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ARTICLE

Exploring the relationship between differentiated instruction and motivation in Cypriot secondary music classrooms

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Abstract
This study aims to enhance our understanding of student participation in Cypriot music classrooms by exploring the relationship between differentiated teaching practices and student motivation. The sample consisted of 170 Year 7 students (13 years old) from eight different government schools. Data were collected through questionnaires completed by the students. The most significant factors influencing motivation in the classes studied were students' perceptions of the value teachers placed on their musical preferences, the importance students themselves attributed to music, and, to a lesser extent, students' perceptions of the emphasis placed on comprehension rather than mere memorization of material. These findings highlight the potential of differentiated instruction practices to boost student motivation in secondary school music education.

Keywords: Motivation; differentiation; music education; music curriculum; secondary education

Introduction

Academic motivation in general education, as well as in the field of music education, has received a lot of attention. Previous literature showed that students' motivational beliefs toward general education (Sloboda, 2001; Wigfield & Wagner, 2005) as well as in music education (Marshall & Hargreaves, 2007; McEwan, 2013) often demonstrate a decline. Previous research in the music context has proposed that school music lacks relevance (Bray, 2000; Green, 2008; Harland et al., 2000; Jeanneret, 2010). In relation to this, research has also pointed out that inappropriate instructional practices such as irrelevant topics and materials often lead to students' negative attitudes toward education (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). Music was found to be the most problematic art form regarding sustaining student motivation (Harland et al., 2000), and low levels of enrollment are noted (McQueen & Hallam, 2010). Contrary to instructional practices that may lead to the creation of negative emotions, differentiated instruction (DI), which takes into account students' readiness, learning profiles and interests (Valiandes, 2010, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014), can shape positive attitudes and motivations for engagement in the learning process.

Motivation

Previous research outlined the complex framework that shapes student motivation and learning (Cogdill, 2014). There are many theoretical perspectives that can explain music motivation (Evans, 2015). This study explored motivation through the lens of cognitive and humanistic

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perspectives that have been linked with engagement in music education. The questionnaire included the sub-scales of Self-Efficacy, Enjoyment, Flow, and Musical Goals (see Appendix A). While in Hadjikou (2021b) an extended explanation of these sub-scales can be found, here we provide a short description of each theoretical perspective.

Self-efficacy refers to how people judge their capabilities before a task (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). In the music context, self-efficacy beliefs are crucial; for instance, research suggests that high levels of self-efficacy serve as a primary predictor of actual musical performance. Furthermore, pedagogical factors such as verbal encouragement and support from teachers have been found to significantly strengthen students' self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). Research also showed that prior music experience was the strongest predictor of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In relation to self-efficacy, the Expectancy-Value theory defines motivation in terms of competence beliefs and also considers the value that students place on a task (Eccles et al., 1983). Enjoyment is considered to be an important aspect of musicians' motivation (Hallam et al., 2011; Koops & Keubel, 2018). Music-making and students' autonomy are the two factors that are related to enjoyment (Green, 2008). Students favored instrument playing, composing music and connecting with professional musicians. Flow is used to characterize an optimal experience which occurs when a challenge can be reached (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Elliott & Silverman 2015). Research on flow showed that flow existed when students felt confident and controlled their own learning. Musical Goals relate to the need for competence, belongingness and autonomy, which are concepts found in self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Dweck's (2006) 'Mindset' theory, which explains how goals shape students' reactions to success and failure. Specifically, Dweck distinguishes between performance goals, where students seek to validate their ability, and learning goals, where the objective is to develop competence. Performance goals often stem from a 'fixed mindset', the belief that musical ability is an innate, unchangeable trait. Consequently, when faced with challenges, students may view difficulties as a lack of talent, leading to diminished confidence and withdrawal (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017). In contrast, learning goals are rooted in a 'growth mindset', encouraging students to view effort as the path to mastery and to perceive setbacks as informative feedback rather than personal failure (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Anderman & Anderman (1999) showed that classroom goal structures influenced the motivation of school-aged students, pointing out the significance of teachers' goal orientations in fostering environments that prioritize growth over social comparison.

