Improving students' intrinsic motivation in piano learning: Expert teacher voices

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Abstract

Many students learn to play the piano but some lack the motivation to continue learning. Many students learn for extrinsic reasons. This research will explore understandings about student motivation held by expert piano teachers who have developed strategies to improve their students' intrinsic motivation to begin and continue learning. This small scale phenomenological case study examined three expert and experienced piano teachers' understandings of student engagement and motivation. The analysis generated a number of themes in relation to students' motivation in piano learning. The findings of this current study could offer a range of ideas and reflections to assist instrumental teachers build their students' intrinsic motivation in learning and foster lifelong music making.

Key words: piano, music learning, instrumental teaching, motivation

Introduction

Engaging with and enjoying music is a universal human trait and it is the right of every child to receive a music education (Schuler, 2012). Instrumental music learning has long been the subject of considerable research interest (MacKenzie, 1991; Schiavo & Cummins, 2015). Learning piano is an effective way for students to gain pleasure and enjoyment from music and those who play piano are thought to perceive themselves to be smart, energetic, outgoing and hardworking which may lead them to achieve better in academic learning (Duke, Flowers & Wolfe, 1997). Although many students learn piano from a young age, a large number lack intrinsic motivation to continue their study to become competent players (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993; Davidson, Sloboda & Howe, 1995/1996). Some students may even consider learning piano an uninteresting activity but

continue for extrinsic reasons such as parental pressure (Costa-Giomi, 2004). This study addresses the question: How do three experienced piano teachers engender motivation in their students?

Motivation has been defined as "the process whereby goal-directed activities are initiated and sustained" (Cook & Artino, 2016, p. 997). Motivation is colloquially understood as a driving force within an individual to do something. Different theories attempt to explain human motivation including expectancy value theory, attribution theory, social-cognitive theory, goal orientation theory and self-determination theory and each offers "recurrent themes of competence, value, attributions, and interactions between individual and the learning context" (Cook & Artino, 2016, p. 997). Whether an individual is motivated may be determined by his or her behaviour (Maehr, 1984; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Maehr & Pintrich, 2011) and influential factors may include: choice and preference, intensity,

persistence, quality of engagement, affect and cognition (Maehr, Pintrich, & Linnenbrink, 2002; Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2011).

Piano teachers frequently find their students' behavioral indicators helpful in determining motivation (Davidson et al., 1995/1996; Costa-Giomi, 2004). These indicators include choice and preference, intensity, persistence and quality of engagement and musical output (Maehr, Pintrich, & Linnenbrink, 2002). Making the decision to take part in an activity indicates motivation. For example, if students choose to practice piano without external pressure and if they persist with practising even though the repertoire is difficult, they are internally or intrinsically motivated (Sloboda, Davidson, Howe, & Moore, 1996; Johnston, 2007). Behavioral indicators of motivation include how long students remain engaged in an activity, how well they accomplish a task, and students' expressed emotions and thoughts (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2011). In this article, intrinsic motivation theory will be discussed.

Intrinsic motivation theory is a social cognitive theory that focuses on the individual, particularly his or her cognitions and affects (Maehr et al., 2002; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). This theory highlights the importance of the affective in motivation. Self-determination theory is an intrinsic motivation theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) that encompasses three general needs which must be satisfied by individuals: competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci, 1980; 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The need for competence means to master and be powerful in interactions with the environment (White, 1959; Wlodkowski, 2011) which in piano learning, means becoming a proficient performer. The need for relatedness indicates interest and the need for autonomy concerns having an experience of self-determination and the freedom to make choices without extrinsic control and oversight. In piano learning, this need implies that students make choices by themselves during and after class instead of just doing what they are told by their teachers and parents. If the needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy are satisfied during piano learning, students may be more intrinsically motivated to continue (Costa-Giomi, 2004).

