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Students' Well-Being and Lifelong Learning in Estonian Music School Violin Curricula: A Policy Analysis Grounded in Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract

For decades, global policies have advocated for child-centred approaches intended to support children's well-being and motivation in educational settings and to provide them with flexible learning pathways for lifelong learning. Following these guidelines, national education policies in many countries—including Estonia—have been reformed, replacing teacher- and subject-centred approaches with advocacy for methods supporting students' holistic development. Yet, responsibility for implementing those innovative approaches in Estonia's decentralised music school system remains the task of music schools' leaders and teachers at the local level. This study contributes to the growing body of research concerning post-Soviet music education with a focus on reforms on both the national and local levels, by investigating how violin students' basic psychological needs, and thereby their well-being and lifelong learning, are supported in Estonian music schools. Grounded in self-determination theory, the findings of a reflexive thematic analysis of 126 violin curricula from 76 music schools point to a lack of guidelines concerning basic psychological need support, while schools rely on students' controlled motivation, which can contribute to the large number of dropouts and thwart students' general life satisfaction. In order for the global and national policies to effect music schools' curricula, music educators' work tasks and schedules should be redesigned to facilitate the understanding and implementation of policy changes.

Keywords: curriculum, Estonia, music schools, self-determination theory, post-Soviet music education

Introduction

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was introduced in 1989, global policies' focus on accessible and inclusive high-quality education has called for updating classroom practices around the globe (European Commission, 2021; UN General Assembly, 1989). This has been accompanied by increasingly valuing flexible learning opportunities and the concept of lifelong development of the learner (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Following these developments, and the latest research in education, Estonian educational policies have also been reformed with the aim of contributing to students' motivation and well-being in all fields of education (e.g., Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). Indeed, adopting a student-centred approach reflects Estonia's shift towards a new concept of learning, referred to as the *changed approach to learning* (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2014). The latter is based on a constructivist view of education (in music, see Pozo et al., 2022), collaborative learning, and autonomy, with the aim of providing high-level knowledge and practical skills, developing learning and self-regulation abilities, strengthening collaboration and 'social intelligence', and supporting physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, n.d.-b, para. 5–13, author's translation).

However, policy reform processes have proven to be difficult to interpret and implement on the school level, as Estonian general teachers tend to view the curriculum as externally imposed and with limited practical relevance (e.g., Erss, 2024; Mikser et al., 2023). Similar tendencies have also been noted in Lithuania, where music schools' strong connection to the traditional curriculum—which dates back to the 1940s—does not align with the current student-centred paradigms in the country's education system (Gabnytė, 2020). Yet, studies in music education suggest that meaningful policy processes would benefit from teachers' policy agency (Kallio et al., 2026), as teachers' feelings of curriculum ownership can be fostered through collaboration in co-defining students' needs and goals and co-developing learning content, which together contribute to 'sustainable curriculum innovation, professional development, and institutional learning' (Rumiantsev et al., 2026, p. 13). Against this backdrop, this study analyses how national policy reforms have shaped the curricula of Estonian public music schools that offer instrumental education to children, and how their implementation could affect students' well-being and lifelong learning.

Policy Transforming Estonian Music School Practice

Estonian extracurricular music schools[1] provide one-to-one instrumental tuition and group lessons in theoretical subjects—such as solfège and music history—outside regular school hours, with students typically attending four to seven lessons per week. In 2026, the music school system included 86 public and private music schools that were members of the Estonian Union for Music Schools and formed the sample for this study, while several more schools existed outside the union. The system in its current form was established under Soviet occupation between 1944 and 1991, following the Western conservatoire model (Vähi et al., in press), but Estonia's re-independence in 1991 brought along reforms: first in the implementation of the National Curriculum (*Kohaliku omavalitsuse huvialakooli/muusika- ja kunstikoolide üleriigilise õppekava kinnitamine*, 1997) for music and art schools, and then in its replacement by the Hobby Schools Act (2007) and its sub-regulation, the Standard for Hobby Education (2007).

While the National Curriculum mainly listed technical requirements with the aim of providing thorough technical training, the currently effective Standard for Hobby Education offers only general guidelines regarding the purpose and function of hobby education for all hobby schools to follow when designing their own curricula. According to the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, n.d.-a), hobby education also prioritises student-centredness by fostering students' individual interests and development, suggesting that, on the policy level, the purpose of music schools has shifted from providing pre-professional music education to supporting all students' holistic development, as envisioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989).