DI framework in mixed-ability classrooms

Differentiation in education has its roots in the idea that learning should be structured in such a way as to respond to students' individual needs rather than trying to adapt students to fit the curriculum (Tomlinson, 2000). Several researchers agree that through differentiation, students' needs are being met (Valiandes, 2015; Maeng & Bell, 2015). When the process or the content of the activities is modified for different learners working at their own pace and abilities, all students may access meaningful learning experiences (Hillier, 2011).

Differentiation is founded on the recognition of students' differences that are inherent in all classroom settings, whether mixed-ability or streamed. It is generally accepted that all classes include students with significant variations in factors such as readiness level, learning preferences, interests, prior knowledge, experiences, socioeconomic status, personality and social skills. Consequently, teaching 'to the middle' to accommodate the diverse needs and strengths of every student is inadequate (Haager & Klingner, 2005, p. 19; Koutselini & Agathangelou, 2009). Recognizing the necessity of mediation to manage students' differences effectively, DI is considered the pedagogical approach that 'emphasizes the modification of teaching procedures by taking into account the different learning modalities, interests, pace, skills, knowledge, and attitudes of diverse students' (Koutselini, 2008, p. 2). In this context, DI promotes equality of condition by addressing not only the educational needs of students but also their holistic needs (Valiandes, 2010).

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By differentiating instruction according to students' levels of readiness, interests and learning preferences, teachers can maximize their students' opportunities for learning and personal growth. Within the framework of DI, equity is achieved by ensuring that all students in a mixed-ability classroom have the opportunity to fulfill the curriculum's goals to the maximum extent, according to their individual abilities and competencies, thus guaranteeing equal access to knowledge for all.

Differentiation can support effective teaching and learning for all students (e.g., Valiandes, 2015; Hattie, 2009, 2011). Research on effective teaching has shown that differentiation is a fundamental dimension of effective instruction (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2010). Specifically, a close relationship has been observed between DI and students' academic performance (Aliakbari & Haghighi, 2014; Valiandes, 2015; Good & Brophy, 2003; Karst et al., 2022), offering learning advantages to all students, including gifted students (Robinson et al., 2014).

Mitsi's (2017) findings are also significant, demonstrating that, in addition to maximizing the academic performance of all students in mixed-ability classrooms, differentiation has the potential to engage students' interest and enhance their cognitive and metacognitive skills. Students' interests are related to cognitive abilities and the positive attitudes formed through students' positive psychological experiences in a lesson (Hidi et al., 2004). Moreover, they are one of the most important types of intrinsic motivation, enhancing the desire to achieve the goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These forms of motivation are key elements for students' success in performing difficult tasks in both working and learning (Jovanovic & Matejevic, 2014). Consequently, teaching within the framework of DI can lead to the maximization of learning outcomes, as it responds to students' interests, thereby triggering intrinsic motivation and curiosity. Interest in a lesson is a crucial element that should be nurtured in students during the learning process, as it is associated with a clear readiness to acquire new knowledge (Pohan et al. 2020).

Links between differentiation and motivation

Various researchers have discussed the link between differentiation and enhanced motivation (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010; Subban, 2006), emphasizing its potential to engage students. Tomlinson et al. (2003) further explored how interest-based differentiation can effectively motivate learners, tailoring educational approaches to individual student interests. In the context of music, Hillier (2011) proposed that the practice of differentiation increases students' engagement and passion for making music. For example, students' motivation can increase when lessons respond to individual preferences for particular styles of music (Standerfer, 2011). In relation to this, research in the field of music education showed that by putting students at the center of music teaching and learning through listening to them and taking into consideration their preferences, teachers can make music lessons relevant and interesting (Burnard & Bjork, 2010; Economidou Stavrou, 2020). In this vein, recent research stressed that more choice in selecting repertoire was found vital for students' motivation (Hadjikou, 2021a; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021).

