



Supporting Piano Motivation through Structured Autonomy and Contextual Teaching: Three Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract

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Intermediate piano learners may lose motivation when progress slows or assigned materials feel disconnected from their musical interests. This exploratory qualitative interview study examines how three piano teachers describe strategies for supporting motivation and engagement and considers their implications for intermediate piano pedagogy. The participants, who taught mixed ages and levels, were purposively selected and interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. The original interview material was thematically coded in the dissertation from which this article was developed, and the retained accounts were interpreted in relation to a narrower research question. Four themes were identified: student choice as an entry point into structured learning; playful and embodied strategies for making concepts and techniques graspable; contextual theory and aural understanding; and guided practice linked to visible or audible progress. Across the accounts, teachers described making student interest productive by translating it into bounded tasks, explicit goals, contextual explanation, responsive feedback, and manageable practice routines. The article then develops structured autonomy as an interpretive framework for this conversion process. Although based on three perspectives from teachers of mixed ages and levels and unable to show effectiveness or causality, the framework shows how autonomy and rigor can be combined in individual lessons at the piano.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation in piano learning is often framed through student interest, discipline, or practice compliance. At the intermediate stage, however, motivation is also a pedagogical problem. Learners are no longer complete beginners, but they may not yet possess the technical confidence, self regulated practice strategies, or musical ownership needed to sustain progress independently. As repertoire becomes more demanding and improvement becomes less immediately visible, practice may begin to feel like repetitive labor rather than meaningful musical development. Research on instrumental learning has repeatedly shown that practice quality, self-belief, and attitudes toward practice shape musical progress and future aspirations (Hallam, 2013; Hallam et al., 2012; McPherson & Renwick, 2001). Recent piano-specific research similarly connects practice quality and engagement with self-belief, teacher and parental support, enjoyment, and continued enthusiasm for future musical pathways (Chen, 2025).

Here, intermediate does not denote a fixed examination grade. It refers to the transitional period after foundational skills have been acquired but before learners can reliably organize practice and progression independently. Motivation refers to learners' willingness and reasons to continue, whereas engagement refers to the lesson and practice participation described by the teachers.

Enjoyment alone is insufficient to support sustained piano learning. Although enjoyment matters, it does not automatically produce disciplined practice, technical growth, or continuing musical engagement. Motivation

in music learning is shaped through the interaction of autonomy, perceived competence, relational support, and meaningful activity (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Evans, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In piano teaching, these factors are mediated through repertoire choice, lesson structure, feedback, parent-teacher communication, practice routines, and the learner's ability to recognize progress over time. Interest in a song does not itself ensure musical development. The teacher must still decide how to adapt the material, sequence technical challenges, introduce relevant concepts, and guide practice while preserving both ownership and progression.

This article avoids a simple opposition between formal and student centered piano pedagogy. Formal approaches can provide technical sequencing, reading fluency, examination goals, practice discipline, and clear feedback. Student centered approaches can provide relevance, ownership, and responsiveness to individual learners. The more useful question concerns how teachers organize the relationship between structure and choice. Intermediate-stage piano teaching requires particular conversion work: teachers must translate student interest into appropriately bounded tasks, practice behaviors, musical understanding, and perceivable progress.

This process is described here as structured autonomy. Structured autonomy refers to a piano-pedagogical stance in which students receive meaningful musical choice while teachers preserve progression through guided goals, contextual explanation, technical scaffolding, and responsive feedback. Choice is therefore not treated as a retreat from rigor. Instead, it becomes an entry point through which rigor may acquire musical meaning. The

teacher's role is to design the conditions under which student interest can become sustained musical work.

Structured autonomy is not proposed here as the first claim that autonomy support and structure can coexist. Educational research grounded in self-determination theory has examined autonomy support and structure as distinct but mutually reinforcing dimensions of need-supportive teaching. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis found that they reinforce each other and are jointly associated with motivation, engagement, and need satisfaction (Patzak & Zhang, 2025). The contribution of the present article is narrower and domain-specific: it identifies how teachers describe this relationship in piano pedagogy through repertoire choice, contextual explanation, technical scaffolding, guided practice, and perceivable musical progress.

