays a phrase; students listen and sing along. 2. Students repeat singing the phrase until familiar. 3. Students play the phrase on the keyboard. 4. Students read the score.

This structure provided a scaffold for independence. Students could complete tasks independently, and this sense of mastery contributed to both autonomy and competence. Although group piano lessons in China are typically structured, the four teachers in this study still offered freedom and choices within their routines. Students frequently chose which piece to perform, which instruments they want to play in ensemble, or how to harmonize a tune. For example, in T4's class, improvising chords to support a tune was routine. T3 encouraged transposing or recomposing learned pieces. T1 and T2 regularly asked students to change parts of pieces. In one class, students learning Brahms' Lullaby were told, "You can end it on any F you like." This made students excited and motivated (T2, O3). Students felt trusted to make decisions, express themselves, and take ownership of their learning. Within a structured and supportive environment, they developed the autonomy necessary to become independent learners.

c. Discussion on Autonomy

This study showed that integrating group piano instruction with comprehensive musicianship creates an autonomy-supportive environment that includes discovery learning and systematic structures. Discovery learning strategies were found to be important in promoting students' autonomy in group instruction. Previous studies indicated that discovery-based approaches, which involve learners actively exploring and experimenting knowledge, naturally support autonomy by allowing students to make choices and take ownership of their learning (Bruner, 1961; Jang et al., 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2017). This study further indicated that discovery learning was a central approach in elementary level group piano instruction. Teachers intentionally moved to a student-centered approach, encouraging children to build knowledge through a range of group activities and eclectic teaching strategies. These practices were also effective in teaching comprehensive musicianship elements such as analysis and creative tasks, which aligns with Kim's (2000: 7) observation that "both group instruction and comprehensive musicianship are fundamentally rooted in the philosophy of discovery learning." Within group piano settings, discovery learning functioned as a key means of helping students grasp and internalize core concepts of comprehensive musicianship.

One important finding was that students experienced rhythm and pitch aurally and physically before associating them with notation, aural training was specifically emphasised in group piano instruction. This finding echoes previous study of Chawke (2023: 238), who suggested that learning by ear inherently involves discovery learning, as "students rely on their aural skills and musical knowledge to identify the notes independently and imitate what they hear." In addition, body movement played a significant role in supporting discovery learning. Approaches inspired by Dalcroze Eurhythmics demonstrated that musical understanding can be developed through physical experience before the introduction of notation. Research has shown that movement-based learning strengthens rhythmic accuracy, coordination, and expressive understanding in young musicians (Juntunen & Westerlund, 2001; Habron, 2016). In the current study, by moving, clapping, or using body percussion, students internalised rhythm and phrasing in a natural way, which later supported their performance on the keyboard.

In addition, discovery learning was reinforced through self-reflection and questioning. Teachers often encouraged students to explain their strategies or describe how they solved a musical problem, fostering critical thinking. This reflects the approach recommended by Kim (2000), who argued that effective group instruction involves guiding students toward self-discovery rather than offering direct solutions.

Participants also used a spiral curriculum to support discovery learning. By revisiting ideas in varied contexts, students could connect new concepts to prior knowledge. Pike (2017) recommends this approach for scaffolding and active exploration. In group settings, this helped students analyse, evaluate, and collaborate more effectively.

In addition, the study found that systematic teaching structures also supported autonomy. Although lessons were organised, students worked independently within that framework. The structure was not rigid or controlling but helped students stay focused while still making choices. Self- determination theory provides a useful framework for understanding the balance between structured teaching and autonomy. SDT studies underscore that supporting autonomy is not about permissiveness, but rather helping to catalyze students' willingness to engage in learning through well-organized learning environments and activities (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Similarly, Evans (2015) noted that autonomy does not mean the absence of structure. Students trusted the teacher and understood the purpose of activities, which made them feel more motivated.

Teachers also offered choices in lesson content, such as selecting ensemble instruments or performance pieces. Consistent with SDT, giving students control supported engagement. Prior studies (Jang et al., 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009) agree that student choice fosters autonomous motivation.