Mostly, piano teachers provide one-to-one tuition which is widely viewed as an intense, indispensable, and intricate part of instrumental and vocal music learning (Carey, Bridgstock, Taylor, McWilliam & Grant, 2013; Carey & Grant, 2014). Sometimes one-to-one tuition may have a negative influence on students' learning (Carey & Harrison, 2007; Gaunt, 2009; Carey, Grant, McWilliam & Taylor, 2013). Variable teaching quality may confuse students (Carey et al., 2013). If piano teachers are able to create environments which elevate engagement, resilience and endurance for each student, teachers may be more likely to see musical and academic persistence and achievement. For example, if piano teachers want students to learn to play a difficult piece, teachers may need students to attend to their independent practice routines even though the practice may be challenging and difficult (Johnston, 2007). It follows that lacking motivation may impede independent practice (Costa-Giomi, 2004). Students with little motivation to practice will be less successful than students who choose to work on technical exercises and music repertoire. A lack of success may then reinforce poor motivation. Unmotivated students may adopt passive behaviours during piano learning that may result with students' overall dissatisfaction with learning piano. Negative thoughts and dissatisfaction may form a vicious circle in which students' piano learning deteriorates.

Understanding how to motivate students is a key to achieving desired goals. For example, a student who can achieve short-term goals "will be more motivated and will show more intrinsic interest in solving [a] task" (Ravzan & Andra, 2010, p. 478). Motivational strategies may include the teacher modeling playing to build students' interest. Improving students' motivation is an imperative for teachers. Piano teachers may use effective external motivations such as providing proper strategies (Hallam, 2002; McPherson, 2005), skills (Schenck,

1989; Schatt, 2011), being patient (Jaffurs, 2004), encouraging students (Creech & Hallam, 2011) and examinations. Teachers can cooperate with parents in improving students' intrinsic motivation by increasing their desire (MacKenzie, 1991; Costa-Giomi, 2004; Schatt, 2011) and enjoyment (Bamberger, 1996; Rife, et al., 2010). This satisfies students' needs for autonomy and relatedness because learning piano relates to their interests (McInerney, 2015).

Methodology

This research was constructivist, qualitative and empirical (Bryman, 2012). Constructivism implies that knowledge is the product of interactions between individuals (Bryman, 2012) and this is situated within a historical moment and social context (Creswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this inquiry, experienced piano teachers known to the researchers via professional networks were sent invitations to take part. Three responded and agreed to be interviewed about how they foster students' intrinsic motivation in piano learning. The research explored their understandings about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in their students' beginning and continuing learning. Representative case studies capture the "circumstances and conditions of an everyday or commonplace situation" (Yin, 2009, p. 48). An instrumental case study uses one case to provide insight into an issue (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were employed as they allow researchers to modify questions as the interview proceeds while still staying close to the list of topics (Bryman, 2012). Interview questions included: 1. How long have you been teaching piano? 2. Can you tell me about your students? 3. Why do you think children want to learn the piano? As stated, the research question that drives this study is: How do three experienced piano teachers engender motivation in their students? Ethical approval was gained from the Human Ethics committee of the university and all participants agreed to be identified by pseudonym.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse data. IPA is a descriptive methodology first presented by Smith in 1996 (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). IPA explores simple description to make sense of the participants' lived experiences by developing an interpretative analysis of the description and relating this to social, cultural and theoretical contexts (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015). In IPA there is a focus on "significant existential issues of considerable moment to the participants and the researchers" (Smith, 2004, p. 49). There are three tenets underpinning IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2012). Phenomenology refers to seeking the related meanings of participants' lived experience to the social world, hermeneutics focuses on interpretation of meanings, and idiography refers to the individual (Smith et al., 2012). Using IPA, researchers seek to explore, restore and interpret meanings of one individual's living experience and connect the meanings to the research topic. The transcribed data were analysed thematically. First the researchers coded the data and then identified emergent themes were organised hierarchically. The researchers then prioritised the themes to construct the case based on depth analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Direct quotations from the participants are included in the text, presenting the voice of the participant. Thematic analysis and the presentation of the research are informed by the researchers' emic and etic positions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Researchers using IPA need to find the balance between an emic position and etic position in analysing data (Reid et al., 2005) by way of member checking, which is a process of researchers asking participants in the study to check the accuracy of the data (Creswell, 2014). Interpretative results of a successful IPA present the understandings and interpretations of participants and researchers (Reid et al., 2005).

Participants

The three participants are all very experienced piano teachers who have each taught piano for

more than 20 years and have both Bachelors and Masters degrees which indicates a commitment to learning and reflective teaching practice. Rosie has been teaching piano for 26 years and affiliates with the Australian and New Zealand Cultural Arts Music Examinations and the Australia Music Examinations Board (AMEB). Margaret has been teaching piano for more than 40 years and has an international concert performance diploma. She has extensive experience as a piano soloist and chamber musician, but now gives most of her time to teaching. Margaret examines for the AMEB and frequently adjudicates local and national Eisteddfods and competitions. Valerie has been teaching piano since the 1960s and affiliates with the London College of Music. She was a member of the now defunct Institute of Music Teachers (Australia).