Self-determination theory helps clarify why autonomy in piano learning cannot be reduced to preference alone. Motivation is strengthened when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness: they need some sense of agency, evidence that they are becoming capable, and supportive relationships within the learning context (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applied to music education, this means that motivation cannot be reduced to enjoyment or external reward. Evans (2015) argues that self-determination theory provides a productive lens for examining how learning environments support or constrain students' internalization of musical goals. For piano teachers, the implication is direct: repertoire choice may support autonomy, but it becomes pedagogically useful only when students also experience competence, feedback, and relational support.

Research on musical practice extends this point. Progress depends not only on the amount of practice but also on its quality, organization, and self-regulation (Hallam et al.,

2012; McPherson & Renwick, 2001; Williamon & Valentine, 2000). Hallam (2013) identifies practice strategies, self-beliefs, support, enjoyment, and attitudes toward playing as important predictors of musical development and future aspirations. Pike's (2017) study of intermediate teenage pianists found that many participants predominantly played through repertoire rather than consistently using deliberate practice strategies. Chen's (2025) piano-specific research similarly foregrounds practice quality, engagement, self-belief, teacher and parental support, enjoyment, and future musical aspirations. These studies suggest that motivation becomes more durable when it is translated into practice behaviors that learners can understand and sustain.

The teacher-student relationship shapes that translation. Instrumental learning is rarely solitary, particularly for developing musicians. Teacher support, parental involvement, and interpersonal interaction influence students' enjoyment, confidence, and persistence (Creech & Hallam, 2011; Davidson et al., 1998). Support is not limited to emotional encouragement. It also includes diagnosing readiness, setting achievable goals, responding to frustration, and communicating progress in terms that the learner can recognize. Work connecting music pedagogy with identity, listening, and cultural belonging suggests that engagement may be supported when musical activity is experienced as personally and socially meaningful rather than merely compliant (Seow, 2025a). At the intermediate stage, this relational and interpretive support may be especially important because students can often attempt more personally meaningful repertoire before they can organize that learning independently.

Student choice and contextual learning can address this motivational problem only when carefully framed. Research on informal music learning shows that musicians frequently learn through listening, imitation, peer exchange, experimentation, and personally

meaningful repertoire (Green, 2002, 2008). Such approaches challenge notation centered assumptions about how musical understanding develops. Related work on aural-skills pedagogy argues for connecting listening with diverse repertoire, musical context, and active music-making rather than treating aural concepts as decontextualized exercises (Seow, 2024). Research on global groove practices further emphasizes situated and embodied listening as a route into rhythmic and stylistic understanding (Seow, 2025b). In piano lessons, student-chosen pieces can therefore provide a powerful point of entry. However, the teacher must still translate that interest into level-appropriate technique, pattern recognition, listening tasks, and practice goals.

Contemporary keyboard pedagogy reinforces the need for this contextual translation. Piano and keyboard fluency increasingly extend beyond the reproduction of correct notes to include sound choice, contextual listening, stylistic function, and responsiveness to musical setting (Seow, 2026c). Although such work addresses contemporary ensemble practice, its broader pedagogical implication applies here: learners benefit when technical and theoretical knowledge is connected to what that knowledge enables them to hear, shape, and perform. Contextual teaching therefore does not reduce rigor. It gives technique and theory a perceivable musical purpose.

Student-centered and genre-inclusive teaching should likewise not be mistaken for looseness. Broadening repertoire or responding to learner preference still requires progression, alignment, and explicit expectations. Practice-led curriculum research has argued that genre-inclusive pathways require carefully designed relationships among repertoire, concepts, standards, and forms of evidence (Seow, 2026a). The same principle applies within an individual piano lesson. A teacher may begin with a student's preferred song, but must still decide

what to simplify, what to sequence, what to explain, what to repeat, and how progress will be recognized. Choice becomes educationally productive through design.