This qualitative study examines whether and how Estonian music schools' violin curricula[2] reflect the national policy goals of supporting students' well-being and lifelong

[1] Instrumental tuition in Estonian music schools traditionally lasted for 7 years (grades), beginning at the same time as the first grade of children's basic education, meaning that most students were between 7 and 15 years old. Recently, however, schools have become more flexible in admitting older students—including adults—resulting in students of various ages studying within the same grade level. Although most music schools that are members of the Estonian Music School Union are public institutions governed by local municipalities, students generally take entrance examinations prior to first grade and pay a monthly fee to participate in the programme, which, as of 2026, ranged from 20€ to 123€. The exact fee depends on factors including the school's location and study programme, and covers up to one quarter of the total cost of study, with the remaining amount provided by the municipality.

[2] Most music schools use the term curriculum to refer to both school-level guidelines and subject syllabi, while the Hobby Schools Act uses the term study programme with the same meaning (i.e., curriculum proper). For clarity, all school-level documents used in this analysis will be referred to as curricula. The violin curricula examined in this analysis typically include general and instrument-specific syllabi, outlining the aims of the school, tuition, and music education more broadly, and listing recommended repertoire and grade-level learning objectives.

learning, which, as argued in this article, can be fostered through meeting students' basic psychological needs. As part of a broader research project, this study provides the foundation for subsequent stages in which interviews will be conducted with policymakers, as well as music school teachers and leaders.

Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory

In the study reported in this article, self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2017) was adopted as 'a framework for making a priori predictions about which aspects of a given social context will enhance versus undermine high-quality motivation, healthy development, and well-being' (p. 12). An established theory concerning human motivation widely used in (music) education research, SDT posits that contributing to students' development requires maintaining their motivation and psychological well-being through supporting their basic psychological needs— autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017; in music, see Evans & Ryan, 2022). SDT provides criteria for assessing policies based on their support for the best processes within classrooms, while contesting structural factors—such as grading, performance goals, and high-stakes tests—which have negative effects on students and teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT is a psychological theory that has also been used in educational research as a methodology to examine educational policies and curricula (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Reeve et al., 2022), where these documents are understood and interpreted as tools that can support or thwart students' basic psychological needs on the basis of how teachers enact them. Therefore, this study considers Estonian music schools' violin curricula as examples of sociocultural contexts that 'engender motivationally relevant beliefs and actions' (Wentzel & Skinner, 2022, p. 1866) by contributing to curricular opportunities that can foster need-supportive educational processes (Ryan et al., 2023; see also, Sinclair et al., 2017).

Most of the studies that use SDT in music education and psychology focus on higher education students (e.g., Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2020; Bonneville-Roussy & Evans, 2024; Hatfield et al., 2025) and professional musicians' practice (e.g., López-Íñiguez & McPherson, 2020), while other studies tackle SDT in the context of music education in general schools (e.g., Kingsford-Smith & Evans, 2019; Sanguinetti, 2024). However, the specific context of European music schools, particularly in the post-Soviet countries, has been minimally explored. Thus, this study contributes to the aforementioned discourses by combining the

theoretical and methodological lenses of SDT in the context of Estonian music schools' violin curricula.

Basic Psychological Needs

According to SDT, *autonomy* is the need to self-regulate our experiences and actions, to have our behaviours self-endorsed or congruent with our authentic interests and values, and to feel volitional while acting. Autonomously motivated music students accomplish their goals and experience greater well-being; their practice is more frequent, productive, and of a higher quality (Bonneville-Roussy & Evans, 2024); and they are more likely to prefer facing challenging tasks (Evans & Bonneville-Roussy, 2016). Providing choice and autonomy support contributes to students' persistence in their studies, whereas psychological control and an absence of choice are linked with dropping out (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2020). *Competence* refers to a sense of accomplishment and growth, which could be nurtured by providing structure, optimal challenges and constructive feedback, whereas *relatedness* means feeling socially connected and cared for. Students can experience relatedness when they belong to a group (e.g., an ensemble), sense parental support (Evans, 2015), and have good relationships with their teachers and peers (Wieser & Müller, 2024).