In summary, this study shows that discovery learning and systematic structures together support autonomy in group piano instruction. The balance between both elements allowed students to explore freely within a well-organized framework. This balance is crucial for fostering musical independence, especially among young beginners who are still developing foundational skills.

ii. Competence

According to Ryan and Deci (2017), competence is a fundamental psychological need that involves the desire to feel effective, capable, and successful in interacting with one's environment. This study found that group piano instruction, especially when combined with comprehensive musicianship, created conditions that enhanced students' sense of competence through engagement with optimal challenges, the provision of meaningful feedback and rewards, and the cultivation of a sense of musical mastery.

a. Optimal Challenges, Positive Feedback, and Reward Systems

In the interviews, participants consistently emphasised the importance of designing tasks that matched students' developmental levels. Observations showed that when teachers understood each student's ability in a group and set up learning tasks and comments appropriately, students were more motivated. However, if the tasks were too easy or too hard, students tended to become distracted. In group instruction, effective tasks often included performance activities, musical games, and peer interactions. All four participants highlighted the role of performance in boosting competence. Students frequently performed for classmates, receiving applause and building confidence. T4 shared that she organised a "performance time" at the beginning of each class, where students played their repertoire at the teacher's piano with accompaniment. This routine helped normalise performance and allowed students to demonstrate progress (T4, Interview). Teachers also held biannual recitals, which students found motivating, often leading to more focused practice and faster progress afterward.

Another key factor in supporting competence was the teacher's use of positive feedback. T1 reflected on her teaching style: "I tend to be very strict and directive in individual teaching, but I do not know why in group teaching I become more gentle and encouraging" (T1, Interview). This was reflected in her open-ended class questions, such as "Who can help me find similar rhythmic patterns?" and "Who wants to come to my piano and demonstrate?" These invitations encouraged participation and allowed students to feel successful in front of their peers. In observation, T1's feedback was specific and formative. For example, after a sight-playing exercise, she said, "I will give Xiao Qi 100 points because she expressed the music with attention to phrasing, breath, and accent." On

another occasion, she told a student, “You played very well because you read fluently and correctly, but you could do better without missing to count the beats.” This balance of praise and critique helped students see both their strengths and areas to improve, making progress feel achievable.

Although Self-Determination Theory warns that external rewards may lower intrinsic motivation, participants still used small incentives to acknowledge effort. T2 shared that she gave cartoon stickers for “gaining new skills and knowledge,” clearly linking the reward to progress rather than mere task completion. T1, T3, and T4 also used visual rewards such as paper flowers next to students’ names on the board to recognise participation and good behaviour. Observations confirmed these practices improved engagement and class morale. T2 showed the strongest alignment with SDT principles. She warned against using rewards just to get students to finish tasks: “The reward should be for progress in knowledge and skill, not just finishing something so that the students feel very proud of themselves. They are motivated because of their increased competence rather than my sticker.” Her approach reflects Chawke’s (2023) view that engagement-contingent and completion-contingent rewards, common in piano teaching, can reduce intrinsic motivation if not framed carefully.

b. Musical Mastery through Independent Learning

This study also found that students developed a sense of musical mastery through independent learning, especially in group instruction settings guided by comprehensive musicianship. The group setting, with less direct teacher attention, required students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, the comprehensive musicianship approach, widely adopted in the group piano lessons of the participants, further strengthened students’ independent learning. Through regular activities that involved aural training, music theory, and analytical thinking, students became more capable of learning music on their own. This played an important role in shaping the students’musical mastery. As T3 observed, students who studied in group settings were more capable of analyzing new repertoire, identifying patterns, and critical listening (T3, Interview).

Observation data provided concrete examples of how this mastery developed. In T1’ s lessons, for instance, students were encouraged to identify intervallic patterns and rhythmic groupings in new repertoire

before playing. In one class (T1, O4), several tudents successfully completed a short piece on their own by applying these strategies. Their ability to decode and perform music independently gave them visible confidence and reinforced their sense of achievement. T1 explained, “I teach the ability to play piano rather than how to play individual pieces” (T1, Interview). Instead of relying on the teacher to provide each note, they experienced mastery by actively using the tools they had learned.

Similarly, T2 highlighted the importance of students being able to check and correct themselves. When a student made a rhythmic error, she guided them to clap the rhythm and self-correct before trying again (T2, O3). This strategy transformed mistakes into opportunities for mastery. Over time, students began to adopt these self- checking techniques spontaneously, showing that they were internalizing the skills needed for accurate and confident performance.

Teachers also emphasised mastery through listening and comparison. T4 explained, “I cannot correct every student at once, so they must listen to themselves and judge if it is right” (T4, Interview). Her approach encouraged students to evaluate their playing against peers or recordings, fostering self-awareness and accuracy. As students learned to recognize correctness on their own, their competence was reinforced by the tangible improvement in their performances.

c. Discussion on Competence

Chawke (2023) noted that by designing engaging, appropriately challenging, and well-structured activities, along with teaching effective practice strategies and learning methods, students can enhance their musical competence and confidence (p. 240). In line with this, this study found that experienced participants supported competence by arranging optimal challenges, giving positive feedback, and using comprehensive musicianship approaches to help students develop musical skills and independence.