The remaining gap lies in this teacher conversion work. Existing research has established that motivation, practice quality, relational support, self-regulation, and contextual learning matter in instrumental education. Less clearly articulated in this literature is how piano teachers describe converting student interest into disciplined progression during ordinary lessons. Accordingly, this study asks: How do piano teachers describe pedagogical strategies for supporting motivation and engagement, and what do these accounts suggest for intermediate piano pedagogy? The study aims to identify teacher-described strategies and to develop structured autonomy as an interpretive framework for understanding how student interest can be converted into progressively organized musical learning.

METHOD

This exploratory qualitative interview study examines how piano teachers describe strategies for supporting student motivation and engagement and considers the implications of their accounts for intermediate piano pedagogy. The study developed from an undergraduate dissertation based on semi-structured teacher interviews and thematic coding. Because each participant contributed one interview rather than the multiple sources of evidence typically associated with case-study research, the present article uses an exploratory qualitative interview design.

Three piano teachers were purposively selected because they had active teaching experience and could speak directly to student motivation, engagement, repertoire selection, practice routines, feedback, and pedagogical adaptation. The focused sample was intended

to provide information-rich teacher perspectives rather than population-level representation. Qualitative sample adequacy depends on the specificity of the research aim, the relevance of participants' experience, and the quality of the available material rather than a predetermined numerical threshold (Malterud et al., 2016). The participants taught mixed ages and levels; accordingly, the interviews were not restricted exclusively to intermediate learners. Intermediate piano motivation functions in this article as the pedagogical problem frame through which the teacher accounts are interpreted.

Teacher A was a private piano teacher with approximately three years of experience, teaching students aged approximately 4 to over 50 across mixed levels. Her teaching included examination preparation, mixed repertoire, and contemporary music. Teacher B was a private piano teacher with more than five years of experience, teaching students aged approximately 5 to over 30 from beginner to advanced levels, with an emphasis on examination and classical repertoire. Teacher C owned a music school and had more than ten years of teaching experience. She taught students aged approximately 4 to over 50 across mixed levels and worked with examination, classical, contemporary, and mixed repertoire. Identifying details relating to teachers, students, parents, schools, and studios were removed. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Teacher	Context and experience	Students and teaching focus
Teacher A	Private piano teacher; approximately 3 years	Ages 4–50+; mixed levels; examinations, mixed repertoire, contemporary music
Teacher B	Private piano teacher; more than 5 years	Ages 5–30+; beginner to advanced; examinations, classical repertoire

Teacher C	Music school owner; more than 10 years	Ages 4–50+; mixed levels; examinations, classical, contemporary, and mixed repertoire
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Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 20–30 minutes and conducted either in person or online. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission and, according to the dissertation record, transcribed verbatim. A common set of open-ended questions explored how teachers identified motivation and engagement, which pedagogical strategies they used, how they incorporated student repertoire preferences and foundational skills, how they responded to disengagement or possible withdrawal, and how they structured practice and feedback. Follow-up questions allowed participants to elaborate on particular teaching situations and examples.

The original dissertation organized the interviews through thematic coding. The article-level interpretation used the anonymized evidence reported in the dissertation and the retained interview summary for Teachers A–C; complete raw transcripts were not reanalyzed for this article. The dissertation's original categories – gamification and off-bench activities, repertoire autonomy, informal practices and aural integration, and educator flexibility – were reviewed against the narrower research question. Reported examples were then compared across the three teacher accounts and reorganized into four themes: student choice as an entry point into structured learning; playful and embodied strategies for making concepts and techniques graspable; contextual theory and aural understanding; and guided practice linked to visible or audible progress. Consistent with Braun and Clarke (2006), the themes were treated as patterns of meaning relevant to the research question rather than as numerical frequencies. Structured autonomy was

subsequently developed by the authors as an interpretive synthesis connecting the reported evidence with the literature, rather than as terminology used by the participants. Because the retained interview summary was a processed record rather than a complete verbatim transcript suitable for quotation, participant evidence is presented through paraphrase rather than direct quotation.

Analytic transparency was supported by restricting the article dataset to the three consented participants, comparing their accounts, grounding each theme in concrete teacher examples, and separating teacher-reported perceptions from claims about pedagogical effectiveness. The study does not claim thematic saturation, inter-rater reliability, demonstrated effectiveness, causal relationships, or generalizability. These boundaries inform the interpretation of the findings.