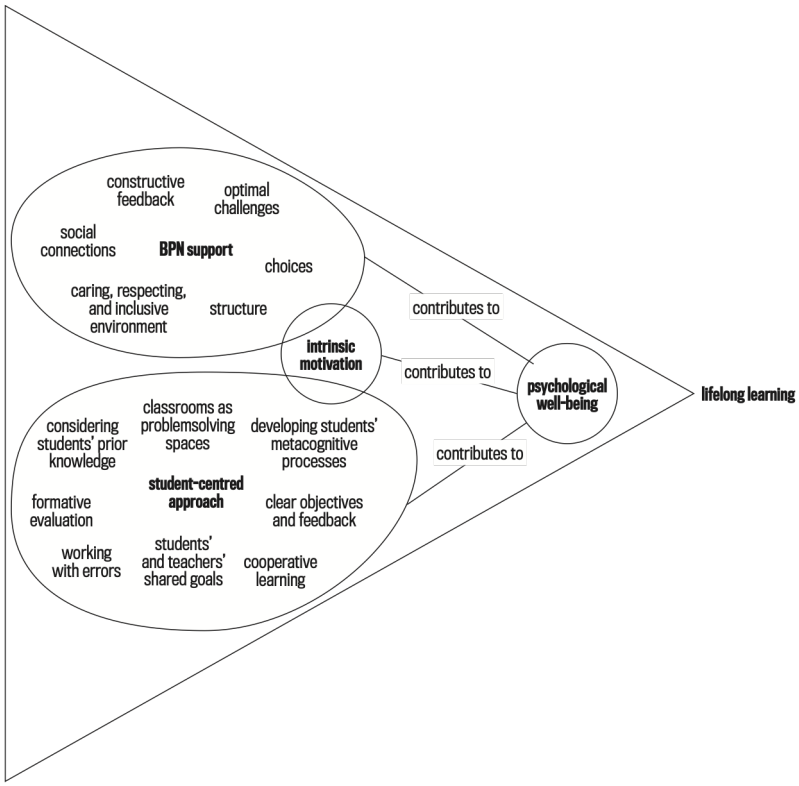
Basic psychological need support contributes to self-determined actions and better functioning in the short term, and also advances the development of greater efficacy, resilience and psychological well-being in the long run (Ryan & Deci, 2017), contributing to students' general life satisfaction (Hatfield et al., 2025). Thwarting basic psychological needs, on the other hand, manifests in controlled goals and reasons for action, which may lead to poorer performance and decreased well-being (Guay, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, while controlled, externally regulated motivation may initially encourage students to make an effort, it prevents their long-term positive relationship with music.

Student-Centred Approach

One strategy for supporting students' basic psychological needs is taking a student-centred constructivist approach, which is based on the understanding that students' intrinsic motivation is the foundation for their meaningful learning (e.g., Gaunt et al., 2021; Pozo et al., 2022). Intrinsic or autonomous motivation refers to a sense of volition and value, curiosity, and interested engagement—doing things for their inherent satisfaction—whereas extrinsic motivation drives our externally imposed actions, or those inspired by avoidance of shame

(Ryan & Deci, 2020). As Figure 1 depicts, lifelong engagement in music and learning can thereby be considered an outcome of 'values and practices that favour participation and success in such learning' (Field, 2009, p. 10), since student-centred educational contexts that support basic psychological needs contribute to students' intrinsic motivation and meaningful music learning (Evans & Ryan, 2022), and their long-term involvement in learning music (Evans, 2023).

Figure 1. *Student-Centredness and Basic Psychological Need (BPN) Support Contribute to Lifelong Learning.*



Note. Adaptation based on Ryan and Deci (2017, 2020), Reeve et al. (2022) and López-Íñiguez et al. (2022). A student-centred approach to planning and teaching music that supports students' basic psychological needs in the process contributes to experiences of intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being. These, in turn, are necessary preconditions for meaningful and lifelong engagement in music.

Research Questions

This study draws on SDT to examine how the current Estonian policies' aims are represented in music schools' violin curricula, and the latter's relation to students' basic psychological needs and lifelong learning. The study was guided by one research question and two subquestions:

Research Question 1: In what ways do violin curricula reflect the principles of Estonian national education policies regarding students' well-being and lifelong learning?

(a) In what ways do curricula consider students' basic psychological needs in the learning process?

(b) What kind of guidelines or strategies for supporting basic psychological needs, if any, do curricula provide to practitioners?

Methodology

This qualitative case study (Yin, 2018) presents an analysis of Estonian national policies affecting music schools and music schools' violin curricula. The violin—one of the most widely studied instruments in Estonian music schools, taught in most institutions and supported by a long-standing curricular tradition—was selected as an emblematic case for this study. The data included 126 violin curricula from music schools, as well as the former and current national policy documents that apply to these institutions. Due to the author's background as a violin student and teacher in Estonian music schools, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was chosen for transparency in examining how music schools' violin curricula reflected national policies' aims regarding student-centredness, well-being, and lifelong learning.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of the systematic compilation and organisation of all available curricula (N = 1,708) from the 86 music schools that were members of the Estonian Music School Union in January 2024. The subsequent analysis focused on the 76 music schools[3] in which violin was taught. Because individual schools may provide more than one learning programme for the same instrument—each with a separate curriculum—the final dataset comprised (a) 126 curricula from 76 music schools, and (b) national policy documents that have guided, or are expected to guide, music schools' work: the former National Curriculum was examined in the first analytic round, and the Standard for Hobby Education was included in the second round of the analysis. The policy corpus for this analysis included 884 pages.

