Strategies for Enhancing Student Engagement in Early Childhood Education Music Classes from the Perspective of Teacher Support

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Abstract: Student engagement in music courses is an essential component of professional training for early childhood education students. However, in practical teaching contexts, many students exhibit limited enthusiasm and superficial participation, which not only hinders their academic development but also weakens their preparedness to incorporate music into early childhood teaching. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study investigates how teacher support can foster student engagement by addressing three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Through an analysis of the underlying factors affecting engagement and the mechanisms by which teacher support influences motivation, this paper proposes targeted instructional strategies to foster active student involvement in music learning. The findings provide both theoretical insights and practical guidance for improving teaching effectiveness and supporting early childhood education students in developing professional confidence and enthusiasm for music education.

Keywords: Student engagement; Teacher support; Self-Determination Theory; Music education; Early childhood education students

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1. Introduction

Music education constitutes a key component of the curriculum for students majoring in early childhood education, serving not only to enhance their musical literacy but also to prepare them for the practical demands of future teaching. As a subject grounded in sensory perception, emotional expression, and experiential learning, music courses require students' active participation to foster meaningful learning outcomes (Koob, 1984). However, in actual teaching practice, many early childhood education students display low levels of engagement in music classes. This lack of engagement not only hinders their acquisition of essential musical skills but also undermines their ability to integrate music effectively into early childhood teaching (Asrobi et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024). Encouraging sustained engagement in music learning is therefore essential for both their academic development and their future professional competence.

Multiple factors contribute to this issue. Differences in students' prior musical experiences, emotional inhibition due to a fear of mistakes, reliance on external incentives, and limited recognition of the professional relevance of music learning collectively lead to passive classroom behaviors and superficial participation. Without effective pedagogical interventions, this disengagement may ultimately weaken students' confidence and professional preparedness as future educators.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a robust framework for addressing this challenge. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation and engage actively in learning when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When

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the learning environment actively supports these needs, students tend to demonstrate stronger motivation, deeper emotional involvement, and more sustained participation in academic tasks. Within this framework, teacher support plays a pivotal role in meeting these psychological needs and promoting positive engagement behaviors (Zhou et al., 2022; Basak & Basu, 2024).

Teacher support generally operates along three dimensions. Autonomy support involves offering meaningful choices and encouraging student initiative. Competence support entails providing structured guidance, differentiated tasks, and constructive feedback to help students build confidence in their abilities. Relatedness support focuses on establishing positive, respectful relationships that make students feel valued and included. Research has consistently demonstrated that when these forms of support are systematically embedded in instruction—especially in practice-oriented courses like music—they can significantly enhance students' engagement and motivation (Merdiaty & Sulistiasih, 2024; Guo et al., 2023).

Building on these insights, this paper focuses on the music courses of early childhood education students as its research subject. It applies the Self-Determination Theory framework to explore how teacher support can enhance student engagement. By identifying key obstacles to participation and developing targeted instructional strategies that align with students' psychological needs, this study aims to provide both theoretical contributions and practical guidance. The ultimate goal is to support early childhood education students in building confidence, fostering intrinsic motivation, and developing the professional capacity to integrate music into their future teaching practice.

2. The Problem of Limited Student Engagement in Music Learning: Current Situation and Contributing Factors

Programs Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured student interviews and reflective teaching practice within early childhood education programs, this section explores prevailing patterns in student engagement with music courses. The analysis reveals several interrelated challenges that hinder active and sustained participation, including disparities in prior musical experience, emotional constraints, motivational deficits, and ambiguous perceptions of professional relevance.

(1) Disparities in interest and foundational musical competence

Interview data indicate a pronounced heterogeneity in students' prior exposure to and music competence. A minority of students entered the program with prior experience in vocal training or instrumental practice, often cultivated through extracurricular lessons or family support. These individuals tended to exhibit high levels of enthusiasm, self-assurance, and expressive engagement during musical tasks. However, the majority of students demonstrated limited proficiency in fundamental skills such as pitch matching, rhythmic coordination, and vocal projection. For these students, even basic performance-based tasks induced cognitive overload and affective discomfort, leading to withdrawal and reduced willingness to engage. This divergence in musical preparedness not only affects individual confidence but also disrupts classroom cohesion, as activities must be continually adapted to accommodate a wide range of ability levels. Without targeted scaffolding, less confident students are prone to disengagement, thereby weakening the collective learning dynamic and impeding the development of a collaborative musical culture.