Research conducted by Bernard & Cayari (2020) examined differentiation through participatory music making (PMM), suggesting that PMM can effectively address differentiation in educational contexts. Turino (2009) further supported this, stating that PMM promotes interactions that balance individual challenges with skills. This balance is central to achieving an 'optimal experience' or flow, where the difficulty of the musical task is precisely calibrated to the student's current proficiency level, preventing both boredom and anxiety. In a PMM framework, this is achieved through flexible pedagogical structures that allow for multiple levels of participation simultaneously. PMM incorporates various musical elements, such as improvisation and collective creation, within a social musical environment, enhancing engagement and addressing diverse learning needs by allowing students to contribute at their own pace while still being part of a cohesive ensemble.

Students' autonomy and social interaction are central to PMM. Many researchers have linked these characteristics to student-centered and autonomous learning (Green, 2008; O'Neill &

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McPherson, 2002), as well as collaborative and creative group work (Creech & Hallam, 2017; Davis, 2011). Within a PMM framework, autonomy serves as a critical bridge to DI, as it shifts the locus of control from the teacher to the learner, allowing for individualized pathways of musical exploration. Although music participation typically involves active engagement, prior research has noted that music leaders often employ teacher-directed approaches, such as extensive teacher talk, which can stifle this developmental process (Creech, 2012). To counteract this, the provision of choice – a fundamental pillar of differentiation – is essential. By offering students options in musical roles, repertoire or expressive outcomes, educators can better address diverse learning profiles and readiness levels (Scarparolo & Mackinnon, 2022). This expansion of student autonomy does not merely facilitate participation but significantly enhances intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2020). For instance, when given flexibility and the agency to make meaningful decisions, students exhibit higher levels of engagement compared to those in more controlling, 'one-size-fits-all' environments (Evans et al., 2012; Scarparolo & Mackinnon, 2022). Thus, differentiation in music education is most effective when it empowers students to navigate their own learning through autonomous, socially situated musical experiences. Group work through flexible grouping, both in mixed-ability and homogeneous groups, constitutes one of the main instructional practices of differentiation (Creech & Hallam, 2017; Pozas & Schneider, 2019). The researchers suggest the intentional composition of student working groups, as students perform better when collaborating in thoughtfully arranged teams (Hallam et al., 2011). In this vein, cooperative work has been emphasized in the new music curriculum as a key instructional practice. Simultaneously, working in groups provides excellent opportunities for peer tutoring between capable and less capable students, thereby strengthening student relationships and creating a positive learning climate (Valiandes, 2010, 2015; Pozas & Schneider, 2019).

Building on this foundation, Jordan (2022) demonstrates that flexible grouping significantly enhances collaborative learning by fostering an environment where students actively engage with one another's diverse perspectives and skills. By utilizing flexible grouping within the general music lesson, students learn to appreciate and incorporate different musical styles and techniques during varied pedagogical tasks, such as group compositions and informal ensemble performances. This strategy allows music educators to tailor the membership of these small groups based on individual strengths and learning needs, promoting both individual mastery and collective creativity. Additionally, Pozas & Schneider (2019) highlight that intentional group formation not only improves academic outcomes but also boosts students' social and emotional skills, which are crucial for effective collaboration regardless of whether the task involves creative song-writing or collaborative performance. By integrating these strategies, music teachers can create a more inclusive and dynamic classroom environment that supports diverse learning preferences and fosters a lifelong appreciation for music.

Context

In the Cypriot context, a few studies have looked at the motivation of students in the music classroom. Music was found to be the least favorite school subject (Economidou Stavrou, 2006), and consequently negative attitudes toward secondary school music have been found (Economidou Stavrou, 2006; Teklos, 2011). Research showed that there was no alignment between what was taught in the music classroom and students' preferences (Economidou, 2006; Teklos, 2011). Economidou Stavrou, (2006), through investigating primary school music lessons, revealed that while the most frequent activities being taught were practicing the recorder and rehearsing for concerts, the musical activities preferred by students related to popular music. A lack of diversity in musical genres and an emphasis on Western classical music were found (Economidou Stavrou, 2006). Teklos (2011) examined the perceptions of secondary school pupils regarding their music lessons and revealed that pupils were unenthusiastic and had unfavorable responses toward the subject of music. The above studies took place before the change of the music curriculum, which