Data Analysis

[3] Violin is taught in 77 schools, and 76 of these schools' curricula were available in the Information System or on the schools' websites, or were sent via email per the author's request, and were thus included in the analysis. As the Hobby Schools Act (2007) requires music schools to upload and regularly update their curricula in the Estonian Information System for Education, making them publicly available, ethical review was not required for this study.

I began the analysis using ATLAS.ti to examine changes in the violin curricula in comparison with the former National Curriculum, with the aim of understanding how societal changes related to Estonia's re-independence were reflected in music schools. I employed Conventional Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to inductively code the National Curriculum and schools' curricula while taking reflexive notes throughout the process. This led to the realisation that, aside from a few exceptions, curricular changes mostly concerned the list of required technical skills, whereas the documents provided little insight into schools' values or their relation to society. Nevertheless, becoming thoroughly acquainted with the documents revealed several distinctive similarities and recurring patterns across schools' curricula, which helped identify the original sources of the text, such as the former National Curriculum or the Standard for Hobby Education, as well as previous or currently effective national curricula for basic education.

For the second round of analysis, I included the currently effective Standard for Hobby Education (2007) among the materials (Table 1). This policy lists the requirements for tuition provided in all hobby education institutions, while also featuring a section (§ 3. Functions of hobby education) identical to the former National Curriculum[4] (1997); these are presented side-by-side in Table 1.

Table 1. *Purpose and Function of Hobby Education.*

New principles presented in § 2 of the Standard for Hobby Education (2007)	§ 3 of the Standard for Hobby Education (2007) is identical to the former National Curriculum (*Kohaliku omavalitsuse huvialakooli / muusika- ja kunstikoolide üleriigilise õppekava kinnitamine,* 1997)
1. The purpose of hobby education is to provide opportunities for the **comprehensive development of personality** and to support young persons in their development into members of society *with good coping skills*. 2. Hobby education shall: 1. be based on the **participation and free will of young persons;** 2. be based on equal treatment of hobbies and young persons;	1. The function of hobby education is *discovering the creative abilities* of young persons and the **planned development of such abilities** to support the development of an individual who: 1. ***thinks creatively***; 2. ***knows how to set up goals and plans for his or her activities, and to evaluate such activities***;

[4] Notably, this section does not mention schools' preparation of students for professional studies, which was listed alongside discovering students' creative abilities in the former NC. This suggests that reforms in 2007 expanded the purpose of hobby education from providing mainly pre-professional preparation to fostering a supportive learning environment where students can develop both as individuals and as members of the society, regardless of their future career choices.

3. support the *development*, **independence**, ***self-initiative, initiative*** [*sic*] **and *activity of young persons;*** 4. *grant experiences of success and recognition to young persons*; 5. ***grant joy from engaging in hobbies and cognition thereof to young persons***; 6. ***develop creativity*** and social skills; 7. be **open**, *positive and encouraging* of young persons.	3. ***can choose, decide and bear responsibility***; 4. ***can analyse the surrounding reality***; 5. *can work* and is ready to co-operate; 6. **understands the importance of knowledge and life-long learning** and *is able to learn*. 2. Hobby education shall support the sustainable development of Estonian cultural and sports traditions, technology, environment and local traditions.

Note. Leaning on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), the principles related to **autonomy** have been marked in **bold**, those referring to *competence* in *italics*, and those referring to relatedness have been underlined. Statements that point to more than one basic psychological need combine the respective font styles.

Taking the Standard for Hobby Education (2007) as a starting point and drawing on SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017), I continued the analysis of 76 music schools' violin curricula. Building on the inductive codes and reflexive notes from the first analytic round, I renamed, grouped, deleted, and introduced deductive codes, resulting in a total of 63 codes. Of these, 37 were grouped into five themes, as presented in the 'Findings' section. Importantly, the themes should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Rather, many schools exhibited features associated with more than one theme, highlighting underlying tensions in how learning is contextualised and represented.

Findings

To enhance the transparency of the interpretation process, Table 2 summarises features of the violin curricula excerpts presented below that supported or thwarted basic psychological needs. Although several excerpts refer to the same features, each of them is mentioned only once.

Table 2. *Features in the Violin Curricula Affecting Basic Psychological Needs.*

	Autonomy	**Competence**	**Relatedness**
Supportive	Self-regulation; individual approach; self-endorsed behaviour; volition; authentic interests/values; providing choices	Structure; sufficient instructions; assumed capability; valuing students' opinion; efficacy	Family support; inclusivity; belonging; social connections

Thwarting	Universal requirements; external control; lack of choice	Punishing/rewarding with grades; assumed incapability, high demands	Exclusion

Note. The categorisation is based on Ryan and Deci (2017, 2020); Bonneville-Roussy et al. (2020); and Guay (2022).