Signed informed consent was obtained before the interviews. The consent documentation authorized audio-recording and the use of anonymized interview extracts in publications arising from the research. Participants are identified only through teacher codes, and potentially identifying contextual details have been removed. No schools, studios, students, parents, or participants are named.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Four themes were identified across the three teacher accounts: student choice as an entry point into structured learning; playful and embodied strategies for making concepts and techniques graspable; contextual theory and aural understanding; and guided practice linked to visible or audible progress. Although the examples were drawn from mixed ages and levels, each theme illustrated how teachers sought to convert interest or difficulty into more organized musical learning. The discussion therefore integrates the reported teacher

evidence with relevant literature and considers how each theme contributes to structured autonomy.

Student choice as an entry point into structured learning

Student choice appeared most pedagogically useful when it created ownership while allowing the teacher to retain responsibility for progression. Teacher A described using contemporary and student-chosen repertoire, including popular songs, film music, anime themes, and K-pop, to re-engage students whose motivation had weakened under externally imposed or examination-focused materials. In one example, a transfer student who remained interested in piano but resisted new examination repertoire became more responsive when invited to identify music she genuinely wanted to play. Teacher A did not leave the subsequent learning entirely open-ended. The chosen repertoire was organized through weekly tasks and a monthly goal of completing an accessible song, with the possibility of performing it for friends providing an additional social purpose.

The other accounts similarly showed that responding to preference did not require abandoning pedagogical judgment. When students requested popular repertoire beyond their present level, Teacher B described selecting a short and manageable section rather than assigning the entire arrangement. Technical difficulties could then be reframed as bounded problems, such as testing a workable fingering or slowing a passage to stabilize its rhythm. Teacher C emphasized that no single method suited every learner and that teachers should begin from students' strengths and preferences while continuing to guide the direction of learning. Across the accounts, repertoire autonomy therefore functioned as an entry point rather than an endpoint.

This pattern supports the distinction between autonomy and unrestricted preference. Self-determination theory suggests that autonomy becomes motivationally productive when accompanied by competence and relational support (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Evans, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The teacher accounts illustrate how that relationship may operate in piano lessons. Teachers described preferred repertoire as increasing willingness to participate, but competence still depended on decisions about difficulty, pacing, technical focus, feedback, and achievable outcomes. Choice alone did not produce progression; it supplied personally meaningful material from which progression could be designed.

The practical implication is that choice requires constraints. Teachers can invite students to propose repertoire, but the material should still be evaluated for level, technical demands, musical purpose, and possible adaptation. A chosen piece may be shortened, simplified, transposed, excerpted, or used to isolate one harmonic, rhythmic, or technical feature. Within structured autonomy, such constraints do not negate student ownership. They enable the learner's preference to become an achievable musical task rather than a source of renewed frustration.

Playful and embodied strategies for making concepts and techniques graspable

Teacher B described using a keyboard-tag activity in which younger students located repeated C notes across the instrument. She also mapped the keyboard through imaginative register-based characters, associating the upper and lower registers with contrasting figures and positioning the student near middle C. These activities were not presented simply as diversions. They gave students a spatial and bodily route into recurring keyboard patterns, register, and pitch direction. By moving across the keyboard and responding to concrete

prompts, students could encounter abstract relationships through action before those relationships were formalized verbally or through notation.

Teacher A similarly selected visually engaging theory and repertoire materials for younger students and used interactive elements such as stickers to support attention. Teacher C used comparison and imagery to make physical technique more graspable, for example by asking students to compare different postures and by relating curved fingers to the shape required to hold a balloon. Across these examples, teachers translated unfamiliar concepts into visual, spatial, or embodied forms that students could immediately test at the instrument.

The pedagogical value of these strategies lay in their connection to a specific musical or technical object. Play did not replace explanation or practice; it made patterns, directions, and physical actions more available for subsequent understanding. This is consistent with embodied accounts of musical knowing that connect bodily movement with conceptual learning (Juntunen & Hyvönen, 2004), alongside situated approaches linking musical understanding with active musical experience (Seow, 2025b). The accounts therefore suggest that playful learning contributes to structured autonomy when it helps students notice, enact, or explain a target concept rather than merely making the lesson entertaining.