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was part of a wide educational reform for all school subjects (Ministry of Education and Culture [MoEC], 2010, 2016). This reform aimed to transform the educational system into a 'humane' and democratic one, focusing on a student-centered environment that respects individual needs and promotes emotional well-being, while developing individuals with critical thinking, cooperative and interpersonal abilities, thus encouraging them to become active and democratic citizens. However, it is important to note that while these goals were formally established in the curriculum, there is limited evidence regarding the extent to which this reform has been widely and effectively implemented in the daily practice of Cypriot state schools.

Previous research suggested that looking at music teaching and learning through students' eyes can be crucial in improving the music learning environment, thus promoting motivation (Economidou & Papageorgi, 2021). Building upon this premise, the current study investigated possible links between pedagogy and motivation from the students' perspective. This research serves as a focused extension of a larger-scale longitudinal study (Hadjikou, 2021b) which investigated student motivation at the beginning of the introduction of the new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010, 2016). While the primary study established a broader trend by tracking student motivation over one academic year and showing that students' motivation declined by the end of their first year at secondary school, the present paper specifically examines the instructional factors contributing to these trends. The aim of this study was to investigate which specific differentiated teaching practices, such as tiered assignments, flexible grouping and choice of musical content, are related to the motivation of students in the music lesson.

DI constitutes one of the foundational pillars of the current Cypriot National Curriculum (MoEC, 2010, 2016). Within this framework, which the authors firmly support as a transformative pedagogical philosophy, educators are called to implement differentiated teaching to provide all students with opportunities for active engagement. As argued by Valiandes & Koutselini (2009), DI is not merely a set of tools but a systematic teaching approach that ensures educational quality and equity by responding to student diversity. Furthermore, empirical evidence in the Cypriot context highlights that DI has a direct impact on academic outcomes; Valiandes & Neophytou (2018) demonstrated that when teachers participate in systematic professional development for DI, there is a significant positive impact not only on their professional learning but also on student achievement in mixed-ability classrooms. In a study on the effectiveness of differentiation in Cypriot classrooms, Valiandes (2015) demonstrated that DI enables active engagement and fosters positive attitudes toward learning by tailoring instruction to students' readiness levels, interests and learning profiles. However, it must be noted that while DI is central to the official curriculum, its implementation in the actual secondary music classroom remains inconsistent. Research by Hadjikou & Creech (2023) highlights a gap between the intended and the enacted curriculum in Cyprus, suggesting that the reform's principles are not yet widely integrated into daily teaching practices.

Main research question

The research question which guided this study was:

> To what extent do students' perceptions of motivating instructional practices relate to the implementation of differentiated instruction and student learning in the music classroom?

Method

The sample consisted of 170 Year 7 students from eight different government schools. Class sizes ranged from 19 to 24 students. These students were beginning secondary school and encountering the new music curriculum for the first time.

Quantitative methods, which are effective for measuring and explaining phenomena (Muijs, 2010), provided a framework for addressing questions regarding the relationship between

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pedagogy and motivation. For the purpose of this research, a specific questionnaire for students was created based on all the literature review in order to investigate students' perceptions of the teacher's differentiated teaching approaches. The statements were related to the pedagogical principles found in the new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010, 2016) which are related to differentiation. The questionnaire was structured based on motivation theories identified as relevant to our research, and it explored students' perceptions of pedagogy in the classroom with the aim of potentially identifying links between these perceptions and levels of student motivation.

The questionnaire included 16 pedagogy statements related to DI practices that can be linked to students' motivation (see Appendix B). These questions were specifically designed to capture students' perceptions of their teachers' practices and their attitudes toward classroom music. Statements regarding perceptions of pedagogy were based on the findings of previous studies in both general education (e.g., Midgley et al., 2000; Patrick et al., 2007) and music education (e.g., Hallam et al., 2016; Papageorgi et al., 2010). These studies emphasize how students' views on teacher support, classroom goal structures and the quality of instructional interactions shape their academic engagement. Statements regarding differentiation derived from literature on differentiation (Tomlinson, 2000) and focused on teaching aspects that promote differentiation, such as PMM in a social environment with opportunities for choice (Bernard & Cayari, 2020).