For the purposes of this article, every music school was assigned a random identifying number between 1 and 76 rather than using their names; all quotations in the 'Findings' section are followed by the ID number of the school(s) that used exactly the same language—not to claim reliability based on accumulated repetition, but to highlight direct similarities among documents that supposedly represent institutions' unique characteristics. In cases where curricula used two variants of the same phrase, the differences have been marked in brackets both within the statement and the corresponding list of schools. It is important to note that functionally similar ideas could have also been phrased slightly differently by other schools than the ones listed, while not using technically identical language; thus, the number of schools following the citations may not be representative of the practical prevalence of certain approaches.

In the process of analysis, five themes were generated: (a) Curricular Requirements as Mechanisms of Progress; (b) Admission and Progression are Based on Ability Assessment; (c) Learning is About Gradual Technical Development; (d) Learning Supports Students' Basic Psychological Needs; and (e) Learning is an Enriching Experience.

Curricular Requirements as Mechanisms of Progress

Based on the violin curricula, learning music is not a universal right, but rather a continuous process for selecting the best students who meet certain requirements, with the curriculum setting 'conditions and requirements concerning the completion of learning stages and graduation from the school' [National Curriculum; schools no. 1; 2; 18; 22; 23; 26; 35; 37; 38; 43; 45; 50; 55–57; 60; 64; 65; 68; 70–75]. Some curricula refer to students' responsibility for their progress by leaving them homework after every lesson: 'It is anticipated that, following the teacher's instructions, the student continues working at home on a daily basis' [10; 55; 66], or highlight parents' role in supporting or monitoring their practice: 'the student practices their instrument every day, and their family ensures the necessary conditions for this' [38]. A few curricula also prescribe practising during summer holidays, as graded performances at the beginning of a new academic year require performing pieces assigned at the end of the last academic year [25; 46].

In most schools, students' progress is graded by numbers ranging from 1 to 5, whereas six schools use formative or pass / fail assessment [5; 10; 19; 37; 40; 66]. The curricula reveal that the goal of assessment is to motivate students to be more determined to learn, and to provide feedback on the students' learning 'to the student, teacher, school's principal, and parents; (defining students' individual learning outcomes)' [50; 55; (National Curriculum; 22; 38; 70; 71; 74–76)]. Although several curricula claim not to dictate the choice of repertoire, they nevertheless provide directions and standards for developing skills, which schools may interpret as they see fit. For example, one schools' assessment criteria—a rare sight in music schools' curricula—includes 'the performance programme's compliance with the subject syllabus recommendations' [38], suggesting that, regardless of the assumed individual approach to all students, repertoire lists may still serve as a model to which the students' progress is compared.

Admission and Progression are Based on Ability Assessment

Most music schools in Estonia hold entrance examinations prior to first grade to determine who is given the opportunity to learn, although the weight of these musical aptitude tests may vary depending on the number of applicants and available spots for learning. A commonly articulated aim of musical tuition is the 'discovery and planned development of students' creative abilities' [National Curriculum; Standard for Hobby Education; 1; 2; 5; 6; 8; 12; 14; 17; 21–23; 26; 32; 34; 35; 37; 42; 43; 45; 46; 50–52; 54; 57; 60; 61; 64–66; 68–70; 72; 74–76], while in some schools 'the teacher's task is to identify and develop students capable of professional studies and guide them towards a suitable specialisation' [National Curriculum; 22; 32; 35; 53; 70]. Students with weak results may be transferred from the more intensive main programme to the general or elective one, and, as highlighted in one curriculum, the student may be denied a chance to continue learning altogether after the fourth grade by the teachers' council, which decides on 'whether students who do not meet the required level may continue their studies' [55].

Although many schools' curricula mention providing alternative learning programmes—such as general or elective tracks alongside the traditional main programme for students seeking reduced intensity—in practice these options may be limited in various ways. For instance, despite its assumed flexibility and individual approach, the elective programme is considered less desirable than the main programme, so the students—and their parents—are expected to compensate for their supposed deficiencies:

> The elective programme is for those whose modest abilities and skills prevent them from following the main programme. Participation in the elective programme requires the students and parents do more independent homework, as there are half as many individual lessons with the teacher as in the main programme. [50]

Even with an individual learning plan for every student, the elective programme still requires students to meet the level of their peers in the main programme who have far more lessons:

> For students in the elective programme, their individual learning plan takes into account the student's individual features, but their level should meet the level of the main programme students, based on the assumption that the students have great interest in their learning and that they work more intensively. [71]