According to Pike (2017), group activities and games play an important role in promoting high levels of self-efficacy among group members. In this study, students were motivated and engaged in performing tasks, playing musical games, and interacting with peers. Group performances, both informal and formal, served as optimal

challenges. These helped students experience success in front of others, which boosted their confidence.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) also suggests that giving positive feedback helps meet students' need to feel competent (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Teachers in this study used various methods to praise students, all of which showed students that their efforts had been noticed. The praise was specific and focused on what was done well. This supports Pike's (2017) view that clear and accurate feedback is vital in group lessons. When feedback was given to one student, others often learned from observing and listening.

Although SDT criticises external rewards for potentially lowering motivation, most participants believed small rewards were helpful in motivating young learners. Stickers or treats were given for good behaviour or consistent home practice. Chawke (2023: 83) described these as "engagement-contingent and completion-contingent rewards", which are common in piano education but may harm intrinsic motivation over time. However, this study found that when rewards were framed around learning progress, they could still support autonomy. The key was that students viewed the rewards as recognition of improvement, not just obedience.

The results also show that students' sense of musical mastery, built through independent learning and the use of comprehensive musicianship in group settings, was crucial for developing competence. In SDT, competence includes both skill development and the feeling of growth and success in the learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Bandura (1977) suggested that mastery experiences, when learners succeed in a task through their own efforts, are one of the most powerful sources of self-efficacy. In this study, students regularly applied aural, technical, and analytical skills independently, which strengthened their confidence.

Through comprehensive musicianship approaches, teachers focused on rhythm reading, pitch recognition, aural skills, and theory, helping students learn independently. This aligns with Chawke's (2023) observation that developing musical literacy, primarily through understanding music theory and sight-reading strategies, plays a central role in becoming a self-regulated and confident learner.

In addition, this study reveals that mistakes also became important opportunities for mastery. Teachers encouraged students to see mistake as part of their learning process rather than as failure, reinforcing their sense of growth and competence. Achievement goal theory provides a useful lens for understanding these practices. As Urdan and Kaplan (2020) explained, mastery goals emphasize the development of competence and knowledge, with mistakes viewed as part of the learning process. In contrast, performance goals focus on demonstrating ability relative to others, which can make failure more threatening. In this study, teachers helped the students treat mistakes as opportunities for growth by steering students toward mastery-oriented goals. This also aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2020) Self-Determination Theory, which highlights the importance of supporting competence through developing mastery goal.

In conclusion, this study found that optimal challenges, clear praise, and appropriate rewards improved students' competence. Although external rewards were not beneficial, this study found that when rewards were framed around learning progress, they could still support autonomy. It also highlighted that fostering competence in group piano settings relies not only on developing skills but also on creating mastery experiences. By emphasising independent learning, comprehensive musicianship, and a positive view of mistakes, teachers supported students' motivation and self-regulated learning.

iii. Relatedness

In the framework of Self-Determination Theory, relatedness is defined as the feeling of being connected to others, belonging to a community, and knowing that one's presence is valued (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT recognises that the fulfilment of relatedness increases internal motivation. Compared to traditional individual piano lessons, group piano instruction naturally provides an environment that fosters a sense of relatedness. This study found that students in group piano lessons developed meaningful relationships with peers, teachers, and parents, which contributed to greater engagement and motivation.

a. Peer Relationships

All participants emphasised the motivational power of companionship in group settings. Students were frequently involved in collaborative activities, games, and ensemble tasks that encouraged peer interaction and bonding. For instance, T2 integrated Orff-based activities such as rhythmic improvisation with percussion instruments and role-playing games. Each child embodied a musical pitch (e.g., Do, Re, Mi) using unique gestures (T2, O3). These activities, combined with aural training, allowed students to express themselves while working together.

Another example came from T3's lesson on 3/4 time. She arranged rings on the floor and asked students to jump into them every three beats. One student's exaggerated jump caused laughter, creating a moment of shared enjoyment. These playful interactions not only made music learning fun but also strengthened students' social connections (T3, O3).

Cooperative learning strategies were also widely used. Students played phrase by phrase or in small groups. Sometimes, one group performed on the piano while others sang, encouraging attention and accountability. T2 observed, "Children learn better from peers," and she sometimes appointed a student as a teaching assistant to model tasks for others (T2, Interview).

b. Student-Teacher Relationships

Group instruction also fostered more informal and relaxed teacher-student relationships than in private lessons. In the interview, T1 explained that while her individual lessons were usually strict and directive, her group teaching style became noticeably gentler and encouraging. T3 also stressed that protecting students' interests was important and that the group setting helped maintain a joyful learning atmosphere.