The overall motivation score was examined through statements based on the four sub-scales: self-efficacy (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), which refers to individuals' judgments of their capabilities; enjoyment, a key aspect of motivation and learning in music (Green, 2008; Hallam et al., 2011); flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Elliott, 1995), used to characterize optimal experiences; and musical goals (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which relate to self-determination theory concepts such as the need for competence, belongingness and autonomy, as well as the fulfillment of one's potential. Content validity was ensured through alignment with theoretical constructs, and internal consistency reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951); unreliable items were removed or reconceptualized, resulting in acceptable reliability for the final sub-scales. Reliability was high since for each of the sub-scales the Cronbach alpha coefficient exceeded 0.7. (Table 1). Notably, in calculating the flow sub-scale score, the score for the indicator 'Music is a hard subject' was reversed. Within the framework of Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), an experience of flow requires a balance between challenge and skill; therefore, perceiving a subject as excessively 'hard' can act as a barrier to this state, representing an experience of 'anti-flow' or a lack of the necessary competence beliefs. To ensure internal consistency within the sub-scale, this item was treated as a reverse-coded indicator, meaning that higher scores on this specific item would normally contradict the presence of a flow state.

Research sample

The sample consisted of the classes taught by the first eight teachers who agreed to participate in the study following a telephone conversation. Written parental consent was obtained prior to involving students in the research. Only students whose parents returned the completed consent form participated in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered during the students' music lessons in a supervised and distraction-free environment, ensuring they had adequate time to complete it thoroughly and thoughtfully. Before completing the questionnaire, the purpose of the research was explained to the students in age-appropriate language, and they were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Additionally, students were informed that participation was voluntary, and they could choose to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Any questions or clarifications needed by the students were addressed by the supervising teacher or researcher during the session. Ethical approval was granted from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education, University of London as well as the Pedagogical Institute of Cyprus.

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Table 1. Reliability for sub-scales of the motivation measure

Sub-scale	Cronbach's alpha
Self-efficacy	0.818
Enjoyment	0.878
Flow	0.735
Musical goals	0.747

Data analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to examine whether the quantitative indicators of perceptions of pedagogy accounted for variability in the students' overall motivation scores. The method employed is what Field (2013, p. 322) refers to as 'forced entry' and Pallant (2010, p. 149) refers to as 'standard multiple regression'. In this approach, all predictors are forced into the model simultaneously. 'Overall motivation' was used as the dependent (outcome) variable, while all statements concerned with differentiation were treated as the independent variables (the predictors). *R* values showed the multiple correlation coefficients between the independent variables and the dependent variable, and *R* squared values showed how much of the variability in the dependent (outcome) variable was explained by the independent (predictor) variables. Beta coefficients indicate the relationship between the independent and the dependent variable. If significant ($p < 0.05$), then the independent variable may be interpreted as a predictor of the dependent variable.

In order to determine whether the data were appropriate for multiple regression, the assumptions of multicollinearity were checked. Multicollinearity exists when independent variables are highly correlated, specifically when the Tolerance value is very small (less than 0.10) and VIF values are above 10. Furthermore, checks for outliers, normality, linearity, homoscedasticity and independence of residuals were performed as mentioned by Pallant (2010). The results of these assessments indicated that the data were suitable for multiple regression analysis.

The data were transferred to SPSS, a statistical data-analysis software package used in educational research (Muijs, 2010). Initially, a preliminary analysis was conducted, checking for the reliability of the sub-scales for motivation. A multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to check whether the perceptions of pedagogy quantitative variables could account for variability in motivation scores.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the data rely exclusively on student self-reports, which reflect perceived rather than objectively observed classroom practices. Second, the use of positively framed Likert items may have encouraged acquiescence bias. Third, while statistical analyses identify patterns across variables, they do not capture the full qualitative complexity of students' reasoning. To mitigate these limitations, items were theoretically grounded, reliability testing was conducted and interpretations were confined to reported perceptions rather than inferred intentions or causal mechanisms.