The transition from play to technical rigor is crucial. A game or analogy should be attached to a defined learning purpose and followed by a task that shows whether the student can apply the concept. Keyboard-tag activities might lead to identifying octave patterns in notation; register imagery might lead to verbalizing pitch direction; and a posture analogy might lead to monitoring hand shape during repertoire. Playful and embodied activity thus becomes a scaffold that can be

translated gradually into explicit musical knowledge and independent action.

Contextual theory and aural understanding

Teacher A described introducing theory when it became necessary within student-chosen repertoire rather than presenting it only as a separate body of exercises. When students encountered unfamiliar keys or chord progressions, she connected the immediate musical problem with scales, the cycle of fifths, and chord quality. In one example, a student learning a song by Jay Chou encountered major and minor seventh chords and initially interpreted the additional chord tones as mistakes. The student's investment in the chosen song created an opportunity for Teacher A to explain extended harmony through material the student already wanted to understand. Theory therefore entered the lesson as a means of solving a musical problem rather than as an abstract requirement.

Teacher C similarly emphasized listening as a route into musical structure. For students whose strengths were primarily aural, she described beginning with listening and playing by ear before gradually introducing notation. Rather than supplying interpretations immediately, she guided students to attend to musical character, repeated sections, chord movement, and larger formal divisions. In contemporary repertoire, she asked students to identify sections, chords, and recurring patterns before introducing the techniques needed to perform them. She also simplified extended harmony by relating unfamiliar chords to familiar shapes, such as explaining a minor seventh chord through a bass note combined with a known major triad.

These accounts show that contextual teaching involved more than attaching theory terminology to popular repertoire. Musical concepts were introduced through a sequence of listening, recognition, explanation, and

application. This reflects informal and contextual approaches in which understanding develops through active engagement with meaningful repertoire rather than through notation alone (Green, 2002, 2008; Seow, 2024). It also supports a broader conception of keyboard fluency in which harmonic knowledge, contextual listening, and stylistic function are integrated with physical execution (Seow, 2026c).

Within structured autonomy, the student's chosen music supplies the context, while the teacher identifies the concepts that can support further progress. A practical sequence might therefore move from hearing a recurring feature, to locating it at the keyboard, naming or explaining it, and then applying it elsewhere in the piece. This prevents contextual teaching from becoming incidental explanation. It turns repertoire preference into a structured opportunity for developing transferable listening, harmonic understanding, and greater independence.

Guided practice and visible or audible progress

Teacher B described responding to careless or unfocused playing by narrowing the practice task rather than asking the student to repeat the entire piece. One strategy required a short phrase to be played accurately three times in succession. The limited target redirected attention toward notation, fingering, and consistency while giving the student a clear point of completion. For longer-term practice, she preferred specific and manageable instructions, such as playing the assigned piece once each day, rather than broad requests to prepare an entire piece by the next lesson. She also described slowing technically difficult passages so that students could stabilize rhythm and coordination before increasing tempo.

Teacher B further connected effort with perceivable improvement through praise and

comparison. When practice produced a clearer result, she drew the student's attention to the difference between the earlier and improved performance. Analogies involving watering a plant or feeding a baby were used to explain why musical development requires regular, distributed effort rather than concentrated last-minute practice. These explanations translated an abstract expectation – practice consistently – into an understandable relationship between repeated effort and gradual growth.

Teacher C similarly emphasized building from what students could already do and helping them persist through periods of difficulty. She described musical learning as requiring resilience when students reached a barrier in their understanding or technique. Her role as facilitator involved identifying the learner's present strengths, adapting the route forward, and introducing the next challenge without overwhelming the student. Across the accounts, guided practice therefore involved more than prescribing repetition. Teachers reduced complexity, clarified the immediate goal, monitored the result, and helped students recognize evidence of progress.