(2) Emotional inhibition and performance-related anxiety

A recurring theme across interviews was the prevalence of performance anxiety, particularly when tasks involved vocalization, improvisation, or physical expression (e.g., movement to music). Students frequently reported fears of embarrassment, negative peer evaluation, and personal inadequacy, which manifested behaviorally in hesitation, reticence, and a preference for passive observation. Phrases such as "afraid of singing out of tune" or

"worried about being laughed at" highlight a psychosocial barrier that constrains full participation. From the lens of educational psychology, such emotional inhibition can be interpreted through the framework of self-protective motivation (Covington, 1992), wherein students engage in avoidance behaviours to mitigate potential threats to self-esteem. In the context of music learning—where expressive risk-taking is central—this pattern severely restricts the development of confidence and communicative competence. Moreover, the classroom environment, if overly evaluative or insufficiently supportive, may inadvertently exacerbate these anxieties.

(3) Overreliance on teacher direction and deficient motivation

Although efforts to employ student-centred pedagogical approaches, observational data, and student narratives indicate that much classroom participation remains externally regulated. Students often comply with teacher prompts and complete assigned tasks but rarely initiate dialogue, ask questions, or contribute original ideas. This behavioural pattern suggests a predominance of controlled motivation over an autonomous engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000), wherein students act out of obligation or to meet external expectations rather than driven by intrinsic interest. The absence of intrinsic motivation undermines deeper cognitive and emotional investment in learning activities. It also limits opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge, which is essential for developing creative pedagogical competencies that future early childhood educators are expected to possess. Without fostering a sense of agency, students are unlikely to internalize the value of music education or apply the skills they have learned in future teaching contexts.

(4) Ambiguous perception of the professional relevance of music education

Another significant barrier to engagement lies in students' limited conceptualization of the pedagogical value of music within early childhood education. Interview responses such as "I thought music class was just for fun" or "I do not see how this helps me become a better teacher" reflect a disconnect between course content and perceived professional application. This misalignment often results in superficial participation, a lack of goal-directed learning behaviour, and diminished long-term retention of skills. This perception gap may be rooted in curriculum design, insufficient contextualization by instructors, or students' limited exposure to integrated music pedagogy in practice settings. From a constructivist perspective, meaningful learning occurs when students can connect new knowledge with their existing mental frameworks and anticipated roles. Without a clear understanding of how music fosters cognitive, emotional, and social development in young children, students struggle to see its relevance to their professional identity formation.

3. Instructional Strategies to Promote Student Engagement in Music Courses: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

Self-determination theory (SDT) emphasizes that meaningful engagement and sustained motivation in learning environments stem from the fulfilment of three fundamental psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For early childhood education students in music learning contexts, applying this framework is particularly valuable, given the observed challenges of uneven foundational skills, emotional inhibition, reliance on external motivation, and limited awareness of music's professional relevance. By designing targeted instructional strategies aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), educators can systematically address these challenges, fostering both immediate engagement and long-term professional growth.

(1) Supporting students' need for relatedness through emotional safety

A critical barrier to active engagement in music learning among early childhood education students is emotional inhibition, often driven by a fear of negative evaluation or the embarrassment of making mistakes in front of peers. For students with limited musical backgrounds, this fear is further amplified by a sense of inadequacy compared to

their classmates who have prior exposure to music training.

Creating a psychologically safe environment is, therefore, essential. Teachers should adopt inclusive communication practices that validate student efforts, regardless of performance quality. Using affirming statements such as "That was a creative attempt" or "Let us explore that idea together" helps reframe mistakes as part of the learning journey. Additionally, incorporating formative assessment techniques—such as anonymous audio submissions, self-assessment rubrics, and constructive peer feedback—reduces the emphasis on external evaluation, thus minimizing performance anxiety.

Low-stakes performance opportunities are also beneficial. Activities like collaborative rhythm games, small-group ensemble work, or recorded musical reflections allow students to express themselves musically without the immediate pressure of public performance. These strategies gradually build students' confidence and cultivate a sense of belonging within the learning community, directly addressing their need for relatedness and encouraging active participation in the classroom.

(2) Enhancing students' sense of competence through differentiated instruction

Significant disparities in students' musical foundations often lead to disengagement, particularly when instructional content is perceived as either too complex or overly simplistic. Rigid, standardized teaching approaches risk alienating both novice learners and those with prior musical experience, thereby undermining students' sense of self-efficacy and competence.