Learning is About Gradual Technical Development

Learning the correct playing position and building technical skills on the instrument are thoroughly described in most curricula, where the list of required skills is complemented grade-by-grade to develop musical expression and achieve technical mastery over the instrument. While some schools mention that their goals include providing students with leisure-time activities [17; 38; 64; 57; 65; 69; 74; 76], or supporting their overall development regardless of their future career choices [13; 20; 56], the aims of many schools' teaching and educational work include 'providing the preparation necessary for studies in professional music education' [National Curriculum; 1; 2; 4; 6; 8; 11; 12; 14; 15; 17; 21–26; 31; 34–38; 42; 43; 45; 47–51; 53–57; 60; 61; 64–66; 68–72; 74; 75]. Along the same vein, regular individual practice is expected from the students [5; 11; 61; 72], especially if they follow the main programme (which in some schools may be the only option up to a certain age): 'the main programme is intended for students who are willing and able to follow a more extensive curriculum that requires more practice and study' [50; 55; 57; 64; 74]. Despite music schools' emphasis on students' dedication, continuing learning after 7 years may prove difficult for those interested, as many schools only provide tuition for additional year(s) to those 'who show potential and are oriented towards pursuing professional music education, and who require continuous instruction until the transition to vocational education due to their age' [National Curriculum; 1; 2; 4; 8; 11; 15; 22; 34; 35; 38; 43; 45; 46; 50; 51; 57; 64–66; 68; 70; 71; 74].

Learning Supports Students' Basic Psychological Needs

According to the curricula, learning an instrument contributes to students' development regardless of their future career choices, mainly in two ways: either by the students obtaining specific skills and knowledge at school, or through their various experiences concerning how learning is arranged. The first category includes the learning skills (planning, memory training, developing independence and critical reflexivity, and knowing how to choose, decide, and bear responsibility) that students are taught or expected to pick up while following the curriculum. The second category refers to aspects in schools' learning arrangements that reflect the society and prepare students for adapting to this society as independent citizens—for instance, when '(based on the principles of democracy), the rules of school life are established together by students, teachers, and parents' [(National Curriculum; 17; 35; 70; 76); 2; 5; 6; 22; 32; 43; 54; 60; 75]. According to some schools, the curricula contribute to minorities' integration [National Curriculum; 35; 70; 73], learning an instrument helps develop students' social skills [26; 55; 56; 71], and learning raises confidence [67; 71], which suggest these schools see their role as reaching beyond that of teaching students how to play an instrument.

While approaching students individually based on their age and abilities may seem self-evident in the context of one-to-one instrument lessons, some schools even claim to support their students' 'national differences' [National Curriculum; 4; 12; 17; 35; 50; 56; 70; 76], presumably referring to minorities' integration after Estonia's re-independence. When it comes to individuality in music making, several schools see their role in 'guid[ing] the student in ... developing a personal style (of expression)' [2; 6; 17; 22; 37; 43; 45; 50; 55; 68; 74; 75; (National Curriculum; 4; 12; 18; 23; 32; 35; 49; 60; 73)] or, more often, mention 'developing independent musical thinking' [National Curriculum; 4; 6; 9; 10; 14; 16; 21; 22; 24–28; 30–32; 34; 35; 37; 39; 40– 46; 50; 53; 55–60; 65; 67–71; 73–75] as a learning goal. In addition, there are more specific guidelines for supporting students' autonomous learning and intrinsic motivation. These could either directly concern the instrument when learning to play by ear [5; 12; 19; 23; 26; 29; 33; 38; 48; 51; 52; 58; 72], or highlight autonomy support by mentioning the students' own role in their learning by setting goals and analysing their progress [2; 4–6; 12; 17; 18; 22; 26; 32; 35; 37; 38; 42; 43; 45; 49; 50; 52; 55; 60; 68; 71–75], learning to appreciate the musical qualities in their playing [16; 64], deciding on their final examination programme [5], or simply understanding the music they play [11; 12; 26; 50].

Learning is an Enriching Experience

Some schools highlight instrumental tuition's versatile effects on students' lives both in and outside music: 'the school's curriculum aims to provide as broad a foundation of knowledge and skills as possible, enabling students to succeed in further studies, professional work and daily life while applying what they have learned in diverse ways' [56], while also acknowledging the positive emotional value of playing an instrument: 'preserving a love for music, the joy of making music, and the ability to receive energy and support from music' [42]. Yet, despite the supposedly creative nature of making music, only some schools mention developing students' creativity [National Curriculum; Standard for Hobby Education; 2; 5; 6; 13; 17–20; 22; 23; 26; 31; 35; 39; 42; 46; 47; 50; 52; 55; 60; 62; 64; 68; 70–73]. This is enhanced by encouraging them to improvise and/or compose their own music [4–7; 19; 26; 38; 39; 49; 51; 52; 55; 60; 66], while others suggest creativity develops without assistance, as 'through active artistic activities [the student] develops musical perception, creativity' [National Curriculum; 2; 6; 17; 22; 26; 35; 43; 50; 56; 60; 68; 70; 72; 73].