This pattern aligns with research showing that effective practice depends on planning, problem identification, focused repetition, and self-regulation rather than time alone (Hallam et al., 2012; McPherson & Renwick, 2001; Williamon & Valentine, 2000). Pike (2017) similarly found that many intermediate teenage pianists primarily played through repertoire rather than consistently using deliberate practice strategies. Structured workshop approaches in contemporary music education also demonstrate how broad musical aims can be converted into bounded listening and performance tasks that make progress more observable (Seow, 2026b). The common principle is that learners are more able to regulate practice when the musical problem, action, and desired result are made explicit.

Within structured autonomy, the teacher initially provides this architecture while gradually transferring responsibility to the learner. A broad instruction such as “practice this piece” may be replaced by a defined sequence: identify one difficulty, select an appropriate strategy, complete a manageable number of focused attempts, and listen or look for a specified change. Progress can then be heard in greater fluency, rhythmic stability, coordination, tone, or musical continuity. Guided practice supports motivation not because every task is enjoyable, but because learners can perceive how their actions produce musical change.

Structured autonomy as a pedagogical synthesis

Across the four themes, motivation was not described as a stable learner trait or as the automatic result of enjoyable repertoire. Teachers described supporting engagement by converting interest, uncertainty, or difficulty into bounded musical work. Student choice supplied relevance; playful and embodied activity made concepts graspable; contextual explanation connected theory and listening with repertoire; and guided practice made progress perceivable. Structured autonomy therefore describes a conversion process in which the learner retains meaningful ownership. At the same time, the teacher designs the sequence, constraints, feedback, and criteria through which that ownership can support progression.

Importantly, the themes did not align with a simple formal-versus-contemporary divide. Teacher B, whose work emphasized classical and examination repertoire, also used choice, play, and problem-solving. Teacher A's use of contemporary repertoire remained bounded by goals and practice expectations, while Teacher C combined aural entry points with gradual notation and technical

development. Structured autonomy therefore describes a relationship among pedagogical functions rather than a fixed genre preference or teaching style. In practical terms, structured autonomy moves from student interest to a teacher-designed task, through guided practice, toward perceivable progress that may support renewed engagement. Table 2 summarizes the themes and their pedagogical functions.

Table 2. Themes and functions within structured autonomy

Theme	Teacher evidence	Pedagogical function
Student choice	Preferred repertoire; adapted excerpts; weekly and monthly goals	Turns preference into achievable progression
Playful and embodied learning	Keyboard tag; register imagery; physical analogies	Makes patterns and technique graspable
Contextual theory and aural understanding	Chord concepts taught through songs; structural listening; familiar chord shapes	Gives concepts an audible musical purpose
Guided practice and progress	Three accurate repetitions; daily tasks; slowing; praise	Links focused effort with perceivable improvement

Limitations and interpretive boundaries

This study is limited by its small sample, reliance on teacher perspectives, and absence of direct lesson observation, student accounts, parent perspectives, or longitudinal evidence. The participants taught mixed ages and levels, so the examples should not be interpreted as exclusively representative of intermediate learners. Intermediate motivation instead provides the pedagogical problem frame through which the teacher accounts were examined. The article also draws on a focused

article-level thematic reinterpretation of the anonymized material retained from the original dissertation rather than a new analysis of complete raw transcripts. Consequently, the findings identify teacher-described practices and conceptual relationships; they do not demonstrate causal effectiveness, thematic saturation, or generalizability. Further research could examine structured autonomy through lesson observation, student interviews, practice records, and longitudinal study across different stages of piano learning.

CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory qualitative interview study examined how three piano teachers described strategies for supporting motivation and engagement and considered what their accounts suggest for intermediate piano pedagogy. Across the mixed-level teacher perspectives, four connected strategies were identified: using student choice as an entry point into structured learning, employing playful and embodied activities to make concepts and techniques graspable, teaching theory and aural understanding through meaningful repertoire, and organizing practice so that learners could perceive progress. Together, these strategies informed structured autonomy as an interpretive framework in which students retain meaningful musical ownership while teachers provide constraints, sequencing, contextual explanation, feedback, and practice guidance. The study does not establish effectiveness or causality and is limited by its small sample, reliance on teacher accounts, and absence of direct observation or longitudinal evidence. Nevertheless, it offers a practical framework for understanding how autonomy and rigor may be combined when teachers convert student interest into progressively organized musical learning.

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