Findings

The findings are presented thematically under the headings of Interest in learning, Interviewing potential students and their parents, Individualised teaching and learning, Repertoire, The role of parents, Examinations, Performance opportunities, and Ceasing lessons. Maintaining motivation involves a range of strategies including individualised instruction, concerts with other students, practice advice, modifying repertoire, and sometimes even undertaking examinations. All teachers spoke about the importance of being a good role model to their students.

Interest in learning

Students' interest may influence their intrinsic motivation. Even before beginning to teach, Rosie wants to understand her students' interest and she always tries to find out why they want to learn. She explains, "I think a lot of students do learn because their parents want them to and I found that quite tragic sometimes because the child does not want to learn particularly and they do it for mum and dad". Rosie suggests that if students are not interested in learning piano,

their parents should give them the opportunity to do something else. She gives an example of a young student who burst into tears when Rosie looked at him and asked "You do not want to be here, do you?". The boy cried because finally someone was listening to him and somebody knew what he was thinking.

Rosie finds that some students who have prior learning experiences may be more motivated to continue. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether a student is motivated. Rosie said that some students are more attracted to the idea of playing the piano rather than the idea of actually practising. Margaret gives an example of a student of hers who was interested in pursuing musical courses and wanted to do anything related to the keyboard because she just "really wants to study piano". If a student is really interested in playing the piano, then this motivates and drives commitment and progress. Margaret and Valerie point out that if there are family members who play piano, students may be more interested in learning. Margaret remains alert to parental pressure as in her teaching experience there are parents who want their child to have a musical, instrumental education and conveniently "they have a piano".

Interviewing potential students and their parents

All three participants interview parents and students before accepting them. Interviews can be an opportunity for teachers, parents and students to know each other better. By interviewing, teachers can explore parents' expectations for students and whether students are interested in learning the piano. Interviews work both ways. Parents and students have an opportunity to understand the teachers' teaching principles and practices. Rosie interviews both students and parents before she accepts them. She tells parents that, "I do not teach formally and traditionally just for exams, I try to explore the music in people". If Rosie believes that parents just want students to learn for examinations she

will tell them to find a more appropriate piano teacher. Margaret also interviews parents before accepting students. She explains that,

I speak to the parents independently with the students out of the room or speak to the parents on the phone. I try to listen just to establish why the student was learning and to get the idea whether the pressure was coming from mum and dad or whether there was a real desire to learn piano.

Just like Rosie, if the parents only want their child to take examinations, Margaret will refuse to teach them. She finds that this happens quite often. Valerie interviews parents and students together to know parents' intentions for students. If the parents want examinations only, she will negotiate with them and try to change their mind to be more open and accommodating of their child's preferences. Interviews can provide an opportunity for teachers to gain an understanding of the student's learning style and preferences. Interviews can foster external motivation for students by satisfying their need for autonomy and relatedness because students can tell their teachers what they really desire without parental pressure.

All three participants mention the importance of fostering enthusiasm in their students as this may influence their intrinsic motivation (Spittle & Byrne, 2009). Valerie notes that teachers' enthusiasm can influence students' enthusiasm and intrinsic motivation. She thinks that teachers should enjoy teaching,

If it is good fun for teachers, then it becomes good fun for the students and teachers try to keep that going all the time. I enjoy what I do and I think that it has to come across to students to help them enjoy, concentrate and put effort into the work. It is about doing things together.

Margaret also believes that piano teachers must be professional in teaching. This includes assessing repertoire, evaluating students' problems and helping them to find the best way to gain the ability to do what they want to. Margaret's students are advanced and usually taking or preparing for music degrees and future careers. Margaret thinks that "teachers have to be serious about the profession of teaching piano. Otherwise, they will fail in time". Speaking about her university performance students Margaret adds that some students need encouragement to gain confidence. She explains that students who are enrolled in university performance degrees are highly motivated to improve their skills.

Individualised teaching and learning

Individualised instruction maintains motivation. Margaret believes that piano teaching should be individualised. Early in her career she used to teach every student the same way which she thinks was a mistake. To find out about preferred learning styles, Margaret first establishes why students want to learn piano. Once this is known teachers can modify according to student preferences. Rosie matches her teaching to students' ability, interest and preferences. She believes that if students ask questions all the time, this is an indicator of interest. She gives an example of two students who ask questions a lot and are keen to learn musical theory.