Several schools recognise metacognition's relevance to their curricula, as 'teaching … must support the development of a person who understands the importance of knowledge and lifelong learning, (and knows how to learn)' [11; 42; 70; 72; 75; (National Curriculum; 2; 5; 6; 8; 12; 17; 21–23; 34; 35; 43; 50; 51; 54; 68; 69; 73)]. However, only a few documents offer explanations or guidelines on what they mean by supporting learners' development from the standpoint of the learning process: 'maintaining the interest, openness, and desire for growth that support lifelong learning' [42], or the student, who 'thinks critically, creatively and systematically, is open to self-development and lifelong learning' [26; 60], or both: 'the curriculum considers learning as an active and goal-oriented lifelong process, in which the learning environment plays an important role alongside the learner's personal characteristics and motivation' [71].

Discussion

Exploring how music schools' violin curricula reflect Estonian national policies' aims regarding students' well-being and lifelong learning, this study highlighted music schools' difficulties in navigating between their historical role in the conformity-favouring Western conservatory tradition (Vähi et al., in press; see also, Tregear et al., 2016; Westerlund & Barrett, in press), and their adaptation to also providing hobby education as envisioned in the policy reforms of the changing society (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2021; Standard for Hobby Education, 2007).

The main research question of this study addressed how violin curricula align with national policies' principles. The analysis showed that some of the curricula reflect basic psychological need support by approaching students individually, according to their interests and development (Evans, 2015), so that students can experience intrinsic motivation in learning music. Examples of this included acknowledging students' active role in the process, where they can learn to set goals and analyse their progress, prioritising learning skills and lifelong learning, and 'developing independent musical thinking'. However, as the latter typically emerged around the fifth grade, it is unclear whether it reflected students being given autonomy in their musical thinking or rather an expectation to adhere to certain conventions of the Western classical tradition, with the idea that independence is gradually earned through meeting these standards.

Meanwhile, many curricula followed the national policies by listing the expected outcomes as goals for learning. Students who reach said outcomes are more likely to feel autonomous and competent in their actions, which could contribute to their experiences of well-being and a greater chance for a lifelong engagement to music (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2020; Evans, 2023). However, the extent of experienced well-being and intentions concerning the lifelong learning of students who do not accomplish these outcomes is unknown. Furthermore, curricula that prioritised learning outcomes often focussed on the technical aspects of playing an instrument and assessing students' performance as a supposedly optimal way to prepare students for a lifelong relationship with music. Yet, neglecting students' personal goals may contribute to conditions that thwart their autonomy and competence (Guay, 2022), overlook relatedness, and ultimately undermine well-being, regardless of the schools' well-intentioned aims. Despite the student-centred principles of Estonian hobby education policies (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2021) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989), the teachers' council's authority over student placement and continuation in learning programmes highlighted music schools' role as a gatekeeper in deciding who has access to music, and under what conditions.

The first subquestion of this study concerned how students' basic psychological needs are considered in the violin curricula, and the findings revealed several tensions. Students' autonomy could be thwarted by practices referring to the requirements for students' individual progress between instrument lessons, as well as other forms of external control or criteria that they are expected to meet, including having to pass entrance examinations prior to first grade.

Yet, some schools also described practices that were likely autonomy supportive, such as providing students with choices regarding their studies or teaching improvisation—the latter, despite its many benefits, remains a rare practice in instrumental education (Stijnen et al., 2024). Several autonomy-supportive aspects in the curricula also included notions of competence, such as considering students' personal goals and preferences in the learning process, while frequent assessment may thwart this need. Compared with the other aspects of basic psychological needs, relatedness occurred rarely in the curricula, being mostly mentioned in the context of ensemble playing. However, in violin lessons this may mean playing with an adult pianist rather than other students in some form, which would allow them to socialise and make friends in the process, contributing to the isolation characteristic of instrumental studies (Burwell et al., 2017). Relatedness was also reflected in goals concerning students' integration and supporting their 'national differences', yet, stressing such differences may work against experiencing relatedness.