Teachers were often seen participating in activities hand-in-hand with students, forming circles, and playing games together. This helped them be viewed not as authority figures, but as partners in learning. The interactive style made students feel secure and willing to participate.

In line with SDT, teachers' instructional styles were generally autonomy-supportive rather than controlling. They often used open-ended questions instead of giving direct instructions. This encouraged student involvement and created a respectful, engaging classroom atmosphere.

c. Student-Parent Relationships

As the group instruction targeted young beginners aged 4 to 8, the classes were often structured as parent-child courses involving regular interaction. All teachers asked one parent to sit beside their child during class.

For example, in T1's first lesson, each student introduced themselves, then sang a group song called "Piano Friends". Everyone clapped in time, and during the second verse, students clapped hands with their parents, guided by the teacher. The students looked happy, and the parents were actively involved.

Other teachers used similar parent-child games. For example, T3 invited parents to join rhythmic improvisation games (T3, O5). T4 included lapriding games where children bounced to the beat while sitting on a parent's lap (T4, O2). T2 led body movement exercises with both children and parents dancing together to the music (T2, O2). These shared experiences deepened the child-parent bond and increased student enjoyment in lessons.

d. Discussion on Relatedness

This study found that group piano instruction effectively supports the psychological need for relatedness, a key factor in promoting intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness was fulfilled through positive interactions with peers, teachers, and parents.

Group instruction gave students many chances to interact with peers through musical games, ensemble playing, and cooperative tasks. These experiences promoted friendship and a sense of belonging. As Tsai (2007) noted, students are more motivated when learning alongside others, similar to other classroom settings. This study supports the idea that group environments allow teachers to use engaging group activities, especially when aligned with comprehensive musicianship. Activities involving movement and creativity, like role-playing or group improvisation, helped students build musical skills and emotional bonds. This aligns with Hallam's (2010) findings that such activities can enhance engagement and foster a sense of belonging, which are essential for motivation in group learning.

The group format also encouraged more supportive teacher-student dynamics. Teachers reported becoming more encouraging and autonomy-supportive in group settings. Bloom (1985) stated that positive teacher-student relationships are more important than technical training in early learning stages. In this study, teachers joined in the music-making instead of teaching from a distance. This closeness echoes Creech and Hallam's (2011) point that teachers who play alongside students build trust and belonging. This also aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which shows that teachers' involvement works best when it supports autonomy rather than controls it (Black & Deci, 2000).

Group piano lessons for young children also involved parents actively. Previous studies, such as Liu (2016), show that parental support plays a major role in children' s musical progress. In this study, parents joined their children in clapping, singing, or moving to rhythms. These shared moments built emotional connections and made music more enjoyable for the children. Creech and Hallam (2003) found that such joint participation increases children' s motivation and persistence, as the presence of parents provides both emotional security and reinforcement of learning. In this way, music-making became a family activity rather than solely a classroom task.

Overall, Group piano instruction promotes relatedness by fostering peer collaboration, building relaxed teacher-student relationships, and encouraging active parent involvement. These connections create a positive, engaging, and emotionally supportive learning environment for young learners.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that, based on Self-Determination Theory, integrating group piano instruction with the comprehensive musicianship teaching philosophy has a significant impact on the learning motivation of young piano beginners. The study shows how the discovery learning environment and systematic teaching structure, generated through this integration, can support students' autonomy. It also highlights the importance of teachers offering optimal challenges, positive feedback, and encouraging independent learning to build students' sense of competence.

In addition, the collaborative nature of group instruction and comprehensive musicianship helps create a supportive learning environment by fostering strong relationships among students, teachers, peers, and parents.

These findings support a holistic approach to group piano teaching that nurtures autonomy, competence, and relatedness. By combining structured teaching with eclectic approaches that support comprehensive musicianship, teachers can provide a rich and motivating experience that prepares students for both independent and group music-making. The findings also highlight several implications for curriculum design and teacher training. Workshops could promote comprehensive musicianship and eclectic approaches to help teachers diversify strategies and create motivating learning environments. Parental involvement should also be encouraged to support home practice and reinforce classroom goals without undue pressure.

This study is limited by its focus on four Chinese teachers. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples. Group piano instruction also fosters 21st-century skills like critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration, which future studies could explore in more depth.

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