Teachers also need to negotiate with students during teaching (Creech & Hallam, 2003; Sichivitsa, 2007). Sometimes students set goals for themselves which are beyond their own abilities and this may violate students' need for competence and self-determination. Rosie negotiates with one of her students who does not have enough technique but wants to take examinations. In this instance, Rosie allows the student to choose the pieces which she would like to play but only when she has enough technique is Rosie prepared to talk about examinations. Margaret teaches advanced students at tertiary level and evaluates students' problems to help them find the best way to improve. She claims that piano teachers should use different strategies for different students. Margaret disagrees with the idea of students competing with each other. In her opinion, teaching is about problem solving, "recognizing problems to me is to know what teaching is about ... It is working out what can be better, what can be made easier, what can be

made more appealing and putting it into practice". Valerie finds that adult students who have returned to learning the piano are often very motivated to play and to practice but sometimes they wish to bypass technique and just play preferred pieces. Piano teachers need to be good persuaders and negotiators both with students and with their parents.

Repertoire

The selection of appropriate repertoire can be a very important factor in maintaining students' intrinsic motivation. All three participants provide opportunities for their students to choose repertoire. Rosie also allows students to choose which music book they prefer and which music they want to play but she does guide their choices. Rosie asks for students' favourite songs and then asks children to give them a ranked score according to how much they like them. She allows them to learn the pieces that they give the highest score to. Rosie always provides some choices that are within the student's ability. Margaret gives the example of a student who wanted to play *Piano Man* by Billy Joel. The professional sheet music was too hard for a beginner so Margaret modified it with a simple base line and an excerpt of the melody.

Valerie also tactfully negotiates with students about repertoire to help them choose achievable pieces. In order to please students, Valerie sometimes plays pop music pieces but she would rather not because those pieces are in her opinion, not well arranged and often too simple. Valerie feels that pop music played on the piano often does not match up to the original versions that the students are thinking of and so playing pop music can be de-motivating. Margaret assesses the chosen repertoire to decide whether it is appropriate for the student. If it is too simple or too difficult, she will change the repertoire. For teachers who teach adult students, modifying music to suit adult students is quite important because if there is no learning challenge in the repertoire, adults may lose interest.

The role of parents

According to the three participants, parents are supporters who provide opportunities for piano learning. Rosie finds that mostly parents are the first to be aware of their child's interest in piano learning although some parents want their child to learn piano much more than their child wants to. Parental support may affect students' continued musical instrument learning specifically by providing material support. For instance, paying the music class fee and buying students their own piano (Georgoulas & Southcott, 2014). In Rosie's opinion, practice is mostly the responsibility of the parents to manage. Practice can be an important component of motivation and can support the determination to keep on learning.

The participants all noted repeatedly that parental pressure can force students to learn piano to please their parents (Brokaw, 1983). Rosie finds that such students were more likely to give up. Margaret also notes that many parents send students to her because they want their child to have examinations instead of developing the students' musicality. Valerie finds that students who were pushed by parents will not progress far and may plateau. Students who are experiencing parental pressure gain less satisfaction or enjoyment from their learning.

Examinations

All three participants are very experienced, mature teachers who all want students to improve their musicality and skills not just succeed at examinations. There were differing opinions about the role of examinations. Rosie claims that examinations were often more a motivation for parents than for students but all participants agreed that examinations can provide good goals in teaching and learning some students. If students want to take examinations, all three participants will set appropriate goals for students to try to ensure that they will be successful. In Australia most students take the

AMEB examinations. The external motivation of examinations may increase students' interest, intrinsic motivation and ultimately their technical skills and musicality (Haddon, 2009; McCormick & McPherson, 2007). Margaret (an AMEB examiner) considers that examinations can provide effective goals for some students but if students learn for examinations only, they become frightening tasks which do not provide enjoyment in learning. Valerie thinks that this may not be the best way to motive students. She adds that the AMEB does provide her with a lot of ideas about motivating students and doing examinations can give students a way to assess themselves.

Performance opportunities

Rosie and Valerie organise concerts in which their students perform. Rosie gives her students the choice about whether to play in the concerts. She organises about four events a year. Rosie believes that playing in these concerts provides students with a goal to work towards and this helps maintain their enthusiasm and overcome frustrations. Most of Valerie's students love the concerts that she arranges. She used to hold these events at local venues but they became quite expensive, things always went wrong and it was difficult to arrange a convenient time for everyone. Now she holds the concerts at home and invites different students to perform. Valerie thinks that mixing the students encourages and motivates younger students to learn from the more advanced ones. Margaret also holds concerts out of school hours. The concerts involve everyone including students who cannot present but who can contribute to events in other ways which is a morale booster. She also includes students who can play a second instrument. Margaret does ensemble work and duet work twice a semester to motivate students and these pieces can also be presented at the concerts.

Ceasing lessons

All the teachers commented that after students begin, they may decide to give up. Margaret

summarises the main reasons: too much school work, a change of musical focus, and for some, learning a musical instrument was undertaken to be able to compete for a scholarship to a prestigious school. Once this had been achieved, there was no longer the motivation to persist. Rosie finds that children could be very busy and have no free time to practice. For this reason, she decided to focus on teaching adults. Valerie also recognises the pressures on her older students, some of whom stop learning because of too much school work at Year 8 or 9 which takes over practice time. Sometimes the participants recognise that a student would be better suited to a different musical instrument. If Margaret thinks that a student has more aptitude for another instrument, she believes that a teacher should encourage him or her to change and is happy to talk to parents about this. Valerie has also identified students who prefer to play a different instrument or may prefer to learn something else entirely. She thinks they should be permitted to stop piano lessons. All three participants noted that when students are old enough to express an independent opinion, and want to stop, then Margaret, Rosie and Valerie are all prepared to talk to parents about their child ceasing piano lessons.

Discussion and Conclusion

The understandings of these three expert piano teachers are the distillation of many years of successful teaching. All three participants tailor their instruction to meet the individual needs of their students. This can be understood as differentiation in which there is a recognition that students differ as learners in many ways such as "background experience, culture, language, gender, interests, readiness to learn, modes of learning, speed of learning, support systems for learning, self-awareness as a learner, confidence as a learner, independence as a learner, and a host of other ways" (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 14). The participants describe their practice

as responsive to individual student needs and incorporating a range of strategies (Watts-Taffe, Laster, Broach, Marinak, Connor & Walker-Dalhouse, 2012). Their realistic and perceptive statements can be summarised into a check list of expert teaching:

1. Interview parents and students before commencing teaching;

2. Be clear about what and how you teach;

3. Model enthusiasm, enjoyment and professionalism;

4. Individualise teaching and learning;

5. Select appropriate repertoire;

6. Manage student and parent expectations;

7. Provide performance opportunities;

8. Support students in their choices to continue or to stop.

Underpinning these assertions is the participants' belief that students who enjoy learning and playing the piano, may develop stronger inherent motivation to play to please themselves (Rife, et al., 2010). If students' needs for a sense of competence, relatedness and autonomy are satisfied during piano learning, students may be more intrinsically motivated to continue (Costa-Giomi, 2004) and this is more likely to be sustained across their lifespan. Successful teacher/student partnerships involve negotiation with all concerned, including parents because they may have different goals to their child (Li & Southcott, 2010). Confident, experienced teachers involve parents (Macmillan, 2004) and it is recognized that both teacher and parents have vital roles to play in students' music learning and progress (Upitis, Abrami, Brook & King, 2016). Teachers and parents should support students in developing their own autonomy. Students who learn due to parental pressure alone, may not continue playing piano once they are independent. Offering choices can be an effective extrinsic motivation used by teachers in improving students' intrinsic motivation (Renwick & McPherson, 2002). For example, all three

participants negotiated repertoire and provided concert opportunities for their students but there was no assumption that all would play. Most of the participants' students enjoyed the concerts.

All three participants exhibit the characteristics of effective teachers. They are well organised and explain clearly, they differentiate between their students, they are skilled musicians, they model enthusiasm and a love of music and the piano, they have an aura of self-confidence, they are concerned about the quality of their teaching and are seen as approachable and interested in individual students (Stanford Teaching Commons, 2016). In addition, they are patient, tactful, and friendly. They seek to foster in their students the three general needs which must be satisfied by individuals: competence, relatedness and autonomy. These needs can be addressed by extrinsic motivational strategies that will improve students' intrinsic motivation in piano learning. The three participants in this study are models of expert teaching and their insightful comments and advice suggest approaches and strategies that would assist all instrumental music teachers.

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