To address this, differentiated instruction should be systematically employed. One effective method is the use of tiered activities, offering multiple pathways for students to engage with musical concepts at appropriate levels of challenge. Beginners might work on fundamental rhythm patterns using clapping or percussion instruments, while more advanced students engage in melodic improvisation or simple harmonization tasks. This approach enables individualized progression while maintaining a cohesive group learning experience.

In addition, role-based collaborative learning can be implemented to leverage individual strengths. Assigning functional roles—such as timekeeper, creative lead, or feedback coordinator—ensures that each student contributes meaningfully, regardless of musical proficiency. Furthermore, integrating practical tasks, such as composing short musical pieces with everyday objects or designing interactive music activities for young children, reinforces students' belief in their ability to succeed. These differentiated strategies not only elevate students' perceived competence but also foster sustained engagement by providing consistent experiences of success.

(3) Fostering autonomy and internal motivation through student choice and professional relevance

Another prominent challenge in music learning for early childhood education students is their overreliance on external incentives for participation. Without perceiving clear personal or professional value in music education, students often engage passively, limiting the development of intrinsic motivation.

Fostering autonomy is key to reversing this trend. Educators should embed structured opportunities for student choice within lessons, enabling learners to select musical materials, form their collaborative groups, or create personalized musical projects. For instance, students might choose songs that resonate with their personal experiences or invent musical games intended for use in future early childhood teaching settings. These choices, while aligned with curricular objectives, provide students with a sense of ownership over their learning.

Equally important is helping students connect music learning to their emerging professional identities. Simulated teaching scenarios—such as planning music activities for preschoolers or practising classroom leadership through music—transform the music curriculum from a standalone academic subject into a valuable pedagogical resource. When students view music learning as directly relevant to their future roles as educators, internal motivation naturally increases. By combining autonomy-supportive practices with explicit professional relevance, teachers can

promote deeper engagement and long-term commitment to musical learning.

(4) Extending support beyond the classroom to sustain participation

Given that many students' initial motivation for music learning is fragile, extending support beyond classroom interactions is crucial for sustaining engagement. Without continuous reinforcement, students may revert to passive participation or disengagement after structured sessions conclude.

One effective strategy is the establishment of peer support networks. Structured or informal peer learning groups enable students to rehearse, exchange ideas, and offer mutual encouragement, thereby extending the sense of community fostered in class. These networks not only reinforce musical skills but also strengthen interpersonal bonds, enhancing overall academic belonging.

The use of digital platforms can further broaden the scope of instructional support. Teachers should curate collections of supplementary learning materials, including demonstration videos, interactive musical resources, and real-world teaching exemplars. Assignments such as reflective journals or short video commentaries enable students to document their musical development, articulate challenges, and receive personalized feedback from instructors. These ongoing feedback mechanisms foster metacognitive awareness, encouraging students to take an active role in controlling their learning processes.

By ensuring that students have access to both social and academic resources outside of formal class time, educators can foster a supportive, sustained engagement with music learning. This comprehensive support structure reinforces students' psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy, making meaningful engagement more likely to persist over time.

By systematically applying strategies grounded in Self-Determination Theory, music educators in early childhood education programs can transform the learning experience from one characterized by passivity and external dependency to one defined by active participation and intrinsic motivation. Addressing the psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy through intentional instructional design enables students to engage meaningfully, not only as learners of music but also as future educators who can effectively integrate musical learning into early childhood pedagogy. In doing so, the classroom becomes not just a site of skill acquisition but a foundation for professional growth and lifelong engagement with music.

4. Conclusion

Promoting active engagement in music courses among early childhood education students is critical for their academic success and future teaching competence. This study, guided by the Self-Determination Theory, emphasizes the importance of meeting students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting sustained participation. Teacher support, manifested through autonomy support, competence support, and relatedness support, plays a decisive role in shaping students' internal motivation and encouraging active learning behaviours.

This study proposes practical strategies—such as offering meaningful choices, designing differentiated tasks, providing constructive feedback, and fostering positive teacher-student relationships—that serve as actionable pathways to enhance student engagement. By addressing the psychological and emotional barriers that hinder participation, educators can help students develop more substantial confidence in music learning, increase their emotional investment, and ultimately enhance their professional capacity to integrate music into early childhood education settings. These insights contribute not only to improving classroom practices but also to enriching the professional development of future early childhood educators.

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