Results

The multiple regression analysis revealed that together the perceptions of pedagogy variables produced a multiple correlation of $R = 0.930$ and accounted for 86.4% of the variance in overall motivation ($R^2 = 0.864$). Table 2 shows the model summary.

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Table 2. Model summary

Model	*R*	*R* square	Sig.
1	0.930	0.864	0.001

Three of the statements relating to perceptions of pedagogy were found to have a statistically significant unique contribution to the prediction of overall motivation at Time 2, with significant value less than 0.05 (Table 3). These included the statement 'The teacher values the music I am interested in' ($B = 0.350, p = 0.005$), the statement 'I think music is an important school subject' ($B = 0.452, p = 0.001$) and the statement 'The teacher emphasizes that we should understand the material, rather than simply memorizing it' ($B = -0.216, p = 0.047$). The negative beta value found in the statement concerned with students' understanding instead of memorization may be explained by the fact that many statements were forced in this model. In order to check whether the relationship of this statement with overall motivation was positive or negative, we performed a simple regression analysis with this variable and overall motivation, which indicated a positive relationship.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that students' perceptions regarding DI practices can be considered as a significant factor for increasing their motivation. By aligning instructional methods with students' needs and preferences, DI helps to create a more engaging and motivating learning environment (Tomlinson, 2017). This suggests that students respond positively to teaching approaches that recognize their individual learning preferences, interests and abilities, which can, in turn, enhance their overall motivation in educational settings (Hattie, 2009). However, in the specific context of Cypriot music education, these results transcend mere theoretical alignment; they reflect a pressing need for a pedagogical shift. While the Cypriot National Curriculum (MoEC, 2010, 2016) officially promotes DI as a pillar of the 'humane school', the reality in secondary classrooms often remains teacher-centered. This study's findings highlight that when DI moves from a 'top-down' policy to an enacted classroom reality, it directly addresses the chronic issue of student disengagement in music during the transition to secondary education.

Three of the statements that showed significant difference in data analysis were as follows: 'The teacher values the music I am interested in', 'I think music is an important school subject' and 'The teacher emphasizes that we should understand the material, rather than simply memorizing it'. These statements highlight key aspects of DI. Valuing students' musical interests connects to interest-based differentiation (Tomlinson et al., 2003), which personalizes learning to students' preferences, increasing motivation. In Cyprus, this is particularly relevant as there is often a cultural gap between the formal music taught in schools and the informal musical worlds of students. Our results suggest that bridging this gap is not just a matter of 'variety' but a fundamental tool for reversing the perceived marginalization of music as a 'secondary' subject. The emphasis on music as an important subject supports relevance-based differentiation, engaging students by linking content to their values (Chamberlin & Powers, 2010). In the highly academic and exam-oriented culture of Cyprus, making music relevant to students' lives is crucial for elevating its status within the curriculum. Finally, the focus on understanding rather than memorization relates to cognitive-based differentiation, which encourages deeper learning through varied instructional strategies that align with students' cognitive processes (Subban, 2006).

Interestingly, these results align with research highlighting the importance of a differentiated music learning environment. For example, Ismail, Chiat & Anuar (2021) outlined the significance of an encouraging and supportive environment. In the same vein, Jones et al. (2017) contend that educators play a pivotal role in providing a meaningful environment by fostering positive

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Table 3. Factors as predictors of overall motivation

	Standardized coefficients beta	*t*	Sig.
The teacher values the music I am interested in.	**0.340**	**3.022**	**0.005**
The teacher lets me choose what music to learn.	−0.098	−1.205	0.237
The teacher does one to one work with us.	−0.153	−1.848	0.073
The teacher considers how much we have improved when he/she gives grades.	0.229	1.531	0.135
The teacher takes into account how much effort we put during the music lesson.	−0.207	−1.176	0.248
The teacher takes into account students' opinions	−0.116	−0.599	0.553
The teacher appreciates the progress I make.	0.133	1.004	0.322
The teacher thinks mistakes are ok as long as we are learning.	0.154	1.351	0.186
The teacher emphasizes that we should understand the material, rather than simply memorizing it.	**−0.216**	**−2.061**	**0.047**
The teacher respects and supports all students.	−0.135	−0.951	0.348
The teacher uses good students as examples.	0.084	1.052	0.300
During music lessons I work better in groups.	0.149	1.922	0.063
The teacher lets me use my own ideas.	0.106	0.862	0.395
I think music is an important school subject.	**0.441**	**4.170**	**0.000**
I learn a lot about music from my teacher.	0.273	1.978	.056
Music lesson inspired me to continue with music outside school.	0.146	1.516	0.139

relationships with students, ensuring they feel supported and come to appreciate the inherent values of music. In the Cypriot context, where rote learning often dominates due to systemic pressures, this finding advocates for a 'mastery over performance' orientation. This exposes the 'hidden curriculum' of the school, which still rewards memorization over creative exploration.

Recent studies in the Cypriot context revealed the importance of listening to students' preferences (Hadjikou, 2021a; Hadjikou & Creech, 2023). Hadjikou & Creech (2023) showed that Cypriot teachers believed that choosing repertoire based on students' preferences would enhance their interest, while Hadjikou (2021a) found that students preferred to choose the music they learned. These findings align with broader literature on the role of autonomy in motivating students (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Green, 2008; Hallam et al., 2011) and support the implementation of differentiated teaching (MoEC, 2010, 2016). However, our research moves a step further by bridging the gap between teacher beliefs and student motivation, proving that student voice is not a luxury but a functional requirement for DI to be successful in local secondary schools.

Valuing students' musical interests consists of a key component of DI. Teachers who integrate students' preferences into the curriculum can better engage them by making learning more relevant (Tomlinson, 2014). This strategy not only boosts motivation but also validates students' musical identities, fostering an environment where diverse backgrounds and personal tastes are explicitly respected (Burnard & Murphy, 2013). In Cyprus, where the student population is increasingly diverse, DI serves as a vehicle for culturally responsive teaching. DI is vital for enhancing students' value beliefs toward music, a subject often undervalued and declining across grade levels (Jacobs et al., 2002; McPherson & O'Neill, 2010; Wigfield et al., 1997).

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Recent studies underscore the role of DI in increasing motivation and engagement. Incorporating student voice and using flexible grouping and mastery learning facilitate personalized skill development, improving academic performance and intrinsic motivation (Pozas & Schneider, 2019; Scarparolo & MacKinnon, 2022). Additionally, PMM and community collaborations promote enjoyment and meaningful connections (Giebelhausen & Kruse, 2018). This study contributes to the collective efforts for improvement by providing empirical evidence that in Cyprus, lower secondary music education suffers from controlling teaching styles (Hadjikou & Creech, 2023).

Shifting the focus from memorization to understanding relates to DI. Teachers who aim for deep comprehension through diverse instructional strategies better address varied learning needs (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011), using a combination of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic activities (Heacox, 2012). These practices encourage critical thinking (Anderson, 2007). In Cyprus, where musical talent is often seen as an 'innate gift', promoting a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) through DI is a radical philosophical shift. It ensures that students without private conservatory training (ωδεία) feel they have an equal chance to succeed.

A key finding from the study reveals that students' motivation is strongly linked to the value they attach to music as a school subject. Enhancing the perceived value of music lessons may lead to higher motivation levels (Arostegui, 2016; Economidou Stavrou, 2006). In music education, when the curriculum reflects students' values, it boosts engagement (Economidou Stavrou & Papageorgi, 2021; Kokotsaki, 2016). Ultimately, this study provides a roadmap for moving beyond the 'intended curriculum' toward an 'enacted curriculum'. By addressing both cognitive and affective aspects, DI creates a classroom environment that aligns with the main principles of the new music curriculum (MoEC, 2010, 2016), promoting continuous improvement and deeper engagement in the Cypriot learning process.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study highlights the importance of DI in fostering student motivation and engagement by addressing individual learning needs, preferences and values. It shows that students respond positively when their interests are valued and when teachers prioritize understanding over memorization. In the specific context of Cyprus, this finding is a direct critique of the traditional 'culture of memorization' that persists despite decade-long efforts for educational reform. While the revised curricula theoretically emphasize competence-based learning, the systemic pressure for curriculum coverage often leads to a superficial, rote-learning approach. The detrimental impact of this emphasis on memorization over deep understanding is a major concern; it fosters a 'fixed mindset' where music is seen as a set of facts to be recalled rather than a creative language to be explored.

DI practices, such as mastery learning and goal orientation, allow students to work at their own pace, promoting deeper comprehension and resilience. By incorporating strategies that cater to diverse learning preferences, teachers can create a learning environment that encourages exploration, autonomy and intellectual growth. This holistic approach not only enhances student motivation but also supports academic achievement and lifelong learning by cultivating a growth mindset. The findings suggest that for Cypriot music education to evolve, it must move beyond the 'intended' curriculum and focus on 'enacted' classroom differentiation that rewards critical thinking and application over passive recall.

Based on these conclusions, in order to improve music education in Cyprus, Targeted Teacher Training: Professional development for Cypriot music educators should move beyond general pedagogical theory. There is a need for subject-specific workshops on how to implement differentiation within the constraints of the Cypriot secondary school schedule, focusing on managing mixed-ability groups and using technology to support individualized learning pathways.

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Ultimately, this study contributes to the collective efforts for improving music education by providing empirical evidence that differentiation is the primary vehicle for achieving the 'humane and democratic school' envisioned by the Cypriot reform. By prioritizing understanding and student agency, educators can transform music from a marginalized subject into a vital, inclusive and motivating experience for all learners. Future research could adopt qualitative methodologies – such as classroom observations, interviews and reflective dialogs – to examine more closely how differentiation and motivational strategies are pedagogically enacted, negotiated and experienced within the dynamic context of music classrooms.

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Appendix A: Sub-scales of the motivation measure

Sub-scale	Indicator
Self-efficacy	I think that with effort you can improve in music. I could be better in music. I want to fulfill my potential in music. I think that I am good in music. I can improve in music. I can play at least one instrument. I can sing well. I can understand and analyze songs that we listen to during the music lesson. I can make up my own melodies.
Enjoyment	I think the way music is taught makes music more interesting. I enjoy music lessons. I would like to do more music at school. I like learning music at school. I like singing during the music lesson. I like playing instruments during the music lesson. I like composing during the music lesson. I like listening and analyzing songs during the music lesson.
Flow	Overall I can understand what the teacher is talking about. Music is a hard subject*. Time passes quickly and pleasantly during the music lesson. I look forward to music lessons.
Musical goals	I would like to learn how to make up my own music. I want to play music in groups with my friends during the music lesson. I want to play music in groups with my friends during school concerts. I would like to listen to musicians performing live at my school. I would like to perform in concerts outside school.

*This indicator was reversed when calculating the score for the sub-scale.

Appendix B: Pedagogy statements

The teacher values the music I am interested in.
The teacher lets me choose what music to learn.
The teacher does one to one work with us.
The teacher considers how much we have improved when he/she gives grades.
The teacher takes into account how much effort we put during the music lesson.
The teacher takes into account students' opinions.
The teacher appreciates the progress I make.
The teacher respects and supports all students.
The teacher uses the good students as examples.
During music lessons I work better in groups.
The teacher lets me use my own ideas.
The teacher thinks mistakes are ok as long as we are learning.
The teacher emphasizes that we should understand the material, rather than simply memorizing it.
I think music is an important school subject.
I learn a lot about music from my teacher.
Music lesson inspired me to continue with music outside school.

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