Notably, while curricula contained numerous elements that concerned basic psychological needs, they rarely pointed to the processes for supporting these needs, suggesting that music schools tend to rely on students' controlled motivation. However, the latter is linked to students' intentions to quit learning music (Wieser et al., 2024; Wieser & Müller, 2024), which requires further attention in the context of Estonian music schools, where around half of music school students cease learning before graduating from the seventh grade (Remmel, 2023). So, even when schools provide students in older grades more autonomy in their studies, many children will stop learning before experiencing independence in making music. Indeed, unless students achieve personal goals and experience positive emotions from the very beginning, they are unlikely to be intrinsically motivated in the learning process, which is necessary for keeping them going until graduation and further on (Evans & Ryan, 2022).

Schools' statements concerning lifelong learning usually mentioned it in the context of continuing learning in secondary music education institutions, or along with their aim of developing a person who 'values knowledge and knows how to learn', suggesting that meeting the standards of the curricula contributes to lifelong learning. While students' intrinsic motivation has been linked to their desire to keep playing music (Evans, 2023; Evans & Ryan, 2022; Wieser et al., 2024), the term *lifelong learning* in music performance research generally refers to the development of professional competencies in higher education (e.g., Doğantan-Dack, 2025; López-Íñiguez, in press). Thus, music schools' responsibility for developing

students' general competencies to navigate independent life to become lifelong learners in higher education is often overlooked, both in curricula and in academic research. Yet, for students to experience the positive effects of learning an instrument and to have a lifelong relationship with music, supporting their basic psychological needs should be of first priority, regardless of whether they learn music as a hobby or with the intention of becoming a professional in the future (Hatfield et al., 2025).

The second subquestion of the study concerned guidelines or strategies for practitioners regarding basic psychological need support. The analysis highlighted shortcomings, as most violin curricula referred to basic psychological needs as outcomes of learning without providing instructions regarding the learning process, which makes understanding the expectations for their work difficult for early-career teachers and other new employees, suggesting that these documents may have little practical value. This was exemplified in some curricula where the general part highlighted student-centred principles while the violin syllabus only listed technical skills and recommended repertoire, leaving it unclear how the student-centredness should be enacted in practice. These findings link to studies highlighting teachers' unpreparedness for curriculum design and the low perceived value of updating the school's policy (Erss, 2024; Mikser et al., 2023), discrepancies between innovative national-level policies and the influence of traditions and habits at the school level (Gabnytė, 2020; Mikser et al., 2023), as well as advocacy for greater centralised control over the curricula in Estonian general education (Sepp et al., 2019). This suggests that implementing any reforms in music schools would first require creating a space for discussions by granting teachers remunerated working hours for participating in policy translation and curriculum design (Vähi et al., in press).

Limitations and Future Research

This study examined how violin curricula contribute to conditions that support students' well-being and lifelong learning, yet, as basic psychological need 'satisfactions and frustrations vary within persons over time, contexts, and social interactions' (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 243), each student experiences different levels of well-being in the music school context. Thus, without investigating the basic psychological need support each individual student perceives in their lessons, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether or how they experience well-being and intrinsic motivation in their studies. In addition, although many violin curricula included general aspects applicable across subjects, it is possible that an

analysis focusing on other instruments—such as popular or folk instruments not covered in the former National Curriculum—could yield different findings. It also remains uncertain whether curricular ambiguity favours an individual approach to students and their musicality, or whether the outcome-oriented documents serve as a control mechanism that may thwart not only the students' but also the teachers' autonomy. As controlled conditions may impact teachers' motivation and well-being, which are linked to students' motivation and well-being (Ahn et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020), further research should investigate teachers' motivation in Estonian music schools.

Conclusion

While Estonian national policy reforms emphasise students' well-being and lifelong learning, the opportunity to reflect on the aims of their tuition has largely remained unutilised by music schools when translating these reforms into their violin curricula. For instance, although schools implicitly support learners' basic psychological needs and provide them positive experiences in the process, their extensive focus on technical skills and progressive development suggests that well-being and lifelong learning in music may be expected to occur as a side effect of closely monitored and frequently assessed rigorous technical training. Schools' freedom to decide on the priorities of their tuition may not only contribute to flexible and original updates, but could also be exhibited in their choice not to integrate national reforms into their curricula and practices. In the current case, this could contribute to discrepancies across Estonian music schools, potentially thwarting students' well-being and hindering the schools' potential to provide a foundation for students' lifelong relationship with music. Intentionally embedding support for students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness in curricula and teaching practices, along with providing guidance and resources for teachers, could ensure that positive experiences and lifelong engagement with music are not left to chance but become central outcomes of Estonian music education. These goals could be realised with the help of comprehensive pre- and in-service teacher education that offers support and guidance in policy translation and curriculum design (Vähi et al., in press), to better address the multifaceted aims of publicly funded hobby education in a democratic 21st-